

Then & Now: The time Bud Germa shook the Liberals and stole Sudbury for the NDP

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Liberal Jim Jerome (left) was defeated by NDP Bud Germa in a Sudbury federal byelection in 1967. | Greater Sudbury Library collection

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Newly elected Sudbury Liberal MP Viviane Lapointe follows in the footsteps of Leo Gauthier, Roger Mitchell, James Jerome, Doug Frith, Diane Marleau and Paul Lefebvre, all members of the party of Wilfred Laurier.

With two exceptions, Liberals have held the federal riding of Sudbury since it was created in 1947.

Glenn Thibeault, who ran federally for the NDP, won the riding in 2008 and 2011. Forty-one years earlier, in a 1967 byelection, New Democrat candidate Melville Carlyle "Bud" Germa was elected.

Germa, in his second bid for the seat, had a narrow victory of 159 votes over the Liberal candidate James Jerome.

The May 29, 1967 byelection was held after Liberal MP Roger Mitchell, first elected in 1957, died at the age of 68.

Germa's surprise win prompted Maclean's magazine to run a feature in its July 1967 issue headlined: "Why Sudbury really shook the Liberals."

Writer Blaine Fraser concluded Germa won the byelection because he was the son and grandson of a nickel miner while Jerome, a lawyer, had only lived in the city for nine years.

"Bud Germa ... is one of their own. Bred and born in the riding, 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."

The journalist predicted the Liberals would call a general election in 1968, three years into its mandate.

The popularity of Lester P. Pearson's Liberal minority government was in a "rapidly descending spiral," and the Conservatives led by John Diefenbaker weren't too popular either.

Germa was a city councillor, and it was acceptable at the time for him as an MP to keep his seat on Sudbury council.

As a city councillor, Germa supported Northern Ontario becoming a separate province because the North was not getting its proper share of provincial mining taxes.

Like other northern New Democrats at the time, he called for the nationalization of Inco.

In the House of Commons, Germa brought attention to the need for a study of the effects long-term exposure to high concentrations of sulphur dioxide fumes from Inco on workers. He highlighted the city's housing shortage and the labour shortage in the mining industry.

In 1968, both the Liberals and the Conservatives had new leaders. An election was called for June. The Liberals with Pierre Trudeau won a majority government over the Tories led by Robert Stanfield.

This time Germa was defeated by Trudeaumania, losing to Jerome by some 5,000 votes.

Jerome was appointed Speaker of the House by Trudeau in 1974. And in 1980, he was named associate chief justice and head of the trial division of Federal Court, where he served for 18 years.

He is credited for lobbying the government to build the Canada Revenue Agency office (tax data centre) in Sudbury which created 1,200 much-needed full-time jobs in 1982.

As for Germa, he was elected NDP MPP for Sudbury in 1971 and re-elected twice. He was defeated in 1981 by Jim Gordon who ran for the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party.

Gordon was the last PC to represent Sudbury at Queen's Park. He served two terms and was defeated by Liberal Sterling Campbell in 1987.

When Germa died from cancer in 1993, Tom Walkom of The Toronto Star described him as "a crusty, working-class hero, someone for whom the idea of socialism had real meaning."

Bob Rae, Ontario's only NDP premier, attended his funeral in Sudbury. He called Germa a political original.

After his career at Queen's Park, Rae ran federally as a Liberal candidate and eventually became interim leader of the federal Liberal Party.

Thibeault, the only other New Democrat elected federally in Sudbury riding, resigned his seat in the House of Commons to run as a Liberal provincially. He was Sudbury's representative at Queen's Park and a cabinet minister from 2015 to 2018. The provincial riding is currently held by NDP Jamie West.

Vicki Gilhula is a Sudbury freelance writer. Then and Now is made possible by our Community Leaders Program.

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