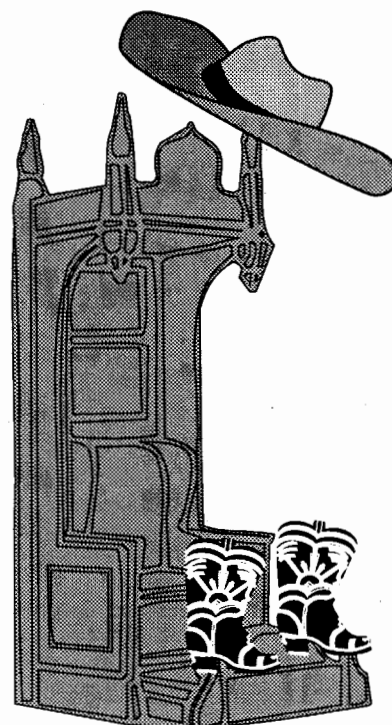

Seven Years in the Speaker's Chair

by David Carter

In May 1993 David Carter retired from the Alberta Legislative Assembly after seven years as Speaker, fourteen years as an MLA and thirty-three years of public service. In the following article he reflects on some of his experiences in the Chair.

In my opinion the most interesting challenge in any legislature is that of the office of Speaker. In June 1986 and again in 1989 I was elected to that Office. Fortunately I had been in the House for seven years prior to being elected to the Chair. That first day of being dragged to the Chair was exciting and fearful as I had only ten days to prepare. In 1989, three years later, I was not only dragged but carried to the Chair by Premier Getty and the Opposition Leader Ray Martin. I had learned what an almost thankless job the Speaker has. Nothing prepares you for that first day in the Chair. Nothing prepares you adequately for Question Period. Members call to you — yell at you — many notes arrive while you are trying to keep track of questions and answers for decorum and length. Purported points of order and privilege are thrown in for good measure. Procedural questions are added to the mix together with requests for emergency debates, valid and invalid petitions, notices of motions, tabling of returns, committee reports and through it all while some of the Members are in an uproar the Speaker must be that rarest of birds — calm, collected, wise with an even disposition.

To be "in the Chair" is intimidating and stimulating. One needs to be a combination of traffic controller, judge, counsellor, organizer-extraordinaire. You must be a defender of parliament as well as a facilitator. Outside the House you are an administrator of a service oriented department, an ambassador for the province, a parliamentary salesperson and all that in addition to



your work on behalf of your constituents as an MLA or MP.

Over the years the legislative staff and I worked together on a complete re-vitalization of our services to the public and to Members. Whether it was Personnel Services, Library, Hansard, Security, or Visitor Services, we greatly improved our interpretive outreach. Now educational programs, videos, pamphlets and books are prepared. A mobile display was taken to schools, conventions and community fairs to attempt to take the Legislative Assembly to the "grassroots".

David Carter was first elected to the Alberta Legislative Assembly in 1979. He was not a candidate in the 1993 election.

A deliberate plan was initiated in 1986 to bring the Assembly to the forefront in terms of word processing, electronic mail and other services to better and faster serve the public. By way of example, in 1986 it took three days for Hansard to arrive in the House — in early 1987 it was available the next day.

In 1987 the Chamber and adjacent areas were upgraded for the first time in thirty-five years. This enabled the Chamber to become more accessible to the handicapped and in particular the galleries became the most wheelchair accessible of all the Canadian legislative chambers. The Chamber was also enhanced electronically and acoustically and returned to its original architectural integrity.

Many Ambassadors and High Commissioners as well as Royalty paid visits to the Legislature and the Speaker has a rare opportunity to meet with people from around the world. The Speaker must also spend a certain amount of time meeting with elected members of other jurisdiction. In 1989 as Chairman of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association I hosted the Regional Conference in Alberta which brought together parliamentarians from across Canada.

I treasure the friendships with parliamentarians and particularly fellow Speakers. Our common interest was the defense of parliament for once in the Chair we do indeed by interest, issues and passage of time become truly non-partisan. Our greatest mutual achievement was the Supreme Court of Canada decision which entrenched Parliamentary Privilege as beyond the scope of the Charter of Rights.

The development of Canada-US relations on a parliamentary basis was a great project for some of us. The annual conferences of the National Association of State Legislatures was an obvious meeting ground —

friendships developed there which were then translated into regional relationships. Together with the Speakers from Manitoba and Ontario I met often with legislators from the American Mid-West Legislators. I was fortunate to be invited to speak to the Senate and House in both Idaho and Washington states as groundwork for what is now a co-operative project known as the Pacific North West Economic Region which includes Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, British Columbia and Alberta.

Personally I decided after 8,328 questions that it was time to return to other aspects of my life — family, friends and other interests such as Canadian history and preservation of historic sites.

Now is a challenging time to be in political life. The world is in stressful economic times — political turmoil continues, freedom and safety are denied many people. Mere survival is often a daily struggle. In Canada deficit control is a haunting spectre — there is not enough money to be found. "The Public" seems to want elected people who are "absolutely above reproach" and who will work for almost nothing. Many electors have no realization how hard an MLA, or MP works nor do they care what personal or family price you will pay. But my old tricorne hat goes off to all the new legislators in Ottawa and in the provinces who take on the challenge of being true parliamentarians.