

L. Richardson

This is an interview with Congressman ~~Richard~~ Preyer,
representative of the ^{Sixth} District of North Carolina. It
was conducted by ^{Jack Bass and Walter DeVries} _^ on January 28, 1974

Richard Preyer: . . .will reflect earlier than the other seven states in the south, changes in the south's relationship with the rest of the country. I think there's changes certainly there, particularly in the racial field, although if you just go down and look at the votes up here, I don't know whether you would think that much had happened by way of changing. North Carolina as a delegation votes still very conservatively and if you look at Virginia, well, it's extremely conservative and the other southern states are still voting conservatively. But I think that's a little misleading to just go by the votes on it. I think there really is a change in the south and a change in its role in the country. You don't have to be so old to remember Roosevelt, when we were the number one economic problem in the country and a southerner was defined by all the things that were wrong with the south. You know, from pellagra to lynchings and our poverty. And I don't think that people define the south like that any more. I think the change is very recent. I understand that the World Almanac a couple of years ago stopped printing the number of lynchings that occurred in the south. I can't recall when we last had a lynching in the south and I don't

believe that we'll have another one, except some aberrant situation. But it was almost systematic at one time, in the deep south particularly. All of that has changed terrifically. I think the southerner was always on the defensive about racial matters, but that has changed, not just because of changes in attitudes, but I guess changes in the economy, in the sense of so many blacks moving into the north. Now, it's about a fifty-fifty problem. And it's a northern problem now, really more than a southern problem. It seems to me that a southerner even today, for the first time, could probably run for national office. For the first time, I think in my memory, because we have gotten the moral on us of the racial thing pretty much off our back. I could see a ^{Fritz}~~Fritch~~ Hollings or a Lloyd Bentson^C or somebody, Terry Sanford, running nationally now, because I think on the racial thing, we have done a great deal more than anybody else in the country. Also, I think maybe the south, for the first time probably, is in a position to teach something to the rest of the country. Van Woodward and historians of the south like to say what is different in our heritage than the rest of the country. They talk about our poverty. They talk about how we are the only part of the country that ever lost a war, so we are used to failure and defeat and know how to react to it, which the rest of the country is going to have to learn after Vietnam. And I think that this general shift away from materialism in the country toward more getting back to some of the older virtues

courtesy, courage, all the William Faulkner virtues, love of place and roots and so forth, which seem to me southern traits, distinctively southern traits. So, I think maybe in that sense, as we move away from a more materialistic sort of country into one getting interested again in roots and non-materialistic values, that the south may have something to teach the rest of the country. I remember that Eudora Welty, the writer, says she is turned on by place and I think that is probably a unique southern attribute. It does turn on our writers. Walker Percy, Eudora Welty and Faulkner. The old land itself, you know, really turns them on and they find some real values there, compared to the big city life where it's rather rootless and not much sense of place. Maybe the south's virtues may come to be more appreciated. Well, that's general, that doesn't tell you too much about the politics of it. I would think that the south is still very centrist. Maybe that rises out of those virtues I was talking to you about. We never have gone very much for the "wingers", certainly not the left-wingers. I don't think the south, in the long run, will really go for right-wingers either. I think that it is going to develop as a centrist sort of political thing that may determine how presidential elections go in the future. It looks to me that a Democratic candidate has got to pick up some of the southern states before they can expect to get elected now. So, I think that the south's day is looking bright. Politically and economically.

Jack Bass: How about the southern role in politics? One theory

that we keep running into, is the south is less influential in Congress than it was ten or twenty years ago. The chairmanships, the training and those who hold them are aging and those who follow behind will be non-southerners and that the south's influence in Congress is waning and that the future direction is that it will wane even more.

Preyer: Well, certainly, it's waned in the ability to stop legislation, which is the great thing that the chairman can do, I guess. He can prevent something happening but he can't always make it happen. And as the south has lost its great chairmen, we've lost the power to obstruct. I think that's true. That's because the congressional system is changing. It's not just the south. The power of these committee chairmen is being whittled away, steadily. The rules committee of course, is not anything of what it was when Judge Smith ran it with an iron hand. If Judge Smith had been from the north, he could have run it the same way. But nobody can run it that way anymore. I don't care if it's a southerner or a northerner. So, in the sense of being a minority, you are handicapped, but you are in a lot better shape as a minority when you have a few key people in position to obstruct things. And that power's going, I'll grant you that. But I would think that you would then fall back on the sort of standard power a minority has in any sort of political situation. Namely that your vote could be the vote that makes a difference. Therefore, you can use it that way, particularly if you can keep it

more or less a solid bloc vote. Right now, we've mainly used it to go with the Republicans and give them a working, not a majority, but at least to keep the Democratic majority from riding roughshod over the Republicans. So it's something of a swing vote right now. And I would think it has some power there to swing either way and affect the outcome. For example, for the first time since I've been up here, recently there've been efforts by the DSG, Phil Burton and his group, to play ball with the southerners on things. For instance, on the minimum wage bill, in return for southern support, they would try to do something on the agricultural bill. On the minimum wage bill for example, they threw in exclusion of tobacco workers and they are actually talking with southerners for the first time, you know, instead of saying, "Well, you're all a bunch of rednecks and we are in possession of the truth and we are going to be ideological about it and oppose you all the way." I think that's some recognition that in the traditional political rules, a minority can well use its influence to affect votes and get something in return for them.

J.B.: Why should the tobacco workers be excluded from the minimum wage bill?

Preyer: Well, because Mr. Perkins is from Kentucky, I guess. I think the tobacco workers is a highly seasonal thing, you know. They work like mad for a few weeks and then don't work any for the rest of the year. It's strictly temporary kind of thing. So, I think, and I'm

no expert on it and haven't looked into it at all, but I think that the kind of reasoning behind the standard minimum wage may not be as applicable to a seasonal tobacco worker as it might be to others. But maybe they should be under it, I don't argue the merits of it so much as to say that that is an example of the way a minority is trying to use its influence in the majority.

J.B.: With the perspective now with these ten years time space, how do you think that historians in the future are going to evaluate the Sanford administration in North Carolina?

Preyer: Well, I think they will evaluate it as being probably the best administration we've ever had in North Carolina. I think it was creative and showed real vision and he moved forcefully in unpopular ways. In the education area, he did things there that foreshadowed what the federal government came along and did much later. What he did in the arts and humanities, for example with that school in Winston-Salem. The OEO programs, many were really foreshadowed by the things that Terry did. The community college set-up that he pushed. Of course, that was in California, it wasn't an original idea, but he pushed it and got it through in the state and it's been a very effective thing. So, I think it was a kind of extraordinary four years, a creative four years. I think he'll get very high marks.

J.B.: Did it have the effect of doing too much too quickly? I mean, was there a reaction to that in [terms of] race, for example?

Preyer: Well, there was certainly a reaction to it. I remember Terry telling me one time that "Popularity is something you have to spend." And he spent it all during his four years there. And by the time he got out of office, there was no doubt that he was unpopular in the state. Of course, the food tax was the main thing that did it, the sales tax. I'm sure he would have rather raised the money some other way. That is a regressive tax, but it looked like the only way that he was going to get any money for education.

Walter De Vries: Some commentators think that North Carolina doesn't have the kind of racial problems that other states have, it's considered kind of progressive at times. Yet, the only time that that was really tested, well, the two times that was tested in the last thirteen years, was in your contest with Lake and perhaps in the Wallace-Sanford contest in '72. As you look back on that, how do you see the importance of that primary? In racial relations as well as in the states ?

Preyer: Well, I think that North Carolina has had a more liberal press than it really deserves. And I think the University of North Carolina has been partially responsible for that. I say liberal press in the best sense of the word. When you look at North Carolina, we had, at least this was true when I ran for governor then and I imagine it's about true today, the lowest per capita income per worker in the country. I think we were below Mississippi. So, we had a lot of

low wage industry, furniture, tobacco, textiles traditionally. We had more farmers, or more small farms than any state in the union, except Texas. That means that you had a whole lot of farms that weren't economically viable. You had a lot of small towns with the small town merchant who's been having it rough in recent years. In other words, you have a large element there that was ripe for a demagogue. Low-wage earners, farmers that weren't making it. Our educational level was measured by draft inductions and so forth and health statistics were way down at the very bottom. All the conditions were ripe for a demagogue. And it's always surprised me a little that a Pitch Fork Ben Tillman or somebody like that hasn't come out of North Carolina. Because the economic make-up was there that would allow that to happen. Dr. Lake, I think his followers were hungering for the real demagogic bit. They would show up in droves at his rallies and they wanted the whole bit. They wanted him to attack the Jews and the Catholics and the bankers and most of all, the liberals on the racial matters. But Dr. Lake, instead, would give them a lecture on constitutional law. He'd gone to Harvard Law School and he wasn't going to stoop to that. He didn't. So, they were disappointed in him, in that sense. Why did it happen, if all those conditions were there, that North Carolina never had a Pitch Fork Ben Tillman and how is it so widely regarded as a progressive plutocracy? I'd give a lot of the credit to the University of North Carolina and to Duke. The University at that time particularly was

active in its institutes there. I think they made it and with the press we had there, a generally progressive press, the Daily News, and the Greensboro paper, the N and O and the Charlotte paper. It wasn't respectable for a demagogue to come out and so the climate of opinion was kept at a high level, a more enlightened level, if that's the word. Although, the conditions were always down there underneath, I think, for it to turn suddenly the other way, if the right demagogue had come along. So, I think that we were more enlightened, if that's the right word, than some of the other southern states, mainly because of the strength of our University and our press. But I think that whenever you get into a political campaign, those other factors underneath would come to the surface and it was darn hard for one of these so called enlightened people that would suit the University of North Carolina and the press to get elected. Because there was an awful lot of that vote that was very conservative on the racial issue and on other issues.

W.D.V,: There's a theory that North Carolina, because of its progressive image, didn't receive as much of the full brunt of the civil rights movement as the other southern states. Therefore, it didn't react as much and in the long run, it didn't react with as much speed to change as the other southern states once the situation got turned around. Whereas, North Carolina twenty-five years ago stood out as a beacon of progress in the south, but now it's just biding the time somewhere. How do you respond to that?

Preyer: Well, I would say that we are behind an area like Atlanta, certainly now. And I think that economics has more to do with that than anything else. Where you have more blacks moving into the middle class, where you've got a strong black middle class, you're going to get a lot of progress on racial matters. Atlanta has got a strong black middle class and I think that's why they're doing so much better on racial matters than Detroit or Greensboro or anybody else. I think if you've got that stable element in the black community, then you're going to make fast progress on racial matters. If you don't have it, you're going to have trouble. I don't know how this theory would check out, but I bet if you would look, wherever you find a good strong black middle class, you'll find racial progress, and where you don't find it, you won't find progress. So, I think the economics, how many blacks you can bring into the middle class probably has more to do with that than anything else. I think we are making some progress in North Carolina on that now, but I would think a city like Atlanta where the economy is stronger than we can have in cities the size of Greensboro, that you'll find them moving faster.

W.D.V.: Your old college law-school classmate, I believe, George *Esser*, addressed the Southern Historical Association in November and mentioned the various aspects of economic progress in the south. But the fact remains that it still has greater economic problems than

the rest of the country. We still have a higher percentage of poor people, we still have a greater disparity of wealth, we still have some 10 million people who have problems related to economics. He suggested that in spite of the group of new southern governors and so forth, that the solution of these problems would ultimately have to be a national solution and it would have to come from Congress. Now, with all that background, I wonder how you would respond to that?

Preyer: You mean as far as bringing up the economic level of the south?

W.D.V.: Developing solutions to the underlying problems, so that they do not remain economic problems.

Preyer: Well, I would tend to be sympathetic to that. I'm not quite sure what George has in mind, but what flashes across my mind and maybe this is what he has in mind, is something like revenue sharing which, if we just dump that on the south and say that we approach every. . . say this community development act. If we would do what the president wanted done on that, just turn the funds over without guidelines, without restrictions, to individual communities and cities and states, I would strongly suspect that those funds would end up in the general budget, in the general funds of many cities, counties and states. And I think that you've still got to have federal guidelines to keep middle class oriented legislatures, middle class oriented city, state and county governments from taking the federal funds and

using them all on worthy, desirable, middle-class programs. If you really want to get those programs to the lower income and the minority, it's going to take some federal guidelines to do it. If that's what George is talking about, then I would agree with him on that. I think that it's still going to take some pushing on it. I don't think we can just entirely leave it up to everybody's good will. And I think that principle works in other areas, too. In environmental laws. You know, if you are going to leave it up to the local community that survives because they've got an asbestos plant there, to clean up the water, it's not going to get cleaned up in that community. Some force outside of it is going to have to put that plant out of business, the local people are never going to do it. So, I would think that there is definitely a federal role remaining in these programs. I'm not sure that's what George had in mind.

J.B.: Where do you see North Carolina politics heading in the future? With the background of a developing Republican party that seems to be growing with increasing strength. For the first time, they've elected a Republican senator and governor. The Democratic Party at the moment, many people feel, is in some state of disarray.

Preyer: Well, this is a bad time to ask anybody to look into the political crystal ball. I've never seen a time when it was more difficult to see how things were going to break, at least in the short term on something like this impeachment vote on Watergate, you know. How is that going to break, no way of telling. What kind of backlash

there will be from it, . . .

J.B.: Let me rephrase that question, if I might. The south was viewed twenty-five years ago as a one-party section of the nation. Do you feel or see it really now as a two party or more of a no party system.

Preyer: Well, that's a good question. I see it as a two party system. I'll grant you that you could make a pretty good no party argument, but I think probably a lot of that is a period of transition where people are moving from the Democratic to the Republican party and they are sometimes reluctant to make the jump totally, so they go through a stage of being independent. But I think we are definitely going to be a two party system and I would agree that the Democratic Party right now is in some disarray, not only in the south, but in the country, because the left-wingers of that party are anathema in the south and whether the Democratic Party can be a big enough tent to keep under it the left-wingers and the middle-of-the-readers and the conservatives, is an issue unresolved right now, I would say. But I think that we are actually, well, I would be more optimistic than I would have been a year ago on that score. And optimistic about the Democratic Party generally. Take Senator Ervin, for example. Now, I think his position on the constitution and constitutional freedoms has made many people realize, including a lot of the more left-wing part of the party, that there is some merit in the conservative wing of the party. And that this is a pretty big tent, where

Ervin can be a hero on some parts of the Constitution and a villain on the fourteenth admendment. I think his example has been a good one. The parties, both of them, have to be a broad tent and I think the Democrats are going to be able to do that and keep a solid Democratic Party in the south. Both parties of course, are having some problems right now. I guess the independents, there are more registered independents than there are Republicans right now, aren't there? It's the second largest party and it's certainly a fashionable position.

W.D.V.: Well, traditionally in North Carolina, a lot of the financial support of the party came from relatively, . . . well, depending on how. . . the business community was people basically conservative and with an attitude of enlightened self-interest. How much of that group do you see shifting into the Republican Party in North Carolina?

Preyer: I think an awful lot of them are going to shift into it. I think they were voting for southern Democrats when we had southern Democratic chairmen that were more effective for their point of view than most ^RRepublicans were. I think you are going to lose about all that crowd.

W.D.V.: Do you see the future of the Democratic Party basically on trying to put together a Populist type coalition of blue-collar whites and blacks?

Preyer: Well, I think it's got to be a very centrist sort of party.

I think we're going to have a hard time getting the big business group into it. But I would, I buy the Scott-Vince- - Scammon point of view of the real majority and that if you are putting together a coalition of the minorities, I don't think that's going to work. You know, if you just have the blacks, and just have the young people and just have all the activist groups, just have the labor, I don't believe that's going to work. But I think that you can put together a pretty centrist sort of coalition. The labor unions are getting more conservative all the time. I imagine they will probably become respectable eventually in North Carolina. They could be a strong part of the party.

W.D.V.: But you see the liberals and conservatives essentially aligning as Democrats and Republicans? That would be a conservative Republican party and the liberals and centrists and left of center in the Democratic party.

Preyer: Well, I guess that's basically what I'm saying. I would hate to see the conservatives run out of the party. I've always fought against this idea that all the liberals ought to be in one party and all the conservatives in the other. I think that would be disastrous in national politics if we got into that, because then every vote would be a vote on a matter of principle, and on issues and then you've got really cut-throat politics. I think each party ought to have their spectrum of liberals and conservatives, so I hope that Senator Ervin, for example, who is basically conservative on his approach to things,

certainly our party ought to always have a strong appeal to people like that. But I think basically you're right, the more business oriented people and the conservatives in that sense, will be going to the Republican party.

J.B.: At this point, would you consider the endorsement of organized labor to be an asset or a liability in a state-wide campaign in North Carolina?

Preyer: I would say that its still a liability. We like to have them, they're good workers and they can really turn out a vote, but I think in answer to your question, that they hurt you when they endorse you. Right now, still. I think we are gradually moving away from that. Particularly as higher wage industries come into the state, like Western Electric. You find people living in the white-collar suburbs, union people. That changes some attitudes and opinions. Or where they've been into an area for a while, such as Eden and that district. The textile workers union there is a highly respected union and the city council almost always has a textile union man on it. And he works very well with all the Fieldcrest people and the attitude there is very good. So, in an area like Eden, I would say that it would help you to have the labor endorsement. But state wide, I would think it wouldn't.

J.B.: How would you compare that to ten years ago?

Preyer: Well, ten years ago was a fortuori. It was just worse. I

think that's just, attitudes on that are softening a lot.

J.B.: Was it the kiss of death ten years ago?

Preyer: Kiss of death? Yeah. I remember when I was running for governor, we wanted labor support, but you in effect begged them to not endorse you, you know. Of course, you couldn't ask them not to endorse you, because that's very insulting to them, but I think there's no doubt about it that ten years ago, labor support out in the open would hurt you. Right now, I know some Congressmen still turn down contributions from labor unions. They send the check back. I accept all the contributions and I go to all the meetings and I don't think in my district that it has hurt. But I would think that in a state wide race you would still have to be pretty cautious.

W.D.V.: In the second primary, was race the thing that defeated you? Is there any doubt in your mind about that?

Preyer: No, I would say that there was no question. The way they used those television commercials, that sunk us. And of course, the basic thing was, which is in the record related to race, we miscalculated. We thought Lake would finish second and then we could then break off some of the more moderate voters from Dan Moore who wouldn't want to vote for a segregation candidate. But when Moore finished second and Lake third, we were sunk. Because we couldn't break off a single vote from Lake, especially after those t.v. commercials. We didn't get a single vote.

W.D.V.: What were those t.v. commercials?

Preyer: Well, on the night of the election, Channel 5 in Raleigh in particular, in reporting the elction returns would at each report put up what they called "and here is how the bloc vote went in Durham" or "here is how the bloc vote went in Greensboro", which was the black vote and it would show 2,010, you know, in favor of me as against the others.

W.D.V.: This was in the first primary.

Preyer: Yeah. So, they didn't let that go unnoticed for more than any ten minute stretch on t.v. all night long. They would put those charts up and call the bloc vote to everybody's attention. And the Civil Rights Bill had been passed a few weeks before, so this was very much on everybody's mind so this was a pretty devastating commentary. So, we just got clobbered the next time around. I remember I would go to. . .one county we carried for example was Burke County, carried it big the first primary. The second primary I went up there and our manager said, "Gosh, I hope this election votes hurry up and come up. We've got it now, but it's slipping fast. I would go out and talk to my old friends that were all for us in the first primary and they say, 'Well, I was for your man Preyer. But he's for the niggers.'" So, we could just see this washing out. So, I don't think there was ever any question that they would really sock us.

W.V.D.: Are you going to run for state-wide office again?

Preyer: Well, I wouldn't. . .not for governor, but I might take

a crack at the senator's race someday. I doubt this time, but Mr. Helms come up two years from now and maybe a good race there might be about time for me to retire from public office anyway. I think I might give that one a thought anyway. Hope the tides have changed a little bit by then. I don't know, right now, I think our state's pretty conservative.