

This is an interview with Rex Carter, Speaker of the South Carolina House. The interview was conducted by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries on February 14, 1974. The interview was transcribed by Susan Hathaway.

JACK BASS: How important is race in politics now and in what way? It has obviously changed since 1948 substantially.

REX CARTER: It has changed not only substantially, but dramatically. Of course, in 1948 and thereafter for a number of years, blacks in South Carolina and most southern states have historically voted for the Democratic party, and still do to a large degree. But if there is any change that I have seen in recent years is respect for the black vote. They are no longer "in the bag" for either party, so to speak. They are interested in results by the government. They are interested in social legislation, they are interested in the black people being given equal employment opportunity. They are interested in seeing their people in governmental and official positions, and here in South Carolina, we, to a large degree, have made tremendous progress in that respect county by county, and

of course, one of the reasons for it, being brutally frank, is because of their voting strength and power, and they have made that known, and the results have been rather significant as far as the results they sought. Over and beyond that, of course, the racial feeling of the people in South Carolina is also changing dramatically. The black person is being looked upon as an equal in most parts of the State of South Carolina. His advice and counsel is being sought economically, socially, politically, and we have become a part of the mainstream of this country in that respect. I think most people in South Carolina now that think progressively realize that to make the progress we need to make and will make hopefully in the future, the black person must be educated, he must become a part of our social and economic structure, and we are working in that direction.

J.B.: Do you think race as a political factor in elections is dead, or is it just used differently?

Carter: It is as dead as far as segregation or that type as anything could be in South Carolina, I think. I think a person who would run ^{on} a political platform of segregation or racism would have no chance for any political office in South Carolina.

J.B.: How about dead . . . There is a change extent in two ways. One of course you have a large number of black voters.

R.C.: Right, and of course, that is significant, and that is one reason why perhaps it has changed.

J.B.: Is it also an issue that can be used with appeal through code words? Busing, quality education, discipline in school . . .

Carter: Of course, I am from Greenville, and I don't feel it up there that we have any code words for busing or using it politically in that respect or discipline in the schools. We have a good school system in our area. The unitary system has worked real good, and we are pleased with it in Greenville.

J.B.: And you have a busing plan?

Carter: We do bus in Greenville. Our situation, as I think you know, is 80 - 20, and every school in Greenville County as nearly as possible is 80 - 20.

J.B.: Is the effectiveness of that plan in part, is it in a large part a result of the fact that that ratio is fairly high.

Carter: That could be a significant factor in the success of the plan. Now that ratio is not absolute in every school, but it is close to it, and that is probably one of the reasons it is successful, but the other reason it is successful is you know, through the years since the unitary plan, our people have learned a lot. The blacks have learned a lot on how to live together and work

together and go to school together.

J.B.: Is the role of organized labor changing, and is it developing into a more significant course?

Carter: It is that. Organized labor has increased significantly in South Carolina, and their leadership's image has changed and they have worked closer with the legislature and more realistically in many respects for the legislative program. They have become more sophisticated in the way they work and their role has . . .

J.B.: What are some examples of that?

Carter: They work closely with the Chamber of Commerce on Workman's Compensation, a package that we have now, which a few years ago would have been unheard of, and they would have . . . possibly the two groups would have never met together. They are now meeting together in areas that they can come together on and suggest and have input into legislative program. It is surprising how close the two groups are in many respects, and I think that is significant.

J.B.: What are the basic ingredients of that package?

Carter: It increases the death benefits of Workman's Comp. to \$40,000.

J.B.: From what?

Carter: From \$25,000. It increases the weekly benefit from the maximum of \$63 to about \$83, it increases specific disability significantly and adds new areas such as the

spleen as a specific, and other areas. I don't remember all, but several other specific benefits under the Comp plan.

J.B.: Does it remove most of those areas of employment that were excluded such as saw mill workers?

Carter: That is one of the areas that I failed to mention. Under this proposal, it would require every person who employs as many as two people to be under the Workman's Comp Act, which would include the saw mill people, and other areas that had not been included before.

J.B.: What were some of those areas? Weren't the pulp mill people . . .

Carter: Pulp mill, saw mill, are the two that I can think of. Of course, that would include . . .

J.B.: Isn't this really a significant step?

Carter: Probably the most significant that I have seen in recent years for social legislation, and is going to be of untold benefits to the working people.

J.B.: Why does the Chamber of Commerce . . .

Carter: Well to be frank again, I think we all recognize the Chamber and labor, that if we don't do something significant and far reaching, the federal government is going to do it, and that is one of the reasons, I think.

J.B.: So in effect it is sort of a federal pressure?

Carter: Sort of federal pressure, but I think that being completely fair the Chamber of Commerce and the labor organizations all realize that we can do much more in that field without any significant increase in Workman's Comp Insurance.

J.B.: These breakfast meetings that labor is having with legislators, are they effective?

Carter: I think so. We met with them in Greenville last Saturday morning and I stayed with them from about eight to ten-thirty, and I had to leave at that time. They realize what is reasonable about their program. They realize what is desirable, what they really want, but they also realize that they are getting results which means taking a lot less in many instances and they educated us in some areas. For instance, unemployment, Workman's Comp, voter registration by mail, which I am for, and other programs that they are interested in that they think will be to the interest of all the people of South Carolina. So I think the meetings . . . my answer really is that I think the meetings are real good, and I will say this too. I can remember the time Jack, 15 or 20 years ago if the same group had invited you for breakfast, probably only two or three would have shown up out of a delegation of 15 or 20. Now practically everybody shows up.

J.B.: I understand that you told them something to the effect that a few years ago that if you saw them coming you would walk across the street . . .

Carter: I kidded Sinway, who is a good friend of mine, that several years ago if I saw him coming I felt like going the other way. I said it kiddingly, I really didn't mean that, but that was about the image of some, not Sinway, but it has changed, you know, they have grown up and we have grown up. Where do you get all of your damn information? [Interruption]

J.B.: How about development and growth in the Democratic party, and why is nothing being done at the local level to develop the Democratic party in such areas as Greenville?

Carter: Well of course I would disagree with you when you say that nothing is being done. I don't think we have been able to develop the party as we would have and make it a vehicle as viable as we would desire, one of the reasons for it is that for so many years the Democratic party locally and state-wide was only used as a vehicle by which you had an election or primary, and you didn't need it as an instrument to get people elected in a general election, but we have developed probably the best young Democratic group in South Carolina in Greenville County in the past year, year and a half, composed of about 270 odd

members actively working and doing a good job, really interesting. We have the best local woman's group, ladies group of any in the State, I think. Those two groups have really been the backbone of the Democratic party in Greenville County, and we are hoping to do better in that respect. One of our problems has been not being able to attract the young, the energetic, people in our party, and we are doing it now, not to the extent we like, but certainly we are making progress.

J.B.: What do you think the chances are

Carter: Excellent.

J.B.: How about registration by mail?

Carter: I don't know about the senate, but I think they should pass it. . . the indications, a close vote on recommitting it to the Judiciary Committee, I believe, was one vote difference over Senator Gressetts . . . with him opposing the bill as a whole indicates to me that it has right much strength in the senate and has a reasonable chance of passage. I'd like to see it passed.

J.B.: If I come back here next year and you are Speaker of the House, what kind of changes are there going to be?

Carter: Well, this is . . . are you speaking in . . . from the mechanics of the house judiciary, the

structure of the house, the working structure, is that what you are speaking of?

J.B.: The structure and operating structure.

Carter: If you come back here this time next year, and if I am re-elected Speaker of the House, I think you will find that we'll have a almost full time research assistants for every major committee of the house. You'll see eight or ten pool secretaries for the general membership of the house. You will . . .

[Interruption]

J.B.: Will there be more than one member on say the Ways and Means?

Carter: When are you going to print this?

J.B.: 1976.

Carter: Yes, you will see more than one, but frankly, until I am re-elected, I'd rather not saying anything about that, and you'll see why. But I honestly do plan to put more than one from large counties.

J.B.: Do you see the growing role of blacks in politics as basically a liberalizing influence in the State?

Carter: I think it is a liberalizing influence, and I think it is a wholesome influence.

J.B.: Where do you see the Republican party?

Carter: They are quite strong in Greenville County, and I think that is largely due to the fact that we have

had so many new people come in our County over recent years that come from areas where a Democrat was looked upon as if he were an extreme left-winger or something, and a lot of those people never got to know the local Democrats and that is the reason they have been strong to some extent, but what I see right now from outside looking in is that they have not developed yet and not willing to go to what they have developed a state-wide office, they seek to go to the top instead of going into their party for their strength, and I think that is a great weakness of the Democratic party. They have some good men in the house, and they seem to ignore what they have attempted to develop when they seek a Lieutenant Governor, Governor or U. S. Senator or what have you instead of going into their party structure, or at least their elected official. I think that is a weakness, a great drawback to the Republican party. I think second, that unless they go to state-wide primaries it will be a drawback to the development of the Republican party, and I have a feeling that the party leadership in South Carolina don't want a primary. They want to do it by convention, the easy way.

J.B.: What effect do you think Watergate is going to have?

Carter: It's going to have some effect. In South Carolina, not perhaps as much effect as it has in other

parts of the country.

J.B.: What effect does it have on the Democratic party?

Carter: It makes us realize that we have not only got to be right as far as our moral approach to politics, we've got to give every appearance of being right. The time has passed in South Carolina and any part of the Country when you can operate in the fringe areas, so to speak, politically, and get by with it with the public. The public is fed up, in my judgement, with the credibility of government officials generally, and they are not going to accept in the future, a person who says "I am right, I'm honest, I've done the right thing," and yet over here on the other side it appears that he didn't do the right thing, and wasn't honest, and I think that is going to make every person who seeks a political office or hopes to maintain a political office a better person.

J.B.: When do you see South Carolina developing a strong ethics code?

Carter: We are on the verge of it. I still think that we are perhaps a couple of years, three or four away from it. I think the senate of South Carolina will eventually accept it. I think the house is willing to pass as strong an ethics code as possible, or as needed I should say, and I think that we would do it immediately if we thought the senate would adopt it, and I think in the next election

we should have full disclosure of campaign contributions, full disclosure of representation or restriction of representation by legislative lawyers or others, agencies of state government, and once there is full disclosure, you have no problems as far as integrity.

J.B.: Do you have a state ethics commission as such to rule on questions?

Carter: I would have no objection to that. I think whatever it takes, and if it takes a State Ethics Commission independent of the legislature to do it, to have public confidence and credibility, it should be done. It would be much stronger, I believe, than to have a house and senate committee to pass upon its own members or families of its own members.

J.B.: Do you think that the endorsement by organized labor anymore is a liability or an asset both in local elections and state?

Carter: I would take it personally as an asset. At one time, it would have been a liability. I don't think that organized labor has the stigma attached that it once had in South Carolina.

J.B.: Do you think their endorsements affect how people vote?

Carter: No, maybe with the rank and file members of organized labor, which is still relatively weak in

South Carolina.

J.B.: How about non-union working people. Are they influenced in anyway by organized labor?

Carter: Not that I can tell or see significantly.

J.B.: What do you think has been the effect of reapportionment?

Carter: The major effect of reapportionment is not fully realized yet as the urban areas of the state are exercising more influence on the legislative process and will become more evident over the next two or three years. The rural dominance of the South Carolina legislature is rapidly growing to a close. It hasn't yet been seen in the senate nor the house fully, but it will be in the next few years.

J.B.: Is the Speaker's *[retirement part of that change?]*

Carter: That's part of it. *[Interruption]*

J.B.: Where do you see the future politics in the State heading?

Carter: What do you mean by that question?

J.B.: Do you see Democrats basically retaining control with this coalition of blacks and court house Democrats, top level financial and business community?

Carter: Yeah, I see that as a future, over the next several years at least, and the reason for it, South Carolina has made and is making a lot of progress

economically, socially and educationally, and as long as that progress is being made, I don't think the people in the State are really going to want to turn it around or upset it or risk a different group in control of the state government and byinlarge we've had good Democratic Governors over the past several years and a reasonable legislature.

J.B.: Where do you see the Wallace voters going in the future?

Carter: I believe the Wallace voter in South Carolina will come back to the Democratic party. I think a large percent of them have voted Republican in recent years, and I think one of the reasons for it might be in the outbreak of the Watergate situation, and the credibility gap that is increasing by that situation. There is a lot of disillusionment because of it. You can see it in the administration, he has lost 90 - 95% of all of his top key original appointments for one reason or another, and an administration whose polls indicate that less than 30% of the people in this country have faith in him, I think you will see that group coming back if Wallace is not a candidate himself. I mean by that if he were an independent candidate outside of the party. If he is a candidate, he'd be a formidable one for southern states.

J.B.: Is Wallace the key in the 1976 election insofar as the South is concerned?

Carter: I think what the South needs for a candidate that we can support is a person like Jackson, who is a middle-of-the-roader in many respects. He's liberal enough to be acceptable to the entire country and conservative enough to be acceptable in the South, and that is the type of candidate we need. We don't necessarily need a reasonable candidate. Wallace may be the key to the nomination of someone like Jackson. [Interruption]

J.B.: Suppose it is someone like Kennedy?

Carter: Ted Kennedy would be acceptable to me. I don't know if he would be acceptable to the people in the South. I think that his own personal problem in regard to that . . . what's the name of that bridge? . . . would have something to do with his effectiveness as a candidate. Right now he is probably leading.

J.B.: If Wallace campaigned for him, would it make substantial difference?

Carter: I think it would. In the southern states it would make a substantial difference.

J.B.: Who would be some candidates, you said that people like you in public office would openly support?

Carter: Jackson would be one.

J.B.: Anybody else.

Carter: I could support, personally, Kennedy, and would if he was the nominee of the party. I would support Hubert Humphrey. I think he would have made a great President had he been elected. I don't think he will be the nominee again. That is about all I can think of.

J.B.: You don't get enthusiastic about names like Mondale and Church?

Carter: No. I don't know enough about them, but what I have read and seen, I don't get enthusiastic about either one.

J.B.: Do you think that having a southerner on the ticket in either the number one or two spot is important?

Carter: I think that it would be extremely helpful. It would probably not only help in the South, but also in the mid-west. Fred Tomlin would make a good number two man. [Interruption] I think we are going to move forward to the intensive capital expenditure type industry, and our per capita income is going to move up substantially over the next few years. We are going to be able to provide equality education and still maintain our trees, our environment, and our good way of living down here. I'm just tremendously impressed. I'm impressed over this house. We've got a group here now that is willing to work and they are working hard,

and we are looking at, you know, trying to do a legislative job efficiently, quickly and responsively and I am really encouraged over the cooperation we get as far as my office is concerned, and we are trying to create an atmosphere of everybody working together, you know, and I think we have made a lot of progress in that respect.