

Winona LaDuke, Acceptance Speech for the Green Party's Nomination for Vice President of the United States of America (August 29, 1996)³

I am not inclined toward electoral politics. Yet I am impacted by public policy. I am interested in reframing the debate on the issues of this society—the distribution of power and wealth, the abuse of power and the rights of the natural world, the environment and the need to consider an amendment to the U.S. Constitution in which all decisions made today will be considered in light of their impact on the seventh generation from now. That is, I believe, what sustainability is all about. These are vital subjects which are all too often neglected by the rhetoric of “major party” candidates and the media.

I believe that decision making should not be the exclusive right of the privileged. That those who are affected by policy—not those who by default often stand above it—should be heard in the debate. It is the absence of this voice which unfortunately has come to characterize American public policy and the American political system.

As most of you probably know I live and work on the White Earth reservation in Northern Minnesota, the largest reservation in the state in terms of population and land base. And as most of you know—in terms of recent political and legal struggles—the site of a great deal of citizen activism and change in recent months. That is how I view myself, as a citizen activist. Yet I find that as small and rural as is my area of the northwoods, as small as my pond is, the decisions made in Washington still affect me. And it is the fact that decisions made by others, people who have never seen my face, never seen our lakes, never tasted our wild rice, or heard the cry of a child in Ponsford, have come to impact me and my community. I am here to say that all people have the right and responsibility to determine their destiny and I do not relinquish this right to PACs [political action committees], to lobbyists, and to decision makers who are far away.

When you live in one of the poorest sections of the country and in the state of Minnesota, you are able to understand, perhaps better, the impact of public policy. It is indeed my contention that there is no real quality of life in America until there is quality of life in the poorest regions of this America.

For instance over half of the American Indians on my reservation live in poverty. This represents five times the state average. Of particular concern is that nearly two thirds of the children on my reservation live in poverty. Also 90 percent of the children in female-headed households live in impoverished conditions. Median family income on my reservation is just slightly above half the state average for median income. Per capita income is at the same level. Unemployment on the reservation is at 49 percent according to recent BIA statistics. And nearly one-

third of all Indians on the reservation have not attained a high school diploma. Finally it is absolutely critical to note that approximately 50 percent of the population on the reservation is under 25 years of age, indicating that these problems will need to be addressed over the long term.

What does that mean in the larger picture? Let me give you some examples.

Welfare reform legislation: This is the nation leading the world in terms of number of people in poverty. There are some 9 million children in this country in poverty. Welfare reform eliminates the safety net for those children. Now let me tell you about some real people. Native Americans are the poorest people in the country. Four out of 10 of the poorest counties in the nation are on Indian reservations. This is the same as White Earth. My daughter's entire third grade class with few exceptions is below the poverty level. The only choice those parents have with any hope—with 45 percent unemployment—is to work at the casino at about six bucks an hour. With two parents working and paying child care expenses, this makes them ostensibly the working poor. Not much different than being in poverty. So my friends, a family of seven who live in a two-bedroom trailer down the road from me—a fifteen-year-old trailer—on AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] have few options under the new welfare reform plan. I will not stand by mute as the safety net is taken away from those children and that third grade class.

Environmental policy: WTI Incinerator is a hazardous incinerator in East Liverpool, Ohio, located less than 1,000 feet from a school. It was visited by Al Gore in 1992 where he pledged if elected, it would not open. It did.

Endangered species: Bill Clinton said in 1992 that he would not allow a weakening of the Endangered Species Act, yet he signed an appropriations bill in 1994 that prohibits any funds to be used to unlist or list any species under the Endangered Species Act. This put a freeze on any action on over one thousand species that are waiting to be listed under the act. . . .

How about Indian policy? Lots of promises and no action. Two free lunches, some Kodak moments, and immense budget cuts. Indian policy has come far in America, there's no question. Until almost the end of the nineteenth century Indians were dealt with by the Department of War. Since then Indian people have been in the Department of Interior. We are the only humans in the Department of Interior treated as a natural resource. . . .

[U]ntil American domestic and foreign policy addresses quality of life issues for the poorest people in the country, we cannot say that there is quality of life. Until all of us are treated as peoples—with full human rights—we cannot tout a human rights record. Until policy decisions are made that do not benefit solely the 1 percent of the population which has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of the population, I do not think that we can collectively say that we are talking about

real economic and social benefits. And finally, until we have an environmental, economic, and social policy that is based on consideration of the impact on the seventh generation from now, we will still be living in a society that is based on conquest, not one that is based on survival.

• • •

Here we include two letters of protest from the prominent writers and activists Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich.

Two Open Letters of Protest to the Clinton Administration

The Clinton administration, despite a few gestures toward easing travel restrictions for Americans traveling there, maintained the harsh embargo on Cuba, a Cold War policy that for decades has prevented vital goods from entering the island nation. When the embargo was further tightened by passage of the Helms-Burton Act, Clinton signed the legislation. Alice Walker, the novelist and poet, responded with an open letter, excerpted here.

ALICE WALKER, LETTER TO PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (MARCH 13, 1996)⁴

Dear President Clinton:

Thank you very much for the invitation to visit the White House while I was in Washington in January. I am sorry circumstances made it impossible for us to meet. I was looking forward to experiencing the symbolic seat of North American government in a new way. In the past, I have only picketed the White House, and as a student walking up and down the street outside it, I used to wonder might be inside. It seemed to be made of cardboard, and appeared empty and oppressive, remote from the concerns of a few black students—and their courageous white teacher—from the deep South. . . .

The bill you have signed to further tighten the blockade hurts me deeply. I travel to Cuba whenever I can, to take medicine and the small, perhaps insignificant, comfort of my presence, to those whose courage and tenderness have inspired me practically my entire life.

I have seen how the embargo hurts everyone in Cuba, but especially Cuban children, infants in particular. I spend some nights in utter sleeplessness worrying