



Recent Publications and Documents

What Have You Done For Me Lately? by Jeremy Akerman, Lancelot Press, Windsor, Nova Scotia, 1977, 84p.

Although not a recent work this little book published by a member of the Nova Scotia Legislature deserves to be better known, particularly among parliamentarians. Mr. Akerman claims he wanted to write a brief handbook to explain politics and politicians to the average person but in fact he has done much better. In a few pages he captures with remarkable wit and clarity the joys and frustrations of ordinary parliamentarians. He knows the exasperation of the provincial politician who is stopped

on the street in mid-summer and asked by an angry constituent why he is not in Ottawa. He can sympathize with the federal member who spends hours driving or flying home only to find himself being condemned for actions of a municipal council of which he is not even aware. But, there are also touching moments in politics as when an old age pensioner, with tears in her eyes, offers a crumpled dollar bill to thank her representative for having solved her problem.

Mr. Akerman spends some time discussing his parliamentary colleagues who he divides into several different categories including the "Statesman", a type so rare he has no personal experience with them. Other types are the "Partisan" who is blind to the virtues of anyone but himself and to arguments other than his own; the "Orator" who is able to entertain or devastate according to the occasion; the "Nightwatchman", who can deliver a lengthy speech saying virtually nothing, on any subject under the sun, thus gaining valuable time for his colleagues to gather their material and their wits.

Mr. Akerman has a warm spot for the person holding the office of Speaker. He or she is supposed to be totally objective and impartial but like all humans the Speaker is subject to human frailties. The author illustrates the point by giving two examples of Speakers called upon to cast the deciding vote because of a tie. One Speaker took the traditional approach saying he would vote in favour of a controversial bill introduced by Akerman because that would allow for consideration at a future time. Another Speaker broke a tie in favour of the administration and added "I think the government is doing a fine job!"

The most serious chapter in this book is the one dealing with the question of whether a Member of Parliament should follow the dictates of his conscience or the wishes of his constituents. Akerman clearly favours more scope for the individual member to speak and vote as he pleases rather than as he is expected to by his party or even by his constituents. This is particularly true on moral or what he calls "lifestyle" issues such as abortion.

Like many politicians Mr. Akerman does not have a very high opinion of the press. He shows how mischievous their use of headlines or their tendency to take things out of context can be. What are "crowds" for their favourite is merely an "audience" for the man they dislike. For one candidate there are "masses of people" but for the other only "a handful of party faithful". He gives a personal example of this kind of journalism. After a meeting in Antigonish during the 1970 election campaign the story read "Mr. Akerman, whose expensive imported English tweed suit contrasted sharply with the plain garb of his tiny audience, said the NDP was the party of the little guy." The suit in question, he says, was bought off the peg in a Sydney store for about \$100.

In his concluding chapter Mr. Akerman evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of being a politician. The work is interesting and varied with an opportunity to travel around the province or the country. On the other hand he laments a loss of privacy. The real disappointing element, however, is when those you have helped turn against you. "Some of the people on whose problems the member has spent the most time and effort may be the very people who are working hardest against him in the next election. This is democracy, but it still hurts." The reward in public

life, according to Mr. Akerman, comes from the satisfaction of knowing that one is not sitting helpless on the sidelines but is in there trying to influence those events. "Even greater reward than that is to be found in learning that one's efforts on behalf of a person have been successful, especially when that person acknowledges the help."

The Editor