

Bill Rea ? Remembering Sinclair Stevens

It was a case of a page turning in my professional life.

I learned last week that former local MP Sinclair Stevens had died late in November.

He was the local MP when I first started working in this community as a student 33 years ago last month. I had heard of him, of course. He was a high-profile member of the Progressive Conservative opposition in Ottawa in those days. He had been President of the Treasury Board during the brief administration of Prime Minister Joe Clark, in the days before I knew what the Treasury Board was. I met him for the first time at the home of local resident. This woman had won his window-washing services in a contest put on by some community group, and I was there to photograph his paying up. This was a couple of months before the 1984 general election.

An election campaign is a good time to get to know any politician, and that was certainly the case with Sinc. I well remember covering an all-candidates' meeting in Aurora (which was part of the York-Peel riding in those days, and scrumming Sinc in the parking lot after the debate. It was a small scrum, to be sure. There was just Mr. Stevens, his wife Noreen and the pesky kid who was myself, standing in there strategically positioned under a street light (I had to be able to see what I was writing down), all three of us anxious to get home. Sinc answered every one of my questions, and I filled several pages of my note pad. And his good humour was in place the whole time.

Forward to election night, when to the surprise of no one, Mr. Stevens was handily returned to his seat. There was a vast crowd inside the hall in Newmarket which was the scene of his victory party. Yet there were several members of the media (myself included) outside waiting for the arrival of the feature of the evening. And he did come, eventually, in a vehicle, and we all fired off our cameras to record the victorious candidate emerging from the car. But I do know facts are facts. Upon his arrival at his victory party, I was the very first person to walk up to him and offer up my hand in congratulations (assuming no one stopped him in the parking lot as the car was entering).

And I vividly remember the scene that followed, as Sinc made his way through the throng greeting those on hand to congratulate him, responding over his shoulder to the questions the media types like me were barking at him. The most powerful memory was the theme from the movie Flashdance was blaring over the loudspeaker.

And then came the scandal, with a lengthy public inquiry into whether Mr. Stevens had violated conflict of interest guidelines. By the time things had progressed, I had become an editor, with people demanding that I call for his removal from office, although the process was not yet complete. There was one elderly lady who was particularly adamant, despite the fact that I reminded her that she had lived through a World War, and one of the issues on which that war was fought was the guarantee that we were all entitled to due process.

The final report from that inquiry was less than favourable to Mr. Stevens, but that ruling was overturned about 17 years later. By that point, the damage to his political career had been done. That wrong can never be righted, but he at least was able to see vindication.

I learned a lot from that experience. I learned how very important it was for a public official to both be clean and look clean. But I also learned that institutions like courts of law and public inquiries can sometimes get things wrong. A Federal Court judge overturned the ruling in 2004. I don't recall reading about any apologies being offered to Mr. Stevens for the damage that had been done to his reputation. Maybe there's a lesson there to be learned by editors and commentators and observers and the rest of us to possibly holster our words until we're absolutely sure that absolutely all the facts have been considered.

As I stated, I learned a lot.

There were a lot of other things I learned from Sinclair Stevens.

There were times when I found him to be a wealth of information on issues involving the federal government. Like most politicians, he loved to talk. Unlike most politicians, just about everything he had to say was actually interesting to listen to.

When Pierre Trudeau died in 2000, I called Sinc for his thoughts on the man he had watched from the other side of the House of Commons for years. I remember taking notes like mad as he talked.

There were other issues he and I discussed, like the merger of the federal Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance, a move of which he never approved. His status with the Progressive Canadian party meant he was always available with his thoughts on the way the federal government was being run.

If memory serves, the last time I talked to Mr. Stevens was to get his thoughts in the aftermath of the 2015 federal election, in which the Justin Trudeau Liberals toppled Stephen Harper.

I should have called him more frequently. He was a wonderful source of information and insight that I didn't make nearly enough

use of.

Sinclair Stevens saw a great deal during his life about the way this country of ours runs and is run, and he had lots to tell.

That's going to be missed by a lot of people, especially by me.

Many thanks Sinc

