

Editorials

A message from Durham

It was not a typical town meeting.

The citizens of Durham were in convocation this week to take a stand for the life of the town. And this is a true view of the matter whether one believes the Olympic Refineries oil refinery would kill or enhance the community's life, for in either case, it was a critical vote to preserve or to change.

There were all these television cameras.

They were there to record and transmit the image of a typical town meeting—and by their very presence, by being there, helped to make it atypical.

The attendance more than filled the large gymnasium which was great for the television cameras which need spectacle.

Durham citizens met to record a vote that was already recorded in every way except officially. By Tuesday night anyone who had been paying attention—and even such people of inattention as Governor Thomson—would have been aware of what the vote would be.

If there were a surprise, then, it might have been the impressive number of voters. When an election or an issue firms up quickly and a result is obvious, onesided and inevitable, voters tend to stay away, feeling either secure or resigned to the outcome.

But that was not the case Tuesday in Durham. Tuesday in Durham, the vote was not to decide an issue, but rather to register a position. It was not so much a vote as a demonstration.

Therefore, the vote was by ballot, and not by voice or show of hands.

What was important, was not

the secrecy of the ballot—just the reverse—but the exact, numerical weightiness of the count and the message of it that all of these cameras and newspaper reporters would help transmit to Concord and to Manchester and to the rest of the state and New England and the nation.

It costs a lot of money to haul television cameras and crews about the country to record the happenings of people for other people to see.

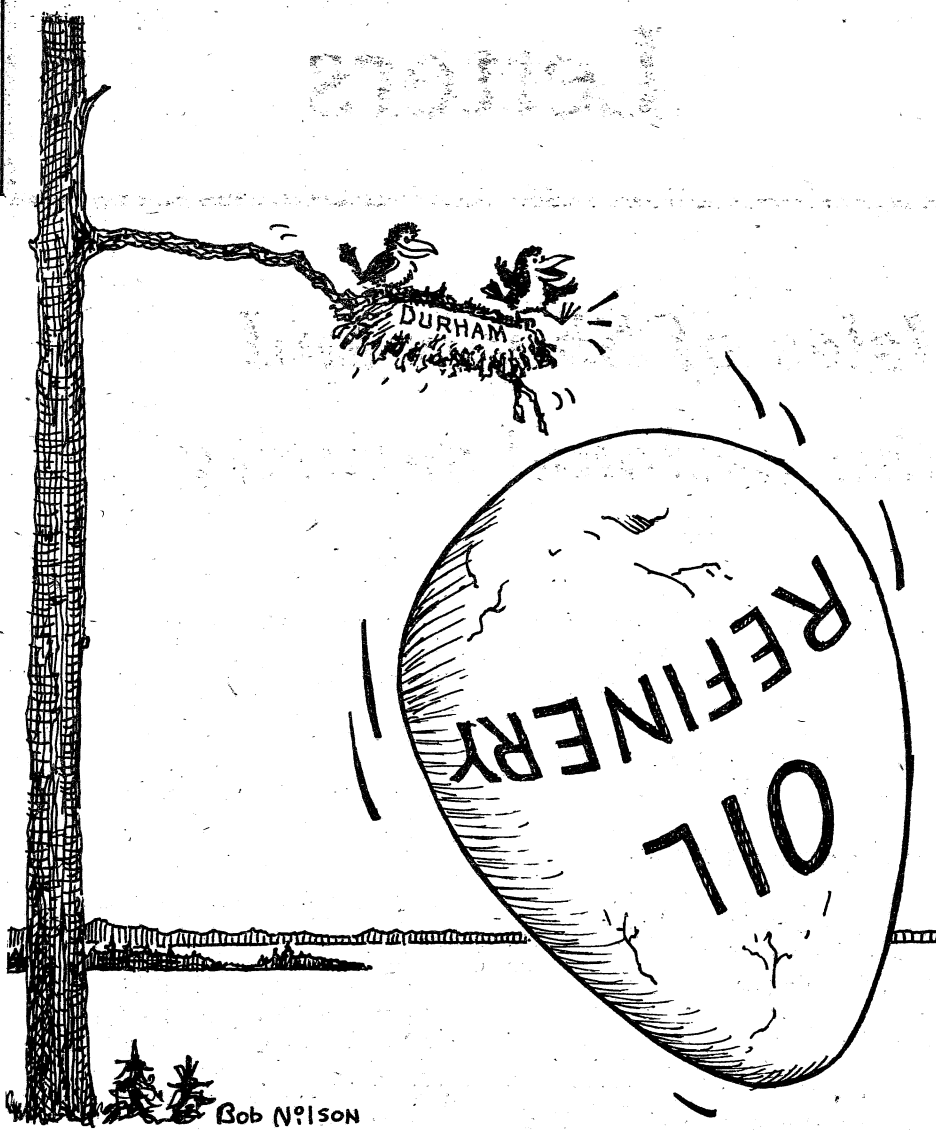
We expect that those electronic journalists were relieved to see the huge number of voters. At least they would have that if nothing else happened.

They had that—the large crowd—and the playfulness of the moderator and the occasional striking phrase of one speaker or another.

And they had the unmistakable sincerity and high drama of that huge crowd breaking into applause for Representative Dudley Dudley, not after, but as she started forward across the stage to deliver her statement; that grateful applause, the standing ovation, the overwhelming warmth and gratefulness and encouragement that swelled out of that crowd, which the reporters felt whether or not the impersonal camera eye could discern it.

One expects that editors back in New York played the videotapes with regret—the hall was too modern, the speakers too educated and correct, the proceedings too orderly and businesslike.

When you are after typicality, you have to play for the cliché—and there were no mackinaws, no manure-covered boots, no plodding through the snow, no ancient citizens fast asleep in



back rows, no crotchety moderator. One might have got the same footage in a Connecticut suburb—or even in New Jersey.

So on the surface it wasn't a typical town meeting.

Nevertheless, Steve Shepard of Boston CBS and David Culhane of New York CBS did their two-minute spots on Durham's struggle. Mike Taibbi of ABC did what Channel Five wanted. Charlie Austin of Boston WBZ knew instinctively that the crowd size guaranteed the story's impact. Richard Hunt of NBC, New York, ran out of the gymnasium to drive to Boston and fly to New York with the film just as he would with any big story.

And if the television cameras capture the truth, if the technol-

ogy reached that level of sensitivity, perhaps they recorded what plainly surfaced for those who were eye witnesses.

It was, in the ways that counted, a typical town meeting, in that new hall, with well-dressed, well-mannered, educated, articulate citizens; it was a typical exercise of local political authority by free citizens guaranteed rights of self-determination—a process called home rule.

If Durham normally musters only 500 at such annual rituals, this time there were more than 1,600.

But they did what they normally, typically, annually do. They expressed a preference, even if the issue was a matter of life or death for a town.

Fogging the issue

The nation needs to increase its oil refining capacity. Does this mean that New Hampshire needs an oil refinery? Obviously not.

Along with other aspects of its growth, the New Hampshire Seacoast area may have to expand its job opportunities. Does this mean it needs an oil refinery to provide jobs? Obviously not.

New Hampshire, like all other states, is continually seeking new ways to increase its tax base. Is

an oil refinery the best thing on the horizon? Not by a long shot.

In order to sell this makeshift oil refinery to New Hampshire, Governor Thomson and the rest of the refinery gang are using a score of arguments, most of which are peripheral and unrelated attempts to make the refinery attractive by turning minds away from the elements that characterize a refinery's main impact.

Who's getting emotional?

Two of the most absurd aspects of this refinery fight are the whacky charges that the anti-refinery forces are guilty of "emotionalism" and are not reasonably approaching this refinery proposal with an open mind.

However, it is the pro-refinery forces, headed by the governor, that are using the near-hysteria of

the current fuel shortage to whip up support for the proposal.

And it is the pro-refinery forces which uncritically welcomed the refinery proposal, endorsed it and support it down the line—BEFORE any of the proposal details were known, before any feasibility studies were made, before ANY facts.

And those are the facts.

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