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Valuing Our History

R.W. Gladstone went undefeated after 1935 win

(Note: This is the conclusion of the story of R.W. Gladstone, M.P. for Wellington South, and later a member of the Canadian Senate.)

Though the voting would not take place until October, 1935's election activity began early in the year. In April, rumours started to circulate that Hugh Guthrie was about to retire as M.P. for Wellington South, a position he had held continuously since 1900.

Time was running out for the Bennett government. It passed its fifth anniversary in July 1935, and a general election could be postponed no longer. The local rumours proved true, with the appointment of Guthrie to the Board of Railway Commissioners in early summer.

With Guthrie the Invincible gone, anything was possible in Wellington South.

The Liberals held their nomination meeting on June 29. Ten names came forward in nomination, but eight of these withdrew immediately. This left J.B. Mitchell, the candidate in 1930, and R.W. Gladstone, who had been trounced by Guthrie in 1925.

Gladstone had seen his firm, Canada Ingot Iron, through the worst period of the depression, and at 56 was prepared to take a less active role in its management. Other members of his family, with skilled hired managers, kept the shop humming. As the most recent candidate, Mitchell believed he had first claim on the nomination. The party members who packed Guelph's city hall auditorium thought otherwise, and the nod went to Gladstone.

By late summer, the CCF had C.E. Fulton in the field, and there was also a Progressive Labour candidate. The demoralized Conservatives did not meet until Sept. 17, only four weeks before the election. Guelph native George Drew had been rumoured as a candidate for months, but he wasn't interested. Party workers then persuaded lawyer J.R. Howitt into letting his name stand, but at the last minute he stepped down in favour of Hugh Guthrie Jr., son of the retiring member.

Gladstone had been campaigning quietly all summer. Late September saw a round of public meetings by all candidates, but none drew large crowds. Guthrie's meeting in Elora attracted only two party stalwarts, and was cancelled.

The national results on Oct. 14 handed a resounding defeat to R.B. Bennett, and a return to power for Mackenzie King's Liberals. Wellington South went with the flow: Gladstone's total of 8,850 gave him a healthy margin over Guthrie's 5,850. Fulton for

the CCF lagged far behind at 1,500, and Neale, the Labour man, trailed at 600. The dominance of the powerful Guthrie machine in Guelph had ended.

As a rookie MP, R.W. Gladstone made few waves. And once he learned the ropes in Ottawa, which he did quickly, he continued to shun the limelight. Much of his effort went into committee work. The waste and inefficiency of government shocked him. He advanced many ideas for streamlining procedure, some of which the King government adopted.

For almost 30 years, Gladstone had managed his own business with a very sharp pencil. His pet objective as an MP was to bring some of these business methods to government. He did not hesitate in criticizing his own party for mismanagement, but he preferred to bring about his reforms quietly, behind the scene.

During the 1939 budget debate he became particularly outspoken, advocating a new government office to examine each department regularly, searching for waste and unnecessary expenditure. Though this concept was rejected, the Finance Department adopted some of Gladstone's ideas into the annual budget process.

Gladstone took particular satisfaction in connecting businessmen with government departments and officials who could help them, either with expansion or with export markets. In this work he ignored party affiliation, insisting that his job was to do everything possible to boost the economy of his riding and the country as a whole. He saw an active role for government in the economy, providing venture capital loans to businesses, and entering into partnerships to develop new products and industries.

A big success in Gladstone's lobbying and backroom work involved the Shand Dam. This project had stalled for years due to disagreements between Ottawa and Queen's Park over financing. Hugh Templin, the conservationist editor of the Fergus News Record, convinced Gladstone of the necessity of the project.

Gladstone's persistence, which involved many calls and several special trips to Ottawa, resulted in federal grants that allowed construction to begin in 1939. Through his involvement with this project, Gladstone became a committed conservationist.

Mackenzie King called a general election for March 1940. The Liberal nomination meeting, as expected, endorsed Gladstone for another term. It was a dull meeting until the guest speaker, Agriculture Minister Jimmy Gardiner, delivered a rousing speech.

The CCF decided not to run a candidate, and with the Conservatives still in disarray, the 1940 campaign at first looked like an easy cakewalk for Gladstone. But Roy Austen soon stirred things up.

Austen was superintendent of the International Malleable Iron Co., and the leader of a group called the Argos Bible Class. Though he had been on the fringe of the Liberal party for years, Austen showed up at the Conservative nomination meeting on Feb. 22,

and had his name put forward by a couple of associates. Austen strongly advocated a union government, with the Conservatives supporting the Liberals and holding some cabinet posts for the duration of the war.

The presence of Austen and his supporters resulted in an acrimonious and confused meeting. Some people had expected a Ferguson man, either J.B. Morrison or Dr. Norman Craig, to get the nomination. Altogether, six people were nominated, but four withdrew, leaving a reluctant Hugh Guthrie Jr. as the only one to challenge the upstart intruder. Party members overwhelmingly preferred Guthrie.

It appears that some Conservatives had assured Austen that the nomination was his for the asking. With a full head of steam he carried on, entering his name as an independent candidate.

The Austen campaign suddenly caught fire. Malleable Iron employees and attendees at Austen's Bible class formed the core of his enthusiastic supporters. He even hired a brass band for his public meetings.

Gladstone was not a man to take anything for granted, but he stepped up his campaign as a result of Austen's sudden popularity. More confident now, he began promoting himself, using favourable press clippings and endorsements. His speeches had a more aggressive tone than five years earlier. To broaden his appeal, he invariably included at least one woman speaker at his meetings. Gladstone answered Austen's charges that he was a party hack with a new slogan: "Re-elect our member who has been independent."

Austen countered that "I am not tied down by party politics."

On election night, Gladstone captured every municipality in the riding, with 8,200 votes. Austen surprised scoffers with a second place showing and 5,100 votes. This was the best showing by an independent candidate in the history of Wellington County, and the record stands to this day. Poor Hugh Guthrie brought up the rear with 4,000 votes.

In Gladstone's second term he maintained the positions he had voiced in his first years as an MP. He spent much time as a liaison between industries in Wellington South and the government, expediting war contracts.

The next election, in the spring of 1945, brought little excitement. The Conservatives finally pulled their organization together, with Charles McTague as their candidate. He gave Gladstone his closest race, polling 7,700 votes to Gladstone's 8,500. Harold Dunk, the CCF man, lagged far behind at 2,400.

In the new parliament, Mackenzie King decided that Canada needed a flag. Gladstone was an appointee to an all-party committee in March 1946.

After considering many proposals, and arguing for several months, the committee

approved Gladstone's motion that the Canadian flag should consist of the red ensign, with a single maple leaf substituted for the coat of arms.

Gladstone regarded his proposal as a sensible compromise, but it satisfied few. The government dropped the proposal, and Canada went without a flag for almost 20 years.

Poor health caught up with Gladstone before the next election, in June 1949.

He spent a lengthy period in hospital after surgery early in that year. Too sick to run, he managed the campaign of Henry Hosking from his bedroom. The victory of his protege over Conservative Eric Robertson and CCFer Charles Leaman cheered him immensely.

In early summer there were rumours that R.W. Gladstone would be appointed to the Senate. Confirmation came on Sept. 7. Never excitable, he commented laconically that "it has been in the air for some time."

R.W. Gladstone's Senate career lasted less than two years. He died on June 2, 1951 at the age of 71, leaving a wife and one son. During his career he had earned the respect of almost everyone who had dealings with him. He was very much a "back room" politician, preferring small meetings to platform oratory. Though known as either "R.W." or "Bob" to everyone, many people found him cold and distant. He never shed his innate shyness.

His Senate appointment resulted from his value to the government in committee work, where he was always a tireless worker, and a man who cared little if he got credit when an idea for cutting waste or improving procedure was adopted.

There has been no Senate appointment from Wellington County since R.W. Gladstone's death 51 years ago. His company, Canada Ingot Iron, has gone through several reorganizations – to Armco in 1946, and finally to Armtec in 1987, when it severed all connections with the United States. The firm is still a leading Guelph industry, and R.W. Gladstone's most visible legacy to his adopted city.

[ photograph ]

Favourite picture: R.W. Gladstone obviously liked this portrait – he used it from 1935 until his last campaign in 1945. The thin lips and wire-rim glasses suggest a stereotypical school teacher or accountant, but Gladstone was an astute manager, quickly grasping the workings of government. He was both a hardworking back bencher for Wellington South and a productive committee member.