



George McIlraith as a young MP. (Public Archives Canada PA47411)

Looking Back at Parliament:

Interview with George McIlraith

George McIlraith was first elected to the House of Commons as a Liberal at the age of 31. He was re-elected in 10 successive general elections for the constituency of Ottawa West (now Ottawa Centre), and served in the House of Commons until 1972, when he was summoned to the Senate. He served there until his retirement in July 1983.

Parliamentary assistant to the Right Honourable C.D. Howe from 1945 to 1953, cabinet minister under Prime Ministers Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Trudeau from 1963 to 1970, Mr. McIlraith held various portfolios including: Minister of Transport; President of the Privy Council; Deputy Chairman of the Treasury Board; Government House Leader; Minister of Public Works and Minister Responsible for the National Capital Commission; and Solicitor General, as well as Acting Minister for the Department of National Revenue and the Department of Justice.

He was interviewed for the Canadian Parliamentary Review in October 1984.

You served in parliament for some 43 years. How did your interest in politics begin, and were there any particular individuals who influenced you to enter politics, or encouraged you to become a candidate for parliament?

I was a law student and a young lawyer during the years of the Great Depression, and like all young people at that time, was tremendously interested in government and in politics. We were constantly concerned with the actions of the various governments, federal and provincial. No particular individual encouraged me in the development of political views, but a wide number of the political leaders of that day influenced me in a general way. However, only one person encouraged me to become a candidate, that was the late Senator Cairine Wilson.

Although I had been very active in politics as a young law student and young lawyer, I had never intended to run as a member of parliament. I more or less accidentally fell into it when pressure was put on me to seek the candidature in Ottawa when there was a vacancy in 1940.

When you were first elected, Mr. Mackenzie King was prime minister. What kind of a parliamentarian was he?

In my opinion, he was the ablest since Confederation, with the possible exception of Sir John A. Macdonald. Certainly, of the prime ministers I have known personally, he was by far the most able parliamentarian. He had a great knowledge of Canadian history, having undoubtedly been influenced by the part taken by his grandfather in the 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada, and in the struggle to obtain responsible government in Canada. He was a true democrat in the sense that he felt that the ministers or cabinet must be answerable at all times through elected members of parliament.

He protected the rights of parliament, at the same time giving the people the assurance that while their elected representatives would make the decisions on their behalf, they would not make them on their own, and they always were held answerable. By like measure, his ministry was constantly kept answerable to the members of the House of Commons, not only in fact, but they felt that they were answerable, and acted accordingly. He did not seek to force legislation through, no matter how good he thought it might be, unless and until it had been fully debated in parliament, and parliament accepted it after debate, rather than through being coerced into accepting it.



Prime Minister Mackenzie King arrives for the opening of Parliament, January, 1947.

(Public Archives Canada PA110523)

The country was at war when you entered parliament. What effect did this have on the workings of the House?

Perhaps it caused a greater sense of responsibility in parliament, and by the government, than we have seen since. The government of the day was very sensitive to its responsibility, and it was an awesome responsibility. This tended to concentrate effort on all sides to the objective of winning the war, and however much there was difference as to the methods to be used in winning the war, there was no doubt in anyone's mind about what the objective of parliament and of government was. This meant that on most routine matters there was much less partisanship than there is now, and indeed as a matter of fact, Mr. King, as leader of the Liberal party, actually closed down the Liberal party offices and ceased all partisan party activity during the whole period of the war.

Of course, as to the methods to bring some of the measures to more effectively prosecute the war, there was sharp difference, and bitterness. An example of this was the conscription issue. National unity was not a slogan then. It was an objective, actively and strenuously pursued by the government of the day, and indeed concurred in or approved by all parliamentarians. All felt that keeping the country together was necessary to our survival as a country and to running the war.

Was Prime Minister Mackenzie King accessible to members?

During the eight years I served under Mackenzie King, I talked with him more than with any subsequent Prime Minister. In those days, he maintained an office in the Centre Block adjacent to the Chamber of the House of Commons. This was in addition to his regular office as prime



Mackenzie King shaking hands with John Diefenbaker at the opening of Parliament in 1949. (Public Archives Canada PA122475)

minister. It was common practice for him to call a private member into his office to discuss any current issue, or any matters of particular interest to that member's area of the country. Indeed, during his term of office, all members had their offices in one building, the Centre Block. This had a great effect on communication between members of parliament, and between them and the cabinet. It also kept them in touch with exactly what was being debated in the House of Commons at any given moment and made the prime minister and ministers of the cabinet much more accessible to members.

When did that close relationship start to disappear?

It started to disappear when members were allocated offices in other buildings than the Centre Block. As they were put in more different buildings, it accelerated quite rapidly. It of course was influenced by the differing personalities of subsequent prime ministers.

Another change that came at the same time was the blurring of the distinction between the political arm of parliament and the administrative side of

government. That distinction is entirely unclear today. The administrative arm of government and the civil service should complement the work of parliament. At the present time, they seem to overlap, and this subject needs attention today.

Ironically, one of your mentors, the Right Honourable C.D. Howe, is often identified with the decline in the importance of parliament.

That is quite unwarranted. Despite his reputation to the contrary, I think Mr. Howe had a great respect for, and understanding of, parliament. For example, when I was his parliamentary assistant, I recall very distinctly a very aggressive Liberal backbencher asking a deputy minister for some information which the deputy refused to give. I remember well Mr. Howe calling that deputy minister in and telling him that "Mr. X is an elected member of the House of Commons. As a Minister of the Crown I am answerable to the elected members of the House of Commons. You must give him the information he wants." He pursued that policy throughout all his administration, as I was very well aware.

Surely Howe's decision to move closure at a very early stage of the Pipeline Debate in 1956 was a black mark for parliament?

The Pipeline Debate hinged on obtaining approval for borrowing authority before a certain date, in order to begin construction of the Trans Canada Pipeline. The decision to apply closure was not Mr. Howe's. It was a decision taken really by his junior cabinet colleagues at that time, and was handled in an arbitrary and unsatisfactory way...Mr. Howe felt himself bound by the decision taken in cabinet at the instigation of these younger members of cabinet, although he strongly disapproved of it.

During the same debate, Speaker René Beaudoin reversed one of his rulings, paving the way for the Bill to pass. What do you recall of that episode?

Beaudoin was truly the most tragic figure in the whole Pipeline Debate. In simple terms, I think he panicked. Mr. Beaudoin actually had a very good knowledge of the rules, but he was very ambitious, and more significant, he had an overwhelming need or desire to please everyone. That quality is very dangerous for a Speaker of the House of Commons to have.

I also recall that in the midst of the debate, when tension was very high on all sides, Beaudoin began to perspire and turned very pale, as if he were suffering from a heart attack. Dr. McCann, the Minister of National Revenue at the time, who was a medical doctor, got from me some nitroglycerine pills, wrapped them in a piece of paper and sent them to the Speaker with a note telling him to put them under his tongue. The next day it was widely reported that the government had been sending notes to the Speaker telling him what to do, and that the Speaker was following them. That indicates the tension that had built up in the House, and the state of emotion in which the debate was being held. All reason had departed from the debate and only emotion took over.

In 1957 and for the next five years, you sat in Opposition. How did this change affect you?

I have often said quite seriously that it is easier and more enjoyable being in Opposition, not more satisfying perhaps, but enjoyable nevertheless. It was not many years until we had the government of the day very much on the run notwithstanding its very large majority.



Prime Minister Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson in 1958. (Public Archives Canada PA115202)

After the 1958 election, there were so many government supporters elected that the lobby on the Opposition side actually had more government than opposition members in it. Did this sharing of a lobby between Liberals and Conservatives cause problems?

Not really. It was a friendly lobby, and we all got along quite well. It was interesting to observe the evolution in attitude of some of those very new government supporters. There had been relatively few Conservative members in western Canada before that time. Many who were elected in the Diefenbaker sweep had never been in Conservative Party Associations or known anything about parliament.

It was interesting to see how quickly they came to believe that they personally had won the election, when in fact most of them were swept in on the flood. Regrettably, some of them grew to be quite arrogant, an arrogance that caused them to do arbitrary things, and to become very careless of the views of others. They were also very suspicious of anyone who was not a supporter of the government. I remember the government whip of the day issued an order forbidding all the stenographers to the members of the government from having coffee break or lunch with secretaries who worked for Liberal MPs.

Despite his rapid fall from office, Prime Minister Diefenbaker is often considered to have been a great parliamentarian. Do you agree?

Mr. Diefenbaker was a good debater, but not a great parliamentarian. He was a tremendously good actor, and probably would have had a very successful career in that field, perhaps as great as Raymond Massey, but he did not have an understanding or appreciation of the role of prime minister. He tended to spend all his time seeking to destroy the opposition, rather than acting as prime minister, presenting to parliament the programme of a strong government that should be adopted by parliament and supported by parliament. In other words, his approach was essentially destructive, rather than making a constructive use of parliament. Never has a leader gone down so far so fast.

You held several cabinet positions under Mr. Pearson. The role of house leader during a minority parliament must have been among the most difficult jobs of your career?

No, not really. Looking back, it appears to me that Mr. Pearson used me as something of a trouble-shooter in his cabinet. I moved from one portfolio to another, whenever there appeared to be a problem. For example, when the Minister of Justice, Mr. Favreau resigned, I was made Acting Justice Minister. The same thing happened when Mr. John Garland, the Minister of National Revenue, died, and no minister was appointed. I was acting minister for some four months. I very often acted as prime minister when Mr. Pearson was absent from Ottawa.

The job of being house leader was carried on concurrently with whatever portfolio I held at the time, and I found it rather pleasant working with all the members of the House of Commons.

You became government house leader during the lengthy and acrimonious debate on adoption of the Canadian flag. What do you recall of that period?

The flag issue was debated for many weeks, and was certainly tiresome and obstructive. Amendments were moved with such frequency that many members spoke several times on the subject, and practically every member on the opposition side spoke more than once. After a while the debate came to look ridiculous because it was wholly repetitive and nothing new was being said.

I remember a columnist in the press gallery watching me read the newspaper while sitting in the Chamber watching the debate. He sent me a note, saying, "You've read the *Ottawa Citizen* 15 times." I sent a note back to him, saying "You're wrong. I have read it 16 times and I'm just starting to read it again."

Shortly thereafter, I moved closure. As a matter of fact, although closure is alleged to be very unpopular, there seemed to be unanimous relief when closure was moved, and I got no complaints from the public. None whatever. Indeed, I got a good deal of private support from the Opposition side in the House of Commons.

What is the most important quality of a good house leader?

Political integrity. The members of parliament must know that the word of the house leader can be relied on, and that he will not use his office to manipulate the business of the House in a way that will take advantage of them. If they once give

you that trust, and you are careful to continue to earn it, they will co-operate fully. If you do not, it is disaster.

Actually, I think that the interest of the members on the government side and on the opposition side in the operation of the business in the House of Commons is the same, or very close to it, and a government house leader must be assiduous in protecting the rights of the individual members of the House of Commons in debate, and they must know that this will happen.

You have attended many leadership conventions both before and since 1968. Do you see a significant change in style and organization and if so, is it for the better?

There is urgent need for discussion and reform on this whole subject. The present methods are not satisfactory. For one thing, conventions have become too costly. Furthermore, delegates to these conventions are no longer representative of the members in the constituencies. Too often they are the choice of a small group in a constituency who have distributed membership tickets to certain limited groups. They really choose the delegates to the convention rather than having them chosen by all the party members in the constituency. This whole procedure requires examination and drastic change.

You stated in your letter of resignation as a minister that you believed in the influence of private members in the process of government. How much influence, in fact, can a private member have and what do you think of the reforms adopted during the last parliament?

The private member can have a very great deal of influence. It is also, however, dependent on the prime minister or leader of the opposition as the case may be. There has been a sharp diminution in the influence of a private member in the last decade. I think the recent procedural reforms were rather superficial. They were an ineffective attempt to meet the need for parliamentary reform.

How did the nature and quality of your relations with the press change during the course of your career?

My own relations with the press were quite satisfactory through the whole of my political career. However, I have noted a considerable change in the operations of

the media during the last four decades. The media now has tended to appoint itself as the authority on many subjects and to abandon its role of recording the news as it happens. Because of the competitiveness between television, radio and newspapers and the changes in each of them to meet the demands of their competition some unfortunate practices have developed. There also has been a regrettable concentration of power in the media. Witness the number of cities in the country now having only one daily newspaper, the number of television stations operated by a chain or some other form of common ownership.

You served more than a decade in the Senate. What future do you see for our appointed Upper House?

The Senate is a necessary and important safeguard against the concentration of power in the hands of the government. It is necessary also as an effective means of checking bills to see that the legislation adequately and properly meets the purposes for which parliament intended i.e. that it is properly drafted and does not unnecessarily interfere with the rights of the various segments of the public. This latter role cannot be done effectively by the House of Commons but it can and is being well done in many instances by the Senate. There is, of course, need for reform in the internal conduct of business in the Senate and some further examination of the criteria being used in appointment to the Senate.

The Conservatives now have a huge majority in the House of Commons and the Liberals a huge majority in the Senate. Do you think this will cause problems?

No. I do not think the opposition majority in the Senate poses any problem. I do not foresee any attempt on the part of the Senate to override or in any way go contrary to the expressed will of the voters as indicated by the representative in the House of Commons. The Senate must continue to expose defects in legislation and if necessary to send legislation back to the Commons for further examination and correction but I do not anticipate any action on the part of the Senate to obstruct or block legislation proposed by the government that has been properly and adequately examined in the Commons. The role of each House is different from the other and the problem you have posed, in my view, will not arise.