



Interview

Alex and Rod Lewis: Sixty Years at the Table

For the Lewis family 1986 marks the 60th anniversary of service to the Ontario Legislative Assembly. A.C. Lewis was Clerk of the House from 1926 to 1954. He was succeeded by his son Roderick who has held the position ever since. The following article is based on interviews done for the Research Service of the Ontario Legislative Library supplemented by a further interview specifically for the Canadian Parliamentary Review in February 1986.

Would you tell us a bit about your father and how he came to be Clerk?

My father was not from a well to do family. In fact, after his father died he had to leave school to support the family. He worked as a newspaper reporter, first for the *World* and then for seven years as city editor of the *Telegram*. His friends used to say he was actually the political boss of Toronto since he more or less chose the slate the *Telegram* would support in local elections. In those days the *Telegram* was an influential paper. He later worked for the city of Toronto where he was responsible for leasing civic properties. A member of the Toronto Board of Education from 1910 to 1914, he served four years with the

Canadian forces overseas during the First World War. He was seriously wounded in a mustard gas attack in 1918 and it took nearly two years to regain his health. In 1920 he won a seat in the Ontario Legislative Assembly as the Conservative member for Toronto Northeast. The Conservatives were in opposition at the time and he quickly gained a reputation as a procedural authority.

When the Conservatives came to power in 1923, Premier George Ferguson told my father he was going to have to choose between himself and William Price for a cabinet position. Price was the senior member and my father deferred to him. Ferguson said there would be other openings in the near future.

In early 1926 Arthur Sydere, Clerk of the House for many years, decided to retire. Ferguson called in my father and said he could choose between the security of the Clerkship or a cabinet position after the forthcoming election. My father was inclined to go for the cabinet but he went home to talk it over with my mother. She said, "Look you have never lost an election but there is always a first time. Why not quit while you are ahead". He opted for the Clerk's office and never regretted it.

Your father was not a lawyer but he was made a King's Counsel. How is that possible?

My father used to say how much he regretted never having had the opportunity to go to law school. He had a fine legal mind and wrote a book on parliamentary procedure in Ontario. Even lawyers used to come to him for advice on certain parliamentary matters. It was Premier Mitchell Hepburn who suggested my father draw up a Bill authorizing the Law Society of Upper Canada to admit him as a Barrister and Solicitor. Allan Lamport introduced the Bill which went through the House in March and April 1938.

Shortly thereafter my father received a letter from the Law Society asking him to remit the proper fees which were more than he could afford. He wrote back notifying them that he had never intended to actually practice law. Finally things got straightened out and he received a nice letter from the Treasurer of the Law Society saying they would be proud to have him as a member and all fees were waived.

In 1939, after his book was published, my father was made King's Counsel. The only one appointed that year.



This painting by Allen Good shows both Alex and Roderick Lewis at the Table in 1950. (The Ontario Art Collection).

Did you always intend to follow your father's footsteps as Clerk?

No although he wanted me to be a lawyer. He used to say I'd rather argue than eat. I was much more interested in becoming a commercial artist. After high school I worked for three years in a commercial art studio. That was during the depression and artists are among the first to suffer. It became

very hard to get work so I decided maybe I should go to law school after all.

After graduating in 1939 I got a job with the Treasury department in the Succession Duty Branch. It was not the most exciting work in the world and after a couple of years I began looking around for something else. One day Premier Hepburn called and asked me to come over to his office. When I arrived I found the Premier with his

executive assistant, the Deputy Treasurer, Dr. Chester Walters and my father. The Premier told me there was an opening as Assistant Crown Attorney for York. He said my name had been suggested and asked me if I wanted it. I jumped at the opportunity and spent the next two years prosecuting in the criminal courts and at the county court level.

The war was on then and I had some health problems, kidney stones,

which kept me out of the service. Eventually, however, I got medical clearance, joined the Navy did my training in St. John, New Brunswick. I was looking forward to going to sea, but my law training caught up to me. I was transferred to Esquimault in British Columbia where I spent the rest of the war serving on boards of inquiry, court martials and so on. It was not what I had been expecting but I enjoyed it for the most part.

While in the Navy I developed rheumatoid arthritis and spent most of 1946 in Christie Street Hospital. Shortly after being discharged I received quite an attractive offer to go into private practice with Senator David Croll and his law firm. I hesitated because of the state of my health. My father was also getting on in years and the provincial secretary, Roland Michener, was looking for someone to understudy my father. The provincial secretary had administrative responsibilities for the House in those days. I told Mr. Michener I would be happy to serve as Assistant Clerk to my father. I started in 1946 almost twenty years to the day he was first sworn in.

Shortly after joining the staff you witnessed a rather extraordinary event – the resignation of Speaker Stewart. Could you tell us about that?

It started very innocently. One day George Doucett, Minister of Public Works and Highways, asked for seats in the Speaker's gallery for some visiting officials including at least one federal minister. Speaker Stewart believed the Speaker's gallery really belonged to the Speaker and when Doucett's secretary called she was told there were no tickets left.

Doucett apologized to the visitors who did not seem too concerned. He then went into the House. When he looked into the Speaker's gallery it was virtually empty. Doucett brought the matter to the Speaker's attention in a polite way, but Speaker Stewart just exploded. He told the Minister to take it up with him in his chambers and when he left the Chair he told Mr. Doucett to come in. After some time Doucett emerged, returned to the Chamber and whispered something to Premier George Drew. Mr. Drew looked very angry. A few minutes later an envelope from the Speaker's office arrived on the Clerk's table addressed to my father. He did not open it but said to me "I think I've got the Speaker's resignation here but I'm going to give him time to cool off". He stuck the envelope in his pocket.

A few minutes later a note came down from the press gallery asking my father if he had the Speaker's resignation. He sent a note back up saying he had not seen any resignation. This went on all afternoon but the letter stayed in his pocket. That evening Speaker Stewart spoke to the press and there was no way out.

In the morning my father called Premier Drew to tell him he had received the Speaker's resignation and that he would hold an election for a new Speaker. The Premier decided to nominate James de Congalton Hepburn and asked Opposition Leader Farquhar Oliver to second the motion. Oliver said, "No, no. I think we may have some ideas of our own."

That afternoon, March 24, 1947, my father informed members of the House of the resignation. Mr. Oliver objected saying the Speaker had been elected by a vote of the House and the resignation should be dealt with by resolution of the House. My father ruled this out of order and advised the House that his opinion was backed up by Arthur Beauchesne, noted parliamentary expert in Ottawa.

Oliver then moved that the House refuse to accept the resignation. Again my father said it was out of order. Mr. Oliver appealed the ruling which was sustained by a vote of 53 – 17. George Drew then moved the nomination of Hepburn. Oliver moved an amendment saying the House still had confidence in Stewart. To avoid dividing on the issue Drew asked if Mr. Stewart accepted the nomination. Stewart said he did not wish to provoke controversy and withdrew.

You have served under some 12 different Speakers. What would you say are some of the most important qualities for a good Speaker?

First, I guess, is a good sense of humour. When a Speaker takes himself too seriously he is going to have trouble. A good Speaker will be able to diffuse a tense situation with a quip that lightens the mood.

A good Speaker must also be fair. He must make the member realize that he is absolutely unbiased in his rulings regardless of his party affiliation when he was a private member. He must be firm when necessary but willing to admit that he is human and subject to error. He must not allow the members to push him around. He must show that he has strength. I personally think there is much to be said for having a

lawyer as Speaker although we have had only one during my time. A lawyer has an advantage in that he is used to interpreting law.

One thing a Speaker is not supposed to do is keep track of how many members are in the House or who votes for or against a particular motion. The Speaker simply asks if the House agrees to a motion. If he hears anyone say "no" he calls for the "ayes" and "nays". He declares the result *taking into account the probabilities*. By that I mean if a government has a large majority he will usually say that the government side has it regardless of the numbers actually present or how loud they shout. Of course, if five members rise in their place there will be a recorded division.

Some members seem to have difficulty understanding this idea. A former member used to think that if there were more members present on the opposition side the Speaker should give them the nod. He used to shout "can't you count Mr. Speaker" at the top of his lungs.

What would you say are the essential qualities for a Clerk?

Essentially the same as for the Speaker, except perhaps without the sense of humour! A number of words come to mind – patience, stamina, trustworthiness, integrity and so on but perhaps the essential word is tradition. Above all the Clerk must be one who loves the traditions of Parliament.

Could you give us just a brief comment on some of the Speakers and Premiers you have worked with?

Aside from Stewart who resigned, Cooke Davis stands out. He was only the second Speaker to have two full terms. He did such an excellent job in his first term that Premier Leslie Frost decided to depart from the usual tradition of changing Speakers after each election.

Fred Cass was a lawyer with a sound grasp of technical and legal details but he tended to get the backs of the members up. Wally Downer was just the opposite. An Anglican Clergyman he was very popular. He had a magnificent voice and a magnificent presence. When he made a ruling it sounded as though it came down from Mount Olympus. He could get away with murder in the House because he was so popular.

Jack Stokes had a difficult job since he presided over a minority Parliament as a member of an opposition party. He had a bit of a temper which he kept under control although he could get very red in the face. He had a faculty for making the House laugh.

What about the Premiers?

I've know them all since Drury who led the United Farmers in 1920. Ferguson was very quick witted, and a great orator. George Henry was a sincere, honest gentleman but he was very wealthy and I think that made it hard for him to understand the common man. Hepburn was brilliant, mercurial, but very unstable. He fought with his own cabinet and with the federal Liberals before finally resigning. Frost was the best at getting legislation through the House. He was patient, well organized and of course, always had a big majority. He was called "Old Man Ontario" and had no interest in going on to federal politics. He also ran a one man show, unlike his successor John Robarts who delegated things to his ministers and acted as kind of a chairman of the board. I admired Mr. Robarts but he was not the politician that Frost was. Bill Davis had tremendous recall. You only had to tell him things once. He was also responsible for bringing the administration of the Legislature into the 20th century by establishing the Camp Commission and implementing many of its recommendations.

Ontario politics is sometimes perceived as rather dull but there must have been some colourful characters in the House during your time?

I would start with A.A. MacLeod one of two left-wing members elected after

the War. They were actually members of the Communist Party but it was illegal so they called themselves Labour-Progressives. He was a very good debater. He and George Drew disliked each other intensely. When Tom Kennedy replaced Drew as Premier on an interim basis, MacLeod welcomed him by saying "when the Great White Chief (Drew) was here the present premier was number two. As a combination they reminded me of arsenic and old lace. Now that we have got rid of arsenic we are looking forward to a term of old lace." After his defeat MacLeod eventually ended up as a speech writer for Premier Frost.

Kelso Roberts was a bit of an eccentric. He loved gadgets. One day he brought in a miniature projector and used it to flash notes on a little screen which he put on his desk. He married and became a father rather late in life and used to point out that he became eligible to receive the old age pension and the baby bonus at the same time. He could be stubborn and one time he tried to convince me that provincial members should have the same free railway passes as federal members because when the trains passed through the province they were under provincial jurisdiction. This was incorrect but he would not hear anything to the contrary.

Farquhar Oliver was a wonderful orator. He came from the farm and did not have a lot of formal education. He was elected at age 22 and served for 40 years before deciding the time had come to quit.

Wally Downer served almost as long (1937-1971) but he began to take things too much for granted. In 1971 he expected to take the party nomination by acclamation and instead he lost it.

He loved to play poker and would often organize a game in one of the back rooms while the House was sitting late into the night. The room was known as the "Senate" and he would sometimes say he had to leave the House to go up to the "Senate".

There were many other amusing moments like the time Fred Edwards was in the Chair during Committee of the Whole. Sometimes at night sessions he became a bit aggressive telling people to sit down. Donald MacDonald got up to give a speech and Mr. Edwards said "order, order". Mr. MacDonald, who was not out of order, demanded to know the problem. Mr. Edwards looked at me. I said "tell him he's not respecting the Chair".

Perhaps I should conclude with a story about a Liberal member elected in 1945. He was very tough and tended to drink rather heavily. One night George Drew was speaking and referring to the opposition he said "one day you will see the light."

The member jumped up and shouted "I see the light, I see the light". When the House adjourned several hours later he had to come up with something to tell the press so he said he had been thinking things over for some time and had come to the conclusion that he was more in sympathy with the government than with his own party. He even got up in the House the next day and asked the government if they were willing to take him. A long silence followed.

But if I remember correctly he actually started voting with the government and sought election as an independent Conservative at the next election. He lost.