

This article which Charlie Cobb wrote about Julian Bond's campaign appeared last year in Studies on the Left, prior to Julian's election. I thought people might be interested now in Charlie's thoughts about the campaign and its significance.

l. moses

ATLANTA: THE BOND CAMPAIGN

(Editor's note: On May 5th, SNCC field secretary Julian Bond won the Democratic primary in Georgia's 136th legislative district. Bond defeated a Negro minister, William Creacy, in the all-Negro district of Atlanta which was recently created because of pressures for reapportionment. He campaigned in a district that includes the Atlanta University complex as well as a large low-income area. His connections have been with the university community, but he campaigned on issues affecting the poor: a two-dollar minimum wage, a "liberalized" urban renewal program, repeal of the "right to work" laws, abolition of the death penalty and removal of all voting requirements except age and residence. Bond's primary victory almost definitely assures him a seat in the Georgia House; the only obstacle is the June 16 regular election contest against a Negro Republican. The following report on the campaign is from another SNCC field secretary, Charles Cobb.)

I approached the campaign with some misgivings based on a serious question I had about anyone being able to function effectively in the state legislature without the support of the "establishment." I will confess that I was also worried about the corrupting influence of politics in general. I felt, and I still feel, the threat of American "politics" has on people who "play the game"--you know, like touch (politics) and be tainted.

On the other hand, I felt that Julian on the floor of the Georgia State Legislature would, by virtue of the fact that he was a young, black SNCC worker, inherently focus attention on the politics that he articulated. In Julian's politics, I have faith, so in the end I based my decision to work on knowing Julian.

Most people on staff say the cities are hardest to organize. They say the people there tend to be "too apathetic." We don't yet know what can tap and sustain the energies of the people locked up in the city ghettos. What is clearest to me in the cities is that the politics that runs things is out of the hands of the hands of the people who need to use it most. (People can enter into politics, e.g., registration and voting, but they can't control it.) Julian's campaign then, was a chance for me to explore the possibilities of people being able to use the politics that exist. Within the confines of Today's "political realities" I don't think that SNCC ever had such a real opportunity before.

We often remarked during the campaign that if you went off Hunter Street you would never know there was a campaign going on. So true! Politicians simply don't approach people in any real sense with their politics. Politically that is not "realistic." Our approach was different. We wanted people to use their own politics. We had a tool for them to use--Julian.

Like most communities, the 136th District has been ripped and torn apart. Julian's like a sewing needle. Using him, we hoped the District could begin to sew itself together again. Probably other kinds of needles are needed, too.

State legislatures are a mystery. What we know about them, generally, is that a group of people sit up there and do something or other--that is called politics. Which is, in reality, outside the day-to-day concerns of the majority of people since they don't understand it. It is important to understand that during the campaign Julian was seen and known. End then the mysterious political aura around at least one state legislator-to-be. People voted for someone they knew and felt comfortable with. Very important; a politician who took the time to walk streets, knock on doors and know people, a politician who was not threatened by a constituency that was organized around issues and not the politician. An operating philosophy of ours was that if hard work can win a campaign then we sure as hell intended to win it.

I think that literally 100 per cent of the people I canvassed had never had anyone come to their house, sit down and seriously talk to them about their community. Certainly not a political campaign worker or candidate, suggesting that a community had to act as a community if they wanted to talk about and make relevant politics. Imagine a politician suggesting that he wasn't the most relevant thing in politics! Imagine that politician winning! Think if that can be sustained and extended.

Most of the time, while working on the campaign, we were wearing shirts (ironed), ties and slacks. Every now and then, a suit. This, apparently, is not respectable by some SNCC standards. Several SNCC folk made judgments about the campaign based on our appearance. We were wearing ties; therefore, we must have "sold-out" to play the political game. (Or we were playing the political game; therefore, we must have sold-out to wear ties.)

The usual articulation was that, these people in the 136th District are not free. They are all bound up in the orientation to material and surface inclemencies. You campaign workers are perpetuating that by wearing ties and things (symbol of the decadent middle class value). I agree only that the ties and things are irrelevant to me. But I am conscious of the fact that it is not entirely irrelevant to a lot of people. My judgment was that adopting the standard of neatness helped squelch the irrelevant question of dress among the people we were working with and helped gain us immediate focus on the relevant issues. Some SNCC people judged the campaign by making the same kinds of surface assumptions which

focus on the extraneous and irrelevant, that we are allegedly freedom-fighting against in society.

WE WERE TAKEN VERY SERIOUSLY. First in the neighborhoods, where, as in the rural areas, people judged us by what they saw us doing in relation to what we said we hoped to do and see happen. We were honest and consistent. We got support from the neighborhoods. House meetings were held.

We did not need the Negro democratic machine in terms of the politics/^{we}were organizing, which was politics that did not belong to politicians. We were taken seriously by this machine because, if we won we couldn't be controlled by them, which seriously threatens the operation of this machine. Especially, if what we do catches on and extends itself. Leroy Johnson (Negro State Senator) wants "politicians" he can control and use for his political ends.

Negro politics in Georgia, not to mention other Deep South states, is still new enough and open enough for Negroes to force a whole new concept of what politics is.

Immediately after it became clear that Julian had won, I thought that SNCC could have pulled off the same thing in all of the Districts where Negroes had won. There were districts in Georgia where nobody even bothered to qualify. I guess these seats are still open. What that could mean is that the issues and questions that are raised in communities as a result of our work, could be amplified on the floor of the Georgia House, hooking communities together on common issues. Imagine, ten SNCC guys in the Georgia House committed to organizing their districts to using the seats in the House to meet community needs defined by the community.

I think we will increasingly find, especially in the urban south, chances to explore American politics and the ways it can be shaped (if it can at all) to meet our needs. This can mesh and hook up with the radical forms of our own (like FDP) that we are developing.

Admittedly, there are dangers inherent in this exploration. (E.g. pressure of traditional politics, isolation, the fact that some people will be corrupted.) However, I am fascinated by the idea of communities moving in and out of traditional American political forms. It implies a creation of instability of these political forms, created by people whose needs are not being and probably will not be met by these forms anyway. I think it is to our advantage to have oppressive government unstable. They have to release some of their control to steady themselves, or they try and steady themselves by increasing control, which heightens the potential for rebellion.

It is a fact now that Julian is the Democratic nominee for the Georgia House from the 136th District. More than likely he will be elected on June 16. I think that SNCC needs to commit itself to an all-out effort to get an overwhelming turn-out for this election. For one thing that characterizes all comment on this election is the expected poor turn-out and interest.

We need to disprove "voter apathy" which really is election irrelevancy. The concept we need to focus attention on is that of people's right to shape and use politics. If that can happen in any one district in Georgia (or anywhere) it poses a threat to current politics all over. In effect, it means that our political campaign does not end on June 16.

One more note: Julian's opponent was a minister. I think this was the first time I've been in the South that I've seen a large reaction against the ambitions of a minister. Apparently people just draw the line at having a minister overtly involved in political decision-making. "I ain't havin' no damn preacher up there." Maybe it hints at a general awareness of their exploitation by ministers. Anyway, I think it helped us that Bill Creacy was a preacher.

What I learned mostly from the campaign was, that in the final analysis, organizing the urban is the same. What people need--all over!--is something they can grab hold of, or build, that is their own. Even if it's just their individual life. So Mrs. Williams now wants a Freedom School and Mrs. Bolden wants action. The Broad Umbrella was Julian's campaign which was our (SNCC's) idea but there is no reason why it can't be taken over by the community that makes up the 136th House District to be shaped and reshaped by them and made theirs by them and what they do.

I found that my own fears about controlling people or manipulating them blurred in the give and take dialogue (which implies give and take of decision-making and ideas) with the community; within the context of Julian's campaign, at least, I was part of that community.