

## Review Article

### *Chubby Power: The Politicians' Politician*

If a reviewer were ungenerous, he might complain about the organization of *The Memoirs of Chubby Power*\*. But perhaps the proper reaction should be one of surprise that the book is as well ordered as it is. Professor Norman Ward has indeed done an excellent job in assembling it from what Senator Power spoke into a tape recorder in response to questions put to him by a number of professors at Queen's. In any case, there should be general agreement that the final product is both interesting and useful.

For one thing the book provides a corrective to some generally accepted facts of Canadian political history. At least, it casts doubts where hitherto there was no doubt. For example, it has long been taken for granted that the choice of William Lyon Mackenzie King as Liberal leader in 1919 was due to his overwhelming support from Quebec. Thus one of King's biographers, R. MacGregor Dawson, seems certain that "four-fifths of the Quebec delegates voted for King."<sup>1</sup>

Power is not nearly so sure. He agrees that because W. S. Fielding, the other main contender for the leadership, had supported conscription in 1917, it had been firmly implanted in the minds of the Quebec delegates that King had always been faithful to Laurier and that he could be held up before the electorate of Quebec as anti-conscriptionist. But the Senator points to some neglected factors which worked just the other way. After all, King had a reputation as something of a radical—only time would demonstrate how ludicrous this belief was—and to federal Liberals as conservative as Rodolphe Lemieux and, more especially, to the reactionary Taschereau ministry of Quebec, this was an unforgivable attribute in a leader. And so it is not improbable that Taschereau's ministers and all the delegates whom they controlled voted for the safe and cautious Fielding and that he "received a greater number of votes from Quebec than is generally believed" (p. 376).

The *Memoirs* might be even more revealing at times if Power's questioners at Queen's had pressed him a little more strongly than they did. This is particularly true when he tries to answer the question (p. 75): "Why did Meighen become so unpopular in Quebec?" Meighen's biographer, Roger Graham, has

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\**The Memoirs of Chubby Power: A Party Politician*. Edited by NORMAN WARD. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1966. Pp. 419. \$8.50.

shown that there developed in that province "a kind of Meighen phobia . . . which gripped people and made them anathematize him more bitterly than any public man since Confederation."<sup>2</sup> The Senator suggests that the Liberals managed to build up this tradition about Meighen only because the Conservatives were at such a low ebb in Quebec that no one dared to defend him. "In other words, Meighen was the Tory scapegoat by default" (p. 75).

But how did Power look upon the methods which his party's campaigners used to create this repellent image of Meighen? Did he approve of their telling the voters in 1921 that, in the event of a Conservative victory, the Orangemen would "pilfer the consecrated wafers in the churches and feed them to the pigs which they led in the streets on July 12. And the author of this sacrilege is Meighen, the father of conscription, the anti-Christ."<sup>3</sup> And what did he think of a figure as exalted as Premier Taschereau regaling the voters in 1925 with obvious untruths, such as his picture of Meighen [see *Canadian Books*—Ed.] as the man "who, with his conscription law, had filled the cemeteries of Flanders with 60,000 Canadians."<sup>4</sup> Would even a self-styled "party politician" feel that this was buying victory at too great a price? Unfortunately the Senator fails even to allude to tactics of which he must have been all too well aware.

Perhaps he may be forgiven for his reticence in commenting upon the activities of his party comrades-in-arms. But he would certainly have been willing to express further opinions about his own conduct during the events leading to the conscription crisis of 1944. Up to now the most authoritative source on this matter has been the work of R. MacGregor Dawson. By the time Professor Dawson had completed his research he had been almost flabbergasted by that human frailty which causes men to see things as they want to see them. The ministers who described to him what went on at a crucial cabinet meeting did it in such varying terms as to leave doubts that they were attending the same meeting. Yet Dawson himself must be suspect because of an all too apparent anti-military bias.

Both Power and Dawson outline in detail the circumstances leading to the meeting in the office of J. L. Ralston, the Minister of National Defence, on the evening of October 26, at which Power and Angus L. Macdonald, the ministers of the other services, questioned the military brass about reinforcements for the depleted regiments in western Europe. To Power, as to Dawson, it seemed incredible that out of 120,000 men in Canada and 90,000 in England who had volunteered for general service it was impossible to secure 15,000 infantrymen. Power was just as astonished that no one over the age of thirty-eight was being allowed to serve in the army in an actual theatre of war. Furthermore, as discussion continued, he "began to suspect that in the minds of these generals the infantryman of today must almost be an honours college graduate" (p. 154). Yet

in the end he and Macdonald were content to report this "rather inconclusive interview" to the cabinet. Perhaps then, the stern judgment of Dawson is justified:

Prying men loose from the grasp of the military machine is not accomplished by examining files in Ottawa or by soft words and polite methods. Experience has shown, however, that the army can do surprising things when subjected to ruthless methods administered by men who will not accept excuses as a substitute for action, but Canada at this juncture had apparently no one who was prepared to assume so formidable an undertaking.<sup>5</sup>

What would Senator Power say about this criticism, which is directed against him as much as anyone in the cabinet? For, if Dawson is right, strong action by Power and Macdonald on October 26 could have averted the subsequent crisis which threatened the very existence of the King administration and led to Power's own resignation.

At times the *Memoirs* shed a good deal of illumination upon the writing of some of the authors who, according to Donald Creighton, have helped to present "the authorized version of Liberalism." Professor Creighton would probably include in this category of works the Skelton and Schull biographies of Laurier, the Dawson and Neatby biographies of King, and John T. Saywell's contributions to the *Canadian Annual Review*. It may seem strange that a Liberal of Liberals like Power would upset the authorized version, but occasionally he does just that. One illustration is to be found in Neatby's attempt to convey the impression that King played a considerable part in building up the parliamentary team which did battle against the Bennett government. Indeed, Neatby quotes King as saying in 1931 that "among the rank and file of new members and back benchers generally, we have developed a formidable opposition."<sup>6</sup> But Power, who was the key man in devising the Liberals' organization and tactics, is much less enthusiastic about King's contribution. He wonders whether "notwithstanding the effusive approval manifested in letters and caucus, King considered that the kind of routine work involved should be done by subordinate members of the party, while the leader reserved his energies for matters of high policy" (p. 277). Certainly King held himself aloof in the discussions about the procedures and tactics which were to be used in the House and seldom, if ever, took the initiative in proposing lines of attack.

In other respects, too, Senator Power fills the gap in our previous knowledge of the relationship between himself and King, and their mutual opinion of one another. The story of Sir John A. Macdonald warning an intemperate minister that he could not tolerate two drunks in his cabinet is probably apocryphal. But Neatby makes it clear that Power was not promoted to cabinet rank in 1930 because he "seemed even more fond of spirituous beverages" than Ian Mackenzie, who had recently become a minister.<sup>7</sup> In 1935, however, Power's claims for a cabinet position were such that they could not be ignored. Later King was not averse to

arguing his alleged tolerance of Power's failings to get him out of his own difficulties. Thus, when Power was about to resign from the cabinet on November 22, 1944, because of the imposition of conscription, King "made a very personal appeal saying he had always stuck by me and had been my friend, hinting there were times when he need not have done so, and he thought I should be his friend at this stage" (p. 164).

In his diary King described his relations with Power as "close but mercurial." Power, he felt, had "a political 'flair' which was shared by no other colleague, but he feared what he regarded as Power's recklessness."<sup>8</sup> He would undoubtedly have labelled as reckless Power's resignation from the cabinet in November, 1944, his statement that the party's policy in the election of 1945 should be: "King if necessary, but not necessarily King," and his criticism of the government's handling of the espionage case of 1945-46. But less cautious mortals may have regarded such conduct as simply bold or decisive.

Power, in turn, was at times lost in admiration as he witnessed the display of King's political genius. This was especially true during the King-Byng affair, in which even some leading constitutional students appeared to swallow King's nonsensical statement that the prerogative of dissolution, like all the other prerogative powers of the Crown, had passed completely from the Governor-General acting by himself to the Governor-General acting on the advice of his Prime Minister. "At times," says Power, "his arguments in the House appeared to most of us to be futile and perhaps puerile, but he built for himself a magnificent case in favour of Canadian autonomy as against the encroachments of the imperial government, and naturally this case appealed strongly to the people of Quebec" (p. 112). In speaking of King as a man, however, the Senator is no more favourably disposed towards him than were so many other ministers. In one place Power makes the comment: "We were never, I think, much impressed by [King's] sincerity" (p. 73). In another: "It is more than probable that [King] preferred to commune alone with his diary in order to assure himself that he and Divine Providence were in accord on the moral rectitude of his actions" (p. 314). Only, perhaps, in his references to R. B. Bennett does Power write more unkindly.

Yet, most of all, the memoirs of Power are revealing about Power himself. The modest and unpretentious label of "party politician" which he attached to himself is not too far off the mark, since, in his own words, "a large portion of my political interest for over thirty years was centred in campaign organization" (p. 368). Only during his period as Air Minister did he eschew party politics. But both Canada and Canadians serving overseas in the R.C.A.F. have reason to feel grateful for the contributions he made in these years. He saw to it that Harris of Bomber Command did not use unfair tactics to induce Canadian fliers to volunteer for longer or second tours; he made certain that Canadian airmen and radar personnel attached to the R.A.F. were not penalized in respect of

commissioning, promotion, and pay; above all, he pursued a policy of Canadianization to the end that, wherever circumstances permitted, wholly Canadian units were established. When British officials opposed him, as they often did, he might say, and not completely in jest: "Remember Sam Hughes. He threatened the War Office with making a separate peace. I have a good Tory precedent, and I might do that very thing" (pp. 45-6). His position, as he stated it, was: "I am a nationalist, but a Canadian nationalist, not a Quebec one" (p. 169).

When Power left office, he could truthfully say—and the members of the Air Council nodded assent—that he never played politics or used political influence in the Air Force. Yet it is also true, political and party man as he was, that he had felt compelled to write to the Prime Minister in 1943 and 1944, urging an immediate election while he thought the odds still favoured the Liberals.

Was the Power who resigned from the cabinet in November, 1944, a party politician or a man of principle? The Senator calls the memorandum in which he explained his action "an unusual and unexpected philosophical dissertation, and perhaps a cynical one, from one who has all his life preached practical politics" (p. 170). He was certain that, if conscription had not been invoked, the practical people of English Canada would soon have forgotten the matter. But French Canadians, he said, were different in that they nursed a deep sense of injury and betrayal. Hence they were likely to believe that a Liberal government which imposed conscription had abandoned the time-honoured tradition of the party as mediator and gone over to the enemy. They were also likely to see no hope, except in isolation:

a French party, a Quebec party, wallowing in grievances and gloating in non-co-operation, a distrust of the other provinces, and a hate of Confederation . . . Quebec will become for some time, one blazing, flamboyant, non-co-operative, anti-Canadian bloc. Government will be difficult, if not impossible, and will be a succession of bargains for Quebec support. Meanwhile, Canada as a nation will disintegrate and social and all other kinds of reform may go by the board (p. 171).

Power admits he was a poor prophet. For a variety of reasons he overestimated the effects of conscription in 1944; certainly the sentiments and emotions it provoked at this time were not nearly so bitter, so deep, or so fearful as it produced in 1917. In the federal election of 1945 Quebec voted no less strongly for the Liberal party, especially because it was so much more appealing than the Conservatives who, seeming never to learn, went all out for the conscription of men for the Pacific theatre.

What actually caused Power to resign? Was it because he feared the breakup of the country or was it because he feared the ruin of the party to which he had given unquestioning loyalty for more than thirty-five years? Probably even he did not know; indeed, he admits that his resignation was followed by a period of "confusion, inconsistency, and probably contradiction" in his own course of action

(p. 172). But was not this the natural reaction of one whose role had hitherto been far removed from policy-making and whose pre-eminent interest had been to devise a successful election organization or an effective parliamentary opposition?

He had begun to learn his trade in a celebrated by-election in 1910 when he was chosen to deliver envelopes containing from \$200 to \$400 to specified individuals scattered throughout Drummond County. He knew he had finally arrived when Premier Taschereau conferred upon him the accolade of *organisateur en chef* in the 1930s. But he also knew that a political organizer was generally regarded as "a rather devious, Machiavellian character" (p. 312). He might have justified his role by asserting that parties were indispensable to democratic government and that Liberal victories ensured good government. But that would have savoured too much of the pretentious humbug of Mackenzie King which he abhorred. He performed the role he did simply because he found the game of politics fascinating and because he knew he had talents especially suited to the techniques of electioneering. Politics almost ran in the blood of the Power family. None of them had ever worked or voted for anybody but a Liberal. And, after all, Charles Gavan was a Power.

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#### NOTES

1. R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography: 1874-1923* (Toronto, 1958), p. 307.
2. W. R. Graham, *Arthur Meighen: II: And Fortune Fled* (Toronto, 1963), p. 142.
3. Robert Rumilly, *Historie de la Province de Québec*, XXV, p. 225.
4. Graham, *Meighen*, II, p. 343.
5. R. MacGregor Dawson, *The Conscription Crisis of 1944* (Toronto, 1961), p. 33.
6. H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: The Lonely Heights* (Toronto, 1963), p. 358.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 333.
8. J. W. Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record: I: 1939-44* (Toronto, 1960), p. 8.