

Why Sudbury really shook the Liberals

The NDP's by-election gain could mean another general election early next year

DEFEAT IN A BY-ELECTION may seem an odd reason for a needlessly early general election, but that is what some influential Liberals are urging. They contend that the only way to pull the party out of a rapidly descending spiral is to go to the people early in 1968. The chain of reasoning that leads to this conclusion is long and tenuous, but it is persuasive.

Few deny that the Liberal government is in trouble. True, the Conservative opposition is in even deeper trouble, but that is no longer an adequate consolation. Conservative weakness does not necessarily mean Liberal strength, a fact dramatically re-demonstrated in May's by-elections.

In Sudbury, Ont., a riding that had never gone anything but Liberal since its creation in 1947, the Conservatives took less than half as many votes as they'd got in 1965 with an even weaker candidate. The winner was a New Democrat. So was the sensational runner-up in Outremont-St. Jean, the luxury suburb of Montreal that also has never elected anyone but a Liberal. There, the Conservatives had no candidate at all in the by-election of May 29, and the NDP got about 45 percent of the votes cast. Evidently, the defectors from Conservative ranks in both ridings went not to the other "party of the Right," as doctrinaires expected, but to the welfare-minded socialists.

The government this year faces a budgetary deficit of \$740 million, the second highest ever incurred in peacetime. (The highest was \$790 million in 1962.) Obviously, therefore, it can't resort to a tax cut to appease the indignant voters. Nor, for the same reason, can it fall back on a grandiose spending program.

Anyway, there is a rising doubt that lush, blanket-spending programs would do the Liberals any good. The discontents that found expression in the by-elections, especially in Sudbury, do not seem to be the kind that money alone would cure. They call for direct concern with local problems, by candidates with local appeal.

Sudbury is a mining and smelting town, "the nickel capital of the world," where employment and wages are high. Money is not scarce. The scarce things are serviced land and decent

housing. Families of better-than-average incomes are huddled into squalid slums because there is nothing else to be had. No government agency, federal or provincial, has taken any visible steps to improve the situation. Three days before the by-election a young Liberal worker drove me through a down-at-heel district of Sudbury. He pointed out one tar-paper shack in which, he said, at least 10 families were living. "There are 30 voters at that address, so I suppose there must be about 50 people altogether." NDP signs were posted on almost every house. As we drove past in a car bedecked with "Jerome-Liberal" stickers, the children boomed and booed at us from the sidewalk.

"You might not realize it," my guide said quietly, "but this district has always voted 60 to 70 percent Liberal. Until now, I mean."

The Liberal candidate in Sudbury, James Jerome, is a vigorous, attractive young lawyer who waged an energetic campaign. For one of the new suburban ridings in the metropolitan areas of Canada he would be just the right sort. For Sudbury, apparently, he wasn't.

Sudbury is a labor town. Until recently the labor vote was split by aancorous feud between the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, a Communist-dominated union, and the NDP-oriented United Steelworkers. A few months ago the feud ended in a merger, and although a hard core of Mine, Mill diehards would still vote for Satan rather than the NDP, most union members are reconciled and united.

Bud Germa, the NDP candidate (and, unless defeated in a recount, the new MP), is one of their own. Bred and born in the riding (whereas Jim Jerome has lived there only nine years), Germa has been working for International Nickel since he was 15. He is an armature winder, a skilled

tradesman. A lifelong union member, he has never held union office and has no personal feuds or rivalries to live down. Already a grandfather at 46, he is a lean, rugged, unobtrusively handsome man who talks well but not too smoothly.

Sudbury is one third French and two thirds Roman Catholic, two reasons why it has always been counted a safe Liberal seat — and, no doubt, why Bud Germa won in May by only 121 votes. Apparently, though, such reasons are becoming obsolete. I asked eight people about Bud Germa's ethnic origin before I found out, from his daughter, that it is French. The name was originally St. Germain, roughly anglicized by Germa's grandfather. His mother was pure Finn, and Protestant. Germa speaks only English, is a member of the United Church, but has served as chairman of a local Roman Catholic credit union. So much for race and religion in the politics of Sudbury today.

The former MP, whose death brought on the by-election, was a highly respected pharmacist named Rodger Mitchell. He was 68 when he died, had been in failing health for several years and was unable to do much of anything for his riding. His organization, such as it was, also suffered from old age and general debility. According to the younger Liberal MPs, their party has too large a proportion of such veterans, some of them in excellent physical health.

This is where the need for a general election comes in. Before fresh young faces can appear on the Liberals' front benches, some tired old faces must disappear into quieter pastures. Many of the party's elders are willing, even eager to retire. But because of redistribution, and the imminent disappearance of many a safe seat, they can't get out now without ruining the future plans of younger men.

In Quebec, for example, young Maurice Sauvé sits for the tiny Magdalen Islands, a seat which will be wiped out. He would have liked to become MP for Outremont-St. Jean, which is where he lives when not in Ottawa. But the party could not risk two by-elections to fill the seat Senator Maurice Lamontagne vacated, and Sauvé had to let Outremont go to a rank newcomer.

This problem crops up in almost every province, and notably in British Columbia where the two Cabinet ministers are John R. Nicholson, 65, and Arthur Laing, 62. Neither is expected to run again — but if either left his seat vacant now, he would throw the BC party into intolerable turmoil. Only a general election on the new electoral boundaries could solve the difficulty smoothly.

There are also, of course, plenty of reasons against an early election, including the bitter experience of 1965. But a rising number of young Liberals think that whatever the risk, it will have to be taken.

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