

Chapter 3

The Campaign and the News Media

The style of political campaigning in the St Kitts and Nevis General Election was characterised by the blend of exuberance and heightened imagination which we witnessed night after night at well-attended rallies. These rallies became theatres of local political drama featuring a brew of politics, rumour and innuendo. Often enough the dividing line between speaker and audience became blurred as an evening rally progressed and an increasingly celebratory mood took hold of the meeting.

The emphasis at rallies was on style and performance, on the capacity to deliver a campaign speech with panache and flamboyance. In the main the speakers were the candidates for election, all seasoned campaigners addressing audiences well versed in the political vernacular of St Kitts and Nevis. The audiences proved to be keen-witted observers of the political scene, showing a ready appreciation for the strands of wit and repartee. Night after night the speakers lived up to the most demanding expectations of addressing the assembled crowds.

The rallies were frequently enlivened with music and popular songs and slogans which boomed from giant speakers in the streets; huge screens displayed the orators on the hustings while lights blazed around them on stages decorated with posters and balloons. Visually there was a riot of colour: men, women and children, indeed whole families, were draped from head to toe in party colours, caps, straw hats, T-shirts, dresses, hats, badges, even shoes blazoned with party insignia.

The rallies clearly demonstrated that the electorate in St Kitts and Nevis enjoys its politics; the rallies we attended maintained an infectious enthusiasm and momentum from early evening often till after midnight. We could not help but notice also the atmosphere of tolerance and good humour which prevailed at the rallies.

Other ingredients in the campaign were the colourful motorcades organised by both major political parties around the island to demonstrate the strength of their support. The campaign also featured a mix of posters, street marches, the use of party newspapers and broadsheets, party manifestos and pamphlets. But it was the succession of nightly rallies which occupied the central place on the electoral landscape.

While allegations of personal impropriety were often made at rallies and in party newspapers and broadsheets, it seemed to be part of the wider hurly burly of politics. None the less, we heard that legal suits were being filed as a result of statements made by candidates about their opponents on the hustings. While there did seem to be a certain liberality in the way candidates sometimes treated opposing political personalities, we were none the less conscious that in a small community scurrilous allegations could be damaging and could hurt the political prospects of the candidate even if completely unfounded.

Personalities rather than issues dominated the political campaign with personal invective a common feature. In the polarised atmosphere of St Kitts and Nevis the heightening of political tension as a result of street oratory could have had an adverse impact and provoked reaction from undisciplined elements in the audience. It says something for the overall peaceful



The People's Action Movement organised an island-wide motorcade to canvass for votes



The Labour Party held a 'family day' rally which turned into a beach party as part of its campaign

nature of the electoral environment that despite this personal invective, there were relatively few incidents of unruly behaviour or violence. Those incidents that did occur attracted immediate public opprobrium, a censure that no party could afford to ignore.

The eve-of-poll statement issued by our Chairman sought to emphasise the importance of peace and calm on polling day, and that intimidation and violence should not be allowed to disrupt the electoral process or affect its outcome.

It was noticeable that while the intense political campaigning on St Kitts saw the streets and buildings across the whole island plastered in party colours and posters, this contrasted markedly with the election campaign on Nevis. It was clear that there was a low-key political activism on Nevis where the campaign was visibly much more tranquil with, for example, fewer campaign posters in evidence, and hardly any rallies on the scale of St Kitts. The tension conspicuous in St Kitts contrasted with the calm atmosphere which prevailed in Nevis.

The Group noted that in respect of the campaign there are no provisions in the law which limit financial expenditure by political parties.

Committee to Promote Compliance with the Code of Conduct

An important achievement of the St Kitts Christian Council, the Nevis Christian Council, the Evangelical Association of St Kitts, the Evangelical Association of Nevis, and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce was the brokering of an agreement amongst four of the five political parties of a Code of Conduct for the Political Process. We believe that the Code made a positive contribution in the highly polarised political climate of St Kitts and Nevis. To monitor adherence, a Committee to Promote Compliance with the Code of Conduct was established which met on a daily basis to receive submissions regarding violations of the Code and to make recommendations for corrective action. It is true that there was complaint from some persons whom we met that the injunctions in the Code of Conduct were not being followed and implemented but, even so, the Committee appeared to play a genuinely creative role in promoting a peaceful electoral environment through its capacity to address a broad range of sensitive issues in a non-partisan spirit. Illustrative of this approach was the appeal it made in response to complaints urging speakers of all parties to refrain from character assassination and avoid misrepresenting the facts, stressing that press releases from parties should be factual and free from innuendo.

The Committee was called on to address one incident that did mar the election campaign. On 25 June 1995, an altercation occurred when supporters of PAM passed through an area where a SKNLP rally was being addressed by the Party leader, Dr Douglas. The Committee immediately sought to defuse possible tension and fall-out from this incident, appealing to both PAM and Labour Party activists to put an end to all acts of political violence. Following upon other acts of violence in respect of motorcades held on 18 and 25 June 1995 respectively by SKNLP and PAM, the Committee recommended that no further motorcades be held prior to the election. The Committee also recommended greater police presence at political meetings.

The work of the Churches and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in closely monitoring the final weeks of the campaign and bringing their collective voice to bear on important issues also merits special commendation. Noteworthy too was the role of the Churches in sponsoring a National Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace and Reconciliation on

26 June 1995 which culminated in an impressive ecumenical service at St George's Anglican Church attended by the top leadership of political parties in St Kitts.

Returning Voters

An important feature of the campaign was the keen public interest in the potential impact of voters from overseas returning to vote in the general election, particularly in constituencies with very small majorities. Under the law as it stands, any person who is qualified to be registered as a voter for a constituency and is so registered, is entitled to return from overseas to vote, even if residing abroad at the time of the election. There was evidence of resentment in some quarters about this. There was a welter of stories and rumour flowing across St Kitts about the numbers of overseas voters returning, the chartering of planes, and arrival of flights, and the complex calculus of possibilities represented by the participation of such voters in the poll. The potential numbers of overseas voters varied according to the source but there were informed guesses that they would represent between 1,000 and 2,000 voters, a significant figure in the electoral mathematics of St Kitts and Nevis.

There were numerous allegations that financial inducements were being offered by political parties to attract overseas voters to exercise their franchise. It was impossible to verify these allegations but their very existence heightened tension and anxiety surrounding the campaign.

The Role of the News Media

As was evident to us from the party rallies, the people of St Kitts and Nevis attach importance to the craft of verbal communication. Hence the role of the news media in the political campaign assumed particular interest.

The electronic and print media resources available in St Kitts and Nevis are small. A key role is played by the government-controlled ZIZ Radio and Television service which broadcasts daily for 12 hours a day and from 7.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m. on Sundays. It has been the tradition for the government broadcasting media to report almost exclusively on the activities of the Government.

Another important electronic media resource is the Voice of Nevis (VON) Radio which is privately owned and situated on Nevis.

Access to the Media by Political Parties

An issue of growing importance since the 1993 election has been the question of access by political parties to the publicly owned media. The SKNLP stressed to us that the consistent focus on government activity by ZIZ Radio and Television inevitably favoured the ruling party, making for an uneven electoral playing field. Significantly, this issue was taken up by the Christian Councils and Evangelical Associations of St Kitts and Nevis which were prompted by the growing public mood for change to devote a specific part of the Code of Conduct to this issue.

The Code of Conduct stressed that public and private media should:

- report the campaigning honestly and impartially;
- ensure that news stories were accurate;
- avoid the temptation to sensationalise reporting; and
- allow independent candidates and political parties to be given equal time on the national broadcasting service.

We believe that important steps have yet to be taken towards permanently freeing-up access by political parties to the publicly owned media in St Kitts and Nevis. One area in particular that could be addressed is in relation to establishing fair and equal access for all political parties to ZIZ Radio and Television, for example, by developing formats which can enhance informed public discussion of political issues and balanced coverage of electoral campaigns.

The Electronic Media

One of the major influences in the effort to develop a more liberal media culture favourable to political dialogue and a more level playing field, particularly as regards political party access to publicly owned media, was the effort sponsored by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce to persuade ZIZ Radio and Television to give political parties free airtime on television and radio for party broadcasts. The fact that this important initiative did not come to fruition at this election should not obscure its importance for the future in keeping with contemporary trends and practices in democracies. An encouraging development, however, was the willingness of ZIZ Radio and Television to allow a televised debate between all political leaders on the weekend before the election, a media innovation which, however, could not be implemented on this occasion, as one of the parties declined to take part.

By the time of our arrival there were encouraging signs of what appeared to be a freeing-up by the publicly owned media in regard to coverage of the campaigns by political parties. A welcome development was the inclusion by ZIZ Radio and Television from 19 June 1995 of election campaign news and information on the activities of the political parties in its evening News Bulletin. This was the first such initiative in the government-controlled media. This initiative drew praise from the community and appreciation from the opposition political parties. Our general impression was that ZIZ Radio and Television coverage of political events during the period of our mission was even-handed, although there was a tendency to begin the news with mention first of the events connected with the ruling party. It should be mentioned that ZIZ Radio and Television also accepted paid advertisements from political parties which did not suffer from any restrictions beyond the normal canons of good taste and libel.

VON Radio played a creative role in providing access by political parties to electronic media to enable them to get their message across to the electorate. VON Radio prepared a varied and interesting election campaign schedule which included two political debates, commentaries by civic leaders on topical issues and a popular public forum where members of the public could go live on radio with questions and comments to representatives of political parties.

The Print Media

The two main newspapers in St Kitts are political party organs, namely, *The Democrat*, published weekly by PAM, and the *Labour Spokesman*, published twice weekly by the SKNLP. Being organs of political parties they are clearly partisan, full of comment and opinion, sometimes vituperative, rather than factual independent reporting. The third newspaper is *The Observer*, which is privately owned and published weekly. Each has a print-run of between 2,000 and 3,000.

The Role of the Media in the Electoral Process

There are clear signs of a maturing of public opinion as regards the role of the media in the electoral process. Representatives of civil society demonstrated a positive leadership role in seeking to enlarge the arena of public debate during this election. The presence of a Commonwealth Media Adviser, who arrived in St Kitts and Nevis on 15 June 1995 to advise the Electoral Commission on all aspects of the media in respect of elections, might also have helped. We believe that these efforts should be nourished and sustained to promote the emergence of a balanced media culture that will enhance confidence in public broadcasting.