
Kimble Sutherland: From Student Council to Queen's Park

Following the September 1990 provincial election, the New Democratic party formed the Government of Ontario for the first time in its history. Many of the new members had no previous experience in the legislature. One of them had been president of the Student's Council at the University of Western Ontario just months before the election. He speaks about his impressions of life as a newly elected member with Susan Allan. The interview was conducted in June 1991.

Tell me about your background in politics?

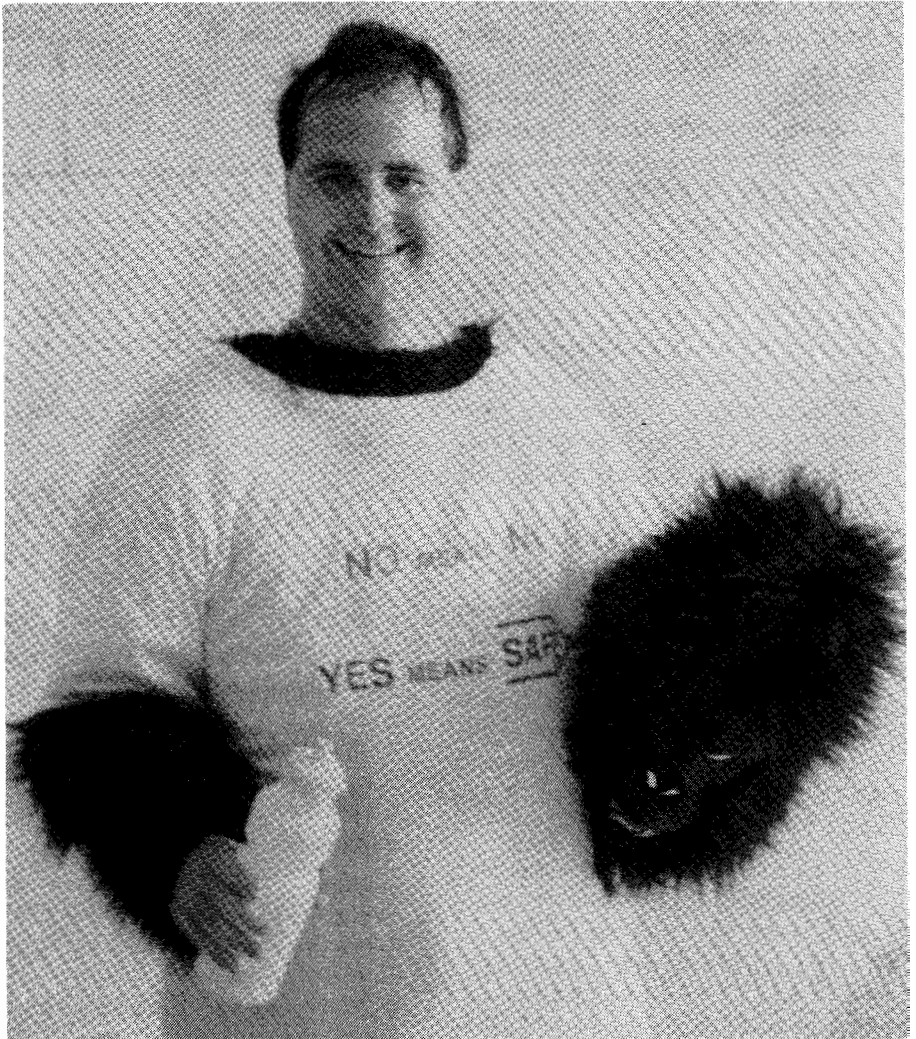
I got involved in politics about 10 years ago during the 1981 provincial election. I went to an all-candidates meeting and took the Conservative MPP to task over an education issue. Actually, when I think back, it was on a colleges and universities funding issue. Shortly after that I got involved in the riding association.

When I was entering grade eleven I ran for Students' Council prime minister and lost. Subsequently, I ran again and was elected and then later, reelected. My first year I was involved with the Ontario Secondary School Students' Association. With that I went to leadership camp, organized leadership conferences and also participated in the student parliament held in the legislature at Queens Park. They gave me the responsibility of looking after the government side.

When I arrived at the University of Western Ontario I had my sights on being involved with the student council. In my first year, I ran for

president of my residence council, Saugeen-Maitland, and lost. The following fall I ran in a student council by-election and won a position. I ran for Board of Directors that spring and failed to get elected.

The following year I ran for president of the students' council and was successful. I guess I always knew that I wanted to get involved in politics but I thought federal rather than provincial.



Kimble Sutherland as "King Condom" during Frosh Week 1989 at the University of Western Ontario
(Jamie Vandermoer)

In July, I was selling hotdogs and pop in the stands at London Tigers games and one of the people from the riding association came and asked me if I'd be the candidate.

We knew the Liberals were going to call the election for early September and we knew once the election was over I would be able to go back and finish my school year. So I was asked to run on a Friday night and by Monday I had almost convinced myself to run. I knew it would be a good experience for me.

Why did you choose the New Democrat Party?

I guess that goes back longer. I am a big "Canadianization" person (not necessarily nationalization) but if you have some national control over your resources and your main areas you can do well. Even today, although it's a global economy you still have to have some significant home-based industries.

I guess my background – I'm the youngest of eight – has something to do with it. Once my dad sold the farm he worked in construction and, of course, construction was always an up and down type thing. It was from job to job and there were some stretches on unemployment insurance and there were one or two stretches on welfare as well.

So there was just the sense the government should be there to employ people and find ways to employ people as well. I guess that is what attracted me. I should say that my dad used to be involved in the late-sixties as well as my older sister.

Many, including yourself, considered your campaign a

longshot. To what do you contribute your success?

I think there were a couple of reasons I was successful. We knew the Liberals were sliding in the riding and we knew there would be a lot of former Tories who voted Liberal in 1987 who would never bring themselves to vote NDP and they'd go back and vote Tory this time. We also knew the Family Coalition Party was going to take away some of the people from the Tories.

We just got out there and worked and canvassed everyday. That, with the combination of the provincial campaign went very well. We tried to say in the provincial campaign that the two old parties were not working and there was really no difference between them. We were able to pick up on discontent out there as a result of the failure of the Meech Lake accord which said the old style of politics of doing it behind doors was inappropriate.

And we knew the most valuable political lesson – Never take your voters for granted.

Tell me about your constituency. How often do you get back? Describe the concerns of your constituents?

It has one city of 25,000 and a town of 10,000. The rest are small villages. Traditionally it's been small-c conservative. Oxford is a very patriotic-type riding. It has strong British heritage. Oxford and Woodstock are known as the dairy capital of Canada.

Right now, I am in my constituency pretty well every week. In Ontario the legislature sits four days a week with Fridays off so Fridays are my busy day in the constituency. I try to get there as much as possible.

There are a great deal of problems. We certainly have a lot of people who need assistance solving

problems with government. People have trouble with bureaucracy: it's not moving for them and sometimes it moves for us. It is particularly troubling when you have different levels of government – is it a municipal/provincial or provincial/federal responsibility? There's no doubt there's a problem with government agencies not taking responsibility for a problem if they can pass it to others. I hear a lot of municipal concerns.

How different is provincial politics from the world of student politics?

There was some good training in the student council presidency. I mean you have all these small constituency groups when you think in terms of the residences and the different faculties. They all have their own interests and as president I had to balance them off just like I have interest groups in my riding.

Students will come to the council president with a problem they need solved – a lot of cases it's just simple referral. The same thing now – in many cases it's just simple referral.

So those types of things are similar.

I was familiar with budgets. I \$3.5 million dollars is nothing compared to \$52 billion but you get a sense of how you develop budgets. Those skills are very helpful.

There is something new everyday in the legislature and there always was on students' council.

Usually with the students' council once the school year started you were always responding to things. As a MPP I am responding to a lot of the crises in my riding.

Has your age been a factor in the way you have been received by your colleagues?

Initially there was some sense of 'Here's the young university student who hasn't even graduated, he came in on the sweep and that's great and he'll be there and maybe

with time he'll evolve and emerge' – I detected that in the first few months.

Really I had more experience in public speaking and debating than a lot of the members and after a couple of outings in the House, people saw I knew what the issues were and seemed to respond more favorably.

It is interesting because even though I was only 24 when I was elected, I was familiar with Queen's Park from the lobby sessions we had done there. Some of the new members had never visited Queen's Park.

My political science background gave me an understanding in terms of how parliament works and how the legislature works and how policy is developed and made. Many other members did not have that. So, you know, they are all things you can learn but in terms of feeling comfortable I think I might have got there sooner than some others.

Tell me about your role in the caucus?

I am doing a couple of things. Right now I am one of the whips with the responsibility of co-ordinating speakers on debates and making sure we have enough people in for our votes. I am also sitting on a committee now – a finance and economics committee. We heard pre-budget consultation and lately we have been dealing with the issue of cross-border shopping.

As a backbencher do you feel you have any influence on the cabinet?

The problem is with our system of cabinet secrecy which makes it very difficult. Cabinet ministers must take an oath of secrecy and there are certainly issues on which you feel you do not have any input. There is consultation that goes on but in terms of where the final decision is made – it is made in cabinet.



Sutherland in Queen's Park flanked by Alexander Mackenzie and Robert Borden
(Scott Feschuk)

The budget is an issue that can be frustrating. I sit in there on Monday afternoon at 4 o'clock when the Treasurer delivers the budget and that is my first time to see it. An hour and a half after he's done I have to tell all my media what I think about it. And, you know, your initial reactions are not always the best.

I certainly hope that somewhere along the line we can open up government and in turn some of our institutions. The partisan nature makes it so adversarial. You would hope you could use the collective wisdom of 130 people to serve the people but after watching a filibuster and watching the opposition do its job you sit there and you wonder if there is not a better way.

How has your life changed since last year at this time?

It is far busier. I thought student's council president was a busy position and it was. This is far busier in terms of the pace. When I am in the constituency on Fridays I have 12 or 13 meetings with constituents or with other groups.

And then there is the public recognition. Where ever I go in the riding, people know me and they will want to come and discuss issues.

One other thing is that I do not have to live like a student anymore. I am able to rent my own place now and I got rid of my rusting Grenada and bought a new car.

With each level I have moved up there has been a greater sense of responsibility. At Western I was dealing with issues about student rights and student input into decision-making. Now I have people coming in who are losing their houses, their livelihoods – much more serious issues in the overall scope of things. There is a greater burden on me as a member to help those people.

Do you see yourself as a career politician?

Well, that will be for the people to decide. I always wanted to be in politics and I would be quite comfortable doing that for a long time.●