

# PLANNED SPONTANEITY: THE GREY FLANNEL ELECTION

By JACK WILCOX

**P**ERHAPS no behind-scenes political event has so stirred public interest in the United States as has the application of public relations and advertising techniques to the 1956 presidential campaign. Actually, the application of such counsel is not new. The public awareness of the fact is.

And so, Canadians and Americans alike watched with interest the battle lines as they were drawn for what Toronto Globe and Mail writer J. V. McArce termed "The Grey Flannel Election."\* Canadians will undoubtedly see similar patterns in national politics in 1957.

In the words of Walter Reuther, whose radio address from Detroit I heard on Labor Day, the advertising and public relations firms of Madison Avenue had been bought by big business for the election. "They're going to merchandise President Eisenhower as they would merchandise a tube of tooth-paste or a box of soap."

Admittedly true. Admitted, in fact, by the head of an agency supporting the Republicans: "The job is merchandising Eisenhower's frankness, honesty, and integrity, his sincere and wholesome approach."

But Reuther's voice carried its considerable passion and persuasiveness, and the Labor Day crowd yelled and hooted in sympathetic accord. Mr. Reuther did not acknowledge that the Democrats also had at that time contracted for advertising and public relations counsel for the campaign.

While all Canadian political parties, like parties in the United States, have in the past engaged skilled advertising people to "assist" with their campaigns for office, it is only recently that Public Relations counsel have been called in to "run" a campaign.

For its issue of December 11, 1954, the London Economist received the following from its correspondent in San Francisco:

"The most striking feature of the recent election campaign in California was the transformation of the incumbent Governor, Mr. Goodwin Knight, well known for his extreme right-wing Republicanism, into a passable imitation of his liberal predecessor, the present Chief Justice, Mr. Warren. The reason for this was simple: victory for Mr. Knight, in a state where Re-

\* Toronto Globe and Mail, Sept. 8, 1956.

publicans are in a minority, turned on his winning the support of one million independent voters, many of them conservative Democrats from the Middle West and South who have moved into California. The easiest way to attract them (which proved overwhelmingly successful) was to adopt the well-tested non-partisan approach of the Warren regime. But the methods by which the transformation was engineered constitute a new and significant political phenomenon.

"Governor 'Goody' Knight's 'new look' was the work of professional public relations experts, the firm of Whitaker and Baxter (a married couple), who earned a national reputation by their spirited defence of the American Medical Association against compulsory health insurance. In 1952 they formed the National Professional Committee for Eisenhower and Nixon, but this was only one of seventy election campaigns they have run in the last twenty years. Only five have been lost and with their rival firms, like that of Vice-President Nixon's adviser, Mr. Murray Chotiner, of Los Angeles, they have set a dizzy pace which nearly all candidates are now compelled to follow if they want to be elected in California."

If a short course in public relations is needed at this stage, it could be said that PR attempts to build good-will, realizing that where a campaign is expertly planned a favorable public opinion can, in fact, be created or generated. This favorable opinion — this good-will — can be directed at an association, an executive, an educational institution, an industry, or what-have-you. In this case, it can be channeled toward a political candidate or party.

How is this good-will best achieved? Mostly through a knowledge of mass communications techniques. The PR man should be a craftsman skilled in the use of the mass media of communication. Through these it is possible to communicate instantaneously with people up and down the social scale, and widely scattered in space. Because of the great upheaval and shifting of population in the United States and Canada today, this is by far the most effective way to reach everybody.

That's an over-simplification.

But with this evaluation, the California firm of Whitaker and Baxter launched their campaign.

"Whitaker and Baxter offer clients a whole series of skills necessary to any campaign. They prepare their own advertising copy. They produce their own television and radio shows. They make their own movies. They are familiar with the procedures and strategies

of radio and television time-buying. They write speeches. They supervise the writing, lay-out, and publication of pamphlets, leaflets, and brochures. They know how to prepare and place a press release. They are efficient and experienced organizers.”\*

In undertaking the Knight campaign, Whitaker and Baxter placed great value on words uttered by their candidate. They wrote his speeches, and saw that the speeches received full coverage in the press.

They stepped in at the policy and strategy level, carefully striking a middle-of-the-road, and sometimes even a liberal note in the candidates' speeches, obviously keeping in mind the mass floating vote of independents and immigrant democrats.

#### *Growth of Suburbs*

In both Canada and the United States, the population shift is, of course, to the suburbs. The Leftist London journal, *The New Statesman and Nation*, finds this significant:

“This middle class, the suburbanites, is the new element in the American politics. They are the people who swelled Eisenhower's huge majority in 1952; they are the Jones family, with its TV set, its year-old car, its subscription to the *Saturday Evening Post*, its mortgage, its niceness. They are prosperous and anxious. They are the main market for the hucksters, conditioned by a generation of ‘commercials’ to buy branded washing machines, breakfast food, and shaving cream at the nearest store. No wonder that, politically, they respond to the same stimulus, that they are manipulated not by the old-fashioned boss but by young men in grey flannel suits, the “mass media” specialists.”

Some young people — suburb dwellers — will allow the truth of this comment, perhaps at the same time expressing the hope that the *New Statesman* will not crusade for a return to bossism.

And what is true of American suburbs can also be true of Halifax, Montreal, or Toronto. The surest way to reach the populations of Dutch Village or Rockingham, Point Claire or Hudson Heights, Clarkson or Don Mills, is not through a local political boss, but by means of mass media.

#### *A Fight or a Show*

Having determined that the best channel of communication to the electorate is by means of mass media, what do you present

\*Professional Public Relations and Political Power, Stanley Kelley, Jr., page 62.

and how do you present it?

A number of avenues of entertainment are available to Mr. and Mrs. Jones. A political address, droning on and on and on, is of interest to a handful of listeners. Sir John A. MacDonald did not compete with the movie theatre, the TV set, or the radio. Today's political figure must.

This, then, is the reason why the "20-second Blitz" on TV was effectively used in the 1952 and 1956 presidential campaigns, and why it was first introduced to Canada in the New Brunswick provincial election in June, 1956 and, to a lesser degree, introduced at that time to the Quebec provincial contest. A brief clip — perhaps a photograph of the man, or a cartoon — is accompanied by an introduction such as: "Here's an important message from Liberal leader Austin Taylor." The seconds remaining give a crisp outline of party purpose.

There is little escape from a "20-second blitz."

What is the philosophy which allows politics to compete with entertainment for longer periods of time? Mr. Clem Whittaker himself explains:

"There are thousands of experts bidding for every man's attention — and every man has a limited amount of leisure. Then we must recognize, too, that in almost every human being there is a great craving just to be lazy, at least part of the time, and a wall goes up when you try to make Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen *work or think* when all they want to do is relax. . . . .

"The average American citizen, when you catch him after hours, as we must, doesn't want to be educated; he doesn't want to improve his mind; he doesn't even want to work, conscientiously, at being a good citizen.

"But there are two ways you can interest him in a campaign, and only two that we have found successful.

"Most every American loves *contest*. He likes a good hot battle with no punches pulled. He likes the clash of arms. So you can interest him if you put on a fight!

"No matter what you fight for, fight for something, in our business, and very soon the voters will be turning out to hear you, providing you make the fight interesting.

"Then, too, most every American likes to be entertained. He likes the movies; he likes mysteries; he likes fireworks and parades. He likes Jack Benny and Bob Hope and Joe E. Brown!

"So if you can't fight, PUT ON A SHOW! And if you put on a good show, Mr. and Mrs. American will turn out to see it."\*

\*Before Los Angeles Area Chapter, Public Relations Society of America, July, 1948.

Whitaker and Baxter therefore look for what they call "the appeal that is beyond politics." Their answer to the competition of entertainment in mass media is to make politics itself a form of entertainment. And so, television's role in Canada's politics can be expected to get top billing.

Many Canadians saw the whole of the Republican convention proceedings at San Francisco's Cow Palace in August. Canadians not on border points where U.S. television is received will recall parts of that convention, or newspaper reports of it. Unlike the "Crusade" of the 1952 Presidential campaign, when blow after blow fell on the Truman administration, the Republicans this year did not put on much of a fight. But it was one of the biggest shows — the biggest circus — that many of us have ever seen.

It is no secret that Whitaker and Baxter played a great part in making it so. And the fact that so many Canadians tuned out the CBC in favor of American TV along the border — to a greater degree than usual, that is — suggests that Canadians like this sort of thing. Many Canadians absorbed what was going on, but not without the occasional and very Canadian embarrassed shuffle of feet and crossing of legs and comments like 'those crazy Americans'.

Toronto newspaperman George Bain covered the Republican convention. In a splendidly-written page one article\* he reported to the Canadian people:

"The trouble with spontaneous demonstrations in Canadian politics is that there isn't enough preparation put into them."

At first sight, the reader would think that this was another tongue-in-cheek piece intended to poke fun at the way Americans do things. It was half that, but the other half viewed with alarm the silly way that Canadians sometimes do things, so that the tone of the article ended up in a beautiful neutral shade which delights the editors of some journals.

The neutralization process takes place in the second paragraph, when Bain says:

"What happens when the Prime Minister arrives in town, say, at the beginning of an election tour? If he is lucky, a small girl, propelled across the platform by a smart rap over the kidneys from her mother, will give him a bunch of sweet peas.

"If it is particularly demonstrative community and there is an extrovert on hand to get things going, there may be a hip-hip-hooray, which struggles off embarrassingly when some-

\*Toronto Globe and Mail, August 23, 1956.

one misguidedly calls for a tiger."

Planned spontaneity is missing.

*Caution Where it Counts*

Skilled public relations counsel not only have the experience and facilities for setting the stage for a show or a fight, but their knowledge in shaping thought patterns often can carry the entire performance to a thunderous ovation at the finale. To know in advance just how the public will receive a given message is also the task of PR.

The Eisenhower crusade of 1952 gave to America one of the greatest heavyweight battles of all time. "The scandal-a-day administration," the "top-to-bottom mess," and the need for a "new broom" — these became the banner slogans.

There was good reasoning behind this battle. Republican party strategists, wisely, had divided the American public into four camps. They were Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and the Stay-at-Homes. The latter camp was populated by those who vote only when discontent stirs them to vote against current conditions.

In this, the Republicans had found the key, and the fight was on.

*One fact shone brightly before them: the Stay-at-Homes outnumbered the Independents by approximately 45 million to an estimated three or four million. The public relations task was to crystalize discontent.*

The New Brunswick and Quebec elections of June, 1956, also give examples of a PR rule-of-thumb: People like progress. This, of course, has been a political axiom for centuries; but the interesting aspect of progress in New Brunswick and Quebec was the fact that the opposition parties caused public attention to be focused squarely on it.

The Beechwood Power project on the Saint John River was for many a dream come true. The Liberal opposition made claims to having initiated the project during their term of office prior to 1952, but it became a reality with the Conservative administration of Premier Hugh John Flemming since 1952.

Although they approved heartily of the project itself, the Liberals lashed out again and again at what were termed "questionable ethical considerations" in connection with construction firms given contracts. Their charge was that friends of the Conservative administration were getting all the jobs. Indeed, they claimed, some of the firms were owned or partially owned by the Premier himself.

This did cause public attention to be focussed on the vast project, but the Conservative slogan of "Peace, Progress, and Prosperity" shone even more brightly in the public eye.

Beechwood stood not as a symbol of alleged malpractice by the administration, but as a symbol of progress and prosperity. It had been a long time, apparently, since the people of New Brunswick enjoyed progress and prosperity in such large doses.

It was perhaps unfortunate that a Toronto public relations counsel, a native New Brunswicker, was called in at the 11th hour to undertake major surgery. The Liberal organization had already taken the giant Beechwood bear by the tail, in both the provincial legislature and in the House of Commons. Hansard for the last session of Commons carries charge and counter-charge centered around the Beechwood project. The footings for bad strategy had been placed months before the election.

"Here was something that could not be fought.

The aura of prosperity, created by Beechwood and by minerals in the north particularly, was indestructible. National publications from Montreal and Toronto, as you know, have given good coverage and favourable comment to New Brunswick developments in recent years, and this, too, carries great weight. A feeling of being part of the great Canadian story now being written — a sense of satisfaction and well-being generally — has settled upon the people of New Brunswick."\*

In Quebec, the story was much the same. Time Magazine reported:

". . . . Against such campaigning, the desperate Liberals stooped to using a demagogic line of their own, charging that Quebec Premier Duplessis was selling out the province's resources to U.S. Investors. Ironically, this was the same accusation that opponents have been hurling at the Liberal government in Ottawa. But on the Quebec hustings the Liberal politicians unblushingly fired it at Duplessis, charging that the big iron ore project at Ungava and other U.S.-financed enterprises in the province were "giveaways to foreigners." The maneuver boomeranged on the Liberals. It merely drew the voters' attention to the vast industrial development and general prosperity the province has enjoyed in recent years — and gave them one more convincing reason to re-elect Maurice Duplessis."\*\*

In attempting to arrive at a basic theory of communication

\*In a letter to the writer.

\*\*On Canadian Affairs, July 2, 1956.

a research firm, asking the question "How do people react to appeals of fear," has come up with a rather startling answer. Three 15-minute lectures on dental hygiene were presented to different groups of high school freshmen. The procedure is outlined by Dr. Claude Robinson, President, Opinion Research Corporation:

"The lectures all ended by recommending proper steps for the care of teeth and gums. But the body of the lectures differed in presenting the consequences of neglecting to take care of the teeth. The strong lecture, illustrated with pictures of diseased mouths, contained references to cancer, paralysis, blindness, etc. as a result of mouth neglect. The mild lecture, illustrated with pictures of fairly healthy mouths, only spoke about the inconvenience and temporary pain of cavities and minor teeth and gum ailments. A week before the lectures were given the experimenters found out exactly what kind of care the student was giving his teeth. A week after the lectures, they asked again for this information. They found that the students who were subjected to the mildly threatening lecture had changed their habits and were sticking quite closely to the recommendations made in the lecture. But the students that were severely scared weren't caring for their teeth much differently from the way they had been before they heard the lecture.

"Interestingly enough, a year later the experimenters went back to the same students and found that the effects of the different lectures persisted: the group that got the mild threat was abiding by the recommendations of the lecture, and the group that got the strong threat was doing no differently from before.

"In explaining their findings, the experimenters point out that a strong threat may be so frightening that the audience focuses all of its attention on the threat itself, and doesn't pay much attention to the recommendations about how to avoid the trouble. It is also possible that when an audience is scared, it becomes angry with the speaker for frightening it, and in its resentment refuses to believe what he is saying."\*

There may be something here that could be effectively used by some politicians.

Such motivational research, and other explorations into mass attitudes and mass reasoning, will likely dictate the pattern of politics in the future. And with the arrival of Canada's national television network this year Canada's politics may become, instead of a series of skirmishes, a fight or a show of true national interest. Politics in Canada may even once again

\*The Gentle Art of Persuasion, Public Relations Journal, June, 1956.



become colorful.

Of course, such organization of "color" and planned spontaneity is rather undignified and un-Canadian. But "maintain dignity — lose the election" is an unrewarding slogan for any party.

A national television network plus the application of sensible public relations to politics becomes healthy for the nation. Everyone participates in the national game — whether in person, in group discussion, or beside the TV set in the living room.

PR offers even more than this. The theory of using mass communications techniques is tending to eliminate the political boss with his bloc of votes, and in turn, the spoils system. The political boss is becoming less and less a factor to consider in the winning of an election.

The principle of lobbying will vanish. The time will certainly come to pass when pressure groups go to Ottawa or Queen's park to attempt at the government level a forceful campaign for their own benefit. Public relations holds the view that you must generate a healthy public opinion at home . . . . back at the voters' level. Little pockets of pressure groups are eliminated, and the electorate again becomes the supreme power.

Public relations believes that's the way things should be.