

Interview Interview

House Leaders, Whips and Deputy Speaker in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly

The following is an interview conducted in June 1988 with Hon. W.B. Strachan, Government House Leader; Mark Rose, Opposition House Leader; Angus Ree, Government Whip; Colin Gabelmann, Opposition Whip and; Austin Pelton, Deputy Speaker. The interview was conducted by Craig James, Clerk of Committees and Second Clerk Assistant in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly. Since this interview, Mr. Ree has become the Solicitor General for British Columbia and the Hon. W. B. Strachan has relinquished responsibility as Government House Leader to the Hon. Claude Richmond.

Let me start by asking each of you how you were selected to perform your present function? The purpose of this interview is to illustrate the role each plays in orchestrating the business of the Legislative Assembly.

Mark Rose: Our caucus chooses the person who will serve as its House Leader each year.

Mr. Gabelmann: I was also elected in a vote by my colleagues in caucus.

Angus Ree: The Premier asked me to take the job as Chief Government Whip.

W.B. Strachan: The Government House Leader is a member of Cabinet chosen by the Premier.

Austin Pelton: I am an officer of the House and was elected by my peers on the recommendation of the Premier but seconded by the Opposition.

How would each of you describe your job?

W.B. Strachan: The job of the Government House Leader, at least in my estimation, is to state the business of government and then set out some expectation as to when that business will be concluded. The agenda and how it is going to be done, is entirely up to the Whips and I think it should be left that way. I have no interest in going around and telling this member or that member they should speak or not speak. I think that is clearly left



W. B. Strachan

up to the Whips. I think our experience, in my eighteen months as House Leader, has been that if we have the Whips organizing their respective speakers the business gets done a lot better. If I were to intervene in any sort of agenda-setting, I would probably complicate the business of getting the government business done so I think it is best that I stay out of it.

Mark Rose: I think a House Leader's job is basically three-fold: first of all, the duties are partly ceremonial; another is the procedural part of it – the wrangles with my counterpart on the government side over procedure, which do not really occupy much time (or have not anyway) because we usually agree, and I suppose the third thing is to attempt to have an orderly debate in the House. I share that job with the Whip, and make certain that people's rights are respected within the caucus in terms of their opportunity to be visible and to participate.

Angus Ree: The Chief Government Whip is, first and foremost, the direct representative of the Premier with respect to the caucus. That involves making sure members of caucus are conversant with legislation before the House and that they are supportive of the legislation. If they are not supportive I must ascertain why, and try, not so much to bring them on side but provide them with full knowledge and background of the matter at the time. I think that is one function. The second function is certainly to see that you have a majority available for division at all times.

There should be a quorum in the Chamber during proceedings out of respect for the Chamber. Then you come down to other duties, some of which the House Leader for the Opposition has indicated. Orderly debates, lists of speakers on various issues and when your members want to speak, and I try to encourage them to participate so that the House can function responsibly and in an orderly fashion and I guess the next item is in respect to the order of the House and the order of business of the day, in conjunction with the

House Leader and negotiating with the Opposition and the Whip as to what business is going to be transacted during the course of the proceedings and I think that is it, basically. There is a lot of hand-holding but basically as Government Whip you are directly responsible for the caucus to the Premier.

Mr. Gabelmann: I think, in terms of the Opposition Whip, there are two distinct areas of responsibility. One is relating to caucus and that is to be sure that your caucus members are present if they should be; to be sure that they know what the order of business is so they can participate if they are supposed to participate or choose to; to be sure there is reasonable attendance in the House at all times – that is probably one of the more difficult and frustrating parts of the job because people in this job are so busy. So it is always a struggle between the Whip and the ordinary members of the Opposition.

The other side of the job has more to do with the House and the House business. This is an area that I think is interesting in terms of British Columbia. We have never had since I have been around this place, a clear distinction between the role of House Leader and that of Whip. There is a fuzzy, grey area that is increasingly grey, in my view, as to who, in fact, discusses the questions of House business, what we are going to do next, how long we are going to spend on legislation and all the details of the running of the place on a day-to-day business. In some jurisdictions the House Leaders do more of that, depending on the personalities of the people involved. I think it ebbs and flows here too. At the present time, the Government Whip and myself end up doing a lot of the day-to-day determination of what business will be conducted and that works well. I think it is less important what the titles are than how people work together and how the place works. I think everyone would agree we had a pretty orderly session this year, given the way it is worked but it may not follow the technical rules or the historical understandings of the responsibilities of House Leaders or of Whips.

Mark Rose: Before you leave that, I would like to elaborate on your

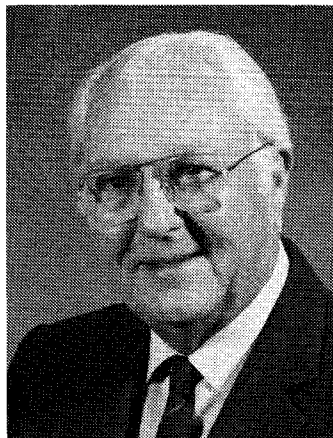
comment that it varies with different people – personalities, rather than the titles prevail. Now Bruce Strachan is a “hands off” House Leader, he just told us that, so that makes my role different as well. I do not have the same involvement in the things that the Whips are doing because Bruce does not care. So his attitudes and style affect the way I operate too.

W.B. Strachan: Mark and I also, I think, have rules or have obligations to be “Ministers of Defence”. That does not happen much in this current atmosphere and with these current administrations – both the administration of the Opposition and the administration of Government. But “Ministers of Defence”, of course, act reciprocally and I think that on an equal basis, and only if someone else is being offensive, do we become defensive. But there have not been a lot of offensive people around, at least in the last eighteen months, so our “Minister of Defence” rules are somewhat diminished, and I think this is healthy. This Legislative Assembly was not an embarrassment as in times past and I think we are all aware of it.

Austin Pelton: My title implies almost fully what I have to do, that is to fulfill the responsibilities of the Speaker in his absence. Other than that my main function is chairing the Committee of Supply.

What problems do you each of you encounter in executing your role?

Austin Pelton: Other than the problem of maintaining order in the Legislature which has not been really



Austin Pelton

difficult over the past year or so, the only other problem associated with the job is that the demands on your time are such that it is hard to plan your own day with respect to people who might want to see you from your constituency – the problems are not all that severe. I thoroughly enjoy it.

Mark Rose: It is very difficult really to nail things down. Change is the only constant and there are always surprises, – it is like a floating crap game. Sometimes you can plan a certain debate to be finished by a certain time but it takes on dynamics of its own and you cannot steer – you are just riding. You try, as much as you can, without limiting the rights of the private member, to monitor the debate.

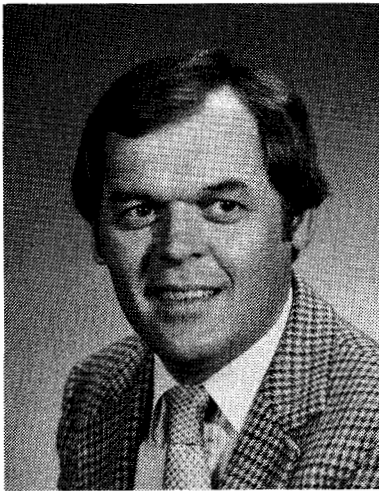
For instance, if I have made an agreement with the House Leader of the Government that a piece of business should end at a certain time and yet my own people go on and on and on, then my credibility is lost. If Bruce tells me one day that there are three more bills coming in and that is it for the year, then he gets pressured and showered with bills unexpectedly, then his credibility is shot. People who favour all sorts of free votes and a kind of a maverick approach, rather than supporting the team system can cause a lot of severe chest pains to House Leaders.

Angus Ree: People say, “Well, what is it like being a Whip?”, and I counter by saying it is like being a school teacher to forty-four independent adults. They do not all march to your tune because they are politicians. I guess the problem to counter is, well, as Mark indicated, trying to maintain your credibility in your negotiations with the Opposition. As far as your own members are concerned they are independent, they have great demands on their time and sometimes, if the debate is not that interesting in the House, they do not know why they should be there. You must coerce, coax, beat them over the head or whatever may be necessary to impress upon them that matters must proceed.

Mr. Gabelmann: Well, my perspective on this question is based on having been Government Whip for a year and a half in the early 1970s, having been Opposition Whip

during a dreadful parliament when we had very little trust or decent communication between the parties, and being Opposition Whip again now in what is an entirely different situation. My biggest problem is trying to decide the fair balance between being a Sergeant-Major and a kindergarten teacher.

It is very difficult to know quite how to deal with people and I am sure, Angus, that it is mostly your own caucus where you have problems because people have their own lives, they have their own egos and they have their own drummers and



Colin Gabelmann

sometimes getting them to march to the common drum is difficult. So, that is the real task and that is the real problem. It was that frustration that made me decide not run again for the position of Opposition Whip some years ago. It is my second time round in this job. I must say I find it a lot easier now with both the atmosphere in the House and with the caucus of which I am a member.

Another problem that might be common to people in these kinds of positions across our parliamentary system is – I find it absolutely essential never to lie to the Government Whip and if I did, or if I do, then I think our ability to do our jobs would be finished and I would have to leave and let somebody else do the job. You can imagine there are some things you cannot pass on, and trying to find a way to not lie, or not mislead or not lead down the wrong path, and at the same time keep the

kind of quiet counsel that you need in terms of caucus strategy can be trying and can be difficult. But it is so much of a challenge that it actually makes the job more interesting.

The dynamics of this place resemble a river in flood, and you can do one of three things. You can try and stop it, in which case you will drown. Two, you can swim against it, in which case you get very, very tired, very, very quickly or in the third case you can swim with it and go with the flow.

W. B. Strachan: Once you understand some basic principles of human dynamics, the fact that we are 69 people in that place, diverse, explosive personalities (we would not be politicians if we were not that way in the first place), once we understand that, once we understand that we have all got egos as big as the building and we have got a job to do on behalf of thousands of people who have elected us and we want to be seen as doing it as well as possible, we have got a responsibility to our political parties who elected us. We have a lot to do. We have to recognize that once we have that sorted out, then the problems go away, or are diminished as much as you can diminish them.

What authority do you have and where does it come from.

Mark Rose: I think that my authority (whatever I have, and whatever anybody has) rests on the confidence of the House, your caucus and the government caucus. You could ask that of the Speaker. His authority rests on the fact that he is elected but if he does not enjoy the confidence of the House, he does not last long as Speaker. He is going to have lots of trouble. There is a pecking order around here and it is not so long before people begin to grade you as you would your peers in a school class. You can always tell a kid who is smarter than you are and one that is not, and whether one can be trusted – whether one has any credibility. As a House Leader you can take cheap shots, but if you do I do not think you will be accepted as a negotiator. If you are untrustworthy or if you are incompetent, then it soon begins to show.

Incidentally, I would like to pick up on that last point Bruce mentioned: the

fact of the matter is that you really cannot be a martinet in any of these jobs. It is a people-skilled job, and so my skill is the basis of the authority I have. For instance, if I tell Bruce, "yes, we are going to be out of here at such and such a time, or we will be through this debate at such and such a time," and it goes on and on because I cannot control my own caucus, that means they have no respect for me. Pretty soon I cannot be relied upon, even though I may be honest personally. The interpersonal dynamics is made up of a great mix of stuff.

One of my main aims is to make this House a more civil place. I was absolutely appalled when I first came here.

Austin Pelton: Well I think Mark said something that is certainly very true in my job – that a lot of the authority you have evolves from the fact that you were put there by people from both sides of the House and the confidence that they expressed in your ability to do the job, before you even took it on. I think that is a kind of an authority and, of course, other than that, all the authority for doing my job is contained in the Standing Orders and they are very explicit and you know exactly where you stand. It is very, very clear what you can do and what you cannot do. And, since you expect everybody else to abide by those Standing Orders then you do the same yourself.

Angus Ree: As far as the Chief Government Whip is concerned, if one talks about authority, you cannot be a martinet, but the authority of my position is whatever the Premier will give to me. However it still involves getting the respect of the people you are dealing with as to whether you are successful or not.

Mr. Gabelmann: As Opposition Whip, I do not perceive that I have any authority in the real sense of that word. I have clout and some influence and the amount of that depends upon the confidence people have in the job I am doing. It really boils down to that.

W.B. Strachan: Maybe it is a semantic concern but in my case it is a matter of "confidence" rather than "authority". I have the confidence of the Cabinet, which is a prerequisite to my position and because of that I

have the confidence of the Social Credit backbench and also of the Opposition. If I lost, first of all, that confidence from Cabinet, then the rest of my credibility would be completely destroyed.

How much time do you spend on your job?

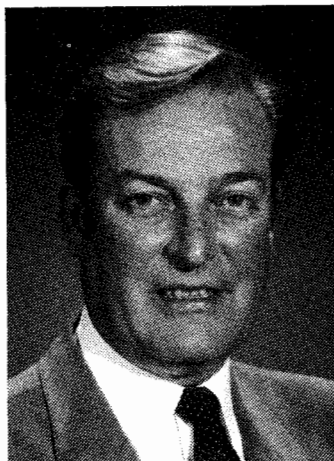
Austin Pelton: Well, when the House is in session, of course, it takes up most of my time but when its not the Deputy Speaker is in a kind of limbo although you may have the responsibility of representing the Speaker at certain functions.

Mark Rose: I also have a role as opposition critic but because I thought the job of House Leader would take a lot of time I deliberately asked to be critic for an area that involves less than 1% of the budget.

I go to daily meetings like Question Period and I am expected to be in the House a great deal. I am expected to show up at all caucus meetings and so it takes quite a bit of time. I would say it takes the majority of my time but if in addition I had to run a ministry like Bruce does I would want a pretty able deputy to look after things in my absence.

Angus Ree: I find it takes a great deal of my time. It may depend upon my nature that I get intense in this and sometimes I have been accused of being a perfectionist, but I probably spend an excessive time in the job as Whip. As Whip, you are generally the first to arrive and the last to leave. You attend many functions in which caucus is involved, certainly all caucus meetings. You go to outside caucus functions when we have people hosting us who are lobby groups gathering information and the Whip is expected to be there. I think, in some ways, it is a detriment to serving your constituents to have the job of Whip. But then again, I think it depends on the individual.

Mr. Gabelmann: I have never counted the number of hours but my guess would be that on a typical day, I would spend a couple of hours on work related to my duties as whip. I think it could easily be eight or ten hours a day, too, it just depends upon how you handle it. It depends upon how well organized you are. I think that is crucial. If you want to get it



Angus Ree

done in a minimum time, you really do need to be well organized. But, I think it is not the total number of minutes or hours that count as much as that it is always there. You need, on occasion, to go into your office to work undisturbed for a couple of hours and you cannot because the phone is ringing or somebody needs something or the business is suddenly changing or one thing or another. As well, when you are meeting with constituents, you do not have the privacy that sometimes you want because you have to be interrupted while you are doing the job. It is that kind of constant interruption that I find more difficult to handle than the absolute number of hours involved.

W.B. Strachan: I agree. You are unnerved all the time because you do not know when something is going to go awry, so even if you think you have a completely easy day there is always the potential for disaster. I think we all have potential for disaster, but it has diminished considerably in the last eighteen months, with the difference in the administrations. Some days I spend no more than two minutes a day, in terms of being House Leader. If we are in estimates when I know they are going to be cordial, I introduce the vote at ten o'clock in the morning, adjourn the House at noon, introduce the vote at two o'clock and adjourn the House at six and that is the extent of my duty as a House Leader. Sometimes not even that if there is a Minister who can handle those duties for us. So, some days it can be quite easy; others can be quite difficult,

particularly sitting with a majority of new cabinet ministers who are not familiar with the parliamentary process. There is a lot of baby-sitting that has to be done although they are gaining more experience in that regard. I also have the responsibility of being the Chairman of the cabinet committee on Legislation so at certain times of the year it involves my attendance at those meetings and that involves a couple of hours a week.

Of course I have staff to assist. The Legislative Counsel and one person from the Premier's Office work for me in my role as Chairman of the Legislation Committee and also assist in organizing the introduction of bills and getting the bill to me before introduction by the Minister. It would be very hard to count the time. I guess if I was going to average it, I would say about two hours a day when the House is sitting, but a bit less when we are not.

What support is available to you?

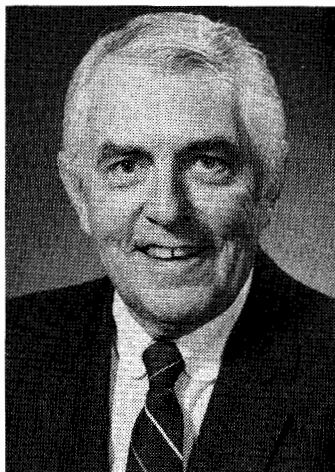
Mark Rose: I have a separate office. We have better offices than we have ever had. There has been a vast difference around here since the new government was elected, a new Speaker and new House Leaders on both sides. But I would like to have some sort of an Executive Assistant attached to the Whip's office and the House Leader's office and that would be a big, big help to us – an equivalent to a researcher for those jobs when certain things are coming up, such as Standing Order 35 motions, privilege motions and that sort of thing.

Austin Pelton: Well, I have more than adequate accommodation and I share staff with the Government Whip and his deputy, which works out really well. No problems at all.

How do you see your role evolving and what would you like to see changed?

Mark Rose: Well, we can do a lot more here in terms of changing structures and dealing with estimates. We continuously need to look at the evolution of the rules. I see the committee system changing and I see procedural reform as an on-going thing. We can all see errors in the last reform and places where we could probably make things more

meaningful for the private member. One of the things that I am most proud about is Friday Morning Statements - an opportunity to allow the private members to raise matters that concern them. It has worked really well. We put several practice recommendations in the last reform package. You know, little things like being able to describe briefly the bill introduced. A few little things have



Mark Rose

made the place a bit more civil. I would like to see backbenchers on both sides have more opportunity to perform, particularly on the government side, because if cabinet wants to get a bill through or get an estimate through, they do not really want their side to speak at all and so there really has to be greater opportunities for their backbenchers to raise matters of concern to them.

Angus Ree: Are you suggesting that as House Leader you have a better opportunity of having influence for these progressive changes than you would if you were just an ordinary MLA?

Mark Rose: Yes, because I am also on the Board of Internal Economy and I am dealing with people who can effect these changes. You know, I am not wailing away by myself as another backbencher. I am talking to the House Leader of the government all the time. I am with the Speaker and other people, formally and

informally, at various bi-partisan social occasions.

Austin Pelton: One of the things that I enjoy about Parliament and about the Speaker's job, as well as the Deputy Speaker's job, is that it is steeped in tradition and history. When you talk of things evolving, they do, but it is a very slow process, happening over many hundreds of years. Certainly, as Mark suggests, we can amend the rules from time to time and change them to the betterment of the House and to all the people that serve there. But, as I say, I really enjoy the traditional things that happen in the House and it would upset me to see changes that took away from those things it stands for and that happens in there.

Angus Ree: I do not know how I would see the role of the Whip evolving. It might be easier if we had some big stick such as the opportunity of fining members to make them jump but I do not think that is necessary. It would ruin the position and ruin the office itself and you would lose more than you would ever gain.

Mr. Gabelmann: Nor do I think there needs to be any attention given as to how to change the job of Opposition Whip. The only significant change I think could be made would be on the Government Whip's side and that would be to look at the question of whether or not, as in Great Britain, the Whip should be a member of cabinet. I could certainly see some good arguments there. It is an approach that seems to me to make sense. Going back to my days as Government Whip a long time ago, it would have been easier to have done the job if I would have known what was on the agenda.

Angus Ree: Well, I think I would certainly have to agree with you and I have not touched on that but if you were closer to the inner sanctum you would know better what was going on and I think you could better negotiate. Under the present system, I rarely know until a bill is being caucused what is coming down. Even the House Leader in his position as a

cabinet minister has not got the right to show me.

No other problems?

Mark Rose: Well, I thought Colin might talk about his frustrations of not only the legal absentees, but the illegal absentees.

Angus Ree: Have you got that problem also?

Mr. Gabelmann: Yes, we sure do. But I think the difference between an Opposition Whip and the Government Whip, in terms of the problem of the illegal absentees, is that it does not really matter to us, other than in a political sense, if we have 16 or 6 - we do not win or lose the government and for Angus, and for Government Whips anywhere, to have any degree of illegal absentees is a major problem as it could lead, potentially, to the fall of a government. I guess because my colleagues know that it does not really matter whether we have 6 or 16, although I think it does matter, there is not a great degree of concern about that. A lot of people will feel quite easy about just going off for a couple of hours and doing something without remembering to tell me and there is a fair amount of that and it is quite frustrating.

I remember one Friday when I had allowed people to be away, in each case for a very good reason, (it is not as though they were away on holiday, they were away on constituency matters or they were work-related) and by 11:30 on that Friday morning I discovered that there were 5 members of our caucus within the precincts - that there were another six away who had decided that they did not need to tell me about it. That gets frustrating at times, but if you let it get to you, you might as well quit the job. You just have to find a way. In the final analysis, you cannot really do anything about it because everybody is adult, they are elected on their own, they are responsible to their constituents and to themselves and the degree to which they are responsible to each other is different in each person's mind.■