



Interview with Two Longtime Manitoba MLAs

Few legislators have long political careers. The turnover in most Canadian legislatures is such that two or three terms is considered a long time. There are, of course, exceptions. In Manitoba the two longest serving members are Harry Enns and Len Evans. Mr. Enns, a Member of the Progressive Conservative Party was first elected in 1966 and has been re-elected eight consecutive times. Presently, Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Enns has also held several portfolios including, Mines and Natural Resources, Public Works, Highways, and Government Services. Len Evans, a Member of the New Democratic Party was first elected in 1969. Presently the Opposition Finance Critic, Mr. Evans is a former Minister of Mines and Natural Resources and later Minister of Industry and Commerce. They were interviewed by Gary Levy in May 1996.

How did you get into politics?

Harry Enns: I lived in the InterLake region of Manitoba. The agricultural land is not as good as elsewhere in the province and under a federal-regional development program at the time (ARDA) the region was designated as an area eligible to receive development assistance. I was one of several local people active in co-ordinating the development and this led to further involvement in public life.

Len Evans: In 1953, while still a student, I ran for the CCF. I was the proverbial sacrificial lamb in St. Boniface, a riding held for many years by the Liberals. However, I did manage to come in second, ahead of the Conservative candidate who was mayor of Winnipeg.

Upon graduation I took a job in Ottawa with the Dominion Bureau of Statistics and forgot about politics. Our family was eager to return to Manitoba and we did in the 1960s. I became a professor at Brandon University and enjoyed teaching. In 1969 I got caught up in the euphoria surrounding Ed Schreyer's election as leader of the NDP. I decided to run for office again fully expecting to lose. Instead I was elected and have been in office ever since. Sometimes it is difficult to leave politics even if you want to. The party activists count on you to hold the seat. So, I have stayed longer than I ever expected.



What impression did you have at your first session of the legislature?

Harry Enns: Like many members, I had to come to terms with the question of how much an elected member can lead and how much he has to follow the party line. This is still one of the questions new members have to wrestle with.

Thirty years ago there was probably more opportunities for individual members, to act and speak independently. Today new members quickly learn to take directions from the Whip.

Len Evans: The Legislature was more or less what I expected. I had some friends who had been members and there were no great surprises. What I remember most

about those days was the great sense of excitement in our party. We were the province's first NDP Government and although in a minority parliament, there were many things we wanted to do including the elimination of medicare premiums the introduction of government auto insurance.



What are the major differences today?

Harry Enns: In my first years the legislature usually sat only from January to May. Now it is a full-time job. The Government is involved in more areas and this has led to increased demands on legislators. Another great difference is that in those days there was money to spend. Now we are all concerned with reductions to the budget. We have introduced a balanced budget legislation and we are committed to reducing and eventually eliminating the provincial debt.

Len Evans: For me the major difference now is being in opposition after spending my first years in government, at the centre of the action. It can be very frustrating in opposition. We can talk but we usually cannot bring about much change.

In terms of resources and facilities, there are great differences. Today we have caucus resource staff and some funds for a constituency office. In the old days, opposition members did not even have offices. Sometimes they had to meet their constituents in the halls or the cafeteria.

As far as the province's finances are concerned, there is a difference but our party takes the view that the question is one of priorities rather than overall spending. For example we opposed a \$40 million grant to



Harry Enns
(Province of Manitoba Information Services)

save the Winnipeg Jets and a \$4.5 million contract for American consultants to tell us how to cut back on our health system. We oppose grants to profitable private companies.

Personally, I think, the government could borrow more from the Bank of Canada instead of from private banks so that the dividends return to the government. A good part of the war effort was financed in this way. Of course, the financial establishment is not interested in this. Many of the loudest critics of the deficit are making a fortune by loaning to government. There is much more that could be done instead of balanced budget legislation which is largely a PR exercise.



Can you compare the Premiers you have served?

Harry Enns: I served under four Premiers, Duff Roblin, Walter Weir,

Sterling Lyon and Gary Filmon. Each has a slightly different way of dealing with caucus. I think today the caucus is much more involved in political decisions than when I first came here.

One common attribute to any successful leader is the ability to attract capable people to run for the party. In Manitoba a big majority is usually 3 or 4 seats so it is imperative to have strong local candidates.

I was impressed by the way Duff Roblin was able to persuade successful doctors and lawyers to run for office when the salary for elected members was very low.

Len Evans: I served under two Premiers, Ed Schreyer and Howard Pawley. The basic ingredients for leadership are charisma and ambition. Experience as an MLA also helps. What made Ed Schreyer so effective is that he had all three.

As far as cabinet and caucus were concerned, Premier Pawley went to great extremes to get consensus. Sometimes he would go around a room three times to make sure everyone agreed. Premier Schreyer also sought consensus but his status as a party "hero" allowed him to be more independent when taking decisions.

Under both Premiers some caucus members probably felt they were not involved enough but I think that is inevitable in our system. Private members will always say they were not consulted enough.



What were some of the dramatic debates that you witnessed in the Legislature?

Harry Enns: My first exposure to a really vigorous debate was the one that led to the defeat of the Weir government. It was over hydro de-

velopment in the north and the impact on the environment. In many ways this was the start of the environmental movement in Canada.

Another vociferous debate was over public auto insurance under the minority NDP Government. There were scuffles in the hallways and at one point we had armed security guards in the building. The situation was not entirely surprising since so many livelihoods were at stake with Winnipeg the hub of many insurance companies

There have been other memorable moments like the time an NDP backbencher, James Walding, voted against his party and brought the government down. There was speculation on our side that he was unhappy and might vote against the party at some point. Mr. Walding supported the government on the Throne Speech but on the budget he said "no" and the government was gone.

The attempt to expand bilingual services beyond what was required by federal legislation brought back some bitter memories in Manitoba. There was overwhelming opposition as demonstrated by local plebiscites and mail to members. The opposition, of which I was House Leader at the time, decided to boycott the House and let the division bells ring. Finally, the government had to back down.

Another dramatic moment was when Elijah Harper exercised his right as a private member and declined to give unanimous consent to speed passage of the constitutional amendment known as the Meech Lake Accord. As a result it died.

Len Evans: The Autopac debate was certainly memorable. At one demonstration there were about 5,000 people on the lawn, many from the insurance companies who gave all their workers the day off. The galleries were packed with peo-



Len Evans

ple wearing black arm bands. When we decided to use existing insurance agents to administer the system the opposition crumbled and today it is one of the government's most popular programs.

The Meech Lake Accord debate was a real dramatic time for me. I was against the Accord, not because I did not want Quebec to have special power. But I did not think additional powers should also go to all provinces. After the party leaders went to Ottawa in June and came back with a "compromise" they suggested members should support the Accord. I refused and my views are on record in the debate. I broke with my party over this. In fact, my office was the "war room" where Ovide Mercredi, Phil Fontaine, Elijah Harper and others discussed strategy to stop the Accord.

I wanted to join Elijah Harper in refusing consent but Ovide Mercredi wanted to keep the focus on

the Native issue and I went along with that strategy.

The defeat of the Pawley Government by the defection of one of our own disgruntled members was a difficult time, particularly since we have been in opposition ever since. I considered myself a close friend of James Walding, and even I did not know he was going to vote against us that night.



Can you suggest any reforms needed in the Legislature?

Harry Enns: I think we are losing opportunities to engage in debate and I blame this on the influence of television which encourages us to speak in 30-second sound bites.

We need to make greater use of standing and special committees. They should become forums for the debate of public policy. Committees should meet more often outside the times the legislature is sitting.

Another problem, although I do not know the solution, is in the way estimates are handled in Committee of Supply. There used to be a very wide ranging debate with members on both sides questioning the Minister on how his department had spent funds. Now we tend to see opposition critics with special responsibility carry the burden and it turns into a dialogue which excludes most other members.

Len Evans: Recent reforms are a step in the right direction, particularly the reduction in length of time for speeches. We tend to spend a lot of time on the Estimates and that may seem a dubious use of time but it depends on the political situation. For example, you can be sure the Minister of Corrections will be having a hard time as a result of the prison riots

With only 57 members in our House there is ample opportunity

for all to make important contributions. Votes are close and MLAs are significant, perhaps more than in other provinces.

One thing that concerns me is that the present government has established some committees without opposition members to travel the province and consult the population. I think this is a travesty of parliamentary government and our legislative committees should be doing this work.



The constitution as an issue has played a large role in Manitoba politics. What is the thinking now of Manitobans about such issues as Quebec independence or constitutional reform?

Harry Enns: Our present fiscal situation has crowded the constitution off the agenda. Among western provinces, Manitoba sometimes appears ambivalent about whether it supports more provincial powers or favours a strong central government. However, I think Manitobans are generally satisfied with the constitution in its present form.

We have probably supped too much on the constitutional question. I think the present federal government's continuing popularity is related to its reluctance to put the constitution on the front burner.

Len Evans: My personal preference, asymmetrical federalism with certain special powers for Quebec is not acceptable to Premiers like Ralph Klein of Alberta and others. As for Manitobans, I expect they are just sick and tired of the issue.



Is there anything that makes Manitoba politics different from other provinces?

Harry Enns: Manitoba is unusual in that it is now possible to win a comfortable majority without a single seat from any of the rural ridings.

As a rural member this worries me because I know the role of a rural MLA is very different from an urban one. We are in more direct contact with electors. When a road needs repair they call us, where in Winnipeg many of these calls would go to municipal officials.

Rural members also tend to have longer careers and are less likely to be swept out (or in) on the coat tails of a popular leader. Rural issues used to dominate the debates. Now urban ones do.

I think we have to give some thought to mitigating this trend. To some extent the same problem may apply nationally. Perhaps the Senate is the place to ensure that rural territories have equal representation with urban ones despite population.

Len Evans: Manitoba politics is characterized by the very close standings in the House. Leaders change, parties change but it seems the results are always very close.

The political fact is that the Conservatives have a base of 20 safe seats in rural Manitoba whereas there are virtually no safe seats for the NDP in the urban areas. I would oppose measures to give rural Manitoba more than a fair share of seats. The real representational problem is not in the southern rural area but in the huge northern territories which are sparsely populated. I sympathize with members who have to represent such huge regions.