Interview

"Since coming to Ottawa I have continued the practice I followed for some forty years in the Alberta legislature namely taking the Pages to dinner in the Parliamentary Restaurant... two at a time." In 1985 Gordon Taylor was made an "Honorary Page" and presented with a sweater containing a crest designed by 1985 Page, Antonia de Sousa.

Gordon Taylor:

Forty-five years of public service

Gordon Taylor has been representing rural constituencies in Alberta — both provincially and federally — since 1940. He was whip of the Social Credit party in the Alberta legislature from 1943-50, then was minister of telephones until 1959. Starting in 1951, he was also given the portfolio of highways and transport, where he worked until September 1971. First elected to the House of Commons in 1979, Mr Taylor continues to serve the people of the Bow River riding in southeast Alberta. In this interview with Nancy Pawelek, he looks back on his political career and provides historical and comparative insights into Canadian parliaments as he has come to know them.

Mr. Taylor, you were elected in 1940 and sat in the Alberta Legislature for almost 40 years. Would you describe your years in the Alberta Legislature for us?
I was a backbencher for the first ten years, but during that time I acted as whip in the House. I headed two or three committees, including workers' compensation. I also joined the Air Force during the war so I was in the Air Force while serving as a member.

Did that not affect your ability to represent your constituents?
I had made arrangements with my constituency that during the war, I would be absent from the constituency. The people said, "That's fine, we'll get along." People were very willing to accommodate anyone who was trying to help the allies win the war.

So I went into the Air Force and was training as a navigator and I was stationed at Portage La Prairie. When the session came around, the commanding officer called me into his office and told me I would have to leave to go back for the session. I said "No, sir, I've arranged with my constituency that I would not have to go." He said "I don't care" and he used swear words, "what your constituency says, you're going back. That's an order." So I went back to the session — in fact I attended each session. The RCAF insisted that I return whenever there was a session.

When I finished my training in Portage La Prairie, I was promoted to pilot officer. I then went to commando school in Calgary, and then overseas. Actually, I did not miss a session during the years that I was in the Air Force because the election was called while I was at commando school and I was re-elected while in the Air Force.

Were the sesssions shorter at that time?
Yes, very much shorter. Well, they still are really. They used to run only six or eight weeks. I taught school before I went in to the Air Force and I would just get a substitute teacher to come in six or eight weeks that I would be away. You see, in those days, the salary for a MLA was $1,800 a year, so you had to have some other profession: you just could not live on that. Also, there were no expense accounts. As a member, you paid all your own expenses. So I continued to teach school. Almost all the members either kept up their law practices or their farms. That was common in those days.

What did it mean to be a Social Credit MLA in Alberta in that period of history?
My father was a Conservative in the R.B. Bennett days and the Social Credit was made up largely of Conservatives under the leadership of William Aberhart, who had been a strong Conservative at one time. Social Credit really took the place of the Conservative Party in Alberta for many years, until Premier Lougheed came and resurrected the party. Many of the present members of the PC Party in Alberta were once Socred supporters.

The party was founded during the economic depression. Mr. Aberhart had great sympathy for those who

suffered. He wanted to help those who were hungry and decided to do it through the use of credit. He started lectures on how banks are able to expand their credit thirteen times beyond the actual value of the money in the vaults. His theory was that this expansion of credit, providing it did not create inflation, should be done for the benefit of all the people and not just for the bankers.

This was widely accepted by the people at that time as everyone was looking for some way to end the depression. With this expanded credit Mr. Aberhart advised that it may be possible to pay a dividend to the people, and the amount of $25 a month (good money in those days) caught everyone's imagination. Mr. Aberhart made it very clear that payment of this dividend would depend on the amount of credit that could be expanded in light of the production of the country. In the first election, in 1935, Mr. Aberhart's group won with a landslide against the United Farmers of Alberta who had formed the government.

Premier Aberhart attempted to carry out reforms that would lead to the expansion of credit but hit upon a major obstacle: credit was under federal jurisdiction, not provincial, and after two or three court cases, the matter went right to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England, which was the highest court of appeal at that time. This part of the theory had to be dropped but the Social Credit people endeavoured to give good government, pretty much on a conservative line.

How would you compare the first two Social Credit premiers, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning?
Premier William Aberhart was a big man both physically and mentally. He had tremendous compassion for people and was a outstanding leader. As an orator, he could not be beaten. I saw and heard him many times as he had crowds of two to five thousand people roaring with laughter and few minutes later, wiping their eyes with tears. He had a tremendous ability as a speaker and as an orator and as a man who lived a wonderful, Christian life and tried to show a good example. He never said, "Do what I say," and yet to do what he did was always the ambition of young people.

Ernest C. Manning was a different type entirely. He was a clear thinker and a good speaker but not an orator like Mr. Aberhart. He was a good administrator. During the years I served under him as a minister, I was only called into his office once and that was when a contractor wanted to be paid extra for rock work on one of the highways. We had advised the contractors that there was rock there and most contractors took this into account when submitting their bids. One did not. He had the lowest tender and consequently was awarded the job. Then he wanted us to pay him more.

I refused because that would have been unfair to the second bidder who may have won the contract had the first bidder included the rock. He went to the premier and the premier called me over because this man was a strong supporter of the party. I outlined to Premier Manning why I could not do it. He asked me to go over the file again and see if I could not find some way of helping him out. I agreed to go over the file again. I was up until 3:00 o'clock one morning and came to the conclusion that I could not possibly, in all fairness to the other contractors, pay him any extra money for the rock. It would have been unfair and I could not have lived with myself. So I advised the premier accordingly. Had he insisted that extra money be paid to the contractor, I would have resigned the portfolio. But Premier Manning did not so advise and accepted the decision that I gave.

You were minister of highways for twenty years in Alberta. Do you feel it's a good idea for someone to hold a portfolio for so long?
Oh, it's very advantageous. When I took over the department they were building blotter-top roads, where asphalt was simply put over the top of whatever was underneath. Of course, this never stood up and there were always blowups every Spring. So I initiated a program where we completely overhauled the whole highway network in Alberta, building from the bottom up with a proper base, then a stabilized base course, surfacing on top of that and using a seal coat. I realized that this was something new, and that, as a program, it would take a great deal of time.

I tried to get approval for this from cabinet and my colleagues there said, "Well, if you can carry the judgment of the people, fine. But we're afraid it will take too long to get highways to the far east and north of the province." I said, "Well, I'd like to try because there's no future in building a highway every year and then repairing it and never establishing a proper road network as a result." So I had 15 to 20 meetings throughout the province of Alberta, right from the Peace River down south to the border. There were always two or three hundred people at a meeting.

I always held meetings in the area to let the people know what we were doing so that there was not any outcry afterwards, and also to speed up the approval process. If I did not get approval at a public meeting — which is again 200 to 500 people — we did not do it. I would outline what we planned to do and I would ask for approval; there was almost always unanimous approval throughout the whole province for this program. The common cry was, "We're sick and tired of patching roads every year after they are built." I made it very clear to them that it would take longer to get the highways, but that they would be built as fast as we could build them and they would be built well.

So we started. It was a long-term project and it would have been very unfortunate if somebody else had come into the department after five years and interrupted that program. As it was, I had twenty years to complete this program and we now have a network of highways in Alberta that anybody can be proud of. I was very happy when in 1971, with the new government under Premier Lougheed, they simply carried on the program that I had initiated.

I had never talked to Premier Manning about staying in the portfolio, but Premier Manning's policy was that if you're doing a satisfactory job in a department you stayed there, so long as you were re-elected. So there was never any question about moving anywhere else in the twenty years.

Now, a number of ministers changed. Several of them changed departments every election. The premier moved them around, but I stayed put. So when it comes to memories regarding the years in the Alberta Legislature, I think my years in the department of highways are the most memorable because there we were successful in building a good network.

As a cabinet minister in Alberta, you never had an office in the legislature building. Why was that?
When I was first made a minister, I was in the legislature building. I got the highways portfolio, the department started to grow and we needed a building, which was eventually located on the east side of the legislature grounds. The premier thought that I should stay in the legislature, but I said, "I want to be with the department. It's only a hop, step and a jump up here to the cabinet meetings and the rest of the week I'm with the department." So I moved my office down into the highways building and I stayed there until I finished.

How did your cabinet colleagues react to that?
I don't think there was any comment about it. In those years a number of ministers didn't keep offices in the legislature building. Now it's entirely the other way around: all the ministers are in the building. If I had my way I would stay with the department because you have maybe one or two cabinet meetings a week. The rest of the time, either your deputies or your engineers are chasing over to see you, or you are chasing off to meet with them and it's just a complete waste of time.

Why did you leave the Socred Party, Mr. Taylor?
During my years in highways I had tried to get the Social Credit government to introduce a "gasification program" for the rural areas. In those days you had the gaslines running out of the province all over the place exporting gas, but our own farmers were not getting any of it. There was a lot of strong feeling against it. As a matter of fact, one of my municipalities offered to try out a cooperative scheme where every farm would get the gas. So some representatives from that community came with me and we appeared before the minister in charge and made our case and the minister said no. I asked if he would at least take it to cabinet. So he took it to cabinet and the Social Credit cabinet wouldn't go along with it. They said, "You cannot provide gas to all the farms of the province. It's impossible." I did not think it was impossible.

After Premier Manning resigned, Harry Strom became premier. Mr. Strom would not go along with the idea either, largely because the minister had said it could not be done. Well, after the 1971 election we became the opposition with about 25 members. Our caucus decided to take a stand against everything Premier Lougheed was doing. My constituents had wanted — and therefore liked — some of the things the new government was doing. Mr. Lougheed appointed a man by the name of Roy Ferran, who was put in charge of getting gas for farmers. They did exactly what I had asked our government to do. And it was popular, very popular. Today there's hardly a farm in Alberta that hasn't got gas. So it was *not* impossible.

Well, the Socreds wanted to oppose that measure. I said to them, "I'm not going to oppose that. You know very well I supported that, and that I wanted you to do it." I told them I was not going to vote against it and that was all there was to it.

William Aberhart addressing a rally in St. Georges Island Park, Calgary, July 1937. (Public Archives of Canada)

Several things like that came up. The Socreds started to turn more and more to the left, several MLAs were quietly supporting the Liberals federally; I'm a free enterpriser so finally I decided to leave the caucus.

Did you sit as an independent at that point?
No I stayed in the opposition, but I really was not part of the party during the last two or three years before the 1975 election. When the election came, I decided I would run as an independent, supporting Premier Lougheed. You see, the interesting thing is that the PCs had a candidate in the Drumheller area already. He had been working there for about two or three years to build up his support, and I did not think it would have been fair to him if I were to seek the nomination. Also I did not think it would be fair to the people — the people had to have a choice — so I stood as an independent supporting Premier Lougheed.

Premier Lougheed never came into the constituency during the campaign, which the other candidate did not like. But I never asked him to stay away. I was elected again, with a big majority. So now I was in the opposition as an independent supporting the government, which is a strange position. There were only four Socreds left in 1975, and one NDP member.

It was very frustrating for the opposition to have me sitting as an independent, because they would get up to criticize policies and here I was in the opposition and I'd get up and support the government policies — from the opposition benches — on anything that I thought the government was doing right, and show where the Socreds were wrong or the NDP was wrong.

That went on until 1979. I had arranged it so that I would cross the floor on the last day. Some people had asked why I did not cross the floor earlier. I replied that I was elected as an independent and I did not think it was fair to the people to do so. But on the last day of the session I planned to cross over and then run as a PC candidate in the 1979 election. And I believe that was satisfactory with Premier Lougheed.

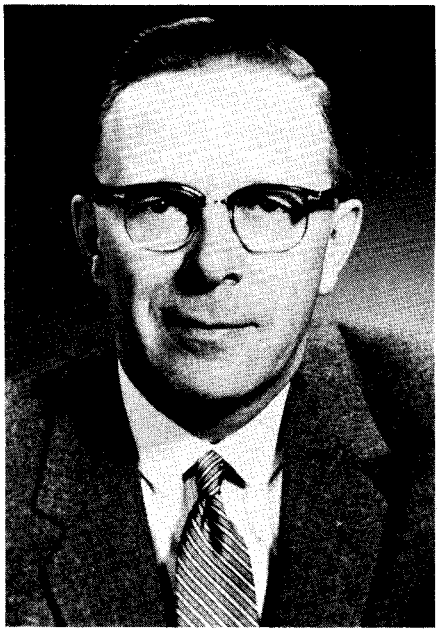
So you were planning on running provincially for the Progressive Conservatives in 1979?
Yes, I was going to stay in the Alberta legislature. But a few months before the session ended I received an invitation from the Bow River Progressive Conservative association to try my luck as a federal candidate in the 1979 election. This was about three weeks before the nominating convention. I said, "No, I haven't got time, I'm not going to be a token candidate. If I run, I want to run to win." And they said, "Well that's what we want." And I said, "No I don't think I have the time to do it, I haven't got

time to cover that big constituency." And they said, "Well, will you come down and talk it over on Easter Sunday?" So my assistant and I drove down, and en route we went over everything and we both decided that no, I couldn't do it.

When we arrived, the room was jammed with people, all wanting to go to work. After discussing the whole thing, I said "Well, okay, I'll stand on three conditions. First, that I tell Stan Schumacher, the other candidate, myself because he's a friend of mine and I do not want him to read it in the paper. Second, we have to do everything according to the constitution, nothing is going to be under the table. Third, if elected I will take my directions from the people of the constituency." They said that was just the way they wanted it, so I agreed. So we went to work and I won that nomination, and then went on to win the seat.

How did you find the transition to federal politics?
Well, I had to change my tactics entirely because as a provincial member I used to hold public meetings before and after a session — about 25 public meetings that would cover the whole Drumheller constituency. Now I found that I had almost 70 towns and villages in the constituency, so there was no way that I could hold these meetings with any regularity. I decided that I would have to change my plans and to "main street" through every area once or twice a year. It was a complete change. I liked the other method much better, when I held public meetings. We still have a few but mostly I main street twice a year thorugh the constituency. I advertise, for example, that I am going to be on the streets of a town between 1:00 and 2:00 o'clock. At first I used to just walk the streets. Then I changed it, and now I'll stay at the post office for half the time and then go from store to store the rest of the time. I talk to people and find out how they would like to see things done, and that gives me ideas on the proper way to represent them when I come back to the House.

What is the effect of party discipline on a private member who genuinely wants to represent the concerns of his constituency?
The member who served before me had said that the caucus in Ottawa was very undemocratic, that they told you what you had to do. So naturally I was very leary about this. I believe in taking my directives from the people who elect me.



Ernest Manning (Public Archives of Canada)

In Alberta, we made sure that any bills or policies or principles that would come before the legislature were always cleared in the caucus by the minister or the premier. This was most important and consequently there was no difficulty in the House when items came up because we had already had our debates and reached a position in the caucus. We do this too in Ottawa, but with a much larger caucus it is not possible to deal with details in the same way. In the federal field, the caucus endeavours to reach a consensus but in many cases they do not deal with the main principles of every bill. I suppose this is because there just is not the time to do so. As minister of highways I would not think about taking a bill to the House before I cleared it with my caucus. If the caucus would not support certain things, I took them out.

Federally, I had visions of doing it the same way. At my first caucus meeting in 1979, Mr. Clark made it clear that he expected us as members to represent the people who had sent us there. So, that was fine, that's exactly the way I wanted it: we had a place to voice our views.

I always made it clear to my people that if there was a vote of confidence and the government that I'm a part of was going to be thrown out if they lost the confidence of the House, I would support the government. But if I had direct representation from the people on any one particular matter, there would be no way I'd vote any other way. I cleared some items with my people, like capital punishment and abortion. I thought they should know how I stand. I made that clear during the election campaigns so that when I was elected or reelected, nobody in the constituency could say, "I want you to support abortion on demand." I would reply,
"I cannot do that. My mandate from the people was that I do not do that."

Have you ever been in a position where you have stood alone against the caucus?
Oh yes. One example is when we were in the opposition, there was a proposed pay increase. I thought the pensions part was way too elaborate and so I voted against it. Three or four of us did. Some abstained and stayed outside. I always figure that my people want to know how I stand. I can't do the job if I am afraid to vote in the House.

Now in caucus, we are very outspoken. We express our views and everybody in caucus knows where you stand. Our caucus is very democratic. Our present leader, Mr. Mulroney, also says, "Your main job here is to represent the people who sent you here." I think that's good — that's democracy.

What was it like to sit as an independent? How is it different from belonging to a party in terms of what one can accomplish?
I enjoyed sitting as an independent in Alberta because I was almost part of the government team. Whenever the opposition raised points that were ridiculous, I would, as an opposition member sitting beside them, stand up and show how foolish and silly their arguments were. The opposition didn't like this but the government members of course revelled in it.

In Ottawa, it seems to me like an independent is a voice crying in the wilderness. One has very few chances to speak, and consequently the role is very insignificant, and the job is very difficult and very lonely. An independent of course, does have an opportunity to contact ministers and departments and can serve his people in that respect. But in the House where policy is established and bills are passed, he has a difficult time to say the least.

You established Camp Gordon more than 50 years ago. Would you tell us about it?
When I was a young man, I never had the privilege of having a holiday. Our summer holidays were spent in the hills around the Red Deer River.

Gordon Taylor, Bill Ens and boys at Camp Gordon, 1940

Sometimes I would feel rather left out when I went back to school in September and heard my chums talking about trips to San Francisco, Vancouver, and Calgary. When I became a school teacher I found that many of my pupils were not having a holiday either.

When I was young, I did do a lot of camping and enjoyed it very much. While teaching at Church Hill School in 1931-32, a school chum, Earl Maynard, who is now Reverend Earl Maynard of the Nazarene Church, was teaching in the adjoining school, and he used to drop over and have a cup of coffee on Friday nights. One night he mentioned that nobody in his school was going to have a holiday. Neither he nor I had been used to taking holidays and one of us said, "Well, let's take them camping!"

This was at the start of the depression, and there was very little cash around. We devised the idea of letting boys and girls come to a mixed camp, with boys at one end in a tent, and girls at the other end. A couple of our old classmates from high school who would come out and look after the girls. Each boy and girl would bring what he could. If his family had a garden, he could bring a sack of potatoes, if they had chickens and roosters, they could bring roosters and if he couldn't bring anything else, he could at least bring a loaf of bread. As a matter of fact, roosters became our main meat supply.

One of the ladies offered to come and do the cooking. With the mixtures we had it was almost impossible to have proper meals, but not with Mrs. Vogen. She used everything that was there by the end of the five or six days and we had wonderful meals.

The only problem as we went along was how to buy the sugar, the coffee and cocoa — things that we could not get from the regular homes. Well that was solved when one of the wealthier farmers of the district said to me, "I'd like my three girls who are in school in Calgary to go to your camp. The trouble is, they're going to have another holiday," because the idea of Camp Gordon is to provide a holiday for children who otherwise would not have one. But I replied, "Well that's okay if they want to come." He said, "Well I'll give you $10 if you let them go." I said, "We'll let them come." So he gave me the $10, which we used to buy the things for which cash was needed.

We followed that same procedure for many years. The camp continues to this day but now very few bring food, although this year on the application form a mother wrote, "We can't sent money as we are on welfare." I immediately sent the card of acceptance to her boy and said could he bring a can of sardines or a loaf of bread or a can of pork and beans because then we will be able to say that every boy at this camp has brought something for the camp.

Attendance has been as high as 170 and now runs around 140 or 150 each year. All the leaders are volunteers. Nobody gets paid at the camp — the cooks come and work like trojans, the leaders come, give up a week of their holiday, the truckers provide trucks and pay for the gas and oil and come on their own time — and so it has become a tremendous community endeavour.

What about the name?

In 1942, Charles Burnham, who was an alderman of the City of Drumheller, got up at a camp fire and said, unbeknown to me, "I think this camp should have a name and I suggest we call it Camp Gordon." There was silence for a moment, then cheers and applause from the boys and the name has stuck ever since. I did not do the naming of it, but the name has stuck and everybody now calls it Camp Gordon. And this year being the 50th anniversary of our camp, the Drumheller Chamber of Commerce adopted the theme "Camp Gordon" for their parade on July 1st. The Drumheller Stampede Board has put the symbol of Camp Gordon on one side of their coin and are inviting their stampeders to share in the Camp Gordon celebrations.

Camp Gordon has never turned down a boy. Boys between the ages of 9 and 16 are eligible. The girls' camp — the mixed camps — were held right up until 1940. By that time, we found that we could not continue mixed camps, so for two years we operated the boys' camp and then a girls' camp for a week. Following the war I was unable to secure girl leaders and we dropped

the girls' camp and it has been a boys' camp since 1946.

Do you still visit the camp?
I don't *visit* the camp annually. I *go* to the camp and *stay* there. I consider that to be part of my responsibility. It is also the only holiday I have taken for many years.

You never married. Do you feel this had been an advantage or a disadvantage to you as a politician?
I was going to say I never married because I did not have a car when I went to college. I did have a bicycle, but that was only made for one. I probably would have married had the girl I wanted to marry not been killed in an accident. I do not like substitutes. I very seldom take apple pie in a restaurant because it does not come up to the standard that I was used to when my mother made apple pie — she was a marvelous cook. I do not like substitutes in pie and I do not like substitutes for wives.

I frankly do not know how I could have carried out the work that I have done over the years if I was married. It would not have been fair to any wife because as minister of highways I went to work in the mornings at 7:00 a.m. and often came home only after 11:00 p.m. I put in 14- 16- and 18-hour days, even on weekends. I spent half of my time out on the road so I would know exactly what was going on, and half of the time in the office, except when the legislature was in session. I still endeavour to visit the constituency every weekend and that, of course, would be more difficult for a married man. Now in the House of Commons my work day starts at 8 a.m. or earlier and ends about 11 p.m.

On the other hand, I suppose there's been some disadvantage too. But the advantages have really outweighed the disadvantages because I have been able to help many families that perhaps may have broken up had it not been for the intervention of someone who was able to do the right thing at the right time.

Leaders of Camp Gordon, 1979 (Bader Bros Ltd. Canada)