



Interview with Stuart Murray ¹⁵⁵

I look at life as windows opening and closing, and some you go through and some you don't. When the leadership of the PC Party of Manitoba came up, I decided I would go through the window and I'm delighted I did.

- Stuart Murray

I. INTRODUCTION

Stuart Murray became an elected member of the Manitoba legislature in November 2000, just two weeks after taking over the reins of Manitoba's Progressive Conservative Party. The path that has led him to the office of leader of the Official Opposition has been a colourful one, including road tours with a Canadian rock band, four years of experience in the Prime Minister's Office, active volunteerism throughout the province, and a successful business career.

We spoke to Stuart Murray about the challenges he faced as a new member of the legislature who would immediately lead Manitoba's Tory Opposition. He shared with us the trials of opposition politics, his observations as he entered the political arena, and the struggle to keep the delicate balance between his work and his most cherished endeavour—his family.

Was it a challenge to get familiar with the rules and how business in the House gets accomplished?

Murray: Yes, and we've got a very good House leader and we have two former Speakers of the House to give us really good advice. There are a lot of rules and regulations that you learn as you go through the process, and there are some that I still don't know. As well, all of the people in the Clerk's office are extremely supportive. I think they recognize that this is an institution with a tremendous history and so you have to learn about the history and that takes time.

¹⁵⁵ Interviewed by E. Melrose (24 July 2002).

When you first entered the legislature, you were again in a unique position because you were the leader of the opposition—you immediately stepped into that very important chair in the House—yet it was the first time you had stepped into that House at all as an elected member. What were some of the unique challenges you were presented with in that regard, and did you get any preparation from your colleagues on what you would experience in the House?

They were very good with me. We had a mock session about being in question period just to give me a sense of what it would be like. The level of noise that goes on in there, it's not like having a conversation. It is a debate and in some regards, it can get very, very active. So, that was good for me because that gave me a sense of what to expect. Again, I've sat in galleries and have listened, but once you're in the Chamber itself, it's different. But I had a very, very supportive caucus to get me through that process and they are still supporting me today which is something you need.

As leader, you have a huge number of responsibilities that other MLAs don't share. Not only are you responsible for your constituency, you also lead the official opposition, you lead the PC Party in Manitoba. How do you balance all of these responsibilities and demands on your time?

I have a great staff that helps me out, both in the constituency and here at the legislative office. But there is a tremendous pull on your time. And one thing you didn't mention in there is that I am also married and the father of two children, and what I'm getting at is that family is something important you have to try and balance. I believe that's one of the things that is not very well understood in the public. It's unfortunate that one of the areas that is not better understood about political life is the incredible sacrifice that it is on your family. And I'm not saying that in the sense that I'm looking for sympathy—you take the job with your eyes wide open, you applied for it, for goodness sake, you better do it. You do it because you love it and you think you can make a difference. That has to be why you're doing it.

II. THE ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION

As an opposition, many people may assume that your main, or only, role is merely to criticize the government—to oppose their initiatives. There is another view that the opposition is really a legislative partner to the government, there to co-operate with the government in order to legislate for the betterment of Manitoba. Do you feel like your role is largely to oppose, or do you feel like it is part of your responsibility to help effect legislation and initiatives for the province?

In most cases, where we take the role of opposition is when legislation is introduced. We obviously have the right to ask the government why they did this, why they did that, what they were thinking when they put this clause in. So, I don't look at it so much as being a critical opposition, but more as asking questions on behalf of the taxpayers of Manitoba. We are, by definition, opposed to the government. We do obviously pass laws that are good for the province, and we all get behind them and get them through very quickly, but again our political background differs from that of the NDP. I think we're there more to oppose not in a negative way, but in a positive way.

Do you find as an opposition you have appropriate tools or resources to fully understand the bills or initiatives brought forward by the government in order to provide intelligent and constructive criticism or suggestions?

I think we do. There is no question that the government is almost resourced to death in some respects, particularly when you compare it to the opposition. We're pretty bare bones in opposition. But you also don't have the responsibilities that you do as a Minister, trying to work a department. Even if you're a critic, you have the ability to go and root around and dig under and get information and do all of the kinds of things that you should do as a critic so that you can ask questions of the government. It means that you just end up doing a lot more of your own work, but it's positive because ultimately it means that you get to understand the issues. I can tell you that I'm going to use [my time] in opposition to do exactly that—to learn the process, to learn some of those issues, and to get myself ready for an election campaign and take it from there.

How often you do find you are able to make a substantial impact on government initiatives or legislation?

Generally speaking, the government of the day will do what they want. There is a process, there's the public process that goes on at committee stage after second reading, where you get the public to come out and make comments. I think it's quite rare that the government of the day would capitulate to the opposition's amendments. More often than not, the government will drive their legislative agenda. That's not to say from time to time we don't all agree on something and, as rare as that might be, it certainly has happened. It's happened numerous times since I've been here.

So, do you think an opposition member could really make a difference in legislation?

Yes, I really do. I think it is really political—that's where the ideology differences we argue come into play. For example, Bill 41¹⁵⁶ before the House at the moment is allowing the NDP government to, in essence, raid Manitoba Hydro for money they don't have because the current government ran a deficit. So, we know they won't change it. We have all of the reasons and I am vehemently opposed to it because it goes against my fundamental political belief that if the government can't live within its means, it shouldn't go into a Crown corporation and just arbitrarily raid money. So, we're not going to win on that, and I know that. But trust me, when I'm premier, it's not anything I would do and I will be very clear about that. So, there's a process that allows you to create some differences and even though you may not have an impact on the government, you're having an impact on the public.

Do you feel as though an opposition still has the ability to use the various tools of delay to stall and make a fuss on an issue, or have those tools gradually been whittled away so a majority government can— through time allocation or closure—eventually pass whatever they want?

The opposition still has a tremendous role to play and, when necessary, can filibuster and delay. The opposition can be very effective in that regard. Ultimately, if the government of the day wants to invoke closure, which is a pretty heavy-handed statement to make, they can do that. I think governments are very reluctant to do that, though, and I can understand why. But, opposition parties can still make a point. And I believe there's always a bit of a chess game going on as well when you deal with the other side in terms of this whole process. It's not just one way. There are a lot of negotiations that take place. But ultimately I believe an opposition party that is effective and understands the rules, and as I say we have a number of knowledgeable members in that respect, I think we can be very effective.

III. INSIDE THE LEGISLATURE

There are concerns that there is a huge amount of power in the Prime Minister's office at the federal level, or in the Premier's office provincially, and that backbenchers are merely being told what to do. Do you think there is too much centralization of power, or is this a good thing?

To answer the question, I believe the answer is no. I don't believe that's the case. Now, of course, in the current situation in Ottawa, yes, I believe there is an element of that. Frankly, when I worked in the Prime Minister's Office, one

¹⁵⁶ Bill 41, *The Manitoba Hydro Amendment Act*, 3d Sess., 37th Leg., Manitoba, 2002 (assented to 9 August 2002).

of the things Brian Mulroney was very capable of doing—and we said this jokingly but it was a fact—when his popularity was lower than the bank interest rate, he had caucus members that would literally jump in front of a bus for him. Because he was able to work his caucus and understand all about them and he made sure he included them in everything. He was a master at that. He wasn't doing it in a dictatorial fashion—he did it on a consensus basis. So, I would say that today's environment in federal politics, just on the basis that you see some of these backbenchers revolting against their leader, the Prime Minister, I would say the answer is yes. In general, though, I don't believe the structure is set up to give too much power. I believe that it is up to the Premier of the day and the Prime Minister of the day to ensure that they service their caucus members the same way they service the members of the public.

Another issue of concern is the power of the caucus whip. Some people have said there should be more free votes—let members vote with their consciences. Others have said it serves an important purpose, consistency in voting, ensuring members of the public know how their MLA will vote. Do you think the power of the whip should be loosened a bit to let members vote as they wish on non-crucial votes – votes that won't bring down the government?

There will always be an issue or two that are not necessarily just on party lines. And on those issues, it's important that you allow members to vote what I would call their conscience, but other than that, no. What caucus is all about, the process of caucus, is that it includes various viewpoints; the strength I believe of the leader of the party and the caucus whip is to try to build a consensus so you come out of there with a sense of direction and a consensus. And it's not a matter of things being black and white. It's a matter of getting that sense of consensus and moving ahead. That ultimately is what democracy is all about and you'll see the ultimate democracy in a caucus situation. You keep your comments in the room, you can be as vocal as you want one way or another on the issue, but once you reach a consensus, then yes, it's important that everyone fall in line.

Do you think events in the legislature get enough media coverage today, or is the coverage little more than a headline or a soundbite?

I think the media have been put into a position where people are looking for quick rapid response. Instead of just getting the local news, you're not only getting the national news, you're getting the international news. There are just so many things out there to cover that I don't think we do get the coverage we should get.

As for performance in the House, and that could include speeches, debates and more notably perhaps the daily question periods, how much do you think what you do in that Chamber actually impacts on your success as an opposition, or do you think you make more of an impact outside of the House through news releases or holding certain events or driving issues?

The things said and done in the House can have an impact; there is no question about that. But from a communications perspective, you can have a bigger impact outside of the legislature. I think being in public, making speeches in public, having a public event to try to portray your point of view, those things—what I would call campaign style events—are more effective in reaching Manitobans than what happens in the House. The thing about the legislature which I believe is most important is that it is a recorded history of the province of Manitoba. Everything you say is a part of our history. There are a lot of emotional comments sometimes that get made in the heat of debate, but there are also a lot of thoughtful comments put on the record and I think Hansard is very powerful in that respect.

IV. PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

One of the most popular criticisms of the political system is the current first past the post electoral system whereby we have often seen majority governments elected with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. One suggestion is to introduce a form of proportional representation into our electoral system. Do you think there is a need for electoral reform, and that perhaps some form of PR should be introduced?

I am always open to looking at reform because I believe that ultimately all processes have to evolve as society evolves. Having said all of that, at this point, with all of the bumps and bruises and warts that the current system has, I think it is the best system.

If you could make one improvement in how the legislature functions, what do you think that would be?

I would say one thing that would be beneficial would be to have scheduled sittings so you could function in your constituencies and in the legislature. I think that would be helpful in terms of the public's knowledge of what goes on here. And the public should be very aware of what their elected officials are doing.