

# Pork-barrel politics = democracy

by RALPH SURETTE

When he was in the opposition, Nova Scotia's Premier John Buchanan could be counted on to mount a high moral horse and come galloping down hard whenever his keen nostrils caught a whiff of the old Liberal pork barrel being cracked open even the slightest.

But obviously, justice of any kind was impossible as long as the evil Grits remained in power. Thus, the awesome significance of the Tory ascension to power last September: justice would finally come to pass.

However, no one was quite prepared for the new morality on which this justice was to be based: that a sin is a sin only when committed by a Grit; for a Tory it is a virtue.

Thus, virtuously, the infidel was slain.

Highway workers by the dozens lost their jobs. Although it is customary in Nova Scotia for some highway foremen who owe their jobs to political affiliation to be fired whenever a government changes, this time the slaughter didn't stop there.

Some unionized highway workers were fired as well, government boards from Halifax's Metro Centre down to the Nova Scotia Harness Racing Commission were swept clean and, generally, Conservative party patronage committees, in the words of NDP MLA Paul MacEwan, "have been established throughout the province to work on every area where the government has discretionary power."

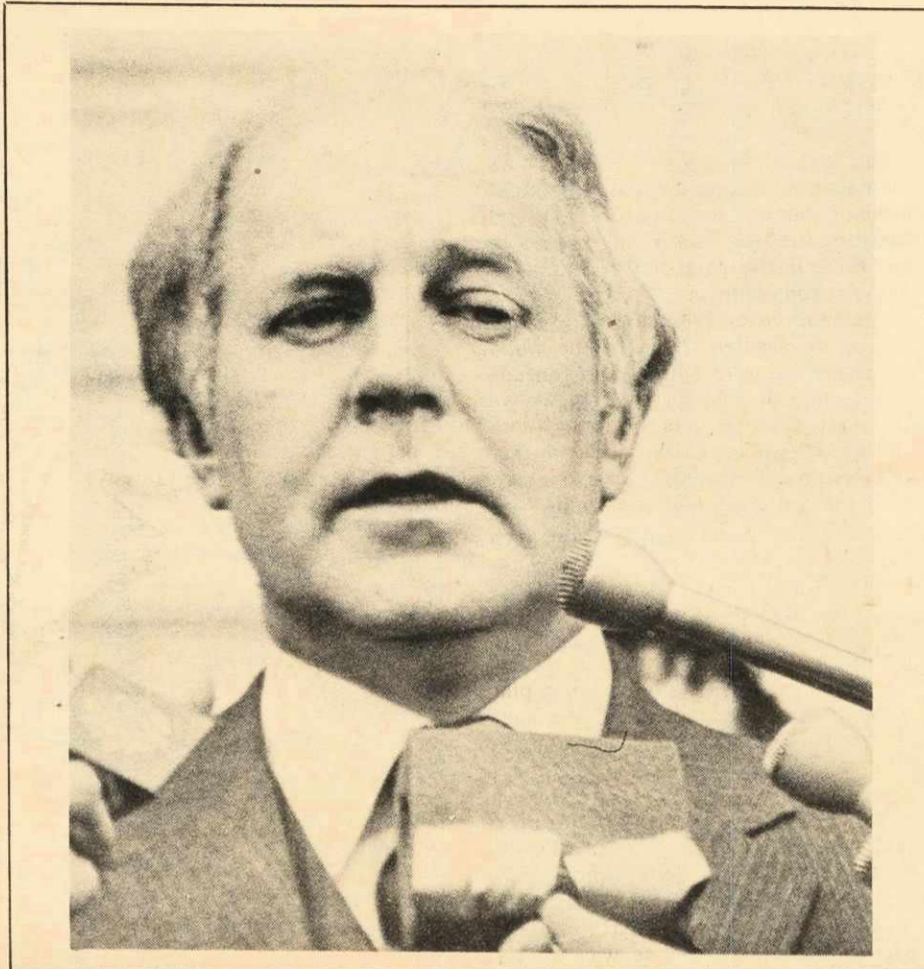
Just before the election Premier John Buchanan proclaimed a "no firings" policy far and wide. On a phone-in radio show on CJFX in Port Hawkesbury on September 9 a caller asked if he intended, if elected, to "follow the Conservative policy of firing all the Liberals who are working for you."

"Certainly not," Buchanan replied. "Good gracious, because a person is a Liberal or Conservative or New Democrat, if that person is qualified and performing . . . and is in a useful position, that person remains."

CUPE local 1867 was promised specifically, in a meeting between union officials and Buchanan four days before the election, that highway workers wouldn't be fired.

Now the number fired probably exceeds a hundred. Some are overt political workers, but some have virtually no link to politics at all except that they obtained jobs during the Liberal reign.

Of these, seven are CUPE members. The union has appealed to both the Highways and the Labour Ministers to have their cases reviewed by an arbitration



Dal Photo / Delorey

## NS Premier John Buchanan

board. The appeal was turned down on grounds that the workers had been still in their probationary period.

Perhaps the most revealing incident, however, involved the firing of the King's County crown prosecutor, Donald Hall, on grounds that he had served as official agent for the defeated Liberal MLA.

"I consider a crown prosecutor's role akin to that played by a civil servant," said Attorney General Harry How in a revealing statement. "It's fine to have political beliefs one way or the other but there is no room for active participation." How gave the job to a non-active Tory.

Paul MacEwan contrasted the firing with the "precociously rapid advancement of Frank Edwards, defeated Tory candidate in Cape Breton West." Edwards was appointed crown prosecutor in Cape Breton County after only four years on the provincial bar.

Pork barrel politics is an old tradition in Nova Scotia, and perhaps a more open one

than elsewhere. Until the 1950s a change in government pretty well meant that everyone working on the road, in particular, got sacked.

When Robert Stanfield was elected Tory Premier in 1956 there was some reduction of these traditional practices. During his administration the highway workers unionized, and when Liberal Gerald Regan took over in 1970 the more overt "pork barrel" practices diminished even more. Although no one would have said that political patronage was dead in Nova Scotia—not by a long shot—it was nevertheless assumed when Buchanan took power that this more recent tendency of weeding out the grosser practices would continue. While former Premier Regan admits that "we did some things too" in patronage terms, he says he has never seen such a systematic and determined effort by a government to weed out anyone who might be an opponent from within.

Initially at least, the Tories seem to be motivated less by duplicity and political

chicanery than by a kind of blundering innocence. John Buchanan gives every indication that he truly believes that party Tories are inherently good and everyone else bad.

What is perhaps most interesting in this whole case is the defence the Conservatives offer for their actions. Buchanan has been quoted as saying that the firings constitute "democracy in action." He has also said that it's "a fundamental principle of democracy" that when a new government comes in anyone in a sensitive position of advising on government policy be changed because you don't want your opponents in top jobs working against you.

This seems to mean that everyone in a highly sensitive function, such as carrying a shovel in the highways department, must fear for his job—a state of mind which many civil servants with no connection to politics have been in since the election.

Buchanan brings to power one of the most narrowly partisan attitudes seen in politics in Canada for some time. His electoral sweep, the near-upset of the Liberals in P.E.I., the clinging-to-power against the odds of Tory Richard Hatfield in New Brunswick, the fact that Newfoundland is Tory provincially seems to have convinced him that a holy Tory millenium is at hand. It will come to earth completely when Joe Clark becomes Prime Minister.

This has led the Buchanan government to take a truculent attitude towards Ottawa and also led Buchanan himself out on a rather presumptuous limb at times.

For example, a few weeks after his election he was in the United States (where else?) making his first major policy speech. The Atlantic provinces, he told a Portland, Maine, audience, have plenty of energy to sell to New England—nuclear power from New Brunswick, tidal power and coal power from Nova Scotia, hydroelectricity from Newfoundland. Apart from this being nonsense, there was the even stickier problem of Buchanan presuming to speak for the other Atlantic provinces. He was quickly sat upon by spokesmen for Newfoundland, who reminded him they had other plans in mind.

In economic policy, the Buchanan government is off on a program of restraint and is describing itself as a "government of business." Not that this makes it any different from the government it replaced—the difference being that it's admitting it. This minor piece of honesty may be the most auspicious part of the Buchanan government's first six months in power.

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