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# A Prince Edward Island Political Primer

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by Doug Boylan

*This year the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association holds its annual Conference in Canada's smallest province whose distinctiveness derives from its history, location and political traditions. This article looks at some recurring themes in Prince Edward Island history, outlines the contributions of five notable Premiers and concludes with some little known facts about Island politics.*

What are the constants which, arguably, define our sense of place in Prince Edward Island? First and foremost is the very land, a finite resource threatened by overuse and over development. Since the creation of the colony in 1769 through to the present, Islanders and their successive governments have grappled with the nature of land ownership, more recently, the use—or abuse—of our land. By a rather remarkable lottery held in 1765 (a precursor to our all-pervasive 6-49 lottery), the ownership of most Island land was placed in non-resident hands, with Britons who had some claim of favour from the monarch of the day. The subsequent one hundred years, through to the Island's entry into the Canadian union in 1873, centred around efforts to dislodge the absentee landlords and to enable the tenantry to acquire land in freehold. It was a bitter contest both in the House and in the countryside and its legacy remains firmly implanted, the concept of "my land, to do with what I will". In recent times, governments of both political stripes have attempted to grapple with land-related problems: inadequate crop rotation, compaction, soil runoff and high levels of pesticide and fertiliser applications. Almost, one might suggest, there is too much history associated with our land?

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Several other recurring themes come to mind. Until the completion of the "fixed link Confederation Bridge" in 1997, communication with the mainland of Canada was a never-ending concern for Islanders. For more than a century, the mainland link—especially during the winter months when ice clogged the Northumberland Straits—was tenuous at best. It may be that this long-standing concern has been overcome, but some will argue that the bridge comes at a cost, that the Island will become something of a Coney Island North with all of the attendant problems of numbers and tacky attractions!

Another constant in our history is the Island's place in the Canadian union. Prince Edward Island was a reluctant entrant into the Canadian union in 1873, succumbing to an insurmountable railroad debt, pressure from Britain to join the new nation and the financial blandishments of Sir John A. Macdonald. Until recent times, the Province was heavily dependent on federal transfers of all sorts and sizes; as much as 60% of annual budgets was "federal money" but now, as a result of determined efforts to expand economic activity, that amount has shrunk to somewhat less than 40%.

A final reoccurring feature of Island society – and one of particular interest to parliamentarians – is what I would term electoral extremes. Given the small size of our House [30 seats from 1893 to 1966, 32 seats from 1966 to 1996 and presently 27 seats], the odds for either sweeps or close returns are high. At present, our standing is 26/1 and, in this century, results of 30/0, 30/2, 31/1, 26/1 and 17/15 have occurred. While such results



Anne of Green Gables created by L.M. Montgomery, has become all-pervasive in our portrayal, indeed an industry in her own right. Every imaginable (and some unimaginable) Anne product is available, and at considerable cost. The endearing and very real qualities of Anne in the Island context remain but it is becoming increasingly difficult to uncover and experience them.

provide a measure of titillation for the media and for the public, they do not bode well for the conduct of parliamentary business. Another aspect of elections and party that continues to intrigue political theorists and junkies is the near failure of Third Parties to "catch on" in the PEI political firmament. The "break through" by the NDP in the 1996 General Election – the first Third Party representation in the House – came to a somewhat abrupt halt in the most recent general election.

### **Some Notable Political Leaders**

From the grant of Responsible Government in 1851 down to the present, our political offices have been occupied by many leaders with notable political and administrative skills. To select five or six from that number is to short-change many not chosen but my list – totally subjective – will, I hope give an indication of the ongoing determination to grapple with local problems which have arisen since our Confederation with Canada. But before my comments on "my five Premiers" allow me to give honourable mention to three others who do not make my list. To Sir Henry Louis Davies, Island politician, then a federal cabinet minister in Laurier's government and finally

Chief Justice of Canada, the only Islander to be so named since the Court's creation. More recently, to the Hon. Joe Ghiz, an eloquent spokesman for his home Province and a passionate Canadian. And finally, mention must be made of the Hon. J. Angus MacLean, recently deceased, who represented PEI in the House of Commons for twenty-four years, was a staunch supporter of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, served in Diefenbaker's Cabinet from 1957 to 1963, was elected leader of the Island Conservative Party and subsequently as our Premier from 1979-1981. He was a remarkable contribution to the public life of Canada and the Island. Angus' clash with Gordon Sinclair on "Front Page Challenge" as to whether he was first a Canadian or an Islander remains part of Island folklore.

But five Premiers, in particular, have made significant and timely contributions to our government and House: W.W. Sullivan, J. Walter Jones, Walter R. Shaw and a father and son, Thane Campbell and Alex Campbell.

William W. Sullivan, a lawyer, politician and judge was next to Alex Campbell, the Island's longest serving Premier. It is also notable that Sullivan, a prominent Roman Catholic, gained the leadership of the Conservative Party and held elected office for slightly more than ten years at a time of much sectarian strife surrounding the public school system in the province. Sullivan, above all a realist, was confronted by problems all too familiar: a declining population, static grants from Ottawa, increasing debt and an oversized public service.

Sullivan's determined attempts for increased federal transfers were largely unsuccessful as were his efforts to increase local taxation. Reactionary measures followed: the secret ballot was eliminated as too costly [and it did not return until 1913], statute labour was reintroduced on provincial roads, the pay of MLAs was reduced, the number and use of jurors was reduced in certain court actions and the overall number of civil servants was substantially reduced as were their salaries.

Despite these rather draconian economies, Sullivan was unable, over his ten-year term in office, to balance the provincial budget. His appointment as Chief Justice in 1889 removed Sullivan from the near-hopeless task of placing the Province's finances on a firm footing, a goal which he had persued with a near-total commitment. Sullivan's twenty-years on the Bench were much more rewarding; until his resignation in 1917, only seven of the cases which he had determined were appealed to the Supreme Court in Ottawa and of those, six were dismissed. In retirement, prior to his death in 1920, Sullivan lived in turn with his three daughters. He walked daily and alone until he suffered a fall; his wife insisted that he be accompanied on his walks. Sullivan reluctantly agreed but only

on the condition that his attendant walk some way behind.

Despite the agricultural nature of the Island, it was not until 1935 that a farmer, Walter Lea, was elected Premier. Lea was followed in the 1940s and the late 1950s by two "farmer" Premiers, J. Walter Jones and Walter R. Shaw. Both were remarkably vigorous men and both came to elected office rather late in life, certainly in today's terms. And both men were remarkably well-educated for their times, with almost unheard of degrees in agriculture from the Ontario Agricultural College and both had a life-long fascination with scientific agriculture.

After an early few years working in government positions in both the United States and Canada, Jones established a sizeable farming operation just across the river from Charlottetown in Burnbury, he raised silver foxes for a short while and then shifted to pure-bred Holstein cattle for which he became famous throughout North America. Shaw, though maintaining and operating his family farm which dated back to the early 1800s, was from graduation totally enmeshed in the public service of the province starting with agricultural extension work and, finally, serving as Deputy Minister of Agriculture from 1934 until his retirement in 1954.

Of the two men, Jones was much more abrupt, opinionated and outspoken. His pronouncements on just about anything under the sun, under or beyond his jurisdiction, still carry a sense of pungency. On the repeal of the Prohibition regime in Prince Edward Island in the late 1940s, Jones told his opponents [notably the Womens' Christian Temperance Union] that "prohibition was a noble experiment with human nature by those who did not understand human nature." And to the visiting Massey Royal Commission on the Arts, Jones suggested that Prince Edward Island "should not train a man too much for the first thing you know he is a professor and has gone off to Upper Canada and we have had the expense of training him." Jones was rarely inclined to pull a punch! Walter Shaw, having completed what many would consider a life's work in agricultural administration, sought and gained the leadership of the Conservative Party and, at the age of 72 in 1959, led his party to an impressive 22/8 victory at the polls. Shaw sensed that Prince Edward Island was not keeping pace with the rest of Canada in the provision of government services, public education and adding value to our agricultural and fishery products. During his two terms of office, tentative moves were made to modernize, a period that was a precursor to the comprehensive macro and micro planning which was the trademark of the late 1960s and on into the 1980s.

Walter Shaw was a gregarious, outgoing person, simply, he "loved" people and, in return, he was thought of

with much affection by "his" people". In addition, he revelled in the telling of stories and all with the most marvellous turn of phrase. Speaking in a House debate after the defeat of his government in 1966 and sceptical that a particular course of government action could be effected, Mr. Shaw suggested, "Mr. Speaker, such an action is about as likely as a goose going to Constantinople."

*Visitors who set aside the glossy tourist literature can, with a bit of effort, get beyond the imagery of Anne of Green Gables, mushrooming golf courses and the "Birthplace of Confederation" concept to discover aspects of Island society which have been with us for generations.*

And finally, two father and son combinations, quite likely unique in Canadian politics, if not beyond our borders? In the 1935 general election – the "clean-sweep" election, – the leader of the Liberal party, Walter Lea, was ailing and the brunt of the campaign, meetings and strategy, was left to his able lieutenant, former Rhodes scholar and Summerside lawyer, Thane Campbell. Campbell had as his close advisor and strategist a young lawyer from Alberton, Jim Wells. It proved a winning combination, producing back-to-back Liberal victories, 30/0 in 1935 and 27/3 in 1939.

Thirty years after that 1935 sweep. Thane's thirty-two-year old son Alex contested and won the Liberal leadership in the first open leadership convention in the Province. The next year, in July of 1966, Alex Campbell's Liberals were elected after a cliff-hanger: 15/15 on general election night and then 17/15 when the delayed-election results were tallied. Assisting Alex as campaign strategist and confidant was Andy Wells, son of Jim. Thus, two father and son teams thirty years apart and both highly successful at the polls and in government. Thane Campbell won two elections prior to "retiring" to the Bench in 1943; Alex Campbell holds the present record for successive victories [four in 1966, 1970, 1974 and 1978] and for the longest period in the Premier's Office [twelve years, two months and some few days]. Thane Campbell had a lifelong interest in and concern for the broad heritage of Prince Edward Island. Shortly after becoming Premier in 1936, he cleared the motor vehicle licensing office from its premises on the second floor of Province House and restored the room as for its original use, the Legislative Council [amalgamated with the Legislative Assembly in 1893]. The former upper house

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served as the meeting place for the delegates to the Charlottetown Conference in 1864 and is now more often known as the Memorial Chamber. Campbell Senior was also instrumental in the formation of the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation and was, in the early 1970s its first chair.

The premiership of Alex Campbell from 1966 through 1978, was a period of near-total change in all aspects of the Island's economy, its educational system and the services, both voluntary and regulatory, provided by the provincial government – in short – of its total fabric. The merits of this all-intrusive planning and delivery effort, known as the Comprehensive Development Plan, continue to be debated. To Campbell's credit, change was essential [if for no other reason than virtual bankruptcy in 1966] and he took an overall rather than a piecemeal approach to necessary change.

### Island Curios

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What's in a name? The name "Alex Campbell" occurs at least three times in our political and judicial history. The first Alex, Provincial Treasurer in the 1830s, was dismissed from office when he was unable to account for the disappearance of 1/5th of the Colony's annual budget. A second Alex was set upon by a gang of "street arabs" in 1880; in an attempt to scare-off his harassers, he fired his pistol in the air and was promptly arrested for "discharging a pistol in a public place". One suspects a sympathetic judge, though, as the fine assessed was 5 cents. The third Alex Campbell was, of course, the Islands longest-serving Premier from 1966-1978.

And what of John Arbuckle, MLA who, in 1840, was censured by the House for "unseemly insobriety". Can

we assume that the House was also mindful of seemly insobriety? And in what colony in the post-Responsible Government period has there been a full-fledged duel between the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition? Why, here in Prince Edward Island, of course, in the pleasant surrounds of Victoria Park. The Leader of the Opposition, Edward Palmer, fired first, and missed. Premier Coles did not return fire. Somewhat inconclusive, I suppose, but direct action nonetheless. Other curiosities were:

- the 1836 statute which prohibited the vote to women as if the matter was in doubt at that time; female suffrage was not introduced in the Province until 1922.
- MLA, John MacIntosh, who, in 1844, spit in the face of a priest for reasons supposedly associated with land ownership. The priest is reputed to have placed a curse on MacIntosh, that henceforth he would not be able to hold spit in his cheeks. From then on, it was always noted that MacIntosh tended to drool.
- the glowing account in a local newspaper, extolling the fact that there had not been a divorce on the Island for thirty years. But neither had there been a divorce court during that period.
- the delightful – or is it somewhat wicked – assessment of Governor Fanning on his retirement from office in 1804 "...he retired with his reputation intact resulting from a combination of his geniality, his deft duplicity and his judicious inaction."

Let me give the final word to Fr. Angus MacEachern, commenting as long ago as 1811: Islanders, he said, "are extravagant in tea drinking, dress, grog and horse-racing". His observation stands the test of time providing only that we add an abiding interest in politics!