

The Voice of Reason

Owen Broadhurst offers voters what the catfight of major party politics can't give

By Maureen Turner

Log on to Owen Broadhurst's campaign website (www.owenbroadhurst.org) and the first thing you see isn't a chatty profile of the candidate or a plump list of campaign promises—it's a link to the website of his party, the Green-Rainbow Party, with information about the small but serious slate of candidates the party is fielding in November's elections.

It would be a mistake to read Broadhurst's deference to his party as a sign that his own campaign lacks substance. Broadhurst's run for the 3rd Hampden state rep seat—left vacant after the resignation of Dan Keenan—has been a steady, sincere affair since it kicked off back in February with a dense campaign announcement that covered corporate welfare, the failings of the healthcare system and the need for sustainable development. His website, studded with links to even deeper information about matters like tax reform and labor legislation, makes it clear that he credits voters with thinking as deeply about those issues as he does.

Broadhurst won't win this election, but he's hoping to get people talking about things that matter in the district and the state, and maybe to get them thinking about new, creative solutions. It's also an opportunity to advance his party and its platform, whose focus on grassroots democracy, social justice and the environment offers a home to progressive voters who no longer find the state's Democratic party a comfortable fit.

"People who hear me out and are actually listening to what I'm saying have reacted with a touch of surprise and inspiration," Broadhurst says. "My goal is to—well, hopefully, to get elected—but to help facilitate movements, to help facilitate organizing around these issues."

Getting people to hear him out is a significant but not insurmountable task for Broadhurst. While he lacks the big-party status of his opponents in the Nov. 7 election—Democrat Rosemary Sandlin, the favorite in the race, and Republican Bob Magovern—the 36-year-old Broadhurst has a long resume of activism, both in his party and on local issues, like the recent citizens' campaign against big-box development in Agawam. Anyone who's spent time in the news and politics forums on MassLive.com is familiar with posts by "Obroadhurst."

Broadhurst says he's been politically engaged since joining the National Wildlife Federation at age five. When he turned 18, he registered as a Democrat and cast his first vote for Mike Dukakis for president.

"But I quickly became disillusioned with Democratic party politics, quickly became disillusioned with how the party was operating in this state," he says. Nationally, he watched Democrats support unjust wars; locally, he watched Democratic legislators push the energy deregulation that paved the way for a controversial power plant built in Agawam in the '90s and another now planned

for Russell. While working as a certified nursing assistant at a local nursing home, he says, "I found who was cutting Medicaid benefits for the people I was caring for: the Democratic party was, their state legislature."

Broadhurst left the Democrats and became an unenrolled voter until 2002, when he was inspired by the gubernatorial campaign of Green-Rainbow candidate Jill Stein. "She was talking about issues I was concerned about, issues I was working on in the town of Agawam at the time," he says. "Her politics and mine seemed to fit like a glove."

Broadhurst was initially intrigued by Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts, an activist group that grew out of Robert Reich's 2002 campaign. But he soon came to see their efforts to change the party from within as futile. "What joy could they possibly derive from constantly beating their head against the wall until it's bloody? What fun is that?" he asks. "Working in the Green-Rainbow Party, people ... can find themselves in positions of leadership very fast, and they can find themselves in positions of influence very fast."

And, Broadhurst adds, they can force debate on issues that would otherwise be ignored. He believes this year's gubernatorial candidates would not be discussing the unequal burden placed on lower- and middle-income residents by the regressive property tax were it not for Grace Ross, this year's Green-Rainbow nominee. And he credits his own presence in the 3rd Hampden race with bringing attention to issues like the Russell power plant and the controversial state plan to cut more than 130 acres of trees at Robinson State Park, both of which he strongly opposes.

With a "war chest" that's yet to top \$700 and an aversion to the big-money campaigning that's come to control the democratic process, Broadhurst depends on public debates, alternate media and door-knocking to get his message out. When he talks to voters, he says, they voice common concerns: inadequate funding of public schools, an unequal distribution of local aid that leaves western Mass. in the cold, the crushing cost of healthcare.

In short: voters feel that they're working harder, paying higher taxes and fees, and getting less in return. Meanwhile corporations and the wealthy get tax breaks, and fiascos like the Big Dig flush away taxpayers' money.

"People are trapped in the paradigm of piece-of-the-pie politics. We see various interests being set against each other; we see communities that think they are competing against each other for scarce resources," Broadhurst says. "But we don't have a scarcity of resources in the state of Massachusetts. The problem is that the resources are being very poorly managed."

Broadhurst's platform includes a number of ideas



OWEN BROADHURST PHOTO

Owen Broadhurst: "People are trapped in the paradigm of piece-of-the-pie politics."

that would help communities save money while also protecting natural resources, like converting municipal fleets to biodiesel or "grease car" vehicles, or fostering partnerships between farmers and local restaurants and schools. He takes a strongly pro-labor stand and backs a single-payer healthcare plan and Clean Elections.

He also supports equal marriage rights for gay couples—a position somehow overlooked by the lobbying group MassEquality, which in August released a statement calling Sandlin the only candidate in the race to support equal marriage. Broadhurst, who is gay, and who helped create a taskforce on equal marriage within his party, has yet to get a public correction from the group. He doesn't resent MassEquality's support of Sandlin, he says: "They would be foolish not to [endorse her]. Looking at the way things are today, we've got to assume that the Democrat will win. ... What I do find surprising is finding myself shoved back into the closet by gay lobbyists."

Broadhurst doesn't think MassEquality deliberately misrepresented his position; he suspects the organization simply failed to even consider a third-party candidate. Which points to the major problem facing those candidates: getting voters to consider their candidacies as "real," as worth supporting.

"I hear people express frustration with the direction the two major parties are taking us, but I also hear a real reluctance to gamble on candidates that are viewed as such a shot in the dark," Broadhurst says. "The 'spoiler' fears are still with us. People are so reluctant to back any candidate who might give the more hideous of the two major candidates a chance."♦

mturner@valleyadvocate.com