



## Parliamentary Book Shelf

**Speaking for Myself: Politics and Other Pursuits** by Duff Roblin, Great Plains Publications, pp 253.

The author of this lively autobiography was Manitoba's Premier from June 16, 1958 to November 11, 1967. His achievements and innovations in those years made him the most dynamic Manitoba Premier in our time. He is also outstanding among the few provincial premiers who made an impact upon the broader political life of Canada.

The author's preface indicates that in the preparation of this book he sought the aid and advice of a cadre of able people. But *Speaking for Myself* is very much Roblin's book. Anyone who has heard him orate will recognize his style. He liked to be well briefed, was brisk in argument, had a copious vocabulary influenced by his reading of the classics. They will note too his occasional use of something near slang. "He can talk the talk but can he walk the walk?"

Roblin's succinctness in utterance is demonstrated in the first paragraph of the preface. "It is a personal testimony flavoured by opinion and if there is a bias, it is in favour of the author". Of course, autobiographies are supposed to be like that! Otherwise why write them?

"Benjamin Disraeli once said: 'I believe that without party parliamentary government is impossible'. The essential wisdom of his utterance has often been proven.

Along with all the other problems facing a political leader on the way up Roblin had to recreate the party system in his province. For decades Manitoba had been governed by a coalition. Naturally this led to a diminution of partyism and a dulling of public interest in the political process. The legislature was a dull, almost moribund, place. Roblin saw no future for himself in the shreds and patches of the old system and ran for the legislature as an anti-coalitionist in 1949. Considering Roblin's description of the government he could not run as anything but an anti-coalitionist candidate. "Most of the MLAs were resting quietly in a self-indulgent lethargy arising from the fact that a hoary coalition government was governing the province". (p. 51)

Needless to say the election of a vigorous eloquent MLA enlivened the legislature. His success caught the attention of rank and file PCs in the province. When at a party convention in 1950 the PCs decided to leave the coalition, Roblin was able to join their MLAs in the legislature. In June of 1954 at a rugged convention he became the party leader. In four years he was premier of the province. As he records: "I was determined from the beginning, even if subconsciously, to be premier of Manitoba. No doubt the memory of my grandfather was buried in my psyche but it expressed itself in my actions." (p. 237)

But yearning and determination are not enough and the years between 1949 and 1958 must have been enormously challenging for Roblin. He had to inspire a party to

serious political contestation. He had to broaden the base of that party in population groups long alien to Tories. He had to acquire funds. He had to knock together a party organization and infrastructure. He had to find candidates of quality and appeal. His footwork was adroit. His timing was good. He avoided prematurely seeking the leadership. He had to practice the arts of appeasement and conciliation for the provincial leadership convention had been something less than a love-in.

He was fortunate in the man whom he replaced as leader, the veteran Errick Willis, buried whatever hurt and grudges he may have felt. Had Duff Roblin won the federal PC leadership in 1967 he would not have received the same treatment from the retiring federal leader John Diefenbaker.

The government Roblin formed in 1958 was the first Tory administration in 43 years. Apparently unaccustomed to being defeated, the coalition government arranged no formal hand over ceremonies. Roblin was sworn in as premier two weeks after the election. He and his future attorney general went that day to the premier's office in the legislature. They heard a noise at the door. The former incumbent, Douglas Campbell was using his key to enter his former domain. Only the British seem to be able to arrange a quick and dignified turn over of administrations.

Roblin sought to draw significance to the epochal change. He asked the Lieutenant Governor to preside in person over the first

Cabinet meeting, a practice not heavily in vogue since the era of Responsible Government. Roblin did something much more important. Mindful of the fact that his was a minority government the new premier sought an assurance that, if the government should be defeated by a vote in the legislature, the Lieutenant Governor would grant a dissolution. There was a degree of constitutional dubiety about this arrangement. But it worked when Roblin needed it some months later.

In the 1958 election Roblin notes that in the countryside they had fought the Liberals on the right, in the city the CCF on the left. "We made the progressive Centre our own". (p. 86) His words prompt remembrance of the advice of the founder of the Conservative party of Canada, John A. Macdonald. In 1854 he had written: "our aim should be to enlarge the bounds of our party so as to embrace every person desirous of being called a progressive Conservative".

Roblin's brief summary of his legacy as premier is perceptive. "If posterity is to remember anything about the second Roblin to be premier of Manitoba, it will be because of Duff's Ditch. My policies in education, welfare, hydro and roads probably did more for Manitobans, but the ditch has captured public imagination. It is obvious it is big, and its protection works for all to see". (p. 166)

The book's dust jacket shows a proud and impressive Roblin against the background of the mighty floodway which cost Manitoba \$26 million and a larger amount from Ottawa. For years after its construction in 1962 Roblin was derided, scorned and excoriated for "Roblin's costly folly". But in the great flood of 1997 it saved the city of Winnipeg. Vindication is sweet and perhaps no sentence in this autobiography gave the author

greater delight than that which closes chapter 9. "Duff's Ditch is there, and Duff's Ditch works." (p. 173)

By 1967 the Manitoba Legislature had lost its savour for Roblin and the 1967 National PC Leadership Convention offered a new arena for him. In 1965 one of Diefenbaker's ministers, Gordon Churchill, had organized an invitation to Duff to move to the Ottawa scene. "A sort of round robin for Roblin" was signed by a great majority of the Tory caucus. The seal was to be put on the idea by a personal invitation from party leader, Diefenbaker. The two leaders met in the Winnipeg airport. According to Roblin, Diefenbaker did not ask him to join the ranks. Diefenbaker's version was that Roblin had been asked but had declined.

We must leave the incompatible versions as stated. But had Roblin jumped into the federal field in 1965 he might very well have been the choice of the 1967 convention. Robert Stanfield was a most reluctant candidate and resisted growing pressure for a long time. Had Roblin thrown his hat in the ring a little earlier in 1967, Stanfield would have been relieved and delighted to stay out.

Roblin's memories of the 1976 convention are not happy. "The campaign passed as a sort of high speed blur – (Movement was everything; reflection was to come later)". Kim Campbell would subsequently have similar thoughts about general elections! He had an able campaign team and powerful support but he could never get beyond second place. His people made some tactical errors which would be amusing had they not been so sad. Advised that an important session was to be an off-the-cuff question and answer format, Roblin found that other candidates had carefully honed speeches. He could not resist a little

dig at his chief opponent. "Stanfield delivered Dalton Camp's speech to great effect." (p. 179)

Leadership conventions can be overwhelmingly draining of body and spirit. The 1967 convention was one of the worst with an inordinate time spent waiting for the ballots to be counted. When told by a convention official that the problem was that the adding machine broke down an expasperated Senator Grattan O'Leary expostulated "God Almighty there must be more than one adding machine in the city of Toronto!" It was important that Stanfield, the convention winner, have Roblin with him in Ottawa. Although the memoirs do not mention the meeting of the two men in Neepawa, Manitoba. Roblin's decision to contest Winnipeg South Centre was warmly received.

Outside observers might have, thought, that considering what he had done for Manitoba, Roblin would have been warmly endorsed by the voters of Winnipeg South Centre. Alas gratitude is not always the operative motivation in politics. He fell prey to Trudeaumania and the gas tax imposed by the provincial PCs of Manitoba. An even sadder episode was Roblin's loss in Peterborough in the 1974 election. Roblin's two defeats denied the House of Commons a star performer.

Roblin, on the invitation of Prime Minister Trudeau, came to the Senate in 1978 and remained there until his mandatory retirement in 1992. He does not seem to regard his senatorial days as particularly happy. He deplored the absence of substantial rules and he passed through the awful Liberal ructions over the GST. He is enthusiastic about electing senators, a suggestion first made by the PEI delegation at the pre-Confederation meetings in the 1860s.

From September 1984 to June 1986, Roblin was Government Leader in the Senate and a member of the Mulroney Cabinet. He assumed that as a Cabinet minister he would have some say in the formation of government action and policy generally. Finding his role to be more honorary than challenging he withdrew. It is surprising that any prime minister having a man of Roblin's experience and wisdom in his Cabinet would circumscribe his role so narrowly.

There is a good deal in these memoirs which is not essentially political. Roblin was an ardent supporter of the Commonwealth of Nations and of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association whose meetings he often attended. In his reflections on international matters he writes "Let us continue Canada's leadership and success in the Commonwealth of Nation where good can be done quietly and by example." (p. 205)

In his chapter "Met along the way", Roblin gives insightful appraisals of interesting people from

Queen Elizabeth to a perennial protester on the grounds of the Manitoba legislature. His sketch of Robert Stanfield is not exactly starry-eyed, but he envied Stanfield's "wry sense of humour". That was astute. Stanfield's humour was of the self-deprecatory variety. Some public men use it to great effect. John A. Macdonald and Lester Pearson come to mind. Others, like George Drew, John Diefenbaker and Edward Schreyer lacked this quality.

There is humour in this volume but there is also exhortation. The thoughtful words of a wise and dedicated public man merit careful consideration. The author is concerned about the excessive control by the executive of the parliamentary process. He recalls better times. "In earlier days, respect for office, if not always the office-holder, was accorded. Politics was a worthy calling and I described myself as a politician with some pride. Nowadays it seems that politics is a pejorative word, although the people in politics are, by and large, just as

good as they ever were." (p. 230) He then proceeds to make some helpful suggestions.

Roblin also pays respect to some of his political adversaries including a beautiful tribute to Lester B. Pearson's speech in favour of a Canadian flag at the Royal Canadian Legion Convention in Winnipeg. "The legionnaires were ready to defend the old Canadian ensign to the last Boo. Amid a welter of noise, cat calls and general uproar, Pearson came to state his case for the Maple Leaf flag... It was a rough meeting. I was on the platform with him and saw him brace himself for the storm. There was no wavering there. He faced them down and he prevailed. Respect, however grudging, was offered in the end, and I take my hat off to him. The diplomat wore armour." (p. 20) Whether Roblin conveyed his views to his Legion friends is not known.

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