

Stanley Knowles

by Chris Guly

Regular viewers of CBC-TV's parliamentary channel can count on seeing the gaunt, old man during Question Period. He sits at the clerk's table, arm draped over the side of his chair. Watching the volley of exchanges from both sides of the House, he transcribes nothing. But 81-year old Stanley Knowles remembers.

For 37 years, he attended this chamber as the member of Parliament for Winnipeg North Centre. Those were the glory days of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which saw Mr. Knowles fight for and win old age pension rights for Canadian seniors. The times when he led the formation of today's New Democratic Party (NDP). Thirteen election victories, and all won to improve the social and economic conditions for all Canadians.

Blessed with boundless energy, the Californian-born United Church minister was known on Parliament Hill for his near-perfect attendance record in the House and his long hours in his office. But in 1981, Mr. Knowles suffered a stroke and was left debilitated following neurosurgery.

Usually stroke victims suffer partial paralysis or lose their power of speech. But even in illness, Mr. Knowles ironically maintained his uniqueness. He can speak, but has difficulty following conversations involving more than one person.

It led him to leave the place he loved and resign from the House of Commons three years later, but in a poignant



gesture, perhaps even more precious to him than his 1979 privy council appointment, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, with the unanimous consent of the House of Commons, worked out an arrangement that allowed him to remain in the chamber he loved.

Without seeking re-election in the federal election of September 4, 1984, Stanley Knowles, honorary officer of the House of Commons, was assured his place in the new Parliament. Along with that unprecedented title, he keeps his old office, a salary for his secretary and executive assistant Doreen Salhany, who has been with him for 28 years, phoning and mailing privileges and an Air Canada pass. However, his old-age and parliamentary pensions are his sole source of income.

"I am grateful to Mr. Trudeau for giving me this appointment. If he hadn't, I would probably be in the hospital with nothing to do", he reflects.

On a typical day either Ms. Salhany or Mr. Knowles' 50-year old son David drives him to Parliament Hill. He heads directly for Room 632-C in the Centre Block, the same office he has occupied since he was first elected to Parliament in 1942. He still receives a considerable amount of correspondence which he goes over before Ms. Salhany brings him lunch. She chuckles when she says that it's always the same. A beef sandwich on white bread, no butter. Dessert usually consists of jello, pudding or his favourite mainstay, Arrowroot biscuits. They go with the tea and heaps of sugar.

After lunch he heads for Question Period. Debates over Meech Lake, the Goods and Services tax and other issues are often difficult for him to follow. But he enjoys the feeling he gets from sitting there. Dr. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, vice-rector (academic) at the University of Ottawa, who wrote his 1982 biography *The Man From Winnipeg North Centre*, says that his presence reminds current members of the dignity and traditions behind that lower chamber.

When he leaves the House Mr. Knowles returns to his office and gets a ride home with his son or secretary. Mr. Knowles usually takes some correspondence home with him, where he'll attempt to write replies. If he knows that his secretary will edit while

she types them, he's not as careful with his handwriting. That is certainly a big change from his active parliamentary days, Ms. Salhany explains. "He was always so pernickety and had this amazing capacity for detail. It was funny, he'd give you a piece of work to do along with a detailed explanatory note telling you how to do it", she recalls. "There was a time that I did not think that I could take it. But then I realized that he could not help it. He was obsessed with detail. Now, he's more frustrated because he knows that he can't always keep up."

Mr. Knowles has lived with David and his family in a two-storey bungalow in Nepean since 1982. Before that, he occupied a room in the Trofimenkoff's family home from the time he was first elected to the Commons in 1942 until he suffered his stroke. Although Mr. Knowles no longer lives with them, the Manns reside just around the corner from David's home. They are still important people in his life and this former deputy leader of the CCF is not one to let his friends drift away.

On weekends, armed with his cane wrapped in bicycle reflector tape, Mr. Knowles slowly makes his way over to the Manns' for afternoon tea.

He even maintains correspondence with his remaining 1930 Brandon University graduating classmates. As its chancellor for the last 20 years, he goes back to his alma mater twice a year to preside over convocation ceremonies. That also gives Mr. Knowles the chance to visit with daughter Margaret Plaxton and her family. They too have a room for him in their home.

He has a bedroom library where artifacts and photo albums take the most prominent position. Newspapers and



books have become just too complicated for him. For mental stimulation, the former NDP house leader and chief whip works on word puzzles. Although he blushes at what he considers its silliness, he bubbles over at the challenge it offers.

Daily he turns to page 3 of the *Ottawa Citizen's* "Classified" section and spends a few minutes completing "Wonderword", a letter maze containing several words. An entire stack of them rest in a corner of Mr. Knowles' simple desk, all finished correctly. It makes him feel good about himself, which is especially important these days, says his longtime friend Walter Mann.

"He's like the Queen of England, you let him talk. He may ask the odd question about what's going on in the House and I'll try to explain. But usually my wife (Marjorie) and I let him go. He may not remember immediate goings-on but he probably can tell you what's on every tombstone in Nova Scotia."

An officer in the Order of Canada, Mr. Knowles continues what he considers to be his patriotic duty. Professor Trofimenkoff says that he can still captivate an audience with his oratory. If anything, his message of improving the living conditions of all people certainly hasn't changed.

Most recently, he proudly stood beside Audrey McLaughlin's side at last

fall's NDP leadership convention. The grand old statesman again playing the same supporting, second-in-command role he had filled under all of Ms. McLaughlin's predecessors.

Few would disagree that his now-legendary place in Canadian history is perhaps influence enough for anyone. His many titles, awards, parks and buildings certainly attest to it.

Sombrely-dressed and hunched over his cane, he still accepts and attends most social invitations. It is people who give him the energy to go on just as they did throughout his political career.

At a reception following his installation the new Governor General Ray Hnatyshyn, made a point of first greeting Mr. Knowles upon his arrival at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

In a 1982 *Winnipeg Free Press* article marking his 40th anniversary of first being elected to the House of Commons, Mr. Knowles said, "What has been most helpful to me is that a number of people have been so friendly. I was away for a long time. People have been most kind to me and want me to keep carrying on. So do I."

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