

What Could Possibly Go Right? Hosted by Vicki Robin for Post Carbon Institute

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Episode 24 with Thom Hartmann

Thom Hartmann

Author & America's #1 Progressive talk show host

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Transcript

Thom Hartmann

Democracy is not a spectator sport. It's all about all of us getting involved. Everybody needs to get active and "Tag, You're It!"

Vicki Robin

Welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?" a project of the Post Carbon Institute. We interview cultural scouts to help us see more clearly so we can act more courageously in turbulent times. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. Today's treat is a conversation with Thom Hartmann, host of the nation's number one progressive talk show for over a decade. His tagline is: "Democracy begins with you. Get out there. Get active. Tag, you're it!" We spoke two days after the election. A little backstory. I met Thom 20 years ago, on a bus on a bumpy road up to Dharamsala, India, where 40 thought leaders and their partners met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama for four days through a project called the Synthesis Dialogues. Of course, when you have 40 thought leaders all eager to tell His Holiness their truths, you sort of lose the synthesis and you lose the dialogue and the project broke down and the facilitators finally cried uncle and asked for members of the group to work with them to facilitate the group. Thom and I raised our hands and thus began years of mutual respect. Talkers Magazine ranked Thom as the number one progressive talk show host in America, with a cumulative audience of 7 million excluding the TV audience. For nine years, he also hosted an evening TV program that was first carried by Free Speech TV, and later picked up by RT TV out of Washington, DC. He separated from RT TV in 2017. He's also a four-time Project Censored award-winner, and York Times bestselling author of 24 books in print, invented the "hunters in a farmer's world" reframe for ADHD and wrote five books on the subject. So here's Thom.

Vicki Robin

Welcome, Thom to "What Could Possibly Go Right?" where we ask cultural scouts to put on their headlamps and shine a light on the mucky, messy, near future so that people of goodwill can see more clearly and have more courage to act. You have really gently unpacked the historical legacies we struggle with today politically, how we got here, and what remedies we can apply to liberate us from the strangleholds on democracy. We're passing through what

seems to me to be a stress test of American democracy, and as of this moment, the jury is out on the results of the election. We're talking on Friday, November 6, and just whatever kind of mess we're gonna go through in the next 70 days or so... So, the question we posed to every guest is "What could possibly go right?" And by this, I'm asking you to look out over this vast battlefield of the election and show us the lay of the land. What opportunities for a more perfect union, a sane, healthy, wise union have arisen? What are you paying attention to? What surprises have come? Where do the good people who listen to you and who listen to me step next in the battlefield? According to Thom, what could possibly go right?

Thom Hartmann

Well, I think that we could, probably the biggest thing that could go right out of this election, is a widespread understanding among the American electorate and a repudiation of the electoral strategies the Republican Party has been pursuing since the Reagan revolution. Back in 1976 and 1978, there were a pair of Supreme Court decisions; Buckley vs Valeo, and First National Bank vs Bellotti. The first said, for the first time in the history of the United States, that if a wealthy person wants to own a politician to the point that they are literally the only patron of that politician - they give them money, they give them free trips, they do whatever they want - and that politician, in turn does nothing but pass legislation of interest to that patron; that used to be called bribery or corruption. The Supreme Court in 1976 said no, that's called free speech; that rich person's money is actually a form of speech, and by buying a politician, or even multiple politicians, that is simply the exercise of free speech, and the government cannot infringe on that. In doing so in '76, they struck down dozens of laws that have been passed in '74, '75 and early '76; the good government laws that followed the Nixon bribery scandals and all the problems with Nixon. And then in '78, two years later, they extended that same logic to corporations, and First National Bank vs Bellotti said corporations are persons and so they have first amendment rights too to buy politicians. The result of that was an absolute flood of unregulated money that poured into the Republican Party and got Ronald Reagan elected in 1980. The Democratic Party at that point in time didn't pursue this because they were the party of the labor unions, and the labor unions were basically not affected, frankly, by the Buckley or Bellotti decisions. But once Reagan came into office, he so effectively gutted the country of labor unions that we went from being one-third of workers in America roughly unionized in 1980, to about 12% by the end of the Reagan-Bush era, 12 years later, and it's 6% right now in the private sector. So as a result of that in '92, Bill Clinton wanted to run for President and it was like, Where are we going to get our money from? You know? The labor unions are gutted; they can no longer pay us. So him and Al From put this thing together - the DLC, the Democratic Leadership Council - specifically to raise money for Democrats from big corporations, and their idea was: We'll just leave the dirty corporations to the Republicans. We'll let them deal with the chemical companies and the weapons manufacturers and things like that. We'll be with the banks and the insurance companies and the pharmaceutical companies because they're so nice, right? And what it did was, it destroyed the Democratic Party. The party lost its credibility, and it's led to 40 years of dysfunction or 30 years of dysfunction ever since then on the Democratic Party side. What the Republican Party did was they sold their soul in that election of 1980 to the big corporations and the billionaires and have continued to ever since, but saying, "Hey, we're a party that's completely beholden to big billionaires and big corporations" doesn't

get you votes. So they had to bring in a few other constituencies. So it was the white grievance racist vote. It was the gun owner freak out vote. It was the religious nut vote. It was the misogynist vote. So they brought together this bizarre little coalition of special interest groups basically, and the anti-abortion groups. But you know, they're basically running a con on all these groups, because they're just a front for the billionaires and the big corporations. When Trump said that their mission was to cut taxes and deregulate industry, that really is all that there is to it. But they've been lying to people, you know, for 40 years. And now, I think, the principal way that they've been able to hold power has been through the suppression of the vote, through preventing people from voting, preventing people from registering to vote. Democrats have been unwilling to even discuss that up until this election. The fact that this is the Republicans', basically, one trick pony; is suppressing the vote. You know, the main way that they've been suppressing the vote since the 2000 election is by throwing people off the voting rolls, so that when they show up to vote, they can't vote, or if they do vote, they're given a provisional ballot, which in many cases is never counted. The upshot of all this is that now in the Trump administration, they've just been right up-front about it; we're going to prevent as many people from voting as possible. And if they do get through and vote, we're going to try not have their vote counted. That's what we're all about. I think that's hopefully a stunning realization that will sink in across the American landscape. And number one, the Democrats will get their messaging act together and start talking about what they're actually in favor of. And hopefully, they're in favor of a return to the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson and the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt; the things that they historically have been all about, protecting the environment, protecting workers, protecting families, things like that, and taxing giant corporations and billionaires in order to provide those protections. If that happens, then I think that there's a real... I mean, that's like the best thing that could happen. Whether that's going to happen or not, it's going to depend on some competent leadership in the Democratic Party, and it's going to depend on some of the corporate Democrats, the Bill Clinton class of Democrats, which is a little over half the party right now, to be willing to tolerate the progressives. We had this bizarre and unnerving situation a few days ago, where one of the members of the "we take money from corporations" caucus within the Democratic Party, Ms Spanberger, on a conference call just said, "We lost this election because the word socialism", which is complete nonsense. It was actually every single Democrat who lost a seat in this election was one of these corporate Democrats. None of the progressives lost, to the best of my knowledge. So, I'm hopeful that this is a wake up moment, not just for the country, but for the Democratic Party as well.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, so where do you see... Where do you look for the possibility that this is going to happen? Because, we're all sort of like, we're trying to come off the bleachers in this election, in this democracy. We're trying to come off the bleachers and onto the field. People have been doing that. They've been joining teams and sub teams and being mascots. I mean, we're just trying to find a place on the field to tip the game. So where do you see moves happening right now that could actually tip the balance? It's not just the hope that we hope for or what we wish for but where is the power moving? Where is the power moving?

Thom Hartmann

Right. Much like in the Republican Party where you've got the anti-abortion group and then you've got the pro-gun group and they kind of tolerate each other, even though how can you say a pro-gun group is pro-life, or whatever; they get along. On the Democratic side, there are a bunch of coalitions, although the Democrats are actually committed to these coalitions' agendas because they're things that will work to the advantage of people, in your benefit to people. We've got substantial movement to stop global warming, to deal with climate change, to try to put our planet back together. We've got a substantial movement to try to equalize, socially and economically, the power imbalance between white people and minorities in the United States and between men and women in the United States. You've got a substantial coalition that are committed to basic economic reform, particularly with regard to labor and the empowerment of labor unions. You've got a substantial coalition who are committed to public forums; things like public banking, public utilities. There is a strengthening of those parts of the commons that are the so-called natural monopolies, you know; power, water, sewage, fire, police, the things that government really should be doing. With regard to power and water and now I'd say, actually, the internet as well, that these are things that should be considered the commons, and should be run by government for the benefit of people. You know, I don't want the government making my BlueJeans. But I'm very upset about the fact that there's only one internet service provider that I can buy from, and I have to go with whatever price they say, and they're not operating in my best interest, and they're spying on everything I do, and selling that information. So, I can get my internet from the government like the City of Chattanooga did, and it's better, it's cheaper, it's faster, it's more reliable and your privacy's assured. Those coalitions all exist within the Democratic Party and each one of them is complementary to the others, because there's a common idea among them all, which is the general welfare of the people of the United States, the common good. So, what I'm seeing is that in each one of those tranches, each one of those slices of the electorate, those movements are getting stronger and more active and more empowered. You know, the women's rights movement as well and the Black Lives Matter movement, and there's a Hispanic movement that's growing within the Democratic Party, etc; that all of these things need to be happening at the same time, and the Democratic Party should be more acting like the conductor of the orchestra rather than the leader of the parade, as it were.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, exactly. And we're teetering, we're at the moment when it's probably soon will be President-Elect Biden. A lot of people have - I know this is very political, but - a lot of people have held their noses to sort of get Biden over the finish line, so that we have somebody we can work with, to enact the common good agenda, if you will, that all these tranches represent. And yet, as you said, with that call, on the left, very often they say, "There's not message discipline. There's not discipline." You know? This becomes the circular firing squad when we get upset, for some reason. So where do you see some opportunities for transcending that? Is the opportunity to come because Biden picks the right cabinet? Or is it going to come because the standard-bearer actually forms the proper conversation? Is it going to come because these movements realize we can't depend on anybody to do it for us? Where's that breakthrough at this potent moment when we haven't circled up to fight each other?

Thom Hartmann

It's happening in two areas. One is the social area, society at large. All of these movements have emerged largely out of that, as opposed to some of the... We don't even need to compare it to the Republicans and their movement. But the second is the political dimension of it. I think there's a general misapprehension of the role of a politician, even among some politicians, of basically what a good politician does, is they - more often than not - is they're surveying that social landscape and saying, "Where's there a parade?" And when a parade gets large enough and big enough and has enough momentum, then they go down and jump in front of it and hoist the flag and say, "This is my parade." And these parades, these tranches, these factions within the Democratic Party that I mentioned, are as they get stronger and larger and louder and more effective, are drawing more and more political support. That's just kind of the iron law of politics, that where the people go, the politicians will follow. I recognize the importance and the value of political talent. There are some people who are - Barack Obama, for example, is a brilliant politician, a brilliant orator, a brilliant articulate spokesperson for all the issues that we deal with. Joe Biden is much less articulate, I guess, not just because of his stuttering, but more generally. He's not that brilliant a politician. But at the same time that I recognize the importance of that skill set, I'm also not that big a fan of the great man history, or great man theory of history, that history happens when some extraordinary people step to the fore. I think more often than not, it's not so much an extraordinary person stood up and brought everybody along with them, but that the movement reached a point, a threshold point where it drew people who want to be leaders, and those with the leadership skills emerged as the winners in the competition for who gets to be the politician at the very front of the parade with the flag. And so, which brings us back once again to democracy is not a spectator sport. It's all about all of us getting involved, that everybody needs to get active and, "Tag, you're it!" That's where I think, that's where I hope it goes; that's how if everything really went right. Obviously, it's not going to happen quickly, fast or easily. But we're at a crisis moment, and Rahm Emmanuel is credited with saying, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." But that mentality goes back to...

Vicki Robin

Milton Friedman?

Thom Hartmann

Yeah. And so we've got a great crisis here. Let's not let it go to waste.

Vicki Robin

Right. I think in the movements, this awkward word of intersectionality actually is sort of a signifier of something that people are realizing, is that "your issue is my issue." We're up against something that's larger than all of us, that isn't actually embodied in Donald Trump. It's embodied in something else, and we can feel it. And if we lose solidarity, we lose. But if we hang together with a sort of shared analysis, of there's something rotten up there in the power chain, that feels hopeful to me.

Thom Hartmann

Yeah, and that's very different from Clinton's idea of triangulation.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, it's sort of a collaborative... It's sort of that we're on belay. In a way we're on belay, and we understand that this is the risky last part of the summiting, getting out of this. I just have one other thing. There's two words that keep coming to me as sort of deeper signifiers, and one is morality, and another one is healing. To me, I feel like we're in an amoral, we stumbled into an amoral slough, and people are behaving badly, and know they are. There's this feeling that there's something contradictory to our humanity that we seem to be embedded in. And the other one is healing; that you know, whatever things happen in the future, in the near future, we have to heal the divides, or we can't do it. So I just would like... Do either of those words resonate with you for any reason?

Thom Hartmann

Sure. We are 4% of the world's population, 1/20th of the world's population, but we produce one quarter of the world's pollution. We have one fifth of the world's COVID and COVID deaths. We are hoarding wealth at levels that are unbelievable. We have the majority of the world's billionaires. We are desperately in need of healing, and yet, we're the only developed country among the 34 OECD countries, the wealthiest countries in the world; we're the only one that does not define health care as a right, rather than a privilege. We're the only one without a national health care system. You look at Taiwan, they got their first case of COVID the day after we got ours, back in January 20th, January 21. Their last death was April 12. They've had in the entire country during this entire period of time, fewer than 400 cases. They acted. We didn't and the largest part of how and why they acted was they've got what I believe is the world's best single payer health care system. Everybody in the country has a little card that kind of looks like a driver's license with a chip in it. That is their healthcare card, and they can literally walk up to any computer terminal in the country and plug it in or plug in their code number, their pin number, and have instant access to all of their medical records. Any physician anywhere can have access to that within the limits of privacy, you know, any authorised position. As a result of this, the country was able to do testing and contact tracing so easily and so instantly and so effortlessly that, like I said, the last time somebody died of COVID in Taiwan was in April, and here it is, we're in November. So, we have not gone down that road of saying that healing, physical healing, or for that matter, even psychological healing - we consider the brain as like a separate thing from the body; even our health insurance in many cases doesn't pay for mental health services - so, we have not put that front and centre. The result is that we have, in the developed world, the highest level of infant mortality, the highest level of childhood poverty, the highest level of childhood hunger, the highest in the developed world, the highest level of rickets. I mean, it's just nuts what we have, how bad things are in the United States as a result of this cabal, basically, of right wing billionaires who have been controlling our political system since the 1980s. It came along with the Reagan revolution, and from the Koch brothers to the Adelsons to... I mean, we're starting to learn their names, the Mercers and whatnot. They're all subscribing to this libertarian Ayn Rand ideology, you know? Ayn Rand famously so that subscribing to Jesus's teachings is evil. It's like, this is where these people are at, and our supreme court gave them the power back in the '70, and until we figure out a way to take that power away from them, we're going to have an ongoing struggle in this country.

Vicki Robin

Yeah. I do think that naming it as evil, actually, without antipathy toward the individuals but naming it as an evil that has us in its grip. Maybe it's part of what's going to muster the moral force that we need.

Thom Hartmann

I'm hopeful.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, I'm hopeful too actually, Thom. Thank you so so much. I really appreciate you taking the time.

Thom Hartmann

My pleasure, Vicki.

Vicki Robin

Hey, thanks for listening. Don't forget to subscribe and leave us a five star review, which will help this hopeful message get out to more people. Check out the Post Carbon Institute website for show notes and for more guest information. Thanks to all our donors for their support. Thanks also to Asher Miller, Amy Buringrud and Clara Winter at Post Carbon Institute plus production assistant Michelle Wigg from FrugalityandFreedom.com