

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 14
Democratic Procedures
Political Insights

69 Ram Gorse
Harlow, Essex
England
25 May 1968

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Late on the afternoon of Friday, May 10, 1968, the day after most of the British local elections, but the day before Harlow went to the polls, I remembered to ask a friend where the votes would be counted. He told me, and added, "You've had your forms signed, haven't you?" WHAT FORMS?

I raced up to the Town Hall where I was given a copy of the Declaration of Secrecy which is required of all persons eligible to be present for the counting of the vote (selected party workers, and press.) The solicitous clerk who handed me the large sheet of paper said soothingly, "Now all you have to do is sign this in front of a Justice of the Peace. Do you know one? If you don't, I can give you a list of some of their names and addresses."

As it happens, I do know a charming lady magistrate in Harlow (see ERL - 7), so I promptly called her. Her young daughter answered the phone. The magistrate was not in. I explained that I had a form. "Well," the child said, "I think it's all right for you to just come around, because mummy said this morning to tell anyone who asked that she's signing forms between 10:15 and 10:30."

Having learned the efficacy of reading all small print before signing anything, I read over the Declaration of Secrecy before leaving the house that evening. I learned that I was going to solemnly promise and declare that I would not, at this election for the Urban District of Harlow, do anything forbidden by sub-sections (1) (2) (3) and (6) of Section 53 of the Representation of the People Act, 1949, which would be read to me. Just in case, the appropriate provisions were printed out at the bottom of the form. Like the three little monkeys, I was promising to see, hear, and do nothing evil once I passed the police barricades into the counting room of Nettessell school, and exactly what I was not to see, hear, or do was spelled out in proper legal detail.

Driving up the street it was quite clear that the magistrate was indeed, signing forms. Either that or having a party. There were six cars parked in front of the house and two others driving away. I knocked at the door which opened immediately, and, on crossing the threshold, found myself in the queue. The magistrate was seated in the dining room signing busily. The line wound out through the sitting room into the front hall where the head of the household was busy greeting arrivals and saying good night to the duly sworn. He said

he didn't remember an election quite like this one, as his wife had been holding signing sessions three nights running, and since she was just one of a number of JP's, albeit known as a politically non-aligned one, this implied that a lot of people planned on going to the count.

Since I was the last person to arrive, there was time to chat after my sheet had been signed. British magistrates are required to witness a great many forms that in the United States would be handled by a notary public, and some that are just the nth degree of bureaucracy. "Last night I was signing forms and a man arrived who wanted to know if I was the magistrate because he needed my signature for something. He got on the queue and when his turn came I realized it was not a poll form at all, but I couldn't figure out just what it was. He didn't know or care that there was an election coming. He was, he explained, trying to change the name of his yacht. So I signed."

The matter of voting eligibility in Britain is impressively simple. If you were in residence and twenty-one, or over, on a certain date in October, your name automatically goes on the register. If you turn twenty-one between October and February (when the roll is published), you can still vote in May. In other words, the names of the entire resident adult population appear on the voting lists. Military personnel stationed overseas can vote absentee. In Harlow a 50% poll (vote) at local elections is not unknown, and has always been surpassed in General Elections. This time the total poll was 44.6%, but within the wards it ranged from 22.7% to 55.1% and was considered a good show. The weather did not play political favorites. Freezing showers alternated with half-hour intervals of baking sunshine. In the Little Parndon ward, where I live, I watched the Labor Party's "Mikardo system" compete with a newly vitalized Tory organization.

The sublime object of the Mikardo system is to read the Labor vote accurately during the day. Given the present almost overwhelming unpopularity of the Labor Party, the predictive aspect of the system allowed one to watch the punishment measure, if not necessarily fit, the "crimes" of the Government. The system was developed in the '50's by Ian Mikardo, now a Member of Parliament. All it really requires is good party discipline, although the more willing bodies, the better it works. Through use it has lost its home-made, volunteer touches like messy individual carbon sheets, and do-it-yourself tally cards. All the forms nowadays are printed by Transport House, the national Labor Party headquarters. But then nothing is like the old days anyway, anywhere. In fact, most of the Labor Party workers wore store bought red and yellow rosettes (from Woolworths.) They used to make their own, they said, and in the good old days there were sufficiently distinctive design differences among the Harlow wards so the rosettes could be read off like regimental insignia . . . Hare Street, Little Parndon, Brays Grove . . .

The system starts weeks before the election when, voting registers in hand, party workers canvass their wards and check off promises of support. The promisors' names, along with their polling and street numbers, are then typed onto long pads of color coded carbon backed paper - the Mikardo pads. "Coolie labor" types and organizes the lists.

On election day large trestle tables are set up in ward committee rooms. As the polls open, the Mikardo pads are cello-taped in long rows on the tables. Runners from the polls bring back tally sheets hourly, showing who has voted. Voters either give their numbers to the poll watchers or turn in the "personalized" reminder cards that were thrust through their front doors in the previous night's final canvass. The assumption that all polling numbers not matched on the Mikardo lists are votes against the Labor candidate is accurate in a straight party fight, but chancy if there is a strong Liberal or Independent running as well. A running tally is kept. Then the knocking up begins.

Generally speaking, English slang is blunt and straightforward. Why say "Exit" when "Way Out" eliminates any doubt? Few English houses have doorbells, all have knockers just over the mail slot. For political purposes it seems the telephone has just been invented; to get out the vote each party's workers must flat-foot it from door to door "Knocking up" their supporters. (Actually, the phrase goes back to mill workers changing shifts in the middle of the night in the early days of the industrial revolution.) The same phrase has a very different but equally specific meaning in American slang, which can create considerable confusion for those who blithely assume they are speaking the same language. The English idiom occasionally appears in phrase-books for innocents and tourists, the American meaning seldom does.

The procedural objective of the Mikardo system is to get "down to the wood"- or complete four ward knock ups before the polls close. The white top sheet is torn off in later morning when the first batch of workers go out on their rounds. In mid-afternoon pink sheets are ripped, the yellow layer in late afternoon. The bottom white layer should go in the early evening in a last attempt to get out recalcitrant voters. Usually though, the committee rooms only get "down to the wood" in a General Election.

The point of the color coding and carbon paper is that workers coming into the committee rooms can see at a glance whose names have been crossed out (i.e. who has voted), and how far the knockups have progressed. In theory, if you have voted, no one will come around nagging. In practice, there can be slip ups which aggravate voters even more than they waste party workers' time. One singularly blunt citizen of this ward who had mistakenly been knocked up after he had voted left an explicit sign on his door lest anyone disturb his Saturday afternoon of watching the league football finals on television. "F--- Off! Ta!" ("Ta" meaning thanks.)

The Conservative Party system is based on cards fitted into slotted boards. Their aim is to wipe all the cards off the board. They must continually rewrite their knocking up lists during the day, but in other respects the systems are the same.

Ye old class stereotypes held almost laughably firm in Little Parndon ward. The Labor troops in sweaters and Saturday clothes, often rumpled and unshaven, gathered in the small sitting room of a terraced house on a main road. The children of the resident comrade Councillor sporadically stuck their heads around the door to ask if anyone wanted

"a cuppa." The Tories were spaciouly ensconced in a semi-detached house in a quieter area on the hill. Tarps had been thrown down from door to den to point out the way to the score boards and protect the floors and carpets. Tea and coffee were passed on trays by smartly dressed matrons in slacks outfits, all the men wore jackets and ties. Both parties anticipated the swing in Little Parndon, so by mid-afternoon party workers from other parts of the town had been called in to help. The poll turned out to be 47.2%, a fraction less than last year.

The polls closed at 9 PM. I arrived at Netteswell school around 9:20. A half dozen people were standing by the door, formless members of the general public. Their number increased as the evening wore on. The constable checked my Declaration of Secrecy and let me in. The Folding doors between the dining room and the auditorium had been opened and observers were provided with seats in the makeshift balcony. The Clerk of the Urban District Council sat serenely at a table on the stage at the far end of the auditorium. Three long trestle tables were set up on the floor with flags showing where the results from each ward would be counted. About 75 party workers and civil servants were settling at the tables waiting for the arrival of the ballot boxes. Candidates with their wives and election agents strolled around the floor, primarily watching their own races, but also checking to see how their colleagues and comrades were doing. Contrary to the Declaration, word of the results in progress travelled quickly to the public in the balcony and was transmitted to the people outside by sign language and grimaces. Confident of the tide, the Conservatives had come early and in force. They filled the first rows of seats in the balcony. Labor Party faithful drifted in and huddled in the back of the room.

One by one the steel ballot boxes arrived from the polling places. Their contents were ceremonially dumped on the tables and the counting began with ritual dignity. The ballots were opened, the total number checked, then they were sorted and counted.

In the balcony people scribbled score cards as they waited. Tories beamed at each other. The Conservative Parliamentary candidate, who was selected only the preceding week, was handed round to the press for scrutiny. The Labor MP, who had spent the day knocking up, did not appear. In hushed tones some of the Labor supporters embroidered on the dire Mikardo predictions "---- was down to 400 at 3 o'clock."

As the count, and for some wards the recounts, proceeded, the Clerk of the Council occasionally strolled to the microphone and called candidates and their agents forward. The quiet hum of rustling paper and conversation was broken sporadically by what sounded like thunder, or a practice drum roll. Initially, I thought the sound was some sort of fanfare to the formal announcements, later I realized it was the shaking of empty ballot boxes.

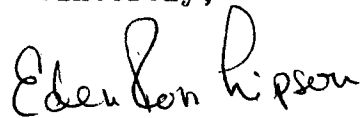
In recent years British local elections have been mini referenda on the quality and popularity of the national government. Since the Government does not hold office for a set period of time, the populace does not have regular calendar fixed opportunities to "throw the rascals out." While there is variation between the national parties

and their local components (although nothing like the laissez-faire relationships of the American system), for practical purposes the local party stands and falls with the national party. The mechanism is structured so the only way the voters can show approval or disapproval of what happens in Westminster is by voting for or against the Government in the local elections.

The present Government is, to put it mildly, unpopular. This was shown in the by-elections earlier in the Spring, and, as previously mentioned, resoundingly echoed in the May local election results. As the Conservatives had done well in the previous local elections, their individual victories, with the exception of the sweep of the London Boroughs, were less spectacular than the overall score board. The fact that Labor was left controlling only three councils in cities of more than 150,000, and the Conservatives had gained more than 1200 seats, and the Scots Nationalists 100, was all too well known before Harlow voted. Moreover, the owner of the Daily Mirror, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country and in Harlow, had fiercely attacked the Government and resigned as a Governor of the Bank of England on the intervening day between the national and Harlow elections.

The only question was how serious the Labor losses in Harlow would be. The answer was serious. The balance in the 37 member Harlow Urban District Council went from 31 Labor 6 Conservative to 25 Labor 12 Conservative.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Edey Ben Ripson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name "Edey Ben Ripson".

Received in New York January 9, 1969.