



The CANADIAN COURIER

The National Weekly



Vol. XIII.

April 5, 1913

No. 18

Personalities and Problems

No. 24—Hon. Robert Rogers

The Man Who Has no Illusions and to Whom a Majority is a Machine to Control Parliament

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

An ingenious member of Parliament unfolded to a group of incredulous listeners his invention of a fabulous instrument by means of which he could penetrate psychically into the bowels of the earth to discover what therein is. He called it the "styroscope."

This set the company thinking.

"Splendid thing!" said one. "Why not try it on the skulls of Cabinet ministers and members of Parliament? It might clear up this deadlock."

Names were mentioned, of several leaders on both sides of the House, who to the public are enigma and even in caucus may be a mystery. I don't recall that the name of Hon. Robert Rogers was omitted from the list. If so it was an oversight. The Minister of Public Works is a fit subject for psychic investigation.

It's a good many years now since "Bob" Rogers became a puzzle to political scientists. Up till 1911 the particular interest in his mentality was confined to Manitoba. For a year and a half now he has been under a microscope at Ottawa. For the past two months members of Parliament and a large army of both Conservatives and Liberals in the country at large would have been glad of a really concentrated squint through any kind of 'scope that would reveal what is going on at any given time in the mind of Mr. Rogers.

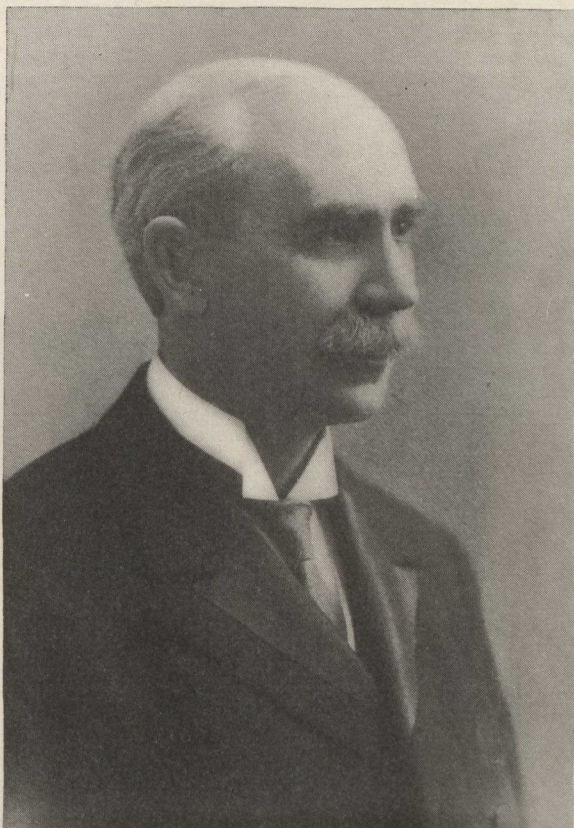
It was the Minister of Public Works who, on March 3, raised the point that the discussion on the cost of warships was out of order, somewhat precipitating the deadlock. It was Mr. Rogers to whom the leader of the Opposition plainly referred in his manifesto on Brute Force. It is the former Minister of the Interior who is credited with the machinery of managing the majority in the House of Commons to pass the Naval Bill. It is he who is clearly pitted against William H. Pugsley, the adroit tactician under Sir Wilfrid. If the closure is applied to the debate—thanks to Mr. Rogers. He has an unmistakable intention. He makes no concealment of it. He has no spider-web methods that obscure his purpose. There are times when the effective unit force of the Cabinet is behind Mr. Rogers—including Mr. Borden. And there are times when the Government benches are a unit behind the stand taken by the "man from Manitoba," who has the dogged courage of his convictions, and was never known to rant or froth at the mouth in his declaration of them either in Parliament or Legislature, in caucus or in counsel, in sickness or health, in the limelight or round the corner.

Mr. Rogers is the coolest man in Parliament. He sits next to Hon. Frank Cochrane in the front benches. Frequently during the deadlock he was seen closely confabbing with the Minister of Finance. At such times he was a fine study in effective contrast. Where in any other Canadian Cabinet was there ever known such a pair of foils? In the technic of Parliament and the business of experience and in type of mentality, Mr. White is just about all that Mr. Rogers is not. They are the this and that, the one and the opposite, the shield and the reverse. Between these two ministerial extremes lies the whole genius of Conservative government by majority. Compared to this antipodes the difference between Mr. Rogers and Mr. Pugsley pales into a very plain resemblance. A Cabinet that in two of its most important port-

folios contains two such irreconcilable intellects must be considered one of the most remarkable cabinets since Confederation.

TO every man his separate gifts. In a Cabinet confronted by such a task and such a tremendously organized Opposition in the Liberal front benches, the genius of one man may be needed for work that no other man in the Cabinet could possibly do.

Mr. Rogers is emphatically that kind of man. The Cabinet contains none other like him. Neither does the party. He is what the English essayists



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call "sui generis," peculiar to himself. And he is at times powerful to other men. Not in peace so much as in war; not in a conventionality but in what may be considered a crisis, which a man like Mr. Rogers may do much either to cause or to cure.

Notice him when he rises in the House to reply to questions of the Opposition. It may be on the estimates, when Mr. Pugsley, acquainted with all the details of the Public Works, gently catechises the Hon. Minister. When Mr. Rogers rises you note that he is physically the smallest man in the Cabinet. A thin, wiry trailsman, cold and passionless, low-voiced and deliberate, with the frozen gleam of little grey eyes and a benevolent wimple of fine, fallow-grey-hair—he does not at all resemble the thunderous bulldog personage that so many have tried to think him. He has no shoulder-back, broad-out aspect of defiance. There are no dia-

pasos or thrills in his voice; no flashings of frenzy in his face; no oratorical periods and eloquent gestures such as characterize Mr. Pelletier or Mr. Doherty or the Premier.

Somewhat stoopedly he stands, calm and collected and deliberate. In his left hand he twiddles his eyeglasses. You might think he was nervous, but that you know he cannot be; at least not obviously from his manner of speaking or the way he has of fronting the facts. Clear and concise as a pair of scissors he snips off just so much reply as may be needed to cover the point raised by the member opposite. No more; and no less. He evades nothing; manufactures no quibbles; fabricates no play upon words. Mr. Rogers is not a man of parliamentary artifices in speech. He has no teasing beguilements of delivery that bewilder and fascinate his opponents. Direct and decisive and for the most part mirthless, he says his say, and he takes his seat when he has done it. To him there is no joy in a mere passage-at-arms; no delight in mere jockeyings for place. Parliament to him is not a yacht race nor a fencing bout to be decided by points. It is a serious, immediate business to be handled without gloves and to be got through with in what he considers the interest of public business.

In these qualities of temper and personality Mr. Rogers is nothing short of admirable. Alas! that he is not entertaining; he is at least business-like and compels your interest.

Getting into Mr. Rogers' office at Ottawa involves about the usual degree of patience. The Public Works Department occupies most of the front part of a whole floor in the West Block. The head office is at the far west end; ante-room fronting the long corridor—and an average of three or four always in the ante-room. Here is a picture of some beavers felling a tree, called—"The First Engineers," and a very obliging attendant who has no objection to visitors smoking while they wait.

Sir Rodolphe Forget bustled in while three or four others waited, sent in his card and was soon admitted.

One remembers that the Public Works Department is the most complicated of all in the matter of spending money, from a rural post-office to a place the size of Montreal Harbour. Looking at the beavers you begin to trace the marvelous development of the works built and owned by the government of Canada in the name of the people; the tremendous ramifications of a vast system of utilities representing government ownership, built as one supposes as well and with such profound regard for economy as any beaver dam. This is at least poetic.

A keen-looking, quick-moving man comes into the office next to the Minister's. You understand that he is Mr. Eugene Lafleur, the chief engineer of a large corps of engineers responsible for this vast scheme of public investments. There is enough in the life and work of such a man to make a book as fascinating as the story of any railroad romance in—

But the man is the important thing. Mr. Rogers in his office is not very different a man from Mr. Rogers in Parliament. He has a huge office and his desk faces the south. He looks fair at the door; so that any man entering may be seen square as he comes in.

But for a moment the Minister does not glance up.