

Paul Martin Sr.: 'A Good House of Commons Man'

Most remembered today for his leadership ambitions and signature programs from ministries he led, Martin was widely regarded as a strong parliamentarian and a 'good House of Commons man' in both government and opposition.

Greg Donaghy

Born over a century ago, Paul Martin Sr. is mostly remembered today for his strong attachment to his Windsor Ontario area riding and his vaunting ambition – he ran unsuccessfully for Liberal Party leader three times. Older Canadians might recall his major accomplishments: Canada's first citizenship act in 1946, the introduction of universal old age pensions in 1951, and laying the foundations for today's health care in 1956-57. He served as Secretary of State for External Affairs from 1963-68. But few now remember his deep commitment to Canada's Parliament, where he served from 1935 to 1974, or his reputation as "a good House of Commons man."

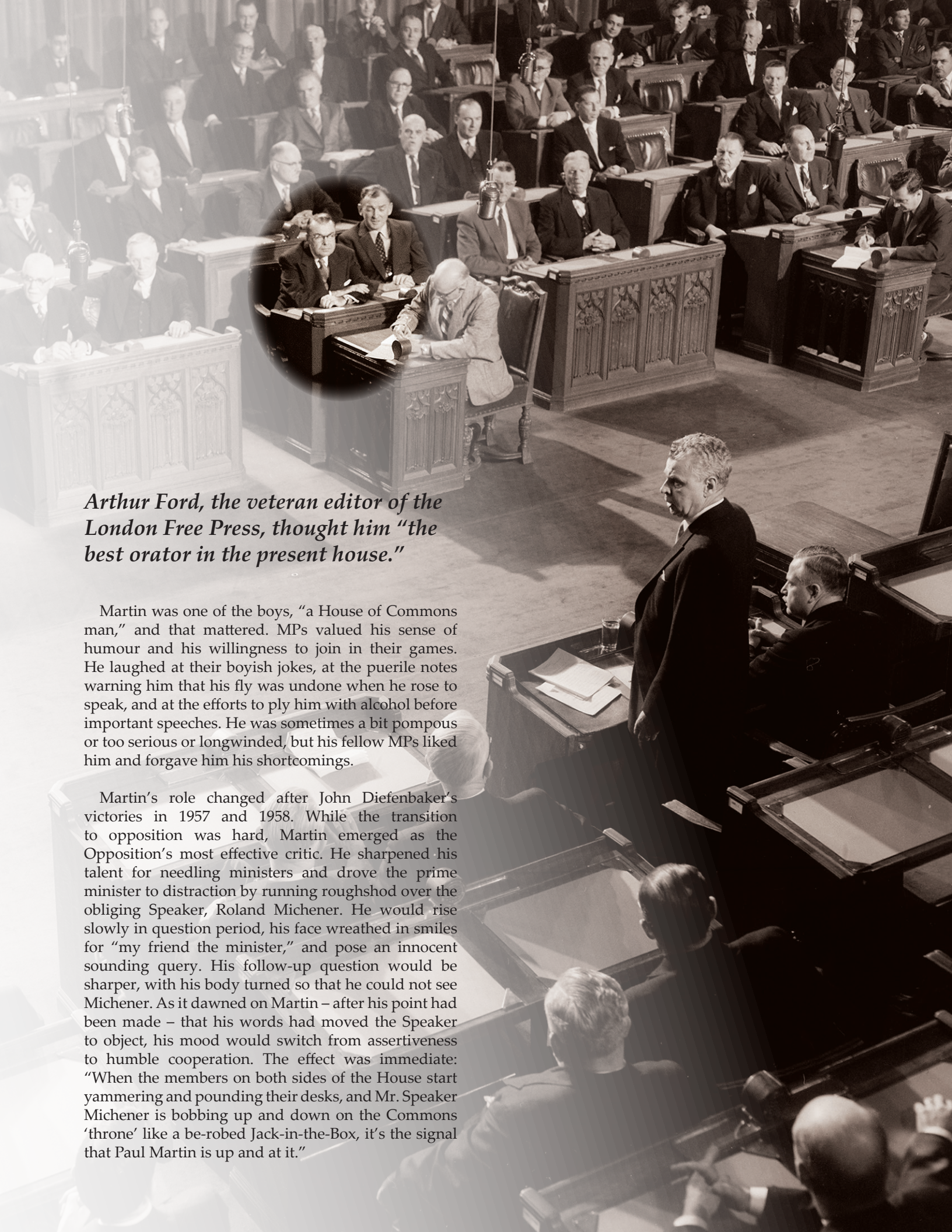
First elected in Essex East in 1935 (and re-elected in the next nine general elections), Martin was a shrewd and effective parliamentarian. Nicknamed "The Cardinal," he came into his own over the next decade and was a dominant House presence. Courteous and good-humoured, balancing every partisan riposte with soothing compliments, he rarely yielded ground willingly. When Tory MP General George Pearkes



tackled him in committee, the General knew what was coming: "Now he's going to reply and I know what he'll do. He'll praise my war record and what I have done in other fields, and then he'll throw everything at me but that bust of Mackenzie King in the committee room." Margaret Aitken, Toronto columnist and Conservative MP, described Martin as the most "adroit" minister at handling probing Opposition members. "He manages to turn the question around so it becomes a plug for his department," she complained. "Every answer is a miniature speech."

"The huge Conservative majority will sit still," marvelled journalist Richard Jackson, "and from this well regarded friend take such abuse as would be tolerated from no other member of the Opposition. It makes him the Liberals' fightingest member."

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Arthur Ford, the veteran editor of the London Free Press, thought him "the best orator in the present house."

Martin was one of the boys, "a House of Commons man," and that mattered. MPs valued his sense of humour and his willingness to join in their games. He laughed at their boyish jokes, at the puerile notes warning him that his fly was undone when he rose to speak, and at the efforts to ply him with alcohol before important speeches. He was sometimes a bit pompous or too serious or longwinded, but his fellow MPs liked him and forgave him his shortcomings.

Martin's role changed after John Diefenbaker's victories in 1957 and 1958. While the transition to opposition was hard, Martin emerged as the Opposition's most effective critic. He sharpened his talent for needling ministers and drove the prime minister to distraction by running roughshod over the obliging Speaker, Roland Michener. He would rise slowly in question period, his face wreathed in smiles for "my friend the minister," and pose an innocent sounding query. His follow-up question would be sharper, with his body turned so that he could not see Michener. As it dawned on Martin – after his point had been made – that his words had moved the Speaker to object, his mood would switch from assertiveness to humble cooperation. The effect was immediate: "When the members on both sides of the House start yammering and pounding their desks, and Mr. Speaker Michener is bobbing up and down on the Commons 'throne' like a be-robed Jack-in-the-Box, it's the signal that Paul Martin is up and at it."