

Safe, Studious Women Voters'

Some Members Balk

At Touchy Issues

By Diane K. Shah

FROM WESTPORT, CONN.

SUDDENLY this peaceful, wealthy bedroom community of 30,000 residents was in an uproar. A plan, called Project Concern, to bus 25 black children from neighboring Bridgeport into Westport schools, was well on its way to implementation, effective next January. But even more controversial than the busing itself was the notion that the local chapter of the League of Women Voters had blitzed the town with busing propaganda to bring off Project Concern.

The league's role as a prime mover on this touchy issue did not sit well with many townspeople, including some league members. Grumbled Mrs. Virginia Lewis, a longtime Westport resident: "I had the feeling the league came out once a year around election time. When did it become so activist?"

To many, the 50-year-old league, founded in 1920 to inform women how to use their newly won franchise, is primarily a nonpartisan voter-information service that prepares in-depth reports on local candidates and issues, and works to turn out voters at the polls. The league is also widely reputed as a research-study organization that undertakes exhaustive studies on government conduct and public affairs, and follows up with well-written, thoroughly documented position papers on issues it has studied.

Usually, Not Much Splash

In most communities, the league generates little splash. The issues it espouses are fairly "safe," such as improving garbage disposal and juvenile detention facilities, updating the town charter, revamping the city budget, working toward a state constitutional convention, or developing better recreational areas.

But contrast that tradition with an incident that occurred during the league's biennial convention in Washington, D.C., last May.

In an unprecedented move, on May 5, Mrs. Lucy Wilson Benson, the national president, acting on a spur-of-the-moment motion from the floor, interrupted one meeting to allow interested delegates to join a procession to the Capitol steps. The



Members of the national board and staff, meeting recently in Washington to map out league strategy.

it considered were unequal educational opportunities in Bridgeport, Conn., a city of 100,000, 10 miles away. Bridgeport contains an inner-city core of underprivileged blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans.

The investigation was carried out by the leadership of Mrs. Elaine Gross, the chapter's human resources chairman. Busing programs in other cities were studied, in addition to the merits of compensatory education, and other innovative approaches. The study lasted from November 1938 to March 1969, a comparatively short time for such an undertaking, but according to Mrs. Gross: "We wanted to implement something as quickly as possible." What the group decided should be

sensus is written up, stating what the majority opinion seems to be, but also noting any dissent.

According to the Westport league president, Mrs. Jackie Heneage, the consensus turned out in favor of Project Concern. However, even at that point, the league was aware the issue would cause controversy in the town.

Explained Mrs. Gross, the human resources chairman who led the Project Concern study: "Obviously at that time there were mixed feelings amongst the group whether the league should take a stand on a very controversial issue. But we felt that because of the national position—that is, steps should be taken to allevi-

rs' League Takes Up the Cudgels



include research and publication of information on "issues," as well as Voter Service activities.

What all this means is that the league, by tapping Education Fund contributions for certain activities it has always paid for, will now be able to free more money for action. The combined budget for the league and the Education Fund for the year April 1, 1970, through March 31, 1971, totals \$1,775,766.

But more than the dollar factor, Mrs. Benson stresses this reason for the recent awareness of league activity. "I think a lot has to do with the issues, and with an issue being lively when the league has a position on it. It's true we are involved in more things, but then, this is an activist time."

There is speculation, too, that because these are activist times, people tend to be more touchy about issues. Whereas 10 or 15 years ago league members could study legislative reform without mussing each other's hair, today league positions on busing and construction of low-income housing in suburban areas are bound to cause controversy.

'We Seem More Activist'

Says Mrs. Heneage, the Westport league president: "The league is taking up touchy issues in certain places for some

what the but also school children in Bridgeport. Many Westport residents thought the league should await the outcome of the study before acting on its own plan. But the league went ahead with its push for Project Concern. The five-man school board seemingly reacted to the impact.

At one controversial school board meeting in March, a letter from Bridgeport's superintendent of schools, Lester Silverstone, was presented. The letter requested consideration of developing "some type of working relationship" between Bridgeport and Westport schools. Mr. Silverstone wrote: "One possible source of assistance might lie in the placing of urban children in some suburban elementary schools."

1950s, trade was a hot issue, and the league was very active in it."

And indeed, the League of Women Voters does have a long history of political activity. In fact, by definition, the league is a lobbying organization. It is doubtful if any U.S. senator or congressman has not heard from the league on one issue or another. When told the league had only 160,000 members, one senator reportedly exclaimed: "I thought there were millions of them."

Indiana Sen. Birch Bayh, a Democrat, knows the league well, for it is strongly backing his effort to bring about Electoral College reform. Senator Bayh warmly praises the league: "The league combines

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vigil had been called to protest U.S. intervention in Cambodia.

To Mrs. Todd C. Storer, a Tulsa league member, delegate participation in the demonstration was not proper league behavior. "I take a real dim view of that," she comments. "I feel those gals at the convention from our city were sent with our funds to act in an official capacity for the league."

Only the day before, the convention had voted overwhelmingly against taking up Cambodia as a study issue. In fact, the league has never delved into U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, and Mrs. Storer believes the delegates were wrong to show up at the antiwar protest. Although delegates supposedly went on their own, many wore their league badges.

Another source of concern to some league members was the youth conference the league sponsored at Fort Collins, Colo., last October. The purpose of the conference was to provide for an exchange of ideas that might help the conferees more effectively confront and resolve vital issues in their communities. Some 200 "youth and adult activists were invited," as the league's official monthly organ, *The National Voter*, described it, with some of the participants representing such organizations as Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Student Union, and the Black Panthers.

Not only is the league tackling controversial issues at the national level, but in some communities, too, local chapters are taking on touchy issues. In some towns, the league is gaining a reputation as a powerful pressure group. The Westport chapter is a case in point.

Up From the 'Grass Roots'

To understand what happened in Westport, it is necessary to see how the league operates. It is structured on three levels — local, state, and national, with the power flow designed to move up from the "grass roots" to the national office in Washington, D.C. Thus, most league activity emanates from the 1,300 local chapters spread out in cities and towns across the nation. When the chapters meet once a month, it is usually to discuss "issues," and again there are three kinds of issues, local, state, and national.

Each chapter decides which local issues to study. Typically, these focus on town government, education, taxes, and zoning. In addition, each chapter in a state suggests to the state board items of study on a state-wide basis, such as constitutional reform, or taxation. Each chapter also proposes issues of nationwide import to the national, 18-member board. The proposals are voted upon at the league's biennial convention. A "dictum" is then sent back down telling the chapters which national issues to study.

This is how the Westport busing affair started — with a dictum from national in 1968 to study equal opportunity in education. Westport is a wealthy, predominantly white community (there are perhaps 14 black families). Educational opportunities in the town are fairly uniform, and the level of curriculum is far superior to that in most school systems. Thus the Westport league board decided to investigate what Westport could do, as a suburban community, to help ameliorate what

Plugging Project Concern

Nothing further was done until the following November, when a two-page ad appeared in the Westport paper spelling out the advantages of a busing program called Project Concern, which was already in effect in several Connecticut communities. The same day, a meeting was held to inform Westport league members of the plan. This would be followed up by four unit meetings the next week to take a consensus on Project Concern.

Unit meetings are held for the convenience of the membership. Because it is often difficult to find one time suitable for everybody, a chapter will schedule several times when members can show up for a consensus. According to league bylaws, votes are not permitted on an issue. Instead, after a lengthy debate, a con-

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The question then arises: How far should the league go to "support" its stand? The Westport league decided to undertake a major effort. What ensued in the following months was the biggest reform campaign the town had ever known. The league held some 50 "coffees," inviting members of every civic group, the P-TA, the school board, religious organizations, social clubs, mens' and womens' clubs, doctors, lawyers, almost every type of group in the town, to hear the league stand on Project Concern.

In the meantime, the Urban Coalition at the behest of the Westport school board a year before, was undertaking a two-year study of ways to aid disadvantaged



Scads of reports inform voters.

—Photographs by D

Memo to the School Board

As a result of the letter, Dr. A. Gordon Peterkin, the Westport school superintendent, wrote a memo to the school board saying: "In view of current interest in the possibility of early implementation of Project Concern, I would expect this possibility might be given early attention in that Study (Urban Coalition)."

Although the school board eventually voted to wait for the Urban Coalition's recommendations, many persons in Westport believe Project Concern will be implemented, largely owing to the league's efforts. The Coalition's study is due in December, and the school board intends to implement some type of educational program for Bridgeport school children in January 1971.

The effect of the league's push for Project Concern was to split Westport. Recalls Mrs. Lucia Donnelly, an editor for the Town Crier, a local daily, which is now defunct: "I received calls from many outraged citizens. Some were opposed to busing, but others disputed the league tactics. They felt the league was using bulldozing tactics just to get the thing through."

Complained one woman: "The league split the town apart, and the town is still polarized. There are over 200 women in the Westport league, but only 70 took part in the Project Concern consensus, and of those, perhaps 40 backed it. But those 40 wore everybody out."

Many Westport residents contend the town itself is opposed to Project Concern. A handful of concerned citizens sent out a poll to every registered voter in the town. Of the 40 per cent return, 83 per cent said they were against the busing. However, it must be noted, there was no space on the poll sheet to show support for the program. Nevertheless, many ask, should the league under these circumstances try to push such a controversial issue? Mrs. Jackie Heneage, the Westport league president, answers:

"I really don't think I could say a majority of people in town are in favor of Project Concern, 'cause I really don't know. Should we go ahead if everybody is not in favor? I think yes, we should, because of what has happened in other towns that have tried the program. People change their minds when they become acquainted with it and they discover it's really a very small program, but that the kids involved in it are helped."

A Basic Change?

Does the Westport affair typify a change in the League of Women Voters from a basically research-study oriented group to one that is activist? Mrs. Lucy Wilson Benson, the national president, says she doesn't believe so.

"The league has never been a research or study organization alone, although some people have that impression. It's always stressed political action with study. I know it seems we're more active now, but I'm not sure that we actually are. Certainly in its first years, the league was tremendously active. An enormous amount of congressional and state legislation was worked on by the league in the 1920s and the 1930s, and through the years. In the

high degree of our ability to study with a tremendous reservoir of energy and interest. It is a powerful force for effective reform."

The league boasts a healthy record of successful reform efforts. The first came in 1921, with passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act, which provided for Federal grants-in-aid to the states for maternal and child-care programs. Other legislation passed with league endorsement included the Social Security Act in 1935; the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act in 1938; renewal of every Trade Agreements Act since 1934; U.S. ratification of the United Nations Charter in 1945; the Economic Opportunity Amendments in 1967; and the Water Resources Planning Act of 1965.

An Early Defeat

The league is not always successful in its efforts. One defeat came in 1920, when Congress voted not to join the League of Nations. The women had worked hard to push U.S. entry into the league.

On each of the issues the league takes up, a tremendous amount of research and paper work is done. Nobody can even hazard a guess on the volume of league papers stored in the Library of Congress. And because league members make themselves so well informed on various issues, they are often called upon to testify at congressional and state hearings.

Why then has the league suddenly come under fire for being an activist organization? One reason: funds. Says Mrs. Benson: "Money has a lot to do with the impression the league is more active. For years, a financial stranglehold kept the league from moving in and taking the kind of action it wanted to."

Mrs. Benson and her national board have acted to break that stranglehold. For the first time in league history, a national fund drive is under way. The goal — \$11,000,000. The avowed purpose of the campaign: "To prepare for even more significant responsibilities in citizen participation in government in the decade ahead."

Chosen to chair the campaign drive was John W. Gardner, chairman of the Urban Coalition and a good friend of Mrs. Benson's. To date, \$6,500,000 has rolled in. About two-thirds of it is from league members' contributions; the rest is from corporate and foundation gifts. Among them: \$50,000 from Humble Oil; \$30,000 from AT&T; \$30,000 from IBM; \$18,000 from the United Steelworkers of America; \$15,000 from the Louisville Courier-Journal & Times; and \$5,000 from the Johnson Publishing Co., which puts out Ebony magazine.

The league is not allowed to accept tax-deductible gifts. To overcome that obstacle, contributors were asked to make out their checks to the Education Fund, a research and development arm of the league, which is allowed to garner tax-deductible gifts. As separate legal entities, the league and the Education Fund, created by the league in 1957, were headed by separate boards. Several months ago this was changed so the national board of the League of Women Voters also sits on top of the Education Fund.

Under this set-up, the league can use some of the funds earmarked for the Education Fund, if the monies are spent for "educational" purposes. This would

people. We may seem more activist to these people, because suddenly they're aware the league is promoting something that somehow hurts them, or something they disagree with very strongly."

This development has caused some members to drop out of the league. Explains Mrs. Richard Kluck of Mt. Lebanon, Pa., a Pittsburgh suburb: "The particular group I belong to is extremely liberal. It seems like the decisions always go one way, as if the girls' minds were made up before an issue is even broached. Dissenters' views are not being heard as they should be. I've tried to make my point at a number of meetings, but I was somewhat afraid to push it."

It is interesting to note the league's policy on dissent. All members are encouraged to speak out, of course, but if a whole chapter disagrees with a national position on an issue, it cannot publicly dissent in the name of the league.

The charge that the league is liberal-oriented has been voiced by others besides Mrs. Kluck. Mrs. Storer, the Tulsa woman who objected to participation by convention delegates at the Washington peace vigil, is dropping her membership. "I'm a conservative, and I guess the league is just too liberal for me."

Mrs. Margaret Bryant, first vice president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia, notes: "In the most conservative cities in Virginia, there are no league chapters."

Middle-Class, Middle-Aged

League membership is predominantly composed of middle-class, middle-aged whites. The very rich, the very poor, and the young, for the most part, do not join the league. Though anyone 18 and over is eligible for membership, few women under 30 sign up. Nor do the blacks, generally speaking. Recently, two black leaguers were voted to the national board, and several head their local leagues. In some cities, however, the league must step cautiously to accommodate black members, without causing friction in the community.

In South Carolina, black women are members of every league chapter in the state. Often this can present a sticky situation. Says Mrs. Keller Baumgardner, president of the South Carolina league: "Sometimes, it's less controversial for us to meet in a public place instead of a member's home. We do this because of the way some neighbors in some locations might feel."

Oddly enough, a smattering of men have joined the league. But they are not given full status. Instead, they are deemed "associate members." Joseph M. Cronin, a faculty member at Harvard University, recently wrote a jesting letter to league President Mrs. Benson maintaining the Male Liberation Front of registered voters is demanding: the dropping of the modifier "women" from the League of Women Voters; a minimum of 20 per cent male officers; and an annual "Man of the Year" award for voter service.

But the league, an outgrowth of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which spearheaded a 72-year drive for the female vote, is not really interested in integrating its ranks. Though denying any feminist overtones, the league maintains it has done quite well for itself propelled by woman power alone.