

Conversation

with Jean Chretien

Jean Chretien has held a number of portfolios in Liberal cabinets. In the last Trudeau cabinet he was Minister of Finance. At the request of several Liberal candidates, the colorful Quebec lawyer has been campaigning across Canada. During a recent swing through Toronto, Chretien was interviewed by *Excalibur* staffer Neil Wiberg.

Is raising the price of oil an effective conservation measure?

Not necessarily. If you look at the experiences of some of the countries, like Germany or France, where the price of energy is much higher than here, there is no indication that there is a huge decline.

The people here have lived with cars for generations. We have developed a society where cars are vital. I think it will take some time for people to change their ways.

People will not, for another 18 or 19 cents a gallon, put their \$10,000 car on blocks in the garage. There is no common measure in the relation between the investment and the cost of the gasoline. If you have a nice car and want to drive on Sunday - it is not because it will cost you \$2 a gallon for 23 miles that you would leave the car in the garage.



Bryon Johnson

How would you rate the job your successors have done - Mr. Crosbie in Finance and Senator de Cobret in Industry, Trade and Commerce?

I think that Mr. Crosbie has a very interesting personality. He makes a lot of jokes - too many of them!

I think that he is a bit cynical. For example, I was very disappointed when he said, "The people did not vote for the promises we made, they voted against Trudeau." That shows a lot of cynicism on his part.

As a human being, he is a very warm person and quite funny. That's an aspect of his personality and I like him for that. But I think that sometimes you have to be serious.

Again, his cynicism came at the time of the budget when he said, let's put that unacceptable budget to the Opposition and the people, because the Liberals are caught with their pants down. They are in the middle of a leadership campaign. We had said all along that even if we were in that bind we would not buy it. It was such a bad budget that even the Creditistes—who will be wiped out—would not support it.

How would you rate Senator de Cotret?

In my book, I don't think that ministers should come from the Senate. If he cannot get elected, he should get another job.

Do you think he will get elected in Quebec this election?

No. He is running in the next riding to mine and I will be extremely surprised if he gets elected.

What is the Liberal position on interest rates? Newspaper reports have suggested that Mr. Axworthy, Mr. Gray and Mr. Phillips wanted the interest rates to go down while Mr. Andras and yourself supported high interest rates. Were these accurate reports?

No, they were not accurate. I have said publicly that there was not a need to go to 14 per cent in interest rates because inflation in Canada was much lower

than in the United States. I don't know where you took that story. The guys who wrote that story do not know what is going on in the Liberal party.

How do you react to people who say the Liberals are cynical by talking about an industrial strategy when they were in power for eleven years and didn't introduce such a strategy?

We had. There is a mythology that if you put on paper a great scheme that all the problems will disappear. We have a strategy. We want to be self-sufficient in energy. We want to maintain our competitive advantage through energy over our partners. We have let the Canadian dollar float so that our goods will be competitive in world markets. But some people think that there could be a grand scheme graphed on a wall that would resolve all our problems. Things don't work that way.

Do you subscribe to any kind of economic doctrine? Are you a Keynesian or a Monetarist?

No. I am a Liberal. A Liberal is a guy who looks at a situation as it exists in this time. We are not doctrinaires by definition. Either of the two formulas you mentioned seem to give the answers for any problem. When you approach those problems in a very doctrinaire way you get caught. You want to prove you were right in adopting that line. I have the privilege and advantage of not being an economist. I am not married to a thesis. I never wrote a thesis or a doctrine. I just use my common sense, and very often, common sense does not match with theory.

The Tories' number one concern seems to be the deficit. Is this a justified concern? Is there a role for deficit financing?

That is exactly what I was explaining to you. They are doctrinaires, they are fanatics about the deficit, not knowing that the deficit is sometimes a necessary economic policy. The deficit in Japan is much higher than in Canada, because their savings are much higher than here.

Our deficit is very often used to recycle the money that Canadians are saving. If we were not in the bond market today, where would that money go?

It's amazing when I look at Bay Street. Some guys who sell bonds don't want a deficit. If there were no deficit there would be no bonds to sell.

You should not be doctrinaire about it. You should look at the practical situation and you will realize, for example, in Canada two years down the line, the deficit of the federal government will be equal to the surplus of the provinces.

Why didn't the Liberals introduce a Freedom of Information Act?

Why we did not? Because we did not have the time. We were working on that. John Roberts was consulting everybody about it.

Everything that I knew as Minister of Finance was available in the *Globe and Mail* every morning—or in the *Financial Post* or the *Financial Times*.

But there is a problem. If your advisers cannot give you candid advice, you do not get their advice. If an advisor is forced to think when he gives you advice, that somebody can come someday and look at this advice and pass judgement from the outside, he will be less candid and more careful.

Do you think the Tory Bill goes too far?

I am not a specialist in that field. It's never been a big problem for me.

Does Premier Davis' treatment of the francophone minority in Ontario have an effect in Quebec? Do you feel it will affect the referendum campaign?

It's a difficult question. I think that he could have shown more generosity toward the Penetanguishene problem. Levesque has used it. But at the same time, we have to recognize that the French teaching in Ontario has gained a lot of ground in the past few years. For example, I live in Ottawa and my kids can go to French school. There are a lot of anglophones in French schools.

We should have a system in Canada—in my personal judgement—by which there should be nobody that graduates from university who does not have a working knowledge of both languages. When you are in university you learn all sorts of things that you will never use in your life. Why not put through the training of university the obligation of learning another language—that is, that language that is spoken by 30 per cent of the population. And for us, the francophones, we should be learning English.

What do you see as the role of the Prime Minister, be it Trudeau or Clark, during the Quebec referendum campaign?

I think that whoever is Prime Minister of Canada in the referendum campaign has to act as a Prime Minister of Canada. He should go to Quebec, whatever his facilities of communication, and explain—through a few meetings or press conferences—his reason why Quebecers should remain in Confederation. He should speak with optimism about the future of Canada.

I was very disappointed with Mr. Clark, who took that view that because he was born in Alberta he should not be there. Born in Alberta or not, he is the Prime Minister of Canada, the Prime Minister of all Canadians, including the Quebecers. I was very disappointed by his lack of leadership.

What do you expect the results to be in the referendum campaign in Quebec if Mr. Trudeau wins the election?

It will be won. It might be won anyway, but we will have a better chance with Mr. Trudeau. One of the great arguments of Levesque over the past seven months was: "You were telling us that there is a place for the French Canadian in Canada. Look at what happened in the last election. They got kicked out." Now, seven months after that, the so-called French power is taken back, because it was a disaster by Joe Clark, John Crosbie and Sinc Stevens. So, we're vindicated.

I don't want a special status, I just want to have a fair chance. I've been a Minister of Finance, of Industry, Trade and Commerce, Treasury Board and so on. Not because I'm French, not because I'm English, but because I could do the job. That's all.



Bryon Johnson

Your name has been mentioned frequently as a possible leadership candidate. I know you can't tell me if you are going to run now, but what criteria will you look at when making your decision, two or three years down the road?

That's a very difficult question. If ever I run, it would be on the basis that I think I am the best one of our guys.

My problem—and it is a well-known one—is that I am a francophone and Trudeau is a francophone. There is a tradition in the party that we should alternate our leaders. But in 1968, I did not support Trudeau, I supported Mitchell Sharp. I argued at the time that you should always look for the best man. I can make the same argument. I do not know if the convention will find that I am the best man.

The second problem is that I do not have a deep commitment or a deadly desire to become Prime Minister. If it was offered, I would like to do it and I do think personally that I would do a decent job. But, if it was not coming my way, I would not go through a depression. I never told my professor I would become Prime Minister, so I am not like Joe Clark. I have no commitment with destiny.

Are you going to get a new pair of shoes soon?

I might, but I'm not sure. But don't wish for one of your friends to become Minister of Finance in Canada. It's a hell.