

MUNICIPAL BYE-ELECTION

Ward 9, Johannesburg, November 18th, 1953

An Analysis by the Chairman of the Transvaal Provincial Division

The Municipal Bye-election in Ward 9 (Killarney, Saxonwold, Parkview, Greenside) was the first election of any kind contested by the Liberal Party. This analysis attempts to extract significant features of the campaign and to underline lessons which may be helpful in the future.

We had to nominate a candidate at short notice and to compress our campaign into about five weeks. We looked for a well-known personality to put forward but gave preference finally to a member of our Council who was a voter in the ward—Mr. L. Cooper. Mr. Cooper proved to be a very good candidate. He threw himself wholeheartedly into the campaign, was a competent platform speaker and made himself well-informed about the issues on which the election was fought. The manner in which he contested the election emphasised a point of great importance to the Liberal Party. We have very few really well-known personalities associated with the Party. We have, however, numbers of young, able and energetic members who will undoubtedly prove themselves if given the opportunity. We need never lack candidates if we are prepared to make full use of the services of these people.

Ward 9 is one of the strongest U.P. constituencies in the Country and has, like all such constituencies, at least an element of liberal opinion in it. The Party had no Branch in the Ward and had not done any work in it. We were therefore faced with the problem of organising an intensive short-term campaign in a constituency where no preparatory work had been done and with a comparatively unknown candidate. In addition the voters' roll was badly out of date.

The Canvass, etc.

An appeal was made for canvassers and the response was so good that we had about 150 people canvassing regularly. As a result, one full canvass of the Ward was completed and over 500 voters who were marked "doubtful" on the first canvass were visited a second time. Again, on polling day members responded very well and we had more than enough cars, drivers and clerical and other workers. This was a very good effort and the response of members was the most significant feature of the whole campaign.

Results of the Canvass were :

Total number of voters	5,200
Removals and deceased	1,200
For	1,000

The actual election results was :

For	809
Against	1,955
Total	2,674

i.e., the Party polled just under 30 per cent. of the total vote cast in a very high poll for a municipal bye-election and on an out-of-date voter's roll.

The Campaign.

Because of the energy put into the campaign the Liberal Party determined the issues on which the election was fought. The U.P. Candidate would have preferred to fight on parochial issues (*e.g.*, traffic lights and better pavements) and general pro-U.P. feeling. We insisted on forcing attention on to the two most important issues in local affairs—Native Housing and opposition to the Western Areas Removal Scheme. We took these two issues to every voter in the ward and found very strong support for our attitude on these two questions.

In addition we placed our whole policy before the electorate and the Party's Principles were stated in full in Mr. Cooper's manifesto. In the closing stages of the campaign, and particularly at the very successful public meeting held two days before the election, the U.P. tried to embarrass us by focussing attention on our colour policy. We refused to run away from any issues and were prepared to have our whole policy tested in the election.

We found that the biggest single factor against us was traditional loyalty to the United Party. This point should be stressed. Although most of us believe that the U.P. will inevitably tend to disintegrate (and we see signs of its happening all the time) we must realise

that it is a large Party with a long tradition, a strong organisational machine and a firmly entrenched hierarchy of leadership. A Party like this only disintegrates slowly and we shall face this reluctance to abandon the U.P. for a long time to come. It was the greatest single factor we faced in this election.

As the campaign developed, our two issues forced themselves to the forefront both in the ward itself and in the press. In the final stages the U.P. candidate took over the issues himself. At his public meeting held the night before the election he pledged himself to support a vigorous Native Housing policy and to oppose the Western Areas Removal Scheme.

Assessment of the Result.

Taking everything into account the Party feels that it did well to poll over 800 votes. Its enthusiastic voluntary effort was in marked contrast to that of the U.P., which, despite the assistance of several full-time paid organisers, did not succeed in completing a first canvass of the ward. The daily press in Johannesburg adopted a similar attitude and both the Rand Daily Mail and the Star interpreted the vote for the Liberal Party as having political significance. It was described as a "red light" to the U.P.

The Campaign cost just under £150 and its results for the Party were :

1. The amazing response of members. The Party entered the campaign with a membership which was largely inexperienced and whose enthusiasm was not known. It now has a substantial body of experienced political workers whose keenness and morale are on a high level.
2. The Party received much valuable press publicity. Generally speaking the Press was fair and gave our candidate ample opportunity to put forward his case. There was a swing towards the U.P. during the last few days of the campaign.
3. A thousand voters told our canvassers that they would vote for the Liberal Party. These people will be canvassed to join the Party. Over a period at least 10 per cent. response can be expected and this means 100 new Party members.

Conclusions.

In Johannesburg about 15 of the 42 Municipal Wards bear the same general character as Ward 9. There are probably about 15 to 20 Parliamentary constituencies of a similar sort in the country. What applied in Ward 9 will probably apply, more or less, in these other areas. The result in Ward 9 is similar to the results of trial canvasses conducted in Hospital Hill and Sea Point. We can conclude that in this type of constituency we can get 25 to 30 per cent. support in a well-run campaign. This means that we are going to lose many elections before we win our first one and faces us with the problem of how to boost our 30 per cent. support to the necessary 51 per cent. We believe that it can be done under the following conditions :—

1. If our opponent is very weak or if his campaign is very badly run. Obviously we can do nothing to determine this.
2. If our candidate is an outstanding personality such as Mrs. Ballinger, Alan Paton or Leo Marquard. Unfortunately we only have a few of these.
3. If enough preparatory work is done in the Constituency over a long period.

We have learnt this lesson in Johannesburg and intend to apply it. We propose to contest some seats in the general municipal election which is due in October, 1954, and the Provincial Council Elections which will probably take place in about November. We intend to start preparing for these elections this month (January, 1954). We will decide tentatively what seats we will fight and will make our nominations. This will give us just under a year in which to make our candidate known in the constituency, to get in amongst the voters, to form one or more Branches in the Constituency, to hold a large number of drawing-room meetings and several public meetings, to register voters, to canvass, etc. By the time the intensive campaign is started, two or three months before polling day, all preparatory work will have been done and the Party will have an organisation firmly rooted in the constituency itself.

We believe that this preparatory work is the one activity within our resources which can step-up our basic 25—30 per cent. support to 40 per cent. and eventually to 51 per cent. We urge this lesson strongly on other Regions—wherever possible start the preparatory work now, long before the elections are due.