

# What Happened in Burlington?

## Overconfidence Hurt Paquette

By **DEBBIE BOOKCHIN**

**BURLINGTON** — How did a 39-year-old political radical from Brooklyn, N.Y., get elected as Burlington's next mayor?

That's what city residents were wondering aloud Wednesday as the shock of Bernard Sanders' apparent victory over five-term incumbent Mayor Gordon Paquette settled in.

Sanders out-polled Paquette by 22 votes in a stunning political upset Tuesday night, unseating the mayor with a final tally of 4,035 to Paquette's 4,013.

Sanders, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native, helped found the Liberty Union Party in 1970 from the remnants of the old anti-war New Party.

It was Sanders' liberal views that had many in this city re-thinking the result of the close election that surprised Vermont.

Once, in a political campaign some years ago, Sanders was asked if he was a socialist.

"Yes," he conceded quietly after a moment's thought.

He was asked that same question Tuesday night.

"We're not discussing that now," he said after a brief

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**Sanders in '71**



**U.S. Senate Candidate Sanders: 1974**



**Sanders in '81**

# Analysis

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pause. "That's not relevant."

Sanders was the Liberty Union candidate for the U.S. Senate in a special election in 1972, then ran for governor later that year in the regular election. In 1974, he ran again for the Senate and received about 4 percent of the total vote.

Sanders tried again for governor in 1976 and did slightly better.

In 1977, he dropped out of the Liberty Union, conceding it had failed to fulfill its promises.

Since that time he has been engaged in production of educational filmstrips, although he has retained an active interest in political causes.

His apparent election Tuesday night marks Sanders' first victory at the polls, and it also represented Paquette's first electoral defeat.

The leftist candidate apparently rode to victory on the strength of a loose coalition of working people, students, young professionals and the elderly — a coalition the likes of which has never been seen before in Burlington.

Political observers blamed Paquette's defeat on his overconfidence, his misjudgment of the mood of the city and on Sanders' ability to attract a number of voters previously alienated from city politics.

Paquette has not been seriously challenged for mayor since 1973. A product of Burlington's ward politics, Paquette moved up the political ladder by welding a coalition of conservative Democrats and the business community of the state's largest city.

"The mayor's made a lot of enemies in the last 10 years," said University of Vermont political science Professor Garrison Nelson.

"Nowhere was this more apparent than in the ultimate decision of the city council and mayor to ignore issues that were of concern to a number of neighborhood residents."

Those included: the need for a fair housing commission, the inadequacy of the Lakeside underpass and the safety of the southern connector, concerns many neighborhood groups felt were not adequately addressed by Paquette's administration.

When the time came to address those challenges, Paquette shied away, choosing to focus on the 65 cent tax hike instead. The mayor mistakenly welded himself to the 65 cent tax increase, only to be dragged down by it, Nelson said.

Meanwhile, Sanders successfully portrayed Paquette as "project-oriented" instead of "people-oriented," and even some longtime Democrats began to wonder if Paquette was building a monument to himself."

Nelson maintains two groups of people were instrumental in Paquette's defeat: longtime city residents who have been alienated from city politics and young professionals, "who felt part of the city for the first time."

"Long-term residents of the city felt the present administration had lost touch with the city. They were affected by (Sanders' portrayal of) the police issue. Those were their friends, the people they went to school with," Nelson said. He noted that the turnout in Ward 3 — the inner city ward, which had been steadily declining — jumped dramatically in this election.

Sanders found another constituency in the "young college-educated professionals who never felt part of the city before," according to Nelson. They unified behind the mayor's own Fair Housing Commission issue.

"Renters historically have not voted in city elections before. They are a very sizable part of the population, who historically have never been motivated to vote in city elections," Nelson said.

"The Fair Housing Commission gave them an issue that hit them, literally, directly where they lived. It turned Burlington politics on its head.

Sanders also made good on some old-fashioned, Democratic politicking, spending days going door-to-door throughout the city.

Fixtures in the city's political and business communities say they too have been searching for a clue to Sanders' surprising success.

"Everybody in town is asking that question today, but I didn't hear too many answers," said businessman Patrick Robins, who owns McAulliffe's Office Supply Stores.

"I would be interested in sitting back and seeing what Bernie's going to do. He's been painted pretty bleakly. A lot of people downtown are alarmed," added Robins who headed the Burlington Church Street Marketplace Committee.

"I guess the people have chosen," sighed Aldermanic President Joyce Desautels, D-Ward 1. "I'm a little numb, I guess," said Desautels, a life-long friend of Paquette's. "It hasn't sunk in."

Desautels, like others who were displeased with Sanders' victory, was quick to point out that the "power (in City Hall) is all on that Board of Aldermen." She noted that Sanders needs board approval on all city-position appointments. "We've never questioned them before, but if he brings in a bunch of unknowns from Oosh-koosh, I'll look at him and say, 'No way,'" she said.

City Attorney Joseph McNeil, whose firm McNeil, Murray and Sorrell represents City Hall, said Sanders, once he assumes office, is entitled to appoint the city clerk, treasurer, constable, assessor and deputies in all those positions.

Like other city officials, McNeil and Desautels said it was too early to comment on Sanders' affect on City Hall.

"If nothing else, the election of Bernard Sanders has made the Board of Aldermen more cohesive," Desautels said.