



Interview with Jon Gerrard ¹⁵⁷

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jon Gerrard served as the Member of Parliament for Portage-Interlake from 1993 to 1997, when he became leader of Manitoba's Liberal Party. Today, Mr. Gerrard remains the Liberal leader and currently sits as the only member of the Liberal Party in the Manitoba Legislature. Without official party status in the House, Jon receives the limited legislative funds and resources available to an independent member—a situation fraught with challenges for a party leader. We sat down with Jon and discussed his observations of this unique situation, how he uses his limited resources to effectively represent Manitobans, and some reflection on his experiences as a federal Minister in Jean Chrétien's cabinet in the mid-1990s.

II. THE VIEW FROM OTTAWA

There's a lot of criticism these days that there is such a centralization of power in the Prime Minister's Office. What's your perspective on that? How much of an influence do you think a person like you could have, or is most of the policy direction coming from the permanent bureaucracy and the Prime Minister's Office?

¹⁵⁷ Interviewed by B. Schwartz and E. Melrose (9 July 2002).

Gerrard: Let me make two points. First, my experience was that it makes a huge difference having a Minister with a background in the area that he or she has responsibility for. It's one thing to have good intentions, it's another to be able to implement them and carry them through. Second, my experience was that there in fact is a huge capacity for ministers to implement effective change. You have to know something about how politics works in Ottawa, and work with people within the bureaucracy as well as the elected political sphere—caucus, cabinet, the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister chose to be right on top of a number of critical files, areas like what's happening in Quebec, with the referendum and things related to that. You'd find that the Prime Minister made sure he was watching these areas very carefully. In areas like science and research and development, there was an interest on behalf of the Prime Minister, but much, much less of any day to day, hands-on role.

When I arrived in Ottawa, there was a legacy of problems in the way that science and research had been supported, which made it a difficult environment. Nevertheless, I was able to move forward, quite dramatically, the area of the Information Highway. This was not in the Liberal Red Book, but I went down there determined to make a difference in this area, and within three or four months, we had announced the overall policy framework, we got the Information Highway into the Throne Speech, and we had some funding through the first budget. In fact, a careful look at that period retrospectively shows we initiated a dramatic leap forward for Canada in this area. This was quite important because in the early 1990s, Canadian federal policy had been drifting and we were losing ground to other countries.

I contrast the rapid progress with the Information Highway with much slower progress initially with science and research in the broad sense. When I arrived in Ottawa, every department was going off in their own directions, and there was considerable infighting and debates about where limited resources should be used. I had an important role to build consensus not only within government but in the public, and within the caucus. The first six to twelve months that I was there, there was very little attention paid to research or science in the caucus. In the summer of 1994, I undertook a process, going across the country, consulting with people in communities on science and technology, trying to get a better understanding of the links between science, research and development and economic activity and employment. It enabled the groundwork to be laid for some major and very substantial investments in science and research, and what we have now which is a huge emphasis and expansion of the federal government's activities in science and research.

What sort of preparation does a rookie Minister get going into the cauldron?

We had a number of preparatory measures very early on for the Ministers like myself. Some former Cabinet Ministers came in and spent quite a bit of time with us going over the things we needed to watch and look out for. I was lucky to be working as Secretary of State for Science, Research and Development very closely with John Manley who was the Minister of Industry. Every week, we would sit down with the Deputy Minister and we really went through what the agenda was for the week and beyond including the whole spectrum of files from our department. I had an incredible opportunity to learn by watching John Manley. He was a lawyer, had been around Ottawa, and had served in Opposition for a number of years. I had several media training sessions to help me with handling the media, and of course I learned day to day as I went about my job. Invariably, you have things that go well, and things that don't.

Did you get a lot of questions in the House? Did you find your critics were well informed?

There were not a lot of questions, there were some. The questions tended to focus on where there were grants provided in odd places—to study the Detroit Tigers, I think was one of them. The Bloc Quebecois questions often tended to focus on Quebec's share of research and development dollars. So there were political areas of science and research that tended to get more attention.

As a minister, did you find it difficult to do the day to day constituency work?

There's no doubt that being a minister, there is a tradeoff and that is you are able to spend less time in the riding, but you are able to use your position to leverage resources and support for people in your riding. I spent quite a substantial amount of time in the riding but since it is a large geographical area, you just can't be visible everywhere. To some extent, it is quite different than an urban riding. So, yes, there are major challenges.

II. INSIDE THE LEGISLATURE

About 40 or 50 bills come through in a typical year. What capacity does the opposition generally have to understand these bills in order to provide constructive criticism? How does any opposition member get themselves up to speed to the point that they can actually provide an intelligent critique?

What's really important is having a network of people and contacts around the province. Thirteen percent of Manitoba's population is well over 100,000 people, so there are a lot of Liberals in this province, and there are a lot of people who will look at a bill and provide me with some advice. I have regular meetings once a week to talk about individual bills that are coming through. I

bring, maybe not a legal background, but the ability to understand a whole variety of subjects and to be able to do research. In today's world, with e-mail and the internet, with the Legislative Library and other resources available here, here it's possible to have a pretty good look at legislation as it goes through. What we do here in Manitoba is a plus, with the public committee hearings where essentially anybody can come forward and present input.

Sometimes as a third party, what I like to do is wait until there has been some input at committee stage, because it is an opportunity to hear people from a number of different backgrounds who have had a careful look at the bill. Sometimes there is a problem where the government, after committee stage, wants to rush a bill through without adequately digesting and incorporating suggestions from the committee stage, but I would say the process at least does provide for reasonable attention to bills.

There's one area where I think there is a big shortfall—we have bills presented without any analysis of the costs and benefits of the bill. We've got an example of this sort of problem at the moment with Bill 14 dealing with school division amalgamation¹⁵⁸, where the Minister is claiming there is \$10 million in administrative savings, but he has not provided any detail as to where he comes up with that number. Here is an example of where there's a real need for a better look at just about every bill that comes through, to determine what the financial impact will be. And yet doing this is quite a significant job and requires a certain level of sophistication as well as resources which are beyond what I have access to.

In the committee process, do you have the sense that if you've got a reasonably substantive criticism or suggestion, that the government is listening to you, or that once they've introduced the bill, they will just do what they want to do regardless of what suggestions they may hear?

I believe there are opportunities to have a significant impact on legislation in a variety of ways. My sense in watching the present NDP government is that they are often a little more attuned to the political side of things than they are to what necessarily makes common sense. When their bills come through, and they see there is a political controversy brewing over part of the legislation, then they've been willing to change.

I will use Bill 14 again as an example. The Manitoba Teacher's Society suggested that when there are public hearings on budgets of school divisions,

¹⁵⁸ Bill 14, *The Public Schools Modernization Act (Public Schools Act Amended)*, 3d Sess., 37th Leg., Manitoba, 2002 (assented to 17 July 2002).

those budgets should be presented in a standard format. I had an amendment which came to the floor yesterday, and it was just a very short amendment to follow through on the suggestion at the committee stage made by the Manitoba Teachers' Society. The amendment was rejected without any reason. There wasn't political heat on this issue, and I think that, even though it made common sense to change it pursuant to a suggestion by a reputable organization, the NDP government was not open enough.

But, on the other hand, there have been instances where there has been significant political controversy and they had to make changes. Again, with Bill 14, there was controversy over what is happening with the school division of Springfield-Transcona, and although they have not made generic changes to the bill that would allow for general situations, they have made a change which specifically addresses, in a political way, the issue of students in Springfield going to school in Transcona. And so what we have seen with the NDP government is a political response, not necessarily good legislation. I think that is a general pattern with this government, but it's not typical of all governments. It just happens to be the way this government is working.

One barometer of the perceived effectiveness of an opposition member would be how often someone would come to you and say, the government is not listening to me, can you put some pressure on the government? Is that something you get a lot of, and do you think you actually can put a little heat on the government that way?

The answer is clearly yes, and there are a number of good examples. I've dealt with the provision of drugs for children with cancer, which is an issue I raised in question period. I raised it repeatedly for a number of days, in fact several weeks, and there have been some changes that have substantially improved that situation. At another time, I repeatedly questioned Conservation Minister Oscar Lathlin about his action plan on climate change and global warming. One of the results was the appointment of a task force looking at the whole area led by Lloyd Axworthy. I have a steady stream of people who have issues, some of which are easier to deal with while others are tougher and require different avenues. The most effective response may not be through question period.

There's clearly a very substantial capacity for me as Liberal leader and MLA to get things through. I think that sometimes when the Conservatives raise an issue, the NDP right it off as political posturing. When I raise an issue, sometimes the NDP see me as eventually taking away some of their votes, so they pay a lot of attention to it. It is actually very, very important that there be a perspective in the Manitoba Legislature that is different than that of either the Tories or the NDP.

III. PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

In terms of the criticisms that are commonly leveled at the system these days, there are generally two. One is lack of proportionality and the other is over-centralization in the Prime Minister's Office. Do you have any views on the appropriate balance in our system between the need for centralized direction from the Prime Minister's Office and the need to let individual ministers or MPs do more of their own thing?

There's room to structure things so there can be more bills coming from individual members of parliament. There's probably more potential for Ministers to get things done than most people recognize. But in order to be successful, you've got to be competent. You've got to be able to make sure when and how to use the political leverage you've got and not use it in inappropriate ways. You also need to be able to put forward your cause both publicly and in caucus in an effective way. To be a minister and to be doing it well is a considerable talent. The role of backbenchers, and the role of members of parliament, in being able to put forward legislation both here provincially and in Ottawa, needs to be changed considerably.

My sense in terms of proportional representation as we understand it would be that there is a possibility for change, but one must remember many years ago we had a form of proportional representation in Winnipeg for a while, but it wasn't stable. Because people want an MLA or someone they can relate to, there is an inherent feeling against a strictly proportional representation system with no individual constituencies. Even though you may be able to have some elected proportionally and some that are not, you have some tied to constituencies and some not, you will start to have some inequities in this kind of legislature.

There are some ways that we could approach the democratic process in a more effective way, and get more participation. I think it is possible to, as an example, require that an MLA has to be elected by more than 50 percent which means either a run-off or a transferable ballot, or something like that. The benefits of that would be people would use their first ballot to indicate where they wanted their vote to go in a substantive way, and they could use their second vote more strategically. It would also mean you don't get people elected with substantially less than 50 percent of the vote. I think it would be a more democratic system. And yet at the same time, it would still maintain the situation where each MLA is responsive to a constituency.

You've gone from being a Minister in a majority government to being the sole representative in the legislature for your party. With 13 percent of the vote in the last provincial election, on a numerical basis, certainly the Liberal party is underrepresented in terms of the people who actually voted for the party. And you

only get the resources go along with a one-person show rather than having official party status. Do you think you should be able to get resources based on popular vote rather than the number of seats won?

When one compares the situation in Manitoba with the one in Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia—a single elected leader in those provinces would have significantly more resources than in Manitoba and there's no doubt that's a limiting factor here in my capacity to represent people all over the province. I regularly use up my travel budget about half way through the year and that's just because it's important for a leader to be traveling around the province. I think that there is reason to look at changing the allocation of resources in Manitoba so that there is a greater level of fairness. What New Brunswick does is provide party resources on the basis of the number of votes that are cast for that party. In Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, when there has been a single elected leader, they have, in other ways, allocated more resources. I believe that there's adequate basis for some revisions in the way support is provided in Manitoba.

Some critics of the current parliamentary system say party discipline should be relaxed a little on issues not central to a government's agenda. Others would argue that the system works better if you have centralized accountability and you know what a party stands for. Do you have a position on whether there should be some relaxation of party discipline on backbenchers?

I think that there's a considerable capacity for increased independence of backbenchers. One of the positive effects would be that Ministers would be forced to listen more closely to backbenchers and ensure that they're paid attention to. My experience in Ottawa was that Ministers varied in their ability to work with and take into consideration the concerns that were raised by backbenchers, some doing it very well and some doing it not very well. It would certainly provide an additional layer of checks and balances for legislation. One has to be a little cautious in suggesting this is a panacea. You could end up with people voting all over the place, but in fact, even with less party discipline, you'll still have a large number of situations where a party will all vote together. But I think it would create some better internal checks and balances and would create, in the long run, better legislation to have more freedom for individual legislators.

IV. BILL 5 ¹⁵⁹

Is there any thing that you would like to talk about that we haven't specifically asked you about?

I would like to talk about one of the bills that came through, because I think it's got some interesting implications that are not immediately apparent and that is the bill dealing with firefighters and the fact that there have been a certain number of cancers that have been higher in firefighters than in the general population. The bill essentially said where these five types of cancers developed in a firefighter, there would be an assumption from the Workers Compensation Board that this was as a result of the firefighting rather than from some other cause. The bill requires that there be a certain time frame—cancers don't just develop overnight—you've got to be working in the occupation for a certain length of time. And the cancers that were included were those where the risk was two-fold or more compared with the general population. It's an interesting bill because it focuses exclusively on firefighters and on several specific types of cancer. But it's also an interesting bill because it sets up a framework so that, in fact, someone with a totally different occupation could now go to the Workers Compensation Board and say, "I work in a profession where the incidence of cancer for people is more than two-fold the risk greater than normal, therefore I should be eligible in terms of getting workers compensation benefits."

It is quite likely that this bill will have some very broad ramifications. Certainly it will enable lawyers to make, much more effectively than before, the case that there should be compensation where cancer develops in relation to workplace exposure. When legislation goes through, not only what is in the bill can be important, but what is said in the legislature around the bill can be used in legal interpretations of what the legislators meant in framing the bill and determining how it should be interpreted. And that's an area where there is probably more room for people to pay attention to because if you read the text of the speeches made in the legislature, what you'll find laid out is the framework and justification for the legislation which sometimes can be interpreted much more broadly than the legislation itself.

¹⁵⁹ Bill 5, *The Workers Compensation Amendment Act*, 3d Sess., 37th Leg., Manitoba, 2002 (assented to 23 May 2002).