

Interview

Leonard "Red" Kelly is a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame and a former star with the Detroit Red Wings and the Toronto Maple Leafs. He played on eight Stanley Cup winning teams including Toronto's last in 1967. He is also a former Member of Parliament having twice been elected to the House of Commons in 1962 and 1963. In this interview he reflects upon the unusual experience of simultaneous competing in Canada's two unofficial national sports. The interview was conducted by Gary Levy on June 1, 1989.

It is rather unusual for a National Hockey League player to be elected to the House of Commons. How did that come about?

One day, after playing in Detroit for twelve and a half years I was informed that I had been traded to the New York Rangers for Bill Gadsby and Eddie Shack. I was shocked and, thinking that my hockey career was coming close to an end anyway I decided to retire from hockey since I had a farm in Ontario at the time. A few days later everything changed when I was informed that a new deal had been worked out to send me to the Toronto Maple Leafs. I reconsidered my retirement and reported to Toronto.

They put me up at the Westbury Hotel just opposite the radio station owned by Foster Hewitt. One of the people who worked for Foster was Keith Davey (now a Senator) and we had breakfast together at the Westbury. He got me involved in a number of community projects for the Maple Leafs and eventually convinced me to run for office.

In 1962 the Conservatives, led by John Diefenbaker, were still in office. I

had some doubts about the possibility of being both an MP and a hockey player but Davey set up a meeting with Lester Pearson at the Park Plaza Hotel. I told Mr. Pearson I did not think it was possible to combine the two. He agreed! I thought Keith Davey was



From 1962-1965 Red Kelly, was both a Member of Parliament and a star player for the Toronto Maple Leafs. (Courtesy of the Hockey Hall of Fame, Toronto)

going to fall off his chair. But Lester Pearson had a great ability to bring people together and the more we talked the more I liked and admired him. I decided I would do whatever I could to help him become Prime Minister.

Essentially they gave me the choice of running in any of five seats in Toronto. One of these was York West which had a very strong Conservative candidate, John Hamilton. As one without any previous political experience I thought I might as well run there and if I was defeated neither I nor the party would have really lost very much. Keith Davey helped set up an organization and I followed the advice of the political pros. I had a couple of unusual factors in my favour. For one thing the Maple Leafs were in the process of winning the Stanley Cup and my riding was one of the first with Pay TV so I had a lot of free and valuable publicity.

How did your first campaign go?

It started on a really low note at my first all-candidate's meeting. We drew lots for speaking order and John Hamilton spoke last. I made a very low key speech and then Hamilton, an ex-

perienced and eloquent speaker got up. With his cue cards, political rhetorical and sense of timing he gave a very impressive performance.

When it was over I knew I had done poorly and even apologized to my campaign manager, Clem Nieman, for letting him down. But there was no time for post mortems because we had to get to another candidate's meeting that night and I think I made a better impression — probably because I was so darn mad at myself. I do better when I get mad.

A few days later Paul Martin called and asked me to come down to Windsor to campaign with him and attend his nomination meeting. I was so busy I asked my wife to call Martin's office and say I was having my hands full in Toronto and did not think I could take the time off. She called and was told that one does not refuse such invitations and that Martin would return the favour by campaigning in my riding. So, reluctantly, I flew up there but it turned out to be the best thing that happened to me during the campaign.

He was a real professional politician and in one day I saw how a campaign should be run. He had everything timed down to the last minute as we went around to factories, nursing homes and shopping centers, meeting hundreds of people. He knew how to work a crowd. I had a little problem in that we were engaged in a playoff series with the Detroit Red Wings and everywhere we went people would say hello to Mr. Martin and then try to talk hockey with me. He would get way ahead of me and then come back to rescue me from a crowd and move on.

That night I was to address his nomination meeting. The place was packed. There were people hanging from the rafters. I sat on the stage waiting for him to finish his speech but he went on and on. Thirty minutes, forty, fifty, an hour as the crowd grew noisier and noisier. I wondered what I could possibly say when he finally did finish. To tell the truth I do not even remember

what I said but that trip was a great experience. My wife says it turned me into a politician.

As promised he came to campaign in my riding as did Judy LaMarsh and others. In fact I was in Niagara campaigning for Judy when my wife, who was pregnant at the time, had to get herself to the hospital. In three years we had two babies, two elections and three Stanley Cups. It was quite a time. On election day the Conservatives managed to win a narrow minority nation-wide but I took York West for the Liberals. A few hours before the polls closed it began to dawn on me, for the first time, that I might actually win. John Hamilton was very gracious in defeat. I was struck by his dignity.

What was your first impression of the House of Commons?

I suppose my first impression was one of awe. I was in awe of the atmosphere, of the rules and of the political personalities present. Eventually I came to look on it more as a kind of sport, not unlike hockey. You had several teams, you had a Speaker who was referee. The Sergeant-at-Arms like the linesman was sometimes called upon to break up the fights (and I recall seeing Gilles Gregoire and Réal Caouette escorted out of the House by the Sergeant-at-Arms). You even had a Press Gallery to give us the thumbs up or thumbs down sign and in those days the "fans" in the public gallery occasionally broke into applause during some of the heated debates that characterized those years. There was no incident quite like the Rocket Richard riot at the Montreal Forum but I did see at least one punch thrown outside the Chamber and I was in the House the day a bomb exploded in one of the bathrooms outside the Chamber.

The Diefenbaker administration lasted only a few months and although I asked a few questions I did not even make my maiden speech before the Government was defeated and a new election called for April 1963.

Was your second campaign similar to the first?

No it was quite different. For one thing I was now the incumbent. More importantly my opponent was Al Eagelson. He made more personal attacks against me and there seemed to be professional hecklers at the back of every town hall meeting. One time I listened to them carrying on for a while and then said, "Thanks for making me feel right at home. You sound just like the fans at Chicago stadium".

As for my riding, the result was the same and this time the Liberals managed to win enough seats to form a government. Lester Pearson became Prime Minister. I had little time to celebrate our victory. We had a playoff game the very next day and I had to leave the hotel where the victory party was taking place to get some rest.

What do you recall of your second term?

For one thing it was even more hectic than the first. The travel was incredible. It seemed like I was going from coast to coast all the time. People wanted me to be everywhere at once. I was told that aside from Mr. Pearson, I received more invitations to speak to various groups across the country than any other Liberal in the country.

People with problems called me from all over and when I told them I was not their MP they said they did not know their member and asked me to help. My family had moved to Ottawa but decided to go back to Toronto, in part because of the incredible number of calls to handle there. People in British Columbia would call at midnight, which is three in the morning Toronto time. I could not go anywhere without being recognized. It seemed like everyone knew me. After a hockey game in New York someone grabbed me on the way out of Madison Square Garden and insisted I look at a document relating to the Seafarers International Union.



Conn Smythe (Right) inducting Red Kelly into the Hockey Hall of Fame, August 21, 1969. (*Hockey Hall of Fame, Toronto*)

In 1964 I missed all of training camp when Mr. Pearson asked me to represent him at the summer olympics in Tokyo. I took my skates and rented ice in Tokyo to try and keep in shape. I got back to Toronto just in time for the first game of the season played in Detroit and the coach, Punch Imlach, told me he wanted me to dress and be on the bench even if I was not ready to play. That was the first time I put on the equipment that year. Things started off poorly and pretty soon we were behind 2-0. Imlach turns to me and says "Kelly get out there".

I made an important discovery that night. The rest of the team had been training twice a day for a month. But their discipline was imposed on them. I found I was in as good or better shape than any of them by following my own disciplined program. It convinced me that doing something yourself is much better than being forced to do it.

In 1965 Mr. Pearson called a snap election in an attempt to win a majority. I decided I had enough and declined to run again. As soon as I made the

decision I felt as though a 200 pound weight had been lifted from my shoulders. When I look back now I wonder how I ever managed to survive those two and a half years. The National Hockey League played games mainly on Wednesday night, Saturdays and Sundays. The House of Commons did not sit Wednesday or Friday evenings or on the week-ends but the sessions extended well into the summer. I missed few sessions and no games but was frequently unable to practice with the Maple Leafs and took my skates to Ottawa where I would rent some ice at 5 a.m. in Hull or from the Minto skating club.

Were there particular issues that motivated you to go into politics and did you have an opportunity to pursue them during your years in office?

I came from a family with a Liberal background but had never been profoundly interested in politics. In the mid 1950s I went with a four other people to Korea and the Far East to entertain Canadian troops. Ken

Charlton (football player), Lloyd Saunders (football broadcaster), and Henry Viney (sports writer) came from the Western Football League; and Bob Hesketh (writer and radio commentator), from Toronto. I gave a hockey clinic in Japan and met a number of officials interested in international hockey. That was probably the first time I thought seriously about politics but it was in the sense of being Canadian and representing Canada abroad rather than in any partisan sense.

It is not surprising, therefore, that my maiden speech was delivered during the debate over adoption of a Canadian flag in 1964. I spoke in favour of the new flag arguing that the old Red Ensign had been borrowed. The time had come to give it back and have our own distinctive flag. I remember the speech for another reason. I was being kidded a lot for not speaking out more often in the House. "Kelly can skate but cannot speak", they said.

The rules say you must not read your speech and I wanted to deliver my

maiden speech on a topic on which I could speak freely and genuinely without notes. I was scheduled to speak in the evening and my wife told me she would prepare a typical pre-game meal to get me ready for the big event. For once things moved faster than expected in the House. I got the floor in the afternoon, so by the time I got home for the steak dinner, the speech was already in the record.

Another thing I remember about that speech was that after I finished talking about cutting the apron strings from Britain, a fellow MP, Russell Honey, turned to me and said, "Red, I couldn't have said that. I would never get re-elected. It goes to show how high the emotions were running those days. Later I tried to advance the idea of adopting legislation that would encourage farmers to donate some of their used equipment which could be sent to less developed countries. There were some practical problems and with all the elections and short sessions it never really got any serious consideration. But I still think it is a good idea.

How did the players look upon your job as a member of the House. Did they treat you any differently?

No not at all. Of course the owner, Conn Smythe, gave me a hard time over the flag debate. He called me up to his office one day and said he could never accept the Maple Leaf Flag. He had served in the first war under the Union Jack and he did not see any reason to change. I mentioned his position to some colleagues in caucus. They pointed out that Canadian soldiers in the First War were identified by a Maple Leaf on their uniform and gave

me a number of other good arguments to use on him.

When I got back to Toronto I asked to see him and gave him these arguments. He listened and made no comment. A few weeks later he again called me in and had obviously done some more research on the matter. He gave me some more new arguments and told me he was going to write every Member of Parliament to ask them to vote against the new flag. He was a tough character but at least he listened to what I had to say.

Have you maintained an active interest in politics since leaving parliament?

Not really. I remained in professional hockey for several years as a coach and player including eight years in the United States in Los Angeles and Pittsburgh. When you are out of the country for that long you tend to lose touch with what is happening politically.

When I finally left hockey in 1977 I started a small business in Toronto. We provide a preventive maintenance service for aircraft. It started as a small operation with no government subsidy and with one part-time secretary. We work on corporate jets such as the Challenger. We now employ nine people and service 1400 aircraft including the Dash 8 and other planes out of Toronto and New York. We also provide information to manufacturers about the service life of their parts. It is a rapidly expanding industry and a very interesting kind of work to be in at the moment. We recently got our first contract for preventive maintenance on some

Department of Transportation airplanes.

Do you see the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement as having any impact on your business?

I do not think it will have any direct benefits or costs for our business. I followed carefully the debate over the agreement and my main problem was trying to obtain accurate information about the agreement. I suppose like a lot of people I was not convinced it was necessarily the best thing for Canada but I hope it will prove to be beneficial. Being out of politics now I did not presume to try and influence anyone about how he or she should have voted in the last election.

Have you ever been asked for advice by hockey players considering running for public office and what have you told them?

Over the years at least a couple of players have spoken to me along those lines. I can only tell them my experience. They have to decide for themselves. It depend's a lot on one's personal situation. I would certainly advise anyone with young children to think very carefully before making any such decision.

I can still remember the incident that helped me decide finally and irrevocably to leave public life. As I returned to Toronto from one trip my four-year old daughter saw me coming up the driveway and shouted: "Look Mommy here comes Red Kelly" It was as though she had seen more of me on television than in person and did not even think of me as Daddy.■