

REMEMBERING ROBERT STANFIELD: A GOOD-HUMOURED AND GALLANT MAN

Rod McQueen



At his passing in December, Robert Lorne Stanfield was once again remembered as “the best prime minister Canada never had.” As his longtime press secretary recalls in this appreciation of the former Progressive Conservative leader, Stanfield was untroubled by his three successive election losses to Pierre Trudeau — including his near-victory in the 1972 election. As Rod McQueen writes, though he would rather have won, Stanfield always kept losing in perspective and never allowed himself to be bitter. McQueen remembers Stanfield for his wry and self-deprecating humour, his debating skills in the House, and above all his convictions and principles.

Lors de sa disparition en décembre dernier, Robert Lorne Stanfield fut de nouveau qualifié de « meilleur premier ministre que le Canada n’a jamais eu ». Comme le rappelle dans cet hommage celui qui fut longtemps secrétaire de presse de l’ancien chef du Parti progressiste-conservateur, Robert Stanfield n’a jamais perdu sa sérénité malgré trois échecs électoraux successifs contre Pierre Elliott Trudeau, dont sa quasi-victoire de 1972. Il aurait certes préféré gagner, note Rod McQueen, mais l’homme savait mettre les choses en perspective et s’interdire toute amertume. L’auteur évoque son ironie subtile et son sens de l’autodérision, ses talents de polémiste à la Chambre des communes et, par-dessus tout, la fermeté de ses convictions et principes.

Let me begin with the worst moment in my life as press secretary to Robert Stanfield. This tribute to him can only improve from there. The 1974 federal election campaign had begun badly and was getting worse. As leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, Stanfield was promoting a policy of price and income controls that included a 90-day freeze meant to halt rampant inflation. Voters loved the idea of a lid on prices but not on their salaries. The policy was a tough sell and it became more troublesome as the media raised questions daily that required ever more complicated explanations.

Three weeks into the election, Stanfield’s campaign plane, filled with staff and press, left Halifax for a grueling follow-the-sun schedule with numerous stops ending in Vancouver 20 hours later. En route, we landed in North Bay, Ontario, to refuel. Everyone deplaned for a little fresh air. Someone began throwing a football around on the tarmac and soon Stanfield joined in — tossing, running, and catching the ball with an easy grace that belied his 60 years.

Doug Ball, a Canadian Press photographer, shot a roll of film.

As Stanfield’s press secretary since 1970, such was my delight with Stanfield looking so lithe and athletic — just like that fellow Pierre Trudeau we were running against — that I accompanied Ball into the terminal and helped him ship the film to Toronto so his editors could put something on the newswires.

Imagine my chagrin the next morning when I saw the photo that appeared in every newspaper in the country. You know the one: Stanfield stooped over, wearing a white shirt and tie, his empty hands clutched hopelessly together as the ball tumbled to the ground below. He looked awkward and knock-kneed. His face was a grimace, his eyes clamped shut. The Vancouver *Province*, the first place I saw the picture, had added penciled lines to his furrowed brow as if the original didn’t already look bad enough.

As a metaphor for our beleaguered campaign, no image could have been more telling. The Toronto *Sun* later asked to look at the complete 36-frame shoot, and published a series of photos showing Stanfield looking deft and agile, but the damage was done. Stanfield soldiered on to election day in July, but everyone knew that he’d long since lost. “Zap! You’re frozen!”



Courtesy Rod McQueen

Press Secretary Rod McQueen listens as Conservative Leader Robert Stanfield takes questions at a news conference in the mid-1970s. McQueen remembers the wit and wisdom of the best prime minister Canada never had.

said Trudeau who, the next year, adopted the very policy he had mocked in order to win his mandate. Politics and life aren't fair, I know, but that *volte face* seemed well beyond the pale.

After the humiliation of Trudeau-mania in 1968, and the jubilation of 1972 when Stanfield came within two seats of winning, the 1974 results finished him off. The "victory" party at the Lord Nelson Hotel in Halifax was a desultory event. Long-faced campaign workers slumped against the ballroom walls while a band played peppy tunes no one wanted to hear. When Stanfield arrived at the funereal affair there were a few awkward moments until my wife Sandy asked him to dance. Soon everyone was up dancing; the event had been successfully rescued.

When Robert Lorne Stanfield died at 89 on December 16, the image that came

unsummoned to my mind was of a man who should have been at the lowest point of his life, but was instead enjoying himself among friends and election volunteers. He'd rather not have lost. But he didn't so desperately need to win that he believed the world would stop turning.

Controls weren't the only Stanfield policy idea later embraced by those who scoffed when first they heard. When inflation-adjusted tax brackets were announced in a Liberal budget, Stanfield rose in the House of Commons and took an author's bow. Stanfield placed his personal assets in a blind trust years before that appropriate step was made mandatory by many jurisdictions. Finlay MacDonald, a long-time friend and a perennial practical joker, once walked into Stanfield's Parliament Hill office and said: "I have good news and bad news. The bad

news is that you're worth nothing. The good news is that all the way down you were never in a conflict of interest."

Stanfield loved to laugh, and make others laugh, usually at his own expense. Television interviews after Question Period in those days were conducted in Room 130-S, in the basement of the Centre Block on Parliament Hill. Stanfield was standing in front of a row of cameras waiting patiently while a technician fixed a problem. Veteran NDP MP Stanley Knowles entered the room, lingered at the back amid the silence, and finally said: "Speak up Bob, we can't hear you." Replied Stanfield, "I'm in the middle of one of my pauses."

Ah yes, Stanfield's halting speech, a charismatic quality that ranked right up there with his solemn looks. Yet year after year Stanfield gave by far the

funniest speech at the Parliamentary Press Gallery Dinner, an off-the-record evening of drinking and skits and speeches by other political leaders and the governor-general. Elves and shoemakers would write material for Stanfield, but the best lines were his own, and his deadpan timing was impeccable. Trudeau always delivered a dud. (See sidebar for some examples of Stanfield's spontaneous wit.)

How we loyal staffers wished the public could hear that dry, self-deprecating wit and see those boffo performances. We endlessly discussed his image and how it might be improved. Except for slightly more stylish suits and a modest bit of TV training, little was done to alter "the man with the winning way" as he was known at the 1967 convention held at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto that chose him leader.

Although Stanfield went to Ottawa after 11 years as premier of Nova Scotia, he was not a parochial man. He had a vision of the country as a whole place. He worked hard to learn French, and spoke it reasonably well. He was relentlessly forgiving and endured constant backstabbing from his predecessor, John Diefenbaker, who never accepted Stanfield's leadership. Yet in all the years I worked for Stanfield, I never heard him utter a mean-spirited word about anyone, not John Diefenbaker, not Doug Ball.

Stanfield fought hard for acceptance of his views. But unlike some people in public office, he was always tolerant of others' opinions, particularly those that most contradicted his own. His opponents always got a gracious hearing as he took into account their differing views even if those beliefs brought bile to his lips.

In this regard, perhaps his strength was also his weakness. In February 1968, soon after Stanfield was elected leader, Lester Pearson's government was defeated in a non-confidence vote. The Liberals summoned the governor of the Bank of Canada, who advised Stanfield that a precipitous election would hurt the dollar and cripple Canada's interna-

tional reputation. Stanfield agreed to another vote, which the government won handily. As his detractors both inside and outside the party put it: He passed up the chance to "go for the jugular" because he was too nice a guy in a cut-throat world.

When the *War Measures Act* was invoked in October 1970,

Stanfield again gave the government of the day the benefit of the doubt. That particular backing was Stanfield's only regret in a long political life. He later admitted that he wished he'd joined his lone dissenting colleague, David MacDonald, who voted against the *Public Order Temporary Measures Act* when it came before the House that November.

The cracker-barrel wit of Robert Stanfield

- When Pierre Trudeau was single, he dated A-list stars like Barbra Streisand. Toronto party stalwart Eddie Goodman urged Stanfield to get with it and be a little more exciting. Asked Stanfield: "Who do you have in mind? Gloria Swanson?"
- After the Trudeau government was defeated on a non-confidence motion in the House of Commons and the 1974 election had been called, Stanfield met in Ottawa with his MPs for a final huzzah before they hit the hustings. Unity, he beseeched them, above all else. "If we stay together, we'll win," he said. "And then we'll really be in trouble."
- Stanfield appeared at a campaign rally in Hamilton, Ont., attended by all nominated candidates from the region. Among those praised by Stanfield that evening was local icon Ellen Fairclough, who had served in the Diefenbaker Cabinet, and was Canada's first female federal minister. When Stanfield introduced Lincoln Alexander, he thanked the member from Hamilton West for helping him maintain some measure of control over his often errant caucus. Then Stanfield added, "But Linc, you'll never be the man that Ellen Fairclough was."
- Toronto MP Jim Gillies was an early advocate of price and income controls but distanced himself from the policy early in the 1974 election campaign. Stanfield interrupted his national tour, flew to Toronto, and read Gillies the Riot Act. After Stanfield announced he was resigning as party leader, various people jockeyed for his job. A few weeks before the convention, a television crew followed Stanfield for a day, shooting footage for a farewell special. Among the events was a meeting with MPs. Gillies seized the moment to declare his intentions. He greeted Stanfield, then looked directly into the camera, and said: "I'm going to throw my hat into the ring." Without missing a beat, Stanfield said: "I hope it's an old hat."
- Stanfield borrowed a friend's house in Halifax for a week's vacation. Finlay MacDonald Jr., a local broadcaster, phoned me in Ottawa to see if he could interview Stanfield while he was in residence. I knew Stanfield would be agreeable, so I called him and passed along Finlay's number at the TV station so they could make their own arrangements. When I hung up, I realized I'd mistakenly given Stanfield the phone number of the house where he was staying. Oh well, I said to myself, he'll figure that out on his own and thought no more about it. Finlay called the next day to say he'd heard nothing. Fearing the worst, I phoned Stanfield. Before I could explain, he said, "I haven't been able to get through to Finlay. His line's always busy." "Sir, I'm sorry, but I gave you your own number. You've been dialing yourself." There was an exasperated sigh. "You guys are just sitting up there in Ottawa figuring out ways to ruin my vacation," he said. "I could have been prime minister years ago."

To be sure, Pierre Trudeau always managed to have his way with Robert Stanfield. Not content with having beaten Stanfield in 1972, Trudeau set out to belittle him in 1973. Trudeau tabled a resolution to reaffirm the principles of the *Official Languages Act*. The measure was totally unnecessary; official bilingualism had been approved in 1969 with Stanfield's full support.

Trudeau was just being mischievous. He knew there were those in the Progressive Conservative Party who would not stand with their leader on this issue and he was right. Sixteen Tories voted against the resolution. Thus the Liberals exposed and embarrassed Stanfield as someone who could not sell his own views to his own people.

Stanfield honored the institution of Parliament and worked hard as leader of the opposition. "Politics gave a depth and meaning to my life that I had no right to expect," he once said. Between elections, he traveled Canada most weekends, highlighting issues such as unemployment, fisheries or energy. During the week he'd arrive at his parliamentary office on the fourth floor of the Centre Block well before 9 a.m., head home for 6:30 p.m. dinner, then return for the evening. He'd often be among a diehard handful attentively listening to a late-night speech of little note.

Stanfield fired the opening round in Question Period, daily trying to trip up Trudeau, make a minister look incompetent, or raise an issue for the media to pursue. Four staffers in the Opposition research office would spend the morning preparing material for Stanfield and other senior MPs in what they hoped would be a co-ordinated attack. With or without their help, Stanfield could go toe-to-toe with Trudeau and his cabinet ministers on any topic.

After Question Period, I'd beat the bushes in the press gallery, trying to interest one of the networks in conducting an interview with Stanfield that might capture some of the fireworks from the floor of the House. In those days before parliamentary proceedings were televised, such inter-

views were the only way most Canadians could take the measure of the man. Recreating the drama of debate, however, was all but impossible though brief news clips. Who knows how voters' perceptions of Stanfield might have changed for the better had they been able to see him in action for themselves.

Stanfield was an excellent debater and speaker; he always did well in front of an audience. Peter Reilly, a broadcaster turned MP, drafted some words for Stanfield that became known as his "vision" speech. Press coverage was adulatory. "Women weep at Stanfield vision," declared one headline. Among the best was his farewell address at the 1976 leadership convention held to replace him, perhaps because he felt free to say whatever he wanted. The night before, Diefenbaker had complimented Stanfield. "I want to thank John for his very kind remarks," said Stanfield, then paused and pointedly added, "last night," a not-so-subtle reminder that Dief's praise was a tad tardy. As for those journalists who had so often disparaged him, he simply said: "Shoo fly, don't bother me."

Stanfield issued a warning that February evening, one that still rings true today, 28 years later. "Some Progressive Conservatives would rather fight than win. Some of us wish to elevate a legitimate concern for individual self-reliance and individual enterprise into the central and dominating dogma and theme of our party. Why do we spoil a good case by exaggeration? Why do we try to polarize a society that is already taut with tension and confrontation?"

Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney, the Progressive Conservative Party leaders who followed Stanfield, built well on his tireless efforts and he celebrated their success. I cannot imagine that Stanfield could possibly have approved of the recent merger that not only caused the 'Progressive' portion of the party's name to disappear but also brought to the fore so many midgets with extremist minds.

Although some of the divisive issues have changed in the intervening years,

the number of narrow-minded politicians seems greater now than in Stanfield's day. There were bigots back then, of course, but when they railed against him in caucus, tried to hijack his social policy plans, or plotted his ouster, Stanfield always steered a thoughtful course without ever selling out his principles.

That inclusiveness was the bedrock of Stanfield's being. He believed that a political party was a powerful means by which to build a national consensus. His other remarkable traits were patience, integrity, decency and fortitude in the face of failure, all of them marks of a man to be much admired. He expected loyalty, and rarely received it, but he gave loyalty freely to all. No matter who you were, you never had to worry about turning your back on Robert Stanfield. He would never do you in — no matter what you might have done to him.

I had not even voted for the Progressive Conservative Party before becoming Stanfield's press secretary. As a journalist, I went to Ottawa thinking I'd spend two years there seeing how that place worked from the inside. Stanfield was a man with such wit and wisdom that I stayed almost six years and never regretted my decision for a moment, never wished that he was anything other than the honest and unassuming man he was.

I would have liked to have been on the winning side. So would he. No, there was no final victory, but if you're going to lose, far better to do it alongside a good and gallant man than be with connivers who will do anything and say anything in order to win at any cost to the country.

After working for Robert Stanfield from 1970-1976, Rod McQueen returned to journalism, writing for Maclean's and The Financial Post, among other publications. He has lived and worked professionally in London, England, and Washington, DC, and has also written 10 books. His next book, a biography of Edgar Bronfman Jr., is scheduled for publication by Doubleday this fall. rod.mcqueen@sympatico.ca