

This is an interview with Barbara Sylvester on February 18, 1974. Ms. Sylvester's title is not given and no location for the interview is given. The person conducting the interview is Jack Bass. The transcriber is Susan Hathaway. *Ms. Sylvester is Democratic National committeewoman and chairman of the board of the S. C. ~~Department~~ of Youth Services.*

JACK BASS: Has there been any change in the role of women in politics in this state or in the south in the last 25 years, or ten years of any real substantive change for you. We've always had some women in politics, had women mayors in this state 50 - 60 years ago.

BARBARA SYLVESTER: I think the change has been brought about deliberately by various forward women, like me, who have pushed themselves through the doors. I don't think that it was because . . . on any political point or any group of men decided that it was time to bring them in. I think it was just because the women were so insistent to get there. I truthfully can't see where's that much change, because I think that there are still so many meetings going on in the back room where they feel that a woman can't get involved in that aspect of politics, which I guess they consider the policy making aspect of it, which I think they are losing out because I think that women that do become truly involved in the political parts of this life are . . . can make a direct contribution in the policy making decisions. I don't think that we have been given the opportunity to do it unless we force our way in.

J.B.: Why is it that women in this state in recent years have been more successful in the Republican party than in the

Democratic party, at least in the sense of the five women legislators, four are Republicans, although Democrats greatly outnumber Republicans.

B.S.: I don't think that they have had more chance in the Republican party than in the Democratic party. I think that the reason there are more . . . five elected Republican women was the respected Republican parties wanted to run a candidate, and the only candidate they got was a woman. They didn't have a primary fight to begin with. Let's face it, every time we have a primary, we have a primary fight. So these were hand selected people. To me, in a way, I am delighted that women were elected, unfortunately they got elected on the wrong ballot, but I think what happened, they were hand selected. I don't know how many of those women have families at home, and I think what it was was the Republicans didn't have a male they could put up to run against the Democratic man that could win. (inaudible) I am sure there were some Democrats that voted those women.

J.B.: Why is it that there have been no women running for state wide office in South Carolina, which is not the case in most southern states.

B.S.: Well, I think that southern . . . particularly South Carolina, I can only speak really for South Carolina, not that much for other southern states. First of all, I think that women in our state are more bound to stay home, however, I do have to say this, I think that women in South Carolina are pretty lazy. I think that there a lot of women that feel like no woman should run, I don't think that any person should

run, whether it is a man or woman, unless they have had some experience in the community in developing community programs. I haven't just yet seen . . . well the women who are coming along now aren't my generation. It was not accepted that you be involved politically. It just wasn't, that was a no no. I think that is one reason we have so many crisis today everywhere is because women aren't involved. I think that the generation coming along behind us are going to be entirely different because they are more professional, they believe more in a woman taking a position on things. There are more female college professors today, there are more female wardens in the correctional system then there were before, and I think that this is going to . . . I don't think that we should rule out that there is going to be a female running for state wide office in South Carolina. I think that this may come within the next five years.

J.B.: Do you think that the political development of women in South Carolina parallels with the blacks? Not to the extent of ^{legal}~~liberty~~ exclusion, but at least psychologically that they weren't expected to participate?

B.S.: I don't have any doubt in my mind that we weren't expected to participate. I do think that there are many elected officials and serving in the legislature, serving on the local level, and also those that are not elected believe that women should be involved. But then you've got to look at the philosophy in South Carolina. Our people . . . it's been somewhat different from what it has from people in other places. I do think that men are basically,

in South Carolina, are a little afraid of a very forward, outspoken female.

J.B.: More so than in other states?

B.S.: Yes I do.

J.B.: More than other southern states?

B.S.: Yes I do.

J.B.: Why?

B.S.: I can not explain it, Jack. I just truly feel that . . . and don't think that I am against men, oh no, we couldn't exist without them . . . none of us could. There is a certain amount of . . . the feeling of the men in South Carolina is that a woman's place is supposed to be at home. This has been embedded in the woman so that they believe it.

J.B.: Do you give talks on this subject to women?

B.S.: Yes I do.

J.B.: What is your basic message?

B.S.: Well the fact that they are wasting a talent that I feel the good Lord gave them, that they can be involved, but more importantly than that I feel like that everything we do is all involved in politics. I mean everything. The schools system is involved in politics. And this is what a working woman would say well I have children in school, I can't become involved, I've got children in school. But then those same women are the women who play bridge three mornings a week, or five mornings a week, and if they only took one morning out and devoted it to some political involvement that they would find that they understand the school system more, they understand how the school board operates, they would understand the

city government more, and right on up the ladder. I think that we have made a dent on . . . in . . . by using that approach for everything we do . . . even businesses, the development of shopping centers and all. Politics is involved in that. All they have to do is sit down and study it a little bit and they'd find out that every bill that comes out of the state legislature had to have a beginning somewhere, and in talking to womens groups and you tell them the steps that a bill takes and how they as one individual can register their support or complaint against it, this seems to excite them a little bit. One reason we haven't gone any further than we have is that I don't think we have had enough women who . . . to be speaking to women's groups to explain to them the steps that you take and what happens. I can't see that we've set the world on fire with it . . . with getting them involved, but even if we go for a year and we pick up 20 additional women, to me this is a good accomplishment.

J.B.: Pick up 20 additional women in what?

B.S.: In a year.

J.B.: Twenty women . . .

B.S.: That would become involved.

J.B.: Wouldn't that be a slow process?

B.S.: Well it may be a slow process, but I think it would be a very positive process.

J.B.: Among women in South Carolina, you probably hold the most influential position in holding . . . in being Chairman of a fairly major state agency, ^{and a member of the} ~~(inaudible)~~ National Democratic Committee, particularly in the formal role, there has always been

a woman in the national Democratic Committee (inaudible).

B.S.: Right, but I have gotten elected with quite a fight.

J.B.: But even the Chairman of the . . .

B.S.: Youth services.

J.B.: Chairman of the youth services. That put you in a non-traditional (inaudible) role. Any examples that come to mind of experiences that are probably peculiar because of your being a woman as opposed to a man in that position?

B.S.: Yeah. I think they had one woman on the Board from the upper part of the state, and she was traditionally the . . . as women are supposed to be Boards and Commissioner Boards . . . supposed to be the Secretary, and then when I was appointed five years ago, I was elected Secretary, and I made no bones about letting the people know that I resented the fact that I was. And then after two years of being on that Board our chairman died and the vice-chairman had been elected to the house from Richland County, so I was the only elected person that was still serving on the Board and so naturally coming down, the chairman was gone, the vice-chairman was gone, so the secretary stepped up as acting chairman. And there was great deliberation and quite a bit of pressure from all parts that although I was serving as acting chairman that it really wasn't the thing to do to elect a woman chairman. I was the first woman to be elected as a chairman of a state agency board. Our board elects our officers, and the board felt that I was the person who should be the chairman. And what they were thinking about, is we were going through an educational process of educating

the legislators . . . the citizens of South Carolina on the Department of Youth Services. I think that many of the staff resented it who had been in (inaudible). They felt that it should be a man that would be visiting the dormitories on the John G. Richards campus, and what have you. Then all of a sudden they found out that I could handle the rough situation . . . the language, the same as anybody else. Sometimes you do things in a position that you've got to listen to words that you say a lady shouldn't listen to. But if a lady is going to become involved, she has got to be hard enough, broad minded enough that she can take anything that a man can take. I have proved that I was able to do it. Up until a year ago the Southern Correctional Association always sent me my mail as Mr. B. Sylvester, and now they have dropped the "r" and added the "s" which I don't particularly like. I'd like for them to have the "Mrs." not the "Ms." It was very hard for people at the American Correctional Association to accept me. I am evidently the only woman around that is the head of a correctional agency, but I have to say that our administrative staff, and the staff down at Central Corrections have been most helpful and have accepted me on their level. But it was hard that first year.

J.B.: Any incidence that come to mind that make that the point that it was hard?

B.S.: Yeah. I was going through the dormitory on the girls campus one time, and when we went on this (inaudible) there were very few programs within the agency and we had our hearts set on becoming a treatment and rehabilitation agency and not just a

custodial agency, and we cut all the television soap operas off in the afternoon, and the girls got upset, and I was walking down the hall to visit a little girl (inaudible) county who was sick, but not sick enough to be in the infirmary . . . there were four little girls in the room and they saw me walking down the hall and they said here comes that damn bitch, like that. And then the Superintendent who was a male wanted to go back and reprimand the girls and I said no, and I had a hard time convincing him that it was the wrong thing to do, but I know that it was the right thing because after the visit I went back and talked with the girls and we turned out to be big buddies, and this was three years ago. Last Christmas and the Christmas before last I had notes from them and I have gotten pictures and they have gotten married. The other thing where it is so hard is that when you go into the security building of the John G. Richards School and staff doesn't want to talk to me about the problems they have had because I am a woman. Then I have to take them and sit them down like I would one of the students and shaking them to tell me exactly what is going on. It has taken them a while to really come around to the fact that they can talk to me man to woman like you would talk man to man. It's been a challenge, but I am winning it.

J.B.: When do you think there will be more women running for public office in the state? Do you see any substantial increase?

B.S.: No

J.B.: Is there something peculiar about women to give them something different to offer the public as elected officials?

Any special reason why there should be women elected to public office?

B.S.: Well I think they should be because I don't think that women are afraid to take a stand, you know. I don't think that they are inclined to step softly when it comes to something that they believe in. I think that women are very very outspoken, and I just think that they would make a contribution because of being so outspoken and believing so strongly in what they believe in that they wouldn't hesitate voicing their views.

J.B.: Do they believe in things men don't believe in, or believe in less strongly on issues.

B.S.: Let's, for example, take something right now . . . and I hate to even bring that in because I am so afraid of the word and the fact of impeachment. But I believe that you would find more women today that believe the President should be impeached than you find men. And I believe that the women would not hesitate in telling you how they feel about it. Men, I think, particularly if they are interested in public office, are very very careful to voice an opinion on the thing. I don't think that you find women to be that way, but I can't truly say these are the women that I deal with, that I work with, that I . . . help me raise money for retardation and things of that type. But I can't see where we've got a woman sitting in the South Carolina legislature that is very outspoken. I sat in there two weeks ago for three days and never in those three days did one of those women go to the microphone. I can't understand it. The other day there was a bill introduced . . .

J.B.: That contradicts your previous statement.

B.S.: Yes, But this is what I am saying, that there are women who shouldn't be elected, who should run and be elected, and that Mrs. Rudnick, ~~(A)~~ who is the only Democrat female who is sitting in the state legislature, did get up the other day and introduce an amendment to a bill pertaining to bicycles. That is the first time I've known her to go to the floor. Now I am sure she has gone to the floor before, but what I was saying to was the fact these women . . . the Republican women aren't necessarily more qualified than anybody, but the Republican party in those respective counties evidently felt that that's who they could get elected and they wanted to elect somebody. They haven't shown me anything whether it evolved in the decision making policy, or what the Republican house members do or not. I don't know if Mrs. Rudnick is, but I know that if I was sitting in there, and a lot of other people like me, we would be involved in it. I can't tell you what . . . I would love to see a woman running from Florence County whenever the primary comes up. I would love to see a woman running for county council when that comes up, and I'd love to see a woman running for city council. I am not talking about . . . what happens here is that a lot of women get elected, not elected . . .

J.B.: You were a campaign manager, weren't you for the probate judge?

B.S. Yes.

J.B.: Now there are a lot of women probate judges in South Carolina, why is that (inaudible).

B.S.: Because I don't think that there are a lot of young lawyers that want to . . . from my understanding they

are talking to law students and attorneys, that when you go through law school you don't really study probate court because no one can imagine a young attorney spending all that time going through law school and coming out and serving full time in a probate court. This would be ridiculous.

J.B.: Well you have a woman then.

B.S.: The reason that I managed on the campaign was that she had served sixteen years, she knew absolutely nothing about politics, she didn't know where to begin, what to do, or anything else. I just felt so strongly, not because she was a woman so much but because the fact that (inaudible) 16 years in that office. And I believe that it is a full time job and that we don't need a part time Judge of Probate.

J.B.: Go ahead and talk about . . . In '68 you had

B.S.: No, No.

J.B.: In '72 there was an effort made to get women elected to the state convention.

B.S.: Right, right. And the counties didn't do too well on that. We had more women than we had ever had before but it still wasn't up to what it should be. What happened though, for example, let me tell you what happened right here in Florence County. We had nine women running on the slate at the county convention. Anybody could be nominated. Anybody could go and nominate themselves by filling out a card and filing it with the Secretary. We had nine women running. Do you know how many were elected? One, one was elected. And all kinds of women had left to be the alternate because you see you picked your highest numbers and then the next starts the alternates.

So some of the men, just to keep the women happy dropped down so the women could be alternats. So then we get to the state convention and in six congressional districts, we had five women running for delegate. But in the national convention, not a single woman got elected, the men would not vote for the women. But we have also found that lots of times women won't vote for men. But in that particular instance, at the state convention when we were electing delegates to the national convention, we had our women there and they voted for the women, but they were the only votes that the women got. We had not one single woman elected from the sixth district. We had one elected as an alternate.

J.B.: You also had a situation where you were attempting to elect blacks, and a number of blacks were elected, right?

B.S.: There were three blacks elected, Jack. In the sixth district we only had four delegates and three of them were black and one was a white male, all of them male. Even with me standing up there and several other people standing up there begging them that we wanted a young person, we wanted a black, we wanted a woman and we wanted a white male. We ended up with four males, three black and one white. I don't know what's going to happen. We've got county conventions coming up. I do know what the women are going to do there. We've got a slate made out with nothing in the world but women, and we are going to hand it out the night of the county convention trying to get at least part of these women elected to go to the state convention and a lot of people have said Oh you can't do that, it's not right. Well, what's not

right about it. One thing that's hurt women with their chances of being elected, I think, and I believe in equal rights, but I think that to a degree the ERA thing got completely out of hand, and I think those of us who do support it and are level headed about it . . . we fell down on our job that we didn't get to as many female groups as we could to explain that you're really not giving up anything, but if you are educated enough to be in a position then you deserve to be paid the same that the male is paid. I think in the State of South Carolina, that if women had gotten themselves together and gone with one presentation on the ERA that it would have passed, and that presentation being the Director of the State Library, if we had used her as the example of equal rights, no one can make me believe any differently, then that thing would have passed. Ms. Rudcre is the Director of a State Agency, her salary is so low that they can not afford to bring someone in to train them to be the Director when Ms. Rudcre retires in about two years, because the person they would have to bring in they would have to pay more than they are paying Ms. Rudcre right now. This is where we fell down on the job. If you could look at it (inaudible) and take it back to the South Carolina Commission on the status of women, that they didn't do their homework, they should have been the ones making the presentation . . .

J.B.: According . . . of course, you have two of the five women legislators voting against it.

B.S.: That's right. But I . . .

J.B.: My question is it really the majority of the women

in South Carolina are against it, because of the reason you cited earlier? Psychologically you said they have been framed from childhood and (inaudible)

B.S.: I do think that though . . . And I have an ERA bracelet . . . that we're going to beat the hell out of Westmoreland.

J.B.: Where is the Democratic party headed in South Carolina? What kind of coalition is holding it together? Where are the Wallace votes going?

B.S.: I think the Wallace vote is going to come back to the Democratic party, because I think that we have come over that disaster we had in Chicago, we overcame that disaster we had in Miami, and I think really and truly the main reason the Wallace vote is going to come back to the Democratic party was that they saw their man, although it may have been in a wheel chair, lifted up to the podium in Miami, and he's been talking about the Democratic party and what it stands for and that this is what is good for the people. Bob Strauss has done a terrific job bringing these people back together on the national level, and I think that in looking at the Democratic women's council, just like this weekend, we had a meeting and you had sitting there, around that table, Wallacites, McGovernites, Humphryites, and things of . . . conglomeration sitting there and the main thing that was the topic of conversation is that we have wasted too much time. It's time for us to take a position on issues, and see all of those factions sitting there discussing what issues we were going to take a stand on, and how we were going to take it, and sit down and reasoning it out, and everybody came

up with the same conclusion. Can't you imagine 33 women sitting there around a conference table with a mixture of that, and every one of them had been so strong for their candidate, and we came out with a mutual understanding on issues.

(This interview suddenly stopped. Mr. Bass did not close it.)