



The artist at work (Howard Johnston)

Where Have All The Members Gone

## HOWARD JOHNSTON: POLITICIAN TURNED PAINTER

*Howard Johnston is a former member of the House of Commons. He sat first for the Social Credit (1965-1968) and later as a member of the Progressive Conservative Party (1974-1979). He now lives in Salmon Arm, British*

*Columbia. Since leaving politics he has taken up painting. In November 1983 Mr. Johnston was in Ottawa for an exhibition and sale of his watercolours held at the Cercle Universitaire. The exhibit was held*

*under the patronage of Maureen McTeer and Joan André. Mr. Johnston was interviewed by Barbara Benoit for the Canadian Parliamentary Review during his visit to Ottawa.*

**Parliamentarian to professional painter is a striking turnabout of career, Mr. Johnston. How did you come to painting and what kind of paintings do you do?**

I turned to painting as a profession immediately after my departure from politics in 1979. Throughout my life, I doodled and sketched informal portraits giving the results away — usually to the delight of my subjects. I had no formal training. I grew up on a farm in the Okanagan Valley and went first to a one-room school and later to the small secondary schools in Enderby and Salmon Arm. Although we had Art at normal school, at no point was it possible to pursue any real specialization. At university I studied English and History. Later, as a high school teacher, I did enjoy occasionally filling in as an art teacher. One summer I took a relaxed sketching course with Fred Ames, the principal of the Vancouver School of Art.

The impetus to experiment with watercolours came in 1974, when I returned to Parliament. My wife and I took an apartment in an old row house on MacKay Street overlooking the grounds of Government House. It was a magnificent location, but the apartment was very long, and narrow; had a high ceiling, and windows only at the front and back. The side walls were enormous, white and bare. I decided to decorate with watercolours and pencil sketches. I snatched moments to do so, from January until the following June. From then on I was too busy to paint at all until after I had left politics.

As a professional I paint florals. My wife and I have galleried a good deal during extensive travels; it seemed to me there was a gap in floral painting; that most of it ran to one of two extremes: rather stiff, botanical illustration, or colourful, amorphous blobs which might equally well represent, say, lilac or wisteria. I wanted to paint true but artistic representations, to paint not just a rose, but a rose recognizable as "Frühlingsgold" and yet have life and sparkle, sun and breeze in it.

**Who are some of the painters who have influenced you?**

There is certainly a Japanese influence in my work, although not a distinct Japanese style. My wife is Japanese-Canadian; I speak Japanese; and we have made several trips to Japan. My painting is, however, more precise and less stylized than typical Japanese work. One thing I have borrowed from the Japanese is complete concentration on the



**Françoise Labrecque with one of the paintings on exhibit at the Cercle Universitaire. (R.F.M. McInnis)**

flower itself. I often paint with no background at all, just leaving the paper white. I like lush flowers and large forms. Iris and large single roses are among my favourite subjects.

Possibly another influence — certainly a painter whose work I greatly admire — is Charles John Collings, a turn of the century watercolourist in the British tradition, who lived not far from my childhood home, at the other end of Shuswap Lake. He captured shimmer and light wonderfully.

Other media than watercolours interest me, as do subjects other than flowers. I still do an occasional portrait and have experimented a little with oils. But as a professional, I have concentrated on flowers — and, indeed, on my own flowers. I paint in my garden in Salmon Arm and in the studio recently added to our house. As that part of the Okanagan Valley is subject to sudden showers, it is often difficult to paint outdoors.

Whenever possible, I paint outside because of my concern with painting the natural, the "pickable" flower. Some fairly stiff species, iris especially, transport well to the studio. Others, such as clematis, simply have to be painted where they grow.

I enjoy the solitary concentration of painting. In many ways, I was not temperamentally suited to the public life. When I left politics, I did not try to return to teaching.

As a painter, however, I have had wonderful support from the community. It is a community which is generally very supportive of the arts. Despite its smallness, it is one of the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra's four concert towns. I have had two successful exhibitions in Salmon Arm. I am also a member of the Canadian Federation of Artists and exhibit several paintings with them every year. The McCaffrey Fine Arts Gallery in Vancouver had handled some of my work.

**How did you come to have Maureen McTeer as a patron?**

Maureen first saw my work in the spring of 1980, after the Conservative defeat, when she stayed with us briefly. She commissioned three paintings at that time. I delivered them in October, 1981, when she brought a group of Quebec artists to Calgary. At that time she suggested organizing a show in central Canada. The summer of 1982 proved impossible for me, both for personal reasons and also because of an exceptional heat and drought in early

June. The flowers simply shrivelled before I could paint them. Last summer was much better; I have brought thirty-seven paintings to Ottawa for this show. The wider exposure is very important to me — this is my first show outside of British Columbia — and I am grateful to Maureen for her help.



The exhibit was held under the patronage of Maureen McTeer (left) and Joan André. (R.F.M. McInnis)

Before you joined the Conservative party, you were a Social Credit member. How did you come to be involved in politics and why did you change parties?

I really cannot remember not being interested in politics. On the family farm outside Enderby, when the family gathered around the dinner table, politics was often the chief subject of conversation. When I was sixteen, I heard some remarkable Social Credit speakers from Alberta, personable and convincing men. Of course, on a farm during the '30's, we were keenly aware of the profound effect that sudden changes in the money supply had on the economy.

I joined the Social Credit party just before the provincial election of 1952, although I did not run for office

at that time. I was active at university in the Social Credit Club and met some of the party's national figures. As a teacher, I emphasized in my civics courses the importance of public participation if our parliamentary system is to operate properly.

In British Columbia after 1952 there were Social Credit candidates in all federal elections. The party made its biggest federal gain in 1957, when B.C. returned six Social Credit members to the House of Commons. These were all swept out by Diefenbaker's landslide in 1958.

I was approached before the election of 1965 by a group from Okanagan-Revelstoke asking me to run. It was not the riding to which Salmon Arm belonged; but it was the riding of my father's farm, the riding where I had grown up. I had never run for any office, not even a school board, and was totally inexperienced in electioneering. I had the advantage, however, of knowing many of the area farmers. Social Credit had come last in Okanagan-Revelstoke in the previous two elections. In 1965 all four parties were evenly supported. I won with 26.5 per cent of the total vote.

I did not know that so little was left, federally, of the Social Credit party. Federal Social Credit collapsed over the next two and a half years. I ran for Social Credit again in 1968. Redistribution then had merged my former riding with East Kootenay to form Okanagan-Kootenay. Consequently, I was unknown in half the riding. There was no party organization and no money. Alec Patterson MP, and I wrote the election platform in his back garden. Not surprisingly, I lost; unlike most of the other Social Credit candidates, I did, however, manage to save my deposit by 90 votes.

When the election of 1972 approached, I was still interested in a career in politics. Having sat once as a member, I felt I had an obligation to remain in politics and put my experience to work. As there was nothing left of Social Credit, I joined

the Conservatives as the party closest to my own personal convictions. Before its demise, Federal Social Credit had become, really, a conservative party, except for its abiding interest in monetary reform — an interest which I then shared and indeed still do. There is, of course, in any change of parties, a tiny group at the core of each which will view you, on the one side, as a traitor, on the other, as an intruder. And obviously, given the nature of politics, if all other factors are equal, then someone who has, as it were, been born into the party will be given precedence over a relative newcomer.

In the election of 1972 my old Social Credit supporters promised me their help in running as a Conservative. I lost the first nomination; but when the designated candidate resigned, I won the second. In that election I was defeated; but I won the following election and returned to the House of Commons as a Conservative member from 1974 until 1979.

You have had experience both as a member of a minor party and as a member of the Official Opposition. Did you have any scruples about serving, in what is essentially a two-party system, as a member of a small and essentially regional party which had no hope of ever forming a government?

No, none at all at the time and none, really, now. Our form of government depends essentially on a two-party system, but it has traditionally had a place both for a small number of independent members and for a much greater degree of independent action on the part of individual members than is possible under the present convention of rather rigid party discipline. The great danger, as the independent element fades, is extreme polarization. Some of British Columbia's current problems stem from polarization. Three or four independents are needed in any Parliament. But the political reality is that an independent has no chance of being elected at the federal level. A

candidate needs the national overlay that a party provides. Minor parties — not too many or too large — are the only feasible substitute. They now fill the role which used to be played by the independent members.

When I sat as a Conservative, I disagreed with the party on a number of issues: for example, the Citizenship Act, the Immigration Act and the redistribution issue. It is very important that the individual member voice in caucus any disagreement he feels and, in the last analysis, vote in the house according to his own convictions.

Similarly, the member should not necessarily feel obliged to vote in accordance with what he perceives as the majority opinion on any given issue in his constituency. His experience in parliament may often have given him a clearer and deeper understanding of an issue than is available to those who have to rely solely on the media for their information. I must, nonetheless, admit that following one's own convictions can on occasion have dire political consequences. The fact that

I voted for the abolition of capital punishment when my constituents were largely in favour of its retention would even now, I feel sure, make me vulnerable if I attempted to return to politics. I do not in retrospect wish that I had acted differently. I simply recognize the consequences of my actions.

**Was your experience of Parliament greatly different, sitting first as a Social Credit and then as a Conservative member?**

Yes, strikingly different, in several ways. By good luck, in 1965 the five of us in the Social Credit party held the balance of power.

Now, normally a party needed twelve elected members to be recognized as a party; but Prime Minister Lester Pearson did not act to enforce the rule. He could not risk offending our group who held the balance of power. Consequently, we continued to hold the privileges of a party, and the five of us shared in all the prerogatives normally reserved to

a party's inner elite: for example, whoever was acting as house leader had the right to ask the fourth question in question period. I was caucus secretary; but I also acted at various times, depending on which other members were in town, as house leader, whip and caucus chairman. One could serve at will on any committee, could speak in the House as often as one wished, could reply to any formal statement by the government. I enjoyed the opportunity of speaking and made great use of it. I had a marvellous run of speeches in the House at that time.

The greatest differences that I noticed on my return to Parliament in 1974 stemmed from the very different situation of being one of 95 Conservative members. There was, of course, much more rivalry for each position.

Another major change during my second term was the introduction of television to the Chamber, over my opposition. Television had an immediate and radical effect on the conduct of Parliament's business. Marshall McLuhan was a true prophet



**Howard and Dale Johnston with Allan McKinnon MP. (R.F.M. McInnis)**

— in the Old Testament sense of warning people against a real threat. Although he was sometimes wrong and often mischievous, he clearly understood the differences among print, radio and television, and the total unpredictability of the effect of the new medium. The televising of House of Commons debates, by giving prominence to random bits and pieces of question period, has contributed enormously to the public disillusionment with parliament. Parliament is a complex institution. What is being accomplished and how, is not made apparent by television.

But it is not simply a question of the public's perception. The real importance of parliament has been diminished by television. Members who rise in the House should address other members. Now, since the advent of television, they address the nation. The temptation to grandstand is insuperable. The real business of parliament has moved out, into caucus meetings, into house leaders' meetings, into the corridors, into a variety of semi-formalized institutions and places.

Canada pioneered the televising of national parliamentary debates. Great Britain sent over parliamentary committees and journalists to study our example and decided to reject television. (I was given far more time for my views on British television than I was on Canadian).

One other difference between the parliaments was the improvement in language training. When I came to Ottawa in 1965, one promise I made was to become trilingual. (I already spoke Japanese). The parliamentary classes at that time were large, and progress was slow. I enrolled at my own expense in a ten-week Berlitz crash course. On my return in 1974, I attended parliamentary classes and discovered that it was possible to go to St. Jean Québec for a special week of immersion. I was too busy to take advantage of the opportunity often, but did manage to get away about twice a year. Those weeks helped enormously on the conversation side.

**How much of a sense of fraternity is there among members of parliament? How important are social contacts with fellow members? Is parliament in any sense a club?**

It should, in a sense, be more of a club than it is, although certainly not simply a club. What I mean to say is that a member should know a large number of other members on a personal and informal basis, and that his acquaintances should cut across party lines. To operate effectively, the institution needs to develop understandings. If members can meet casually and can informally share their views and knowledge — about parliament itself, its procedures and functions, and also about national issues —, then the whole institution will operate a little more smoothly and effectively.

This informal element of parliamentary life has been enormously diminished, however, by the ease with which members can now return to their constituencies. My personal experience lies entirely within the present convention of frequent returns home; but Doug Fisher, a pressman and former Commons member, has told me about the old days, when there were always 50 to 100 members in town on weekends and consequent life and buzz in the House. Many members now go home every weekend; and, while this may provide a sound basis for reelection, it is the ruination of parliament.

As an MP, I flew home only every second weekend; but because my constituency was split by mountain ranges, I, in effect, made only one visit a month to each half. When I was in Ottawa, there were never more than five or six members about, including, usually Stanley Knowles and Alvin Hamilton. I would frequently manage to have long chats with both, drawing on their immense experience and knowledge of parliament. To balance the needs of one's country against the demands of one's constituency requires tact and judgement but it should be done.

Parliament is in disrepute because members forget their obligation to the national interest. A member's main concentration should be on national issues. A federal member is also meant, to a degree, to act as the voice of his home province, another element of representation which has fallen into neglect.

**What other advice would you give to a new member of parliament? What experience should someone considering a career in politics have? What should his expectations be upon coming to Ottawa?**

The experience which a member needs on entering politics will depend very much on local circumstances and on the local party organization. In my constituency, my farm background was important. My mother's people came to Enderby in 1905, my father's to Deep Creek in 1912. My brothers still farm. All of this put me into easy touch with my rural constituents.

I was fortunate in coming directly to the House of Commons without any previous political experience. I think that experience at other levels of government is not always necessary, and that it can be wasted time. What previous experience does do is quiet that disgruntled sector of the public that wants you to "earn your spurs." It is, however, much better for the institution if people come in with idealism and dreams and vision rather than just an extensive knowledge of the partisan side of political life.

I am not, however, advocating ignorance on the part of the novice MP. A thorough knowledge of Canadian history, of the history and development of our political institutions, of schools and traditions of political thought and of current national issues are basic essentials. Some knowledge of both official languages is of course desirable. I was fortunate in being brought up with an interest in the nation as a whole, in growing up feeling that Champlain

and Maisonneuve were my heroes. People growing up now seem to have a much more regional bias.

Ideally, the local party organization should have the vision to look for the best person in the constituency, and to invite him or her into the party if necessary, to run as a candidate. The greatest fault of local organizations is to look inside themselves for candidates and to reward long service to the party. There is also the problem of making the choice seem totally democratic. It is important for the committee not to appear to pre-choose a candidate. Our Canadian nominating convention system does politics a disservice. The last-minute recruiting of party members is unfortunate. One thing we should borrow from the USA is the permanent registration of voters by party. Under the American system, voters register at every year end their affiliation with any political party. This is not the same thing as an electoral list for a general election. It is a registration of party members. In that way, when a convention is called, those eligible to attend are already listed and known. There is no obscene scramble to sell "tickets". American campaigns to recruit members are thus more neutral. The recruitment is not done in support of any one individual. This is a great element in the stability of American party life. The Canadian system militates against the development of any recognizable party policy. It is the weakest link in our democratic process. One can only hope that this weakness in the system will eventually come home to politicians. An all-party agreement would be the only possible way to alter it.

When a new member arrives in Ottawa, he should not expect an immediate and smashing success.

Indeed, he should not expect any media notice at all for quite a long time. He should stay physically in parliament, learn how it works, and watch for opportunities. They will come to the diligent and observant.

Politics is certainly not a field to enter for personal gain. No one with good business sense would become involved in politics unless he had a special interest in and commitment to a party or the political life. Expenses are considerable and members' salaries are not, despite the prevalence of the cartoon of the "trough", at all excessive.

The member should certainly bring his family to Ottawa. He will have much more opportunity here than in his constituency to see his wife, and the marriage will have a better chance of surviving. Living in the capital will be a broadening experience for the children. It is tempting, however, to make the cynical observation that a member who wants to stay in office should leave his wife as a hostage in the constituency. It is unfortunate that so often, in constituents' eyes, being in Ottawa is equated with being out of touch. Seriously, keeping the family together and keeping trips to the constituency short are risks the member should take. Being a member of parliament is usually a team job. There is great scope for a spouse to help further a member's career.

I must say that my wife has been very supportive of all my careers and through the periods of transition. She enjoyed Ottawa and parliamentary life, and was a keen and observant critic and supporter of my parliamentary career, as she is now of my painting. I would certainly wish that sort of support for any member of parliament.

**I imagine the transition from politics to private life can be a traumatic experience?**

I would advise one to plan withdrawal well in advance, perhaps even before entering politics, keeping in mind that withdrawal can be either voluntary or involuntary.

The most harrowing year of my life was the year after I was unseated in 1968. Our financial struggle lasted right through 1970. We had no time to think of politics or anything else. I often wonder how I had the courage to turn to politics again in 1971. Having no children certainly gave us more freedom to take the risk. Children add a great deal of pressure to the uncertainties of a political career.

I learned, however, from experience in 1968; and before I left Parliament in 1979, I set aside a financial cushion, enough money to see us through for a year or a little more. It proved a very wise measure; because by 1979 it was not longer possible to return to teaching. The transition was also easier because we were prepared for the emotional hazards.

I still miss the sense of power, but I enjoy my privacy. I was not always comfortable with my public persona and was never a good backslapper.

In summary, I would say that a political career is, or ought to be, selfless: that one enters politics with the ideal of promoting constructive policies and of serving one's country; but that at the same time, one must take into account the various and acute demands made by political life and order one's private affairs accordingly. If one has made prudent provisions, then politics can be — and certainly has been for me — a very satisfying and rewarding career.