

The Road Back: By a Liberal in Opposition. J. W. Pickersgill.

S. J. R. Noel

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The Road Back: By a Liberal in Opposition. J. W. Pickersgill. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986.

S.J.R. NOEL

THE FIRST VOLUME of J.W. Pickersgill's political memoirs appeared in 1975 under the title *My Years with Louis St. Laurent*. In this latest volume he takes up the story of the Liberal party in opposition, following their crushing losses to Diefenbaker's Conservatives in 1957 and 1958, when only five former Liberal ministers managed to hang on to their seats and only forty-nine Liberal members were elected nationally. The parallel with the present situation is obvious and lends added interest to this account of the revival of Liberal fortunes by one who was undoubtedly among the principal architects of that revival. (It should be noted, however, that he assigns only thirty percent of the credit to the Liberals themselves: the remaining seventy percent, he modestly tells us, "was the work of Diefenbaker himself".)

The fact that Pickersgill was among the five ministerial survivors, and thus well placed to resume his accustomed place in the inner circles of government in 1963 when the Liberals returned to office under Lester Pearson, is further testimony to the value of his link with Premier Smallwood, which assured him of a safe seat in Bonavista-Twillingate despite the national tide flowing against his party. Though he makes frequent brief references to his visits to Newfoundland and includes chapters on the two major disputes between the Smallwood and Diefenbaker governments (over the refusal of the latter to support reinforcements to the R.C.M.P. during the I.W.A. loggers strike of 1959, and over the province's fiscal guarantees arising out of Term 29 of the Terms of Union) readers who are primarily interested in Newfoundland politics will look in vain for new information or revealing insights. Instead, for whatever reasons, all of the punches are pulled and the result is oddly bland, boring and ultimately unbelievable.

The real interest of the memoir, then, lies in its portrait of political life within the narrow confines of Parliament. This was where Pickersgill obvi-

ously felt himself most intensely involved, the one place where his considerable qualities of energy and intelligence were most fully engaged — and the one subject on which his writing rises above the merely pedestrian and occasionally sparkles. He is at his best in his intimate account of the day-to-day parliamentary struggle, with its ceaseless manoeuvring for party advantage and its complex interplay of political and personal interests, ambitions and animosities.

That the crises and issues purported to be the substance of the struggle were generally somewhat less than earth-shattering, and sometimes entirely synthetic, hardly seems to have mattered: what comes across most strongly is the author's palpable excitement in the game itself and his pleasure in being among its outstanding players. Cumulatively, chapter by chapter, issue by issue, with all of the wins and losses, scores and point totals carefully recorded, there is also evoked (perhaps unintentionally) a strong impression of the claustrophobic, overheated atmosphere of the Ottawa political arena of the day. Not surprisingly, such an atmosphere was hardly conducive to the taking of long views or broad perspectives on national issues. Instead, it seems to have fostered an at times comic propensity to grind every issue down to the level of Ottawa's own parochial concerns. Thus, for example, the tangled Coyne affair — which potentially revolved around such important questions as the direction of Canada's monetary policies and their effects upon employment levels and currency values, the degree of autonomy which ought to be permitted the Governor of the Bank of Canada, and the constitutional right of the government of the day to overrule (and if necessary, fire) the Governor — in the end came down to a wrangle over the size of Mr. Coyne's pension.

In Pickersgill's version of this and other similarly dusty episodes the chief villain is invariably John Diefenbaker, with the ironic result that Diefenbaker's vivid presence dominates these memoirs while Pickersgill's own party leader, Lester Pearson, seems by comparison but a pale shadow. This may do less than justice to Pearson, but it is surely an accurate reflection of the political temper of the times. For the Liberals were obsessed with Diefenbaker, in their eyes a malevolent demagogue who had deprived them of their natural right to govern (and of the perquisites of power to which they had been long accustomed). Their behaviour in opposition was accordingly full of resentment and unrestrained hostility, which Diefenbaker fully reciprocated. The result was a rough, tough, gloves-off style of politics which continued unabated after the teams changed ends in 1963. In this book we are treated to a blow-by-blow account from the point of view of the Liberal bench, but whether the outcome meant anything at all beyond the game itself is open to question (though it is a question Pickersgill never asks, presumably because winning was not the main objective, but the only one).

Nevertheless, fans from coast to coast will be grateful for his faithful recreation of one of the game's most entertaining eras.