

Inside the race for the Texas Democratic chair

by Konstantin George

The Texas Democratic Party will convene its 1980 state convention on Sept. 16, gathering 3,000 delegates in the state capital of Austin to choose a new state chairman and other party officers. Expected to be the scene of one of the sharpest party battles in a long time, the convention will be watched intensely around the nation. Texas "gay rights" activists have used the McGovern affirmative action rules, and watergatings of moderates, to assume a level of party control out of proportion to their strength in the population; in Austin, an all-out fight is expected between the moderate conservatives ("Mod-Cons") and the vocal liberal and radical factions.

A swing toward rebuilding a traditional Democratic constituency party in Texas would detonate explosions in state party machines in every region of the country. Texas's clout in shaping national Democratic politics dates from the period when it was the "party of Rayburn." At the 1932 convention, it was Texas that sprang the balloting loose on the fourth ballot to put Franklin Delano Roosevelt over the top, with his running mate, Texan John Nance Garner; this clout persisted through the era of Lyndon Johnson.

Currently, despite heavy rumblings of discontent among anti-liberal Democrats—many of whom have considered "turning Republican" in protest over the state party's radical drift—the state chairman race itself was viewed as a nondescript race between Robert Slagle, a Sherman lawyer, and El Paso attorney Luther Jones.

Slagle was viewed as a shoo-in, endorsed by the AFL-CIO and reportedly backed by Democratic National Chairman John White and Carter/Mondale national campaign chief Robert Strauss, both Texans.

As of last week, there was no longer an assured outcome. The two-way race has become a three-way contest. On Sept. 3, in a room at the state capitol in Austin packed with press and TV crews, David Samuelson, commissioner for Harris County, seat of Austin, announced his candidacy for the state Democratic chairmanship. Samuelson's charges, carried front page in the Austin press, won him a wide following overnight: "The state Democratic Party has become too liberal and has ignored two of the largest industries in the state, energy and agriculture. . . . More time was spent at the state convention in San Antonio on gay rights than on bread-and-butter issues. . . . We have gone too far. . . . My opponents Slagle and Jones are in line with this drift away from crucial economic principles."

Samuelson's candidacy was the result of organizing efforts by a group of statewide Democratic leaders informally called the "Alliance for Progress," who asked Samuelson to run. The Alliance for Progress says it is "seeking to save the Democratic Party from the ultra-liberals to rebuild the Party as an 'alliance of the producers' (a 'farmer-labor alliance')." As thousands of Texas farmers face bankruptcy from the combined effects of the drought and Carter credit policies, the alliance demands immediate measures such as farmer debt relief and 100 percent parity to ensure food production for home and foreign markets.

On energy, the alliance demands repeal of the wind-fall profits tax as part of a program to encourage and assist increased domestic energy production.

The Texas alliance includes American Agriculture Movement president Marvin Meek of Plainview, promi-

ment businessmen from Houston and Dallas, and the Mod-Con grouping of the state Democratic Party.

Front-runner Slagle brushes off the Samuelson challenge, saying: his campaign is ideological." Samuelson's reply to this: "The issues I raise, food and energy, are what Slagle calls ideology. I speak to the facts."

The third candidate, Jones, dismisses Samuelson's contention that farmers require government credit and 100 percent parity, espousing the "free market" in American agriculture, and calling the present situation "a crisis resulting from overproduction." Jones has refused to endorse the parity demands of farm organizations.

The other major issue brought forward by the Samuelson campaign is his demand that U.S. Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti be impeached for devoting the bulk of Justice Department resources to operations against state and local Democratic Party machines, based on the ongoing Brillab trial of Texas House Speaker Billy Clayton. The Brillab entrapment schemes by the Civiletti Justice Department have targeted the Texas Mod-Cons and, members assert, have provided the basis for the gradual "liberal-gay rights crowd" takeover of the party.

Front-runner Slagle, while not echoing Samuelson's charges, told the *EIR* nonetheless that "The Justice Department did their best to induce folks into engaging in misconduct."

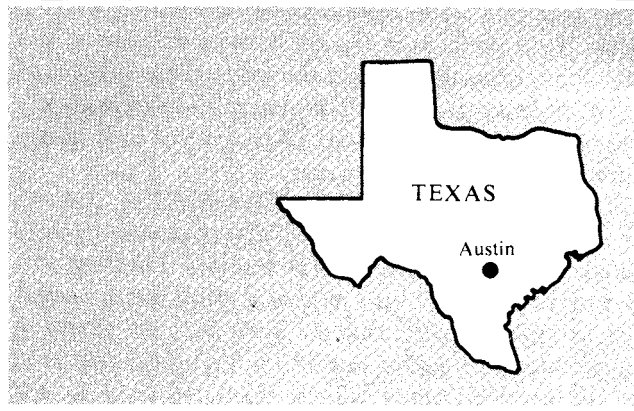
Slagle is playing the role of the cautious front-runner, steering as clear as possible from taking a stand on the issues. A high-ranking state party official says matter-of-factly: "Slagle is favored to win because he is a party hack. He is the handpicked choice of former party chairman Calvin Guest."

There is an interesting story behind this. In 1976, then DNC chairman Robert Strauss asked Guest to supply someone who would "win Bob's approval" to run the state Get Out the Vote operation for Jimmy Carter. Guest picked Slagle, then only 30 years old.

That was before there was a Carter policy record. Now, given that record, it is understandable why Slagle steers away from issues. The contrast on the Carter question between 1976 and now was expressed to this writer recently by a West Texas Democratic official: "We supported Carter in 1976, thinking he would only be a one-term President. We're stuck with him. What's important is to retake the party, build for local races for 1982 and 1984."

Slagle can win via a "fix." A top state AFL-CIO official, key to Slagle's labor backing, candidly admitted as much, saying, "If we were choosing someone for a state legislative post, we would pick Jones because he has a good voting record. Slagle is not the best, but he has paid his dues. Slagle's daddy is also a longtime brass-collar Democrat." (Slagle's father ran liberal Ralph Yarborough's unsuccessful bids to become U.S. Senator.)

Interviews



BOB SLAGLE

EIR interviewed Bob Slagle on Sept. 7. Excerpts follow.

Q: What are the key issues in this campaign?

A: In terms of ideology I don't think that issues are surfacing. It's a question of activism. I supposed that there would have been some ideological implications to the race but it hasn't been that way.

Q: Will you raise some issues?

A: Well, in Texas you say that the two parties have become one, but I think that going from no party to two is a better analysis. Now, statewide, we have Republicans, a lot of conservatives have left the Democratic Party.

There is a third candidate in the race, Samuelson, who is trying to make it an ideological race. He says he represents the conservatives and the farmers but this won't sell. I don't think that it's interesting to people that he's a conservative. . . . He's hollering that the minority caucus has too much power but it only has 40 percent of the DNC seats. The gays—he is talking about them—he is demagogic. One press story said he was counterposing the gays and he's trying to say that the party pays more attention to them than the farmers, but they lost their resolution at the convention and the farmers got it, so this is a phony issue.

The other candidate is a state rep and he says there are no ideological issues between us. We both come from the middle of the road. I have supported La Raza to the conservatives, to blacks, labor, white, Mexican. But some folks are trying to make this a liberal-conservative race.

With Jones, my major opponent, the differences aren't so dramatic. We've spoken 25 or 30 times together and he says there are no major differences. We are interested in building the party and we are both nice guys. I assert I am the most able for the job.

The other gentleman, Samuelson, I don't know where he is ideologically. He claims to be the conservative—the

support he has listed is hard right-wing. He has listed Dick Arlington, John Burnham, Corkey Smith, Marvin Meek. None of these in the last four years were on the state committee, or active in the party. They are out of step with the development of the party. They have always supported the conservatives. They are not into party-building.

I was an associate member of the NFU. . . . I don't have any problems with the programs passed at the state convention on agriculture—they wanted 90 percent parity and we passed it, they wanted a resolution on equal cost of federal water and we passed it, we passed a deregulation of trucking resolution, that if the cost goes up 160 percent then it will be regulated trucking for agriculture. I'm used to working with the Farmers Bureau and the NFU. . . .

Q: What about the issue of gays that he brought up, what do you think about that?

A: All the gays are asking for is that we have a penal code that doesn't make homosexuality a crime. . . . Why should we care what you do in your bedroom?—the cops don't.

Q: What do you think qualifies you for the job?

A: If I was not 45, I would say I am young and good-looking. I was raised in the Democratic Party . . . In 1967 to 1968 I was on the Democratic National Committee and was executive director in Washington for the Young Dems. In 1965 I was also chairman of the southern organizing committee for the Young Dems. I was president of my regional and local bar. In the fall of 1975 Calvin Guest and the president of the AFL-CIO, Hubbard, asked me to organize an activist program. I organized the Texas Dem Party Participation Program—to teach how to participate in the party system. It was also an affirmative action program for minorities. We had a new voter registration law so we had to explain it. . . . In 1976 Guest asked me to do a voter registration drive. The DNC voted it one of the two best drives in the nation, but we did better than the other program because we carried the state. Then I worked for Carter, I headed the get-out-the-vote drive. In 1976-78 I was the legal counsel to the DNC and liaison to the legislature; I have spent my life organizing Dems.

Q: Are you friends with John White?

A: John White and I are friends, we have known each other since I was 18. Bob Strauss and I are acquainted, I would not presume to say friends. He has been so much on the national side since 1968 we don't see much of him.

Q: Someone said that you are backing John White for Governor because Calvin Guest is for him.

A: I was the first candidate to say this: that the state

office and chairmanship must not be used for anybody until there is a nominee. . . . I myself am totally uncommitted. . . . I told John Hill I'm damned tired of saying I am not anti-Hill. I owed it to Calvin Guest to back Briscoe, who was his close friend.

DAVE SAMUELSON

Excerpts from an EIR interview with Dave Samuelson on Sept. 8:

Q: What do you have to say to Bob Slagle's charges that you are a demagogue and that you are making the race an ideological one?

A: My answer is that he can't interpret that fact that we are speaking to the issues. That's just further reason for people supporting me. The issues were not spoken to, and when I brought them in they don't know how to answer an issue. People in Texas have lacked politicians addressing the issues. The issue is the key thing and the economic issue is the number one of these. The moral issues and the economic issues go hand in hand. If you have weak morals you have a weak economy, and if you have a strong morals you have a strong economy.

Q: What economic issues do you see as key?

A: The producers, we have to protect the producers. We have to have tariff or reduction of regulation, so that we regulate to increase production and not to hinder it. Employment and with it high interest rates are important. We have the most debt-infested economy to finance the debt, the interest load, that's consuming the protective capital. We have to rebuild our national industry. It is important under this to have a debt system. We have to cheapen finance, interest rates. We have to have a gold-backed monetary system. This falls into the area of politics. The government is elected by people and they represent people, not the New York bankers and the English bankers.

Q: What about the rumors that Slagle will back John White when he gets into office?

A: I'm probably the only one in the race and the Producers Alliance is the only element which can serve the party as a whole. Backing us is the Mod-Conservative people, religious leaders, farmers, businessmen. Also the fact that the blacks are looking seriously at this group shows that they want to be in the producers' element. They know that giveaways to minorities are an appeasement, not an advancement. The minorities have been waiting for real leadership to invite them to come into this and bring back the country to the great principles that it was founded on, economic freedom for the individual.

Through the producer flows wealth so that we can all advance civilization.

Q: How would you do this as chairman?

A: Through the Producers Alliance, I would seek the leadership for political offices. We have to raise the money to seek individuals to run for office and to return to these issues.

Q: What about the question of labor? There have been major charges brought against some of Texas labor people, the Brilab controversy, the judge in the Brilab case is saying there were dangerous FBI tactics possibly leading to a police state.

A: The day I announced [for the race] I called the Justice Department a political assassination outfit. The Attorney General, Civiletti, handled that. I am of the opinion he should be fired and before this is over with I believe he will be forced to step down. Outside interests can come into the state, that's what this means, and attack leaders here. They attack people before they can become a challenge to the Eastern bankers and the London bankers.

Q: Jones also raised education as an important issue in my discussion with him.

A: To say we are going to pay for education means we have to raise the productivity capacity. When wealth is produced then more can be channeled aside for quality education and higher pay for quality educators. These issues are what Slagle calls ideology. I speak to the facts, not ideology.

LUTHER JONES

From a Sept. 5 EIR Interview with Luther Jones:

Q: What do you think are the most important issues in the race for the state Democratic chairman?

A: The most important is electing a chairman qualified to organize the party so it can deliver meaningful services—that the party can be helping candidates win elections—track those voting in elections in the primaries. Other services have to be provided such as inhouse polling, which has to be both general and special for specific candidates so they can target their resources and which precincts they will try to win. We have to have fundraising so that the state party can contribute to campaigns. We have to publish a newsletter to be sent to all officials so they can be kept abreast of what is happening in Austin and Washington and the issues being debated. I don't conceive of my role as state party chairman as a policymaker, the state Dem committee

would formulate policy. I would have to take care of basics, the nuts and bolts of party politics.

I think the party should issue papers about what is critical and the pros and cons of an issue and what's being talked about in the legislature and campaigns. To the nominees the party should issue briefing papers about what the Republicans' positions have been, their voting records.

Q: What about the issues that the candidates are dealing with, what is your opinion on such issues as education, agriculture, energy?

A: The most important issue is education—we are 46th in the nation in education. This is the one single issue we have broad agreement on. Teachers' salaries have to go up. We have to reduce class size....

On energy we have to establish nationally strong conservation. I am all for alternate sources. I don't understand the windfall profits tax well enough to make a statement on it.

On agriculture we are beset by many problems. I was on the agriculture committee for six years. There are many problems, labor, energy, regarding agriculture that the legislature can do nothing about. We need money for water development and herbicide and crop research. I sponsored and passed the Family Farm and Ranch Security Act because in fact we are losing our farms. This act is for loan guarantees, that the state uses its credit to get loans for new farmers. A constitutional amendment was needed for that here and I had it passed. Agriculture will dominate as an issue when food prices go high, and they will soar. Prices are low as there is overproduction but the farmers don't want their production limited. The marketplace has to right itself.

Q: What is your background? What qualifies you for the job?

A: My background is I am 34, I didn't graduate law school but I took and passed the bar exam from St. Mary's University in San Antonio. Then I was assistant District Attorney in El Paso, and then in 1973 there was an open seat in the legislature which I went for.

Q: Who has endorsed your campaign?

A: I have been endorsed by Rep. Mickey Leland; Rep. Jim Maddox; State Rep. Craig Washington; Hector Garcia, head of the GI Forum; Ruben Bonilla, head of LULAC, Bill Heatley, a senior member of the legislature from West Texas; Jim Hightower, who ran for railroad commissioner; Johnny Bryon; John Hill, a former Attorney General; Billie Carr of the DNC; Jane Heckie and Bonnie Leslie; both of whom headed the women's political caucus; Ann Richards of Travis County, the commissioner; Jerome Friemal, the AAM leader in Texas; and Jay Naman of the Texas Farm Union. ■