

A reserved accountant learns the fine art of fast talking

Despite press reports which make her seem like a cross between Lady Macbeth and Maggie Thatcher, Rosemary Varty is no dragon lady. She is not exactly Lucille Ball either, but then how many 52-year-old suburban mothers are?

Tall, thin and reserved, the Liberal Party's hope for Nunawading Province is a shy woman struggling to find a campaign technique. It has not been easy switching from accountant to political star attraction but Mrs Varty, who is nothing if not determined, appears to be learning fast.

She may not be ready for the National Press Club, but unlike some candidates she has already picked up the cardinal rule of politics: when in doubt keep talking. With this skill under her belt, finer points such as glad-handing and back-slapping are sure to follow.

Evidence of the breakthrough came yesterday when Mrs Varty and Liberal frontbencher Phil Gude were waiting in a windy shopfront to lobby the head of Blackburn's Chamber of Commerce. The tactic was, as Mrs Varty explained it, for Mr Gude, a former head of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce, to chat up the local VIP.

As the man in question approached, Mr Gude leaned over and asked, "What's his name?" "Geoff Prior," whispered a confident Mrs Varty as the bearded shopkeeper extended his hand. "G'day Geoff," she said. "It's Mike actually," Mr Prior answered, to which the candidate shot back, "Hi Mike, how's the chamber going?" It was the response of a seasoned performer and earned Mrs Varty the silent admiration of Mr Gude, one of the Opposition's best operators.

What followed was the true face of the suburban battle for control of Victoria's upper house. Mr Prior, the local hardware dealer, talked about lack of parking, shop trading hours and rates, while Mrs Varty nodded and smiled and Mr Gude offered to come and "flag down a few issues" at the Blackburn Rotary Club. It was hardly gripping stuff but that is what this byelection, crucial or not, is really like.

It is a constant battle to create rather than attend events, court local movers and shakers and work over the minuscule concerns of neighborhoods. In a sense Mrs Varty, as a former Box Hill councillor, is well placed to do the hack work; she knows the area and many of its people and seems to enjoy what to some would be



Picture: PETER SMITH

Like a seasoned political trouper, Rosemary Varty hams it up for the camera with Liberal frontbencher Phil Gude.

boring repetition.

It is just the high profile stuff which, initially at least, was difficult. "Some of the things said about me have not been kind, but it has been partly my fault," she says. "I can seem, on first meeting, a little reserved, but I have no trouble relating to people."

People that is except her Labor opponent, Bob Ives, who refuses to be photographed with Mrs Varty. "If he sees me in the street, he crosses the road," she explained, "and I think that is sad." Mr Ives, whose office is about a dozen shopfronts away from the Liberal campaign room, justifies his reticence by saying: "It is nothing personal. It is just that I'm better known than her. Why should I give her additional publicity?"

Driving along the Maroondah Highway, it was possible to believe both contenders were household names. Every block seemed to contain a color poster picturing one or other, smiling and looking like an appendage to some sort of bizarre soap advertisement.

Henry Lawson once called Aus-

tralia "the worst dried-up and God forsaken country I was ever in", but he was talking about the outback not the suburbs where Mrs Varty campaigns, plays lawn bowls, and listens to classical music. Lawson, of course, was not much of a pragmatist and would have hated suburbia even more than he pretended to dislike the bush.

Which is not true of Mrs Varty who, having found her political feet, is not about to do anything impractical. This is a woman who claims to enjoy campaigning on railway platforms with Jeff Kennett at 6 am when the temperature is around zero and there are still 10 days to go before polling.

She has not got time to read books, does not need an alarm to wake up and, even though there are moments when she thinks about returning to the land, will not let "unworkable dreams" distract her from her cause. In other words, she is learning to be a politician.

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