

U.S. politics - "just warm spit"

by David Oke

"The American political system isn't worth a bucket of warm spit," was how Walter Stewart described U.S. politics Wednesday in the Tory Lecture Theatre.

For those who missed the talk, Stewart's article in the latest issue of MacLean's is a reasonable facsimile. Stewart's talk began where his article left off: on the bucket of warm spit.

Just like his writing, Walter Stewart is entertaining, witty and fast with a quip.

"This year's presidential election is between a schnook and a jerk," he said. "A proven fake on one side and a social neanderthal on the other. Gerry Ford just doesn't know what's going on. He's handicapped by his background; the quintessential Grand Rapids boy."

Stewart was just as cynical about Jimmy Carter.

"He has a smile like a cheshire cat and he can say, 'Ah love yah,' which is what the American people wanted to hear. But after that, he just fades away."

"Carter is shrewd," Stewart conceded, adding he has "a tremendous impact on TV and an extraordinary ability to communicate over that medium."

About the two debates televised to date, Stewart wondered, "Carter and Ford seemed to fade together and the image you get is that of Ronald Reagan. It makes you wonder who really won."

Discussing the office of the president, Stewart said, "There is so much power in the U.S. government that only a superman could ever fill the office of President and only the mediocre succeed to that office."

"Abe Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt. You could name all of America's great presidents in one breath," stated Stewart.

"In fact, I just did."

Walter Stewart then devoted a few minutes to a review of American presidential history.

"Andrew Jackson thought Europe was spelled UROP and that the world was flat. Harry Truman spent his term of office in the pocket of a tin-horn crook - Tom Pendergast."

On J.F.K. - "What he did mostly was to make colorful speeches and put his back out with a series of young ladies."

The 1972 election was "a contest between the unspeakable and the unworkable."

The 1968 election was "between the unspeakable and someone who never stopped speaking."

To Stewart, the signers of the Declaration of Independence created the office of President, thinking they were getting rid of Kings. Instead, the presidency has gone from "primacy to supremacy."

Walter Stewart agrees with Arthur Schlesinger that "the institutional presidency has become the imperial presidency. Although in the case of Ford, the emperor wears no clothes."

"Legislation by lottery and lobby is the underpinning of American government," was Stewart's comment on the American Congress and Senate.

He termed the system of checks and balances a cop-out.

"When three bodies share power, no one is responsible. Who is responsible for the budget? - each body has its own budget; for health, energy or fiscal and monetary policy? The legislative system is a zoo."



Walter Stewart — "They're drowning in spit down there!"

Photo Don Truckey

Stewart's best example of the American legislature in action was its vote on a recent bill that gave a subsidy to southern tobacco producers. A group of southern members, noticing that the representative blocking their bill was out visiting the toilet, quickly 'huddled' and rushed their bill through the House. When the member returned, the bill was law.

To Walter Stewart, the Canadian parliamentary system is subject to the same abuses as the American system, yet he sees important differences in our parliamentary system as valuable protections against these abuses.

"Canadians expect mortality," Stewart said. In contrast to an imperial presidency, he saw the Pearson years as having "a tendency toward buffoonery."

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"We have a responsible, effective system." Despite lobbies and cozy connections, "legislation is still thrashed out on the floor. There is the constant threat of government defeat with the Prime Minister and cabinet being daily subjected to direct questioning."

Somewhere, though, in the flood of Stewart's cynicism and showbiz, more substantial views were lost. To say of Joe Clark: "On stage he looks like Howdy Doody and sounds like a teenage kid imitating John Diefenbaker in a high school play," though true, is a rather superficial criticism of the ex-Gateway editor who, according to the latest Gallup polls, could well be Canada's next Prime Minister. Stewart's

emphasis is on adjectives and not on analysis.

According to Stewart, the current debate in Canada and the United States over government intervention in the economy is the most important issue facing us today.

"This election, there is a discernible difference between the platforms of the two parties on this issue." Stewart, however, declined to go into this topic in much more depth. His MacLean's article devoted two paragraphs to the issue.

A question period followed the talk allowing Stewart some more quotable observations.

On the NDP's chances: "If Flora MacDonald were to be found 'with child' from Ed Broadbent, they might stand a chance."

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