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Neil Cherry, scientist, teacher, politician, peace worker

Part 5

Labour candidate for national elections in 1986

Dorothy - 26/05/03

Pressure to enter politics

The result of all the talks and interviews was that people knew Neil Cherry's name and his attitudes to contemporary issues and kept urging him to become a politician and clean up the environment, promote energy efficiency and renewable energy. They liked the fact that he was caring of people, caring of the environment and worked to find practical solutions.

Candidate for the Labour Party in Parliamentary election in 1986

Neil was invited to put his name forward for selection as the Labour Party Candidate for the Fendalton electorate in 1986. He recalls the time of the decision vividly.

"When I was invited to stand I was not even a member of the Labour Party, so I could not be considered as a candidate if anyone stood against me who had been a member for two years or more.

"In my Bible Class days at Opawa Baptist Church our local MP, Norman Kirk, used to come and give the annual prizes. We talked together sometimes and he became one of my political heroes.

"Gae and I considered the suggestion very seriously. We talked to politicians whom we respected - David Caygill, Mike Moore, Helen Clark, Fran Wilde and Margaret Austin. We were interested in the women's concerns as well. They said that they would like me to stand. Kate Dewes put forward my nomination, and the two women who had put their names forward and were members of the Labour Party both not only withdrew, but offered to work in my campaign. I agreed to stand.

"I had a highly skilled campaign team - both academics and people involved in community work. The core group of committee members numbered around twenty, and behind them was

a group of fifty or more supporters."

Campaign objectives

"I sat down with them and we agreed on ten objectives regarding the quality of the campaign's integrity and policies, and raising the profile



The electoral car

of the Labour Party and the Government. The tenth objective was to win the seat. - the ninth was to have a party on election night to celebrate a high quality, good campaign."

The style of the campaign was to hold public meetings as much as possible - street corner meetings as were traditional at election time, but also a new type of meeting introduced by Neil - coffee mornings where people in a given street would invite their neighbours to meet the Labour candidate. Neil attended dozens of coffee mornings in the eight or nine months between selection and the election. Judith Tizard was standing for Labour in Remuera, an electorate with a lot of well-off voters, similar to Fendalton. There was a lot of support from business people for the policies adopted by the Labour Government. Because there was a possibility of their winning in the last two weeks before the election Judith and Neil were on national television several times along with Philip Burdon and Douglas Graham.

A woman who was a psychologist and a Labour Party strategist, went to live with the Cherry family. The importance of the Fendalton campaign to Labour's national campaign was illustrated by the Cabinet Ministers and MPs who came very frequently to the electorate and by the Labour Party providing a full time staff member to assist the family in the last few weeks.

Gae recalls a family meal at which the girls were teasing Neil about his political role. Gail's comment was that MPs can be subjected to horrible abuse in Parliament but Neil's teasing family would keep his feet firmly on the ground.

In summary Neil described his candidature as a positive, personal and social and even academic experience. Some of the down side results were the effect on the girls who had to cope with derogatory comments from at least one teacher, and the changed attitude Neil had to face from some of the people he knew. For years they had asked him to be a politician because of his integrity, but once he was a candidate he was regarded by these same people as having no integrity because "all politicians tell lies".

Emphasis on policies and facts, not criticism of personalities

Neil decided that in his campaign on principle he would not criticise the other candidates, but would confine his criticisms to their policies. He had meetings with Philip Burdon, the sitting National Member of Parliament (MP) for Fendalton, and some in the Student Union at the University of Canterbury, which was in the Fendalton electorate.

At one meeting at the university Philip Burdon was talking about how the Labour government policy had reduced the investment in plant and machinery and had the effect of slowing economic activity. Neil went to the Statistics Department and found that the statistics quoted were from one quarter only and in the following quarter the rate went up again even higher. The variation depended on factors like the purchase dates for Air New Zealand's aircraft and when oil arriving in various ships was paid for.

Neil challenged what Philip had said, and Philip responded with the phrase, "Lies, damned lies and statistics".

Neil's response was to say, "What a shame to spoil a good story with some facts!" There was a very good reaction from the audience, of

course.

Ruth Richardson was the Member of Parliament for the Selwyn electorate which includes Lincoln University. Neil was invited to take part in what was billed as "The Big Debate" - between him and Ruth Richardson. She talked about the terrible effect of the regulations governing transport. When she was asked about all the documentation which the transport operators had to complete she said that they needed a blond secretary in the cab of the truck. The audience exploded saying, "What a sexist comment!" She came back saying that a lot of male secretaries are blond. Being an academic Neil was determined to stick to policies and facts and not to put spins on the issues.

An impartial attitude to politicians of both main parties

As a candidate Neil got to know more MPs and candidates from both main parties and he found that all of them had good sides to them though they sometimes put political spins on their concerns. He found it exciting meeting the leading politicians - Jenny Shipley, Jim Anderton, David Lange (then Prime Minister), Geoffrey Palmer, Helen Clark, Roger Douglas, Mike Moore, Bruce Caygill, Margaret Austin, Anne Hercus, and Fran Wilde.

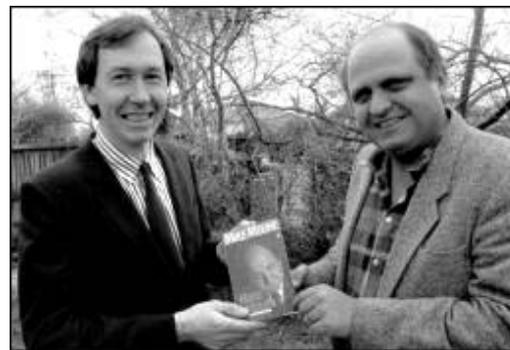
"One of the major lessons I learnt" he said, "was that they were all committed to serving the public."

Election night

On the night of the election a big party was held at the campaign headquarters. For about two hours when Fendalton came up on the television screen it was pink, which meant that Labour had a small lead. In some parts of the electorate Neil got more votes than Philip Burdon. The team was immensely excited that after 80% of the vote had come in Labour was still ahead. They would have liked the result to be red, but it was still pink, indicating that Labour was not far ahead. Mike Moore and Geoffrey Palmer and their supporters were having their party in a Working Men's Club in the north of the city and invited the Cherrys to attend. There was great excitement as it looked as though the Labour



Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Lange (left) and Neil Cherry



Neil Cherry (left) and the Rt Hon Mike Moore with his book *Hard Labour*



The Hon Roger Douglas sitting at his desk and Neil Cherry beside him

Government was going to be returned - the first time that the New Zealand Labour Party had secured a second term in office. Just before they left for the second party the Cherrys saw the result turn blue and Labour lost the seat by 211 votes. (In the previous election Philip Burdon had won comfortably with a relatively large majority.)

In Monday's Press there was a coloured picture of the Palmers, the Moores and the Cherrys celebrating the Labour victory. Neil and Gae were wearing jerseys Gae had knitted. Right through the campaign Neil had worn Gae's jerseys, including one she had knitted in red and black. "The Press article was entitled 'The Agony and the Ecstasy'. The coloured picture of the Labour Party group was 'The Ecstasy' and 'The Agony' was in a black and white picture on page three showing Philip Burdon in tears when he thought he was going to lose.

It had been a fantastic Fendalton campaign by Labour as they had achieved nine out of ten of their objectives. One of the most important objectives was to return the Labour Government and to keep New Zealand nuclear-free, and this objective they had certainly achieved.

In 2002 when Neil had been a member of the Canterbury Regional Council for ten years I asked him whether with hindsight he wished he had gained another three hundred odd votes in the Parliamentary election. His answer was:

"I far prefer being on the Regional Council to being in Parliament because to live locally with my family and to work on regional plans to clean up the environment rather than the politics of Parliament, is much more satisfying. As I have explained to many people when you are elected to Environment Canterbury (formerly the Canterbury Regional Council) you are elected to 'the Cabinet' because there are only fourteen members, whereas in Parliament you are a back-bencher for a long time and your effectiveness is very limited."

For more information about Neil Cherry's scientific research go to his website www.neilcherry.com

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