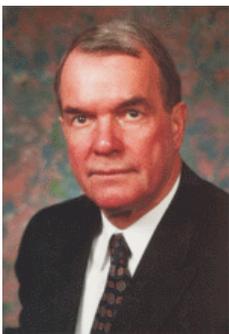

Robert Stanfield: A Nova Scotian and a Canadian Remembered

by Senator Lowell Murray, PC

Robert Lorne Stanfield was born on April 11, 1914, in Truro, Nova Scotia. A lawyer he became president of the Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative Party in 1947; party leader in 1948; first elected to the provincial legislature in 1949 and premier of the province from 1956-67. He won the federal PC leadership in September 1967 and was elected to the House of Commons in June 1968. He resigned as party leader in 1976 having failed three times to lead his party to victory in general elections. He relinquished his Commons seat in 1979. Robert Stanfield died in December 2003. This article is based on a eulogy delivered in St. Bartholomew's Church, Ottawa, on December 19, 2003.



We will never know for sure, but it may be that reports of the Robert Stanfield's modesty were somewhat exaggerated. For example, upon his departure from federal politics, and upon hearing allies and adversaries fulsomely and in unison singing his praises, he was heard to remark that, all in all, he was probably just too good for this country anyway. On

another occasion, I had drafted some notes for him, containing a sentence that began "In my humble opinion..." He handed the draft back to me with that phrase erased, his wife commenting – without protest from him – "Bob Stanfield never had a humble opinion in his whole life".

What is truly remarkable about the tributes that came forth in the days immediately following his death was

that it had been almost 30 years since his retirement from politics, most of them entirely out of the public eye. He published no memoir. There was no one tending a flame on his behalf or creating a mythology about him. Yet there has survived in the collective Canadian consciousness a vivid memory of Robert Stanfield as a leader of a major party, a man of civility, humanity, and integrity, who adorned our national life.

Almost 10 years ago, at a dinner in Ottawa celebrating his 80th birthday, Mr. Stanfield reflected on the good fortune that had been his throughout his life. He spoke first of his parents who had left him with the financial security to pursue a political career at a relatively young age. Then of his wives – Joyce and Mary who had predeceased him, and Anne who would be with him for the last 25 years of his life; then, of his children. Finally, the opportunity that politics had provided to know so many different people, across the widest spectrum of Canadian life, and to be joined with them in working for the betterment of the country. "This opportunity" he said, "has given my life a depth and a meaning I had no right to expect. I owe that opportunity to my party".

In Nova Scotia where he began, the first thing he had to impress upon his Tory followers was that there were not enough of them to elect a government. It was not quite

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the message many of them wanted to hear after 23 years in the political wilderness. However, they knew he spoke from experience, and for the future of their party. From zero seats in the House of Assembly when he became leader, he had brought them to a majority government eight years later.

Given the opportunity to govern, he and his party earned increasing support – dramatically increasing support – year after year, election after election, for the next 11 years. It is hardly an exaggeration, nor a reflection on those who came after him, to say that his Premiership, although now long past, is for many Nova Scotians still the template, the standard by which his successors have been measured.

He was a very effective campaigner, if somewhat unconventional by today's standards. Rather than make a grand entrance into a political rally after a number of preliminary events had whipped up enthusiasm among the crowd, he preferred to arrive early, in fact ahead of everybody else. (If it is possible to be punctual to a fault, Stanfield was). He would say hello and shake hands with one and all as they filed into the hall. Otherwise he accommodated himself to whatever the local people had arranged. One of his few instructions to campaign organizers was to try to make sure, if at all possible, to get him out of Cape Breton before dark.

For most of his 11 years as Premier he was also Minister of Education. This was a labour of love for him. He expanded government involvement in primary and secondary, vocational and university education, and extended French language education through high school.

He led an activist, and in the context of those times a very progressive government in Nova Scotia. Then, as a candidate for the national leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1967, when he was asked what kind of leader he would be, he replied by telling them what kind of party he intended to lead – “a party” he said, “that will be recognized not merely for its affluence, for its comfort, for its power – but for its humanity, for its compassion and for its decency”.

It was his fate to defend these values not as Prime Minister but as Leader of the Opposition, and so he did, unflinchingly, throughout his time in Parliament. To him, Mr. Trudeau's concept of the “just society” seemed more legalistic than compassionate, and so he came at it from that perspective.

When Mr. Trudeau asked, rhetorically, à propos the civil war in Nigeria “where is Biafra”, it was the Prime Minister's way of declaring his extreme reluctance to say or do anything that might be construed as recognition or support of a breakaway state in another federation.

However, Mr. Stanfield was appalled by the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. Together with David MacDonald, Gordon Fairweather and the NDP's Andy Brewin, he helped alert and arouse Canadian public opinion and from opening day in the new Parliament of 1968, kept the government's feet to the fire until there was some softening of the hard line official position.

Similarly, Mr. Stanfield maintained a constant and heartfelt criticism of the government's economic advisors for what he saw as their casual acceptance of higher unemployment as the necessary cost of bringing inflation down. In time this led him, with politically fatal results, to advocate a temporary freeze on wages and prices, followed by a brief period of mandatory controls, followed – hopefully – by voluntary restraints. His defense of the policy was simple: whatever its shortcomings, he saw it as much better than the human misery of prolonged high unemployment or runaway inflation.

Later, he might have said, and probably did say, that his approach had turned out only to be a bit premature. Rejected in the 1974 election, wage and price controls were adopted by the government a year later.

Relentless as he was in opposing some government policies, he was unstinting in his support for Mr. Trudeau's *Official Languages Act*. Notwithstanding a revolt by a group of MPs led by Mr. Diefenbaker, he defended the policy then, and to the end of his days, as noble in conception and necessary to the future of the country.

In 1974 he went as far as to reject the candidacy of Leonard Jones of Moncton on account of Mr. Jones virulent opposition to Acadian rights in New Brunswick. As the leader of a national party Mr. Stanfield called on English speaking Canadians to support measures designed to protect the French language and culture. He asked them to understand why Quebecers and their governments were so preoccupied by this issue.

He brought into the Conservative Party a number of eminent Francophones such as Marcel Faribault, Yves Ryan and Claude Wagner. In the tradition of Georges-Etienne Cartier he was convinced that English and French Canadians had to work together to build the party and the country. His vision, in this regard, was not fulfilled until the 1980s but although retired for many years he took up with vigour and energy defense of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords.

Of his latter years he said “I am enjoying life and hopefully doing some things that are useful”. This “useful” activity was extensive. It included the Chairmanship of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, Director of the North-South Institute, Vice President of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, Director of the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Governor

of the Windsor Foundation, Associate Governor of Dalhousie University, Honorary Director of Canada Life, Chair of the Commonwealth Foundation; and regular participant with scholars, diplomats, journalists, parliamentarians and others in a discussion group devoted to the Middle East. Those who were associated with him in these undertakings, know that his commitment was anything but perfunctory. The truth is he loved these opportunities to work on questions he considered important to public policy and to the future of the country.

Occasionally he accepted speaking or writing engagements. Reading the texts, some of them written or heavily annotated in his inimitable handwriting, it is obvious they were intended to stimulate, indeed provoke, his audiences. There was a nice edge to some of the prose, and maybe some mischief, perhaps because he was out of politics and away from political advisors.

To the Albany Club of Toronto in 1979 he saw "just a touch of hypocrisy" in Ontario's criticism of "wicked" Alberta's defense of provincial rights, when historically Ontario had been the first to challenge effectively the strength of the federal government. That said, he acknowledged the generous support of the people and government of Ontario for policies intended to increase opportunities for the people of Atlantic Canada, and he hoped that the people of Alberta would use their wealth with the same degree of national responsibility, as had the people of Ontario in his time.

Before the Quebec referendum of 1980, he said, "The concept of sovereignty-association seems mad to English speaking Canadians." In 1980 he spoke to the Canada West Foundation in Banff while controversy raged on both energy and the Constitution. Remarking on a certain "nationalist" opinion aligned against some western aims and which was lecturing the west that they must act in the interests of the whole nation, he said, "Now you know how French-speaking Canadians have felt".

Where were Western Canadians in 1970, he asked, when the *War Measures Act* was invoked? Then he added: "Perhaps their attitude would have been different if I had set a better example".

At a Halifax conference, he wondered whether the Atlantic Provinces would ever develop a joint economic strategy on their own, or whether they needed Ottawa to force the issue. "It is perhaps a terrible question for me to ask" he concluded, "but do we need to have our heads knocked together a little".

To his own party's supporters, he warned repeatedly against trying "to pile ideological confrontation and polarization on top of the tensions inherent in our country". As far back as 25 years ago, he was concerned about the overloading of the federal government and parliament and had come to the conclusion that "we must make a choice between all-pervasive government and parliamentary responsible government, that we cannot have both".

Perhaps we ought to pull together an anthology of those speeches. While they are of some historical interest on the issues they addressed at the time, many of them are really worth reading as essays in public philosophy.

Robert Stanfield was never much given to grand peroration himself and often thought it overdone in the speeches of others, so let me conclude with a prediction made, fifty years ago the great Liberal Premier of Nova Scotia, Angus L. Macdonald. Robert Stanfield he said "will always do right by Nova Scotia".

At the end of his long life, Bob Stanfield - who was personally modest - would be more than content to have it said of him that he had done right by Nova Scotia; by his country, Canada; by his party, the Progressive Conservative party; by his family, his friends and associates. We know that he was a statesman of the highest quality, and we were privileged and fortunate to have known him.