

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: BERNIE SANDERS

A candid conversation with Vermont's maverick U.S. senator about the end of the middle class, avoiding foreign wars and why he hates both political parties

At a time when politicians—particularly members of Congress—are almost universally reviled and blind partisanship seems to dictate the fate of every piece of legislation, one U.S. senator stands out as a unique voice.

Bernie Sanders has been a senator from Vermont since 2006. It's hard for him to be caught up in partisanship: He's one of only two U.S. senators who identify as independent. Although he caucuses with the Democrats, Sanders refuses to run as one and regularly chides them for abandoning the working class. He has never been much of a party man. When he was first elected to the House of Representatives, in 1990, he refused any party affiliation, making him the longest-serving independent member of Congress in American history.

His views are clear and differ radically from those of his Republican colleagues and often sharply from those of his closest allies, the Democrats. He describes himself as a democratic socialist and often praises Scandinavian-style social democracy. Fox News thinks he's crazy, and he makes MSNBC look timid.

The 72-year-old Brooklyn-born Sanders moved to Vermont in 1968 after graduating from the University of Chicago and spending time on a kibbutz in Israel. Always a leftist activist, he became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. That led him to politics, though

he failed to win early races for the Senate and the governorship.

It wasn't until 1981 that he won his first office, mayor of Burlington, Vermont's largest city, by a total of 10 votes. His four terms were full of his trademark liberal ideas—low-cost housing, reining in the excesses of the local cable-TV operation and forming the Vermont Progressive Party. He has also taught at Harvard and at Hamilton College in New York.

Of course Vermont is one of the bluest states in the country (it gave us onetime presidential candidate Howard Dean), and Sanders is a hero to locals. He won reelection last year with 71 percent of the vote, and his approval ratings make him one of the most popular senators in the country. Nationally, he gained notoriety for his views on gun control (pro), foreign intervention (anti) and, most vocally, his passion for the plight of the middle class and the sorry state of the American economy.

We sent noted economics writer **Jonathan Tasini**, who previously interviewed Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman for PLAYBOY, to sit down with Sanders for a series of discussions in Vermont and Washington. Tasini reports: "I was warned ahead of time: Bernie doesn't do personal revelations. No question about it; he is the anti-Bill Clinton. The most extensive anecdote about Sanders the person came from

a ticket agent at the Vermont airport. When I mentioned what I was doing in the area, she smiled and said, 'Oh, we love Bernie,' and proceeded to tell me how Sanders had helped her boyfriend, a veteran with a back injury who was having a hellish time getting the Department of Veterans Affairs to approve his medical costs. 'By the time they were done, they were on a first-name basis,' she said.

"After spending numerous hours with Senator Sanders, I came to understand why he resists suggestions from his followers that 2016 might be the right time for him to make a run for the White House. It's not that he worries about losing. Although he wants to influence the debate, his hunger for power isn't so insatiable that he would debase himself in the arena of what poses as serious political debate in America."

PLAYBOY: You have said, "There are people working three jobs and four jobs, trying to cobble together an income in order to support their families." Has the middle class died forever?

SANDERS: Well, I certainly hope it's not forever, but one of the untold stories of our time is the collapse of the American middle class. From the end of World War II until 1973, we saw an expanding



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"One out of four major profitable corporations pays zero in federal income taxes. Got that? You'd think that before you cut health care or Social Security, you might want to take a hard look at that issue. Am I missing something here?"

"If you want to talk about nation building, I know a great nation that needs to be rebuilt. It's called the United States of America. I would rather invest in this country than in Iraq or Afghanistan."

middle class, with people’s incomes going up. Since that point, and especially since the Wall Street–driven financial crisis, you’ve seen a real collapse. Since 1999 median family income has gone down \$5,000. Real unemployment, counting people who have given up looking for work or who are working part-time when they want to work full-time, is more than 14 percent. More than 14 percent! You’re seeing millions of people working longer hours for lower wages. When I was growing up in a lower-middle-class family, the gold standard for blue-collar workers was union manufacturing in the automobile industry. As the big three have been rehiring, they’re hiring people at something like \$14 an hour, half the wages. The U.S. has 46 million people living in poverty today. We have the highest rate of childhood poverty in the industrialized world.

PLAYBOY: How do you explain that?

SANDERS: We live in a hypercapitalist society, which means the function of every institution is not to perform a public service but to make as much money as possible. There’s an effort to privatize water, for God’s sake. I suppose somebody will figure out how to charge you for the oxygen you breathe. The function of health care, in a rational world, is to make sure every person, as a right, has access to the health care they need in the most cost-effective way possible. That is not the nature of our health care system at all. The function of this health care system is for people in the system—whether it’s insurance companies, drug companies, medical specialists—to make as much money out of it as possible. In five minutes one could come up with ways to make the system simpler and more cost effective.

PLAYBOY: Has this hypercapitalism accelerated lately?

SANDERS: People have lost sight of America as a society where everyone has at least a minimal standard of living and is entitled to certain basic rights, a nation in which every child has a good-quality education, has access to health care and lives in an environmentally clean community, not as an opportunity for billionaires to make even more money and avoid taxes by stashing their money in the Cayman Islands. Can you argue that the era of unfettered capitalism should be over? Absolutely. Does this system of hypercapitalism, this incredibly unequal distribution of wealth and income, need fundamental reform? Absolutely it does. You have the entire scientific community saying we have to be very aggressive in cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Yet you’re seeing the heads of coal companies and oil companies willing to sacrifice the well-being of the entire planet for their short-term profits. And these folks are funding phony organizations to try to create doubt about the reality of global warming.

PLAYBOY: Aren’t they just taking care of their shareholders?

SANDERS: Big business is willing to destroy the planet for short-term profits. I regard that as just incomprehensible. Incomprehensible. And because of their power over the political process, you hear a deafening silence in the U.S. Congress and in other bodies around the world about the severity of the problem. Global warming is a far more serious problem than Al Qaeda.

PLAYBOY: Today, people who don’t have a union, pensions or health care feel resentful of those who do have those benefits.

SANDERS: That’s part of the Republican plan. It has worked very well. This is not a new idea. Think back 50 years, to the 1950s and the 1960s. The lowest-paid white workers in America were where? They were in Mississippi, in Alabama. How did those companies get away with paying them such low wages? They played them off against black workers, who were even worse off. Then over the years you play immigrants against native-born people; you play straight people against gay people. Rather than say, “Firefighters have a halfway decent health care program, and we have to make sure you get one as good as theirs,”

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Republicans are pretty clever in playing one group against another. When you have a president of the United States who is talking about cuts in Social Security and veterans’ programs, who was willing earlier on to give continued tax breaks to billionaires and unwilling to go after huge corporate loopholes, people sit there and say, “Both parties are working for the big-money interests.”

PLAYBOY: Ten years ago jobs were going abroad to low-wage countries. Now jobs are coming back because we’re seen as an even lower-wage country.

SANDERS: There’s a quote I can dig up for you from some guy saying General Electric can expand in the United States because the wages are now competitive with the rest of the world. You can now hire workers in America for wages so low it becomes a good investment for American companies. That is pathetic. The goal of all those trade agreements was, in fact, to shut down plants in America. We have lost almost 60,000 manufacturing plants and millions of good-paying jobs in the past 10 years. Products go to China, Vietnam and elsewhere, are

manufactured and brought back to the United States, not only causing unemployment in this country but pushing wages down. That’s what corporate America has wanted, and it has significantly succeeded.

PLAYBOY: You’ve said that today the wealthiest 400 individuals in this country own more wealth than the bottom half of America, 150 million people.

SANDERS: One family, the Waltons, who own Walmart, has more wealth than the bottom 40 percent. The top one percent today owns 38 percent of all wealth. Take a wild and crazy guess as to what the bottom 60 percent own.

PLAYBOY: Probably five percent.

SANDERS: No, 2.3 percent. When we were growing up and read about oligarchic countries in Latin America and elsewhere, did you ever think that in the United States one percent would own 38 percent of the wealth and the bottom 60 percent only 2.3 percent? As part of the budget debate, I brought forth an amendment in committee. I looked at my Republican friends and said something like “I know you’ve been interested in welfare reform. So am I, and I want to give you the opportunity right now to take on the biggest welfare cheat in the United States of America.” In state after state, Walmart employees are on Medicaid, they’re on food stamps, they’re in publicly subsidized housing. I said, “If we can raise the minimum wage and get a living wage for these people, we’re going to save billions of dollars. The wealthiest family in this country, the Walton family, is getting welfare from the taxpayers of this country. Let’s end that.” You’ll be shocked to know I didn’t get any votes from the Republicans on that.

PLAYBOY: You make the U.S. sound like a banana republic in which a handful of families control all the economic and political power.

SANDERS: Yes, it is. In more technical economic terms I would call it an oligarchy. You have an economy where a very few people control a large part of the wealth. You have an economy where the top six financial institutions have assets equivalent to two thirds of the GDP of the United States, more than \$9 trillion. That’s economic control. On top of that, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on campaign finance, *Citizens United*, said to these folks, “Hey, so you own the economy. Fine. Now we’re giving you the opportunity to own the political process.” The other part of the story is what happens on the floors of the Senate and the House. If there’s a tough vote in the House or the Senate—for example, legislation to break up the large banks—people might come up and say, “Bernie, that’s a pretty good idea, but I can’t vote for that.” Why not? Because when you go home, what do you think is going to happen? Wall Street dumps a few million dollars into your opponent’s campaign.

PLAYBOY: Beyond *Citizens United*, has the Supreme Court become too partisan?

SANDERS: The Supreme Court has always been political, but it’s much more so now. The Republicans are tougher than the Democrats. They nominate right-wing judges who act very boldly. Democrats nominate moderates. *Citizens United* will go down in history as one of the worst decisions ever made by the U.S. Supreme Court. Does anyone really think *Bush v. Gore* was decided on the legal merits? I saw a study that said when the Chamber of Commerce weighs in on a case, the justices decide in the business lobby’s favor almost 70 percent of the time.

PLAYBOY: The collapse of the middle class didn’t happen overnight. This is a process of at least 30 or 40 years, right?

SANDERS: It happened in a few ways. Number one, the decline of trade unions in America. At the end of the day unions are what workers have to negotiate decent contracts, and unions are what give working people political clout. When you see a devastating reduction of the trade unions, as you see in Michigan, workers will have less power to negotiate contracts and less political clout.

PLAYBOY: In your youth, unions represented probably 35 percent of the workforce. Now it’s 11 percent.

SANDERS: Exactly. Most workers now have nobody to look after them, so the employer says, “Oh, by the way, good news! We’re giving you a job, but you don’t get any vacation time.” Where are you going to go? You’re going to go to your union rep to talk about it. But you don’t have a union rep, so you say, because everybody else is unemployed, “Thank you very much. I’ll take the job.”

PLAYBOY: How do you think the U.S. should view and engage China?

SANDERS: We should do everything we can to avoid a hugely expensive cold war with China similar to what we had with the Soviet Union. We should also do our best, in a respectful way, to support those elements in China fighting for a democratic society. But I vigorously opposed the permanent normal trade relations agreement with China that was pushed by corporate America and supported by many Democrats as well as Republicans. The motive for that agreement was to shut down plants in this country and take advantage of cheap labor in China.

PLAYBOY: You complained recently about ExxonMobil, “They had a bad year in 2009. They only made \$19 billion in profit, and they paid nothing in federal income taxes, but they got a \$156 million refund from the IRS.”

SANDERS: Bank of America operated 200 subsidiaries in the Cayman Islands. In 2010 it got a \$1.9 billion rebate from the IRS. There’s a list of about 15 companies that paid nothing, or very little, in taxes. Many of these institutions—Bank of America, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase—were actually bailed

out by the American people. They were wonderful, proud American companies when they came for their welfare checks from the American people. After the bailout, they suddenly love the Cayman Islands and are parking all their money there. The next time they go broke, they can go to the Cayman Islands for a bailout, not the American people. There’s an estimate out there that we’re losing about \$100 billion a year because companies are taking advantage of the tax havens in the Cayman Islands, Bermuda and so on—\$100 billion a year!

PLAYBOY: That’s a sizable pile of cash.

SANDERS: Today one out of four major profitable corporations pays zero in federal income taxes. Got that? Today, what corporations are paying into the U.S. Treasury, as a percentage of GDP, is lower than in any other major country on earth. You would think that before you cut health care, education, nutrition or Social Security, you might want to take a hard look at that issue. I mean, am I missing something here?

PLAYBOY: You once said, “It is Robin Hood in reverse. We are taking from

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working families who are hurting and giving it to the wealthiest people.”

SANDERS: Welcome to America 2013. We are in the midst of intense class warfare, where the wealthiest people and the largest corporations are at war with the middle class and working families of this country, and it is obvious the big-money interests are winning that war. They are winning the war in terms of their lobbyists negotiating tax breaks for people who don’t need them and then fighting for cuts for working families. The Business Roundtable—CEOs of the largest companies in the U.S.—came to Washington earlier this year and proposed that we raise the Medicare and Social Security eligibility ages to 70. Can you imagine the chutzpah of guys who are worth hundreds of millions of dollars in some cases and have retirement packages the likes of which average Americans couldn’t even dream, proposing that? Can you imagine somebody who will get a golden parachute of perhaps tens of millions of dollars—who is not going to have a financial worry in his or her life—coming to Washington and

saying, “I want you to raise Medicare eligibility to 70”?

PLAYBOY: Is the problem that wealthy CEOs are out of touch with the concerns of the common man?

SANDERS: Absolutely. These are people whose kids live in gated communities, people who get into their chauffeured cars when they travel, into their own jet planes, and go all over the world. They eat at the finest restaurants; they work out in the greatest gyms. They haven’t got a clue or a concern about what’s going on with ordinary Americans.

PLAYBOY: We saw one calculation that said if the productivity of workers was matched to the minimum wage, the minimum wage in America would be \$22 an hour, three times what it is.

SANDERS: If I give you a new tool—for example, a computer as opposed to a yellow pad—we have a right to expect you to be more productive, right? If I give a guy in the woods a chain saw as opposed to an old-fashioned saw, that guy’s going to cut down more trees. Here is the irony: Our society has become far more productive—productivity has soared—and yet all the gains from that productivity have gone to the people at the top. While you have become more productive as a worker, your wages, income and benefits have gone down.

PLAYBOY: Is anyone in Washington concerned about this?

SANDERS: Every speech I give, I get a question. “Bernie, I don’t understand. These CEOs and large financial institutions were clearly engaged in fraudulent behavior, but none of these guys is in jail. Why?” Attorney General Eric Holder said he had concerns about the Department of Justice prosecuting large financial institutions because if they became destabilized, it would have an impact on our economy and the world economy. In other words, these guys are not only too big to fail, they’re too big to jail.

PLAYBOY: How powerful is Wall Street in Washington?

SANDERS: The Wall Street folks spent billions and billions of dollars to deregulate Wall Street. Then they proceeded to create the world’s largest gambling casino, which then ended up collapsing and was bailed out, against my vote, by the American people. Then, the American people looked to the president of the United States and Congress to say, “How did it happen? Hold these bastards accountable. Throw the crooks in jail. Do something.” I was new to the Senate at the time. I remember we went to the White House and met with the president, the secretary of the treasury, the whole financial team, and our message was: The American people are outraged. Wall Street has just caused immense suffering in this country. People want action. What are you going to do about it?

PLAYBOY: And the president said...?

SANDERS: Oh, I hesitate to tell you—I

don't like to talk about private sessions behind closed doors with the president, but let's just say the response to that discussion from the president and his team was not inspiring, and the proof is in the pudding. The president has hired people from Wall Street, obviously. We had Federal Reserve Board chairman Ben Bernanke come before the Senate Budget Committee, and I said, "Mr. Bernanke, can you tell me the role the Fed played—how much money the Fed provided to financial institutions, and which ones, during the financial crisis?" He said, "No, I can't tell you that. I'm not going to tell you that."

PLAYBOY: Do you think the term *class warfare* is a hard thing to explain to or use with most Americans?

SANDERS: People understand it. Sometimes people come up to me and say I'm courageous for saying all these things. I say, "I'm not courageous. Go look at these guys who want to give more tax breaks to billionaires and cut programs for working families. That is incredibly courageous, because the vast majority of the American people think that's crazy." The polling says: Don't cut Social Security, don't cut Medicare, don't cut Medicaid. Ask the wealthy and large corporations to pay more taxes. The political question is, why have the Republicans not been reduced to a 15 percent marginal third party?

PLAYBOY: And the answer is?

SANDERS: Most people do not perceive a heck of a lot of difference between either party. The Democrats are too diffuse, and their message is so unclear the American people don't see the real difference.

PLAYBOY: Some people claim Obamacare was really a payoff to the drug companies and the insurance companies to continue to make billions of dollars.

SANDERS: I think you can make that case. You could also say it was an expensive and inefficient way of doing some good things. We can't ignore the fact that at a time when 50 million people have no health insurance, after Obamacare we're going to provide insurance, in a rather complicated way, to 30 million more through Medicaid and access through exchanges. That's not anything to sneeze at.

PLAYBOY: So Obamacare in your view is a plus?

SANDERS: Well, as a matter of fact, it's no great secret that early on the president made a deal with the drug companies to get them onboard, saying there would not be an effort to lower the cost of prescription drugs. On financial issues the president is a moderate, not very progressive at all.

PLAYBOY: Do you respond to politicians who say they're patriots and they support the troops but then vote to cut veterans' benefits?

SANDERS: People who give great speeches about the need to go to war and years later talk about gutting benefits for vets

or ignoring their needs? As somebody who has always been antiwar—I'm not a pacifist but I've always understood war is the last recourse—I also understand the cost of war. Some people think more Vietnam vets committed suicide than were killed in Vietnam. Lives were just totally destroyed. Right now, as a result of this war in Iraq, which I voted against, there are an estimated 50,000 veterans suffering from minor to moderate traumatic brain injuries. These are folks you would not recognize walking down the street. This is not somebody who has had half his head blown off. These are folks who are functioning but have been exposed to multiple explosions; maybe they have had many, many concussions. We don't know what that will mean over the years. We don't know its impact on depression, on other emotional attributes, on behavior.

PLAYBOY: How would you assess the country's nation-building efforts around the world, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan?

SANDERS: If you want to talk about nation building, I know a great nation

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that needs to be rebuilt. It's called the United States of America. I would rather invest in this country than in Iraq or Afghanistan. Our roads and bridges and railroads and water systems and schools need rebuilding. We have been at war now for more than a decade. Our troops have done a tremendous job, but it is time for the people of Afghanistan to take full responsibility for their country and for waging the war against the Taliban. And in Iraq, I think it's clear that nation building didn't work very well.

PLAYBOY: There has been a debate about the president's use of drones, particularly whether any president can order the killing of an American citizen without due process. What's your view?

SANDERS: The way the drone program has been handled is a major reason I voted against the nomination of John Brennan to head the CIA. Of course we must defend ourselves against terrorism, but I am not convinced Brennan is adequately sensitive to the important balancing act required to make protecting our civil liberties an integral part of ensuring our national security. Drone

attacks that kill innocent people are immoral and create an enormous amount of anti-Americanism.

PLAYBOY: Do you think international terrorist attacks at home are a serious threat requiring more surveillance, less privacy or other actions? Do we need a London-style network of cameras on public streets? How active should the NSA be?

SANDERS: I think we can fight terrorism without undermining the Constitution. That is why I voted against the so-called Patriot Act. In my view, that surveillance law gives the government far too much power to spy on innocent U.S. citizens and provides for very little oversight or disclosure.

PLAYBOY: What role does religious fundamentalism play in conflicts today in the world and at home, whether it's fundamentalist Islam, Christianity or Judaism?

SANDERS: I have real problems with people who believe they have a direct line from God and can commit any act, no matter how horrendous, because it is "God's will." There is no simple answer to combating religious fundamentalism. It's a question of education, of bringing people together to discover their common humanity and working toward more tolerant and democratic societies.

PLAYBOY: If you had the power, how would you negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where fundamentalism is so strong?

SANDERS: The hatred, violence and loss of life that define this conflict make living an ordinary life a constant struggle for both peoples. We must work with those Israeli and Palestinian leaders who are committed to peace, security and statehood rather than to empty rhetoric and violence. A two-state solution must include compromises from both sides to achieve a fair and lasting peace in the region. The Palestinians must fulfill their responsibilities to end terrorism against Israel and recognize Israel's right to exist. In return, the Israelis must end their policy of targeted killings, prevent further Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes, businesses and infrastructure.

PLAYBOY: And what role, if any, do you see for the U.S. in Syria?

SANDERS: With regard to Syria, it is my strong opinion that Bashar al-Assad has to go. He is a terrible dictator at war with his own people. The difficulty for the United States is to make certain the opposition groups we support in Syria are not extremists working with Al Qaeda.

PLAYBOY: Is the deficit a challenge to be addressed slowly over time, as Paul Krugman and others argue, or an immediate crisis that puts the country at grave risk and requires immediate deep cuts, as others say? Do you see a price for inaction?

SANDERS: Congressional action has already resulted in a major reduction of the deficit, and (continued on page 130)

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I expect that in years to come those reductions will continue. Our focus has to be on the economic crisis facing the working families of this country. We need to address the reality that real unemployment today is around 14 percent and higher for young people and minorities. We need to invest significantly in rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure and transforming our energy system away from fossil fuels. When we do that we make the country more productive, cut greenhouse gas emissions and create millions of jobs. We cannot continue to balance the budget on the backs of the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor.

PLAYBOY: Yet people go out every two or four years and vote for those two parties. Incumbents keep doing those things, and they keep getting reelected.

SANDERS: I think a lot of that has to do with people voting for what they perceive to be the lesser of two evils. A couple of years ago, not long after President Obama was elected, I had the opportunity to be in the Oval Office with him. What I said to him—I won't tell you what he said to me—was "Now is the time not for another Bill Clinton but for an FDR. People want to know why their standard of living is going down, why they're getting battered. They want to know who is responsible, and they want to know what we are going to do about that." That's what the American people want to hear. Why is the standard of living for the average American going down? Why is the gap between the rich and the poor getting wider? Why is Wall Street able to get away with murder? People want to know why.

PLAYBOY: How would you describe the differences between FDR and Bill Clinton?

SANDERS: Well, Clinton was and is a very smart guy, but he is the guy who signed NAFTA. I like Bill Clinton, I like Hillary Clinton, but they live in a world surrounded by a lot of money. It's not an accident that Clinton is doing a fantastic job with his foundation. Where do you think that money is coming from? The point being that Clinton was a moderate Democrat who was heavily influenced by Wall Street and big-money interests, and Obama is governing in that same way.

PLAYBOY: And compared with FDR?

SANDERS: The difference is FDR had the courage and the good political sense to understand that in the middle of terrible economic times the American people wanted to know what caused their suffering, who was the cause of it, and they wanted somebody to take these guys on, so he was very aggressive in his rhetoric in taking on the money interests. He said, "Of course they're going to hate me, and I welcome their hatred. I'm with the working people of America. We're going to take on the money interests, and we are going to create jobs through a variety of government programs." If you're

prepared to deal with class issues, as Roosevelt did, if you're prepared to take on the big-money interests, you can rally the American people, and I think you can marginalize the Republicans.

PLAYBOY: Do you have a favorite Republican, dead or alive?

SANDERS: Abraham Lincoln, of course. George Aiken, a former governor and senator of Vermont, was a smart and progressive politician. Teddy Roosevelt fought to break up big corporations. Eisenhower warned us about the military-industrial complex and built the interstate highway system. One of the great tragedies of today's politics is that the Republican Party is now a right-wing extremist party in which none of these leaders would be welcome.

PLAYBOY: What is the importance of manufacturing jobs? What's the matter with service-sector jobs?

SANDERS: That's a good question. First, we know that historically, in terms of wages, service-industry jobs—McDonald's, Walmart—pay significantly less than manufacturing. Often in the past those were unionized jobs.

PLAYBOY: And McDonald's is not unionized. That's the fundamental difference, isn't it?

SANDERS: So you're arguing if McDonald's workers were organized tomorrow and were paid \$20 an hour, what's the difference? The answer is, I'd like to see that. There is something psychologically important about being able to say, "I created this product," whether it's an automobile or a table. Do I want to see McDonald's workers make a living wage? Absolutely. Is that important? It's enormously important. Should we organize them, unionize them? Absolutely. But I think it says something about a society if it is capable of producing the goods it consumes rather than just importing them.

PLAYBOY: Where do you stand on immigration?

SANDERS: Look, my dad came to this country as an immigrant.

PLAYBOY: He was only 17 when he came, correct?

SANDERS: From Poland, without a nickel in his pocket. It was difficult. I mean, he came here, as many immigrants do, without any money and didn't know how to speak the language. He had maybe one or two relatives here. He started from the bottom. He never made much money, but he was a proud American who appreciated the opportunities this country gave him and never forgot that. The ultra-conservative or libertarian types say we shouldn't have any rules. If capital needs labor, bring them in. Let them get the cheapest possible labor. I think we need a sane immigration policy, and the lifeblood of this country is immigration. But that doesn't mean open the doors and say to a black kid who can't find a job, "Hey, we're going to bring in people to work for lower wages than you would."

PLAYBOY: When you talk about America,

you don't often talk about American exceptionalism, saying we have the greatest workers in the world. That's different from most politicians.

SANDERS: We are largely a nation of immigrants, with people from all over the world coming to this country. We have from our earliest days held democratic values. We rejected early on the class nature of Europe, believed in social mobility regardless of where you were born. Those are all extraordinary virtues of this country that we should be very proud of. I think we have a lot to be proud of. Do I think we were born superior to the folks in Mexico or Canada, that God somehow stopped at the border? No, I don't think that.

PLAYBOY: The country has moved rapidly to a different view on gay marriage. In 10 years will the country look back and wonder what all the fuss was about?

SANDERS: Absolutely. There has been a huge societal transformation on this issue. Today, state legislatures all over the country are passing gay marriage bills—and hardly anybody cares. For younger people it is totally a nonissue.

PLAYBOY: Vermont has quite a few gun owners. How do you position yourself on the debates regarding gun ownership and restrictions?

SANDERS: Vermont does have many gun owners who enjoy hunting, target shooting and other gun-related activities. But most people in Vermont understand that as a nation we must do everything we can to end the horror of mass killings we have seen in Newtown, Connecticut; Aurora, Colorado; Blacksburg, Virginia; Tucson, Arizona and other American communities. Clearly, there is no single or simple solution to this crisis. While the legislation [to expand background checks] recently brought forth in the Senate would by no means have solved all our gun-violence problems, it would have been a step forward, and that's why I voted for that legislation.

PLAYBOY: Does the public care all that much about the issues you're passionate about?

SANDERS: If you go out and talk to people and say, "Hey, the Celtics beat the Knicks last night. Let's talk about that, or let's talk about the football game," that's part of the vernacular. If you say to somebody, "What are you doing to try to improve life for the middle class?" they'll look at you as if you're crazy. "What are you talking about? What am I supposed to do? I've got a job, I'm working 50 hours a week." Or "I don't have a job. I'm unemployed. I'm knocking my brains out trying to find work, taking care of my kids." The idea that collective action can improve our quality of life and make gains for working families—I don't think that's part of people's worldview.

Let me tell you a story outside of school. I go to the Democratic caucuses every week, and every week there is a report about fund-raising—Republicans have raised thus and thus; this is what we have done. In the six years I've been going to

those meetings, I have never heard five minutes of discussion about organizing. It's about raising money. Not five minutes to say, "Look, West Virginia, we have rallies, we're doing this, we're doing that, we're knocking on doors." In six years, I have heard no discussion about that at all.

PLAYBOY: Why is the hatred of Obama so extreme from some quarters? Is that a function of race or ideology or both?

SANDERS: The hatred of Obama is extreme, and it is frightening. There is no question race is one of the factors behind that hatred, but it is not race alone. Today millions of Americans get all their political information from right-wing media outlets that have totally distorted the reality of who Obama is and what he stands for. That is one of the reasons so many right-wing Republicans were shocked at the election results. In their world it was impossible to believe anyone would support Obama.

PLAYBOY: People just seem to think the system doesn't work for them, whether they're in the Tea Party or on the left.

SANDERS: The system doesn't work for them. I think they're exhausted.

PLAYBOY: Are we stuck with the two-party system?

SANDERS: There's no question there is a massive amount of cynicism and displeasure toward our current political system and Republicans and Democrats. Clearly most people vote for one or another party not because they strongly believe in the goals of that party but because they see it as the lesser of two evils. Having said that, no one should underestimate the enormous difficulty of creating a broad-based third party that speaks to the needs of working families. That party in all likelihood would have to be organized through the trade union movement and its millions of members.

PLAYBOY: Many of your hardcore support-

ers are urging you to run for president in 2016. Are you considering it?

SANDERS: Well, the answer is that to run a serious campaign, you need to raise hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars. That's number one, and I don't think—

PLAYBOY: Barack Obama proved candidates can raise money.

SANDERS: Obama went to his friends on Wall Street the first time around.

PLAYBOY: That's true, but he still raised a fair amount of money in small donations.

SANDERS: Yeah, but I'm not Barack Obama. That's the point. I do not take corporate money. I think people are hungering for a voice out there. It would be tempting to try to raise issues and demand discussion on issues that are not being talked about: inequality in wealth and trade policy, protecting the social safety net, moving aggressively on global warming. Those issues are not being talked about, and it would be tempting, but....

PLAYBOY: Hillary Clinton will probably be the Democratic nominee. Does that offer an alternative to the country?

SANDERS: No, it does not.

PLAYBOY: Are you absolutely ruling out running for president, 100 percent?

SANDERS: Absolutely? 100 percent? Cross my heart? Is there a stack of Bibles somewhere? Look, maybe it's only 99 percent. I care a lot about working families. I care a lot about the collapse of the American middle class. I care a lot about the enormous wealth and income disparity in our country. I care a lot that poverty in America is near an all-time high but hardly anyone talks about it. I realize running for president would be a way to shine a spotlight on these issues that are too often in the shadows today. [pauses] But I am at least 99 percent sure I won't.



"I hate this guy...he always has to thaw it out first!"

IDRIS ELBA

(continued from page 102)

And the teacher said, "Son, this is a boys' school." I was mortified. But there were loads of girls in the neighborhood. Trust me, I wasn't short of girls.

Q8

PLAYBOY: At 14 you started hanging around with your uncle, who deejayed at sound system parties. What did you like about being part of DJ culture?

ELBA: My uncle played a lot of Nigerian songs, which were often 16 minutes long. Nigerian vinyls were thick like doormats. I think he played them so he could dance longer with the ladies. My cousins and I were gagging to just touch the turntables. I got into the world of pirate radio, which was illegal, and sound systems, which was sort of a heated atmosphere, with one sound system clashing with the other, so I didn't spread the news to my parents about that. They were very strict, and I didn't want to get in trouble. I was my mum's only child, so she was very protective of me.

Q9

PLAYBOY: As a father, are you more like your mom or your dad?

ELBA: More like my mum, believe it or not. Man, what's that about? I'm very protective of my daughter and who she hangs out with. Same stuff my mum used to do, when I'd tell her, "Mum, relax." [laughs] You can drive yourself nuts as a parent, thinking about what boys do and what I got up to as a kid. If my kid got up to that same stuff, I'd be horrified.

Q10

PLAYBOY: When you were spending time in London clubs, did you take ecstasy?

ELBA: Drug culture is a big part of the house music scene that I deejay now. Loads of DJs get smashed. But then you end up playing shitty music. At first I bypassed drugs. I didn't start smoking weed until later in life. Am I allowed to say that? I mean, I'm not gonna lie—I've tried everything, just between you, me and the people who read this magazine. I've tried it all. I played one of the biggest drug dealers in the world on TV, so you think I'd know what I was talking about.

Q11

PLAYBOY: You're also a rapper. This lyric from "Sex in Your Dreams" is particularly interesting: "Bone-hard diamond cutter, dick thick like homemade butter."

ELBA: You have been listening. [laughs]

Q12

PLAYBOY: "Show you parts of your pussy that you ain't discovered." Has your mom heard the song?

ELBA: When it's read back to me like that, I'm mortified that such trife could come out of my mind. [laughs] Let me tell you, some fans hate it, some love it, some can't stand the idea that I've got the audacity