

# The Honourable John A. Fraser

PC, OC, OBC, CD, QC, LLD (Hon.)

BY PENNY CHOLMONDELEY

By the late 1940s, during his teen years, John A. Fraser was working in lumber mills and camps, loading boxcars and booming logs. It was dangerous and brutal work. There was no automation, there were no computers—just sweat, muscle, and back-breaking labour. It was then, on the tidewaters and in the forests of British Columbia's rugged wilderness, that the future politician and conservationist nurtured his deep appreciation for nature. It was also at this time that he solidified the stringent work ethic that carried him through law school and cultivated a celebrated career in public life.



Fraser graduated from UBC Law in the spring of 1954, thanks in part to raw ambition and determination. "When I got into law school, I was going through a difficult time," he reflects somberly. He pauses, then continues with a mischievous smile: "I thought, 'I don't know how smart I am compared to some of these students, but I do know that I can outwork any one of them and I am going to work so hard and become such a good counsel that even the Liberals, who I then assumed would always be in power, would *have* to appoint me to the bench."

True to his spirit of adventure, he spent the summer after graduation leading pack horses through the Yukon before embarking on a legal career that would last until his election to the House of Commons in 1972. Although active in politics from an early age, Fraser says giving up the practice of law was the most difficult decision of his life. "I thought it was my duty. Looking back on it now, I have no regrets and I don't indulge in nostalgia, but I missed the law very much. My whole ambition in life, and what drove me, was the law."

Committed to a life in politics, he would return to Ottawa five more times over the next two decades, serving in a number of positions including Minister for the Environment, Minister of Fisheries, and Speaker of the House of Commons. During this time he demonstrated his dedication to environmental conservation through a number of initiatives including an international treaty between Canada and the

US to prevent flooding in BC by the proposed Skagit River dam in Washington, and the creation of the Pacific Salmon Treaty with the US.

There is no doubt that John Fraser is a tenacious achiever. For his work in the service of his fellow Canadians, he has been made an officer of the Order of Canada (OC) and a member of the Order of British Columbia (OBC). He also holds the Canadian Forces Decoration (CD), is a Queen's Counsel (QC) and was awarded honorary Doctor of Laws degrees for his contributions to environmental causes by Simon Fraser University, St. Lawrence University (1999) and the University of British Columbia (2004).

But John Fraser is also a thinker whose decisions and actions are made with an eye to the future—a future he believes must include the protection of the natural world. It is a value first instilled upon him by his father, who worked in the BC lumber industry in its early days. "My father said we have one of the richest heritages and sources of superb wood in the world. Grinding it up for pulp and two-by-fours was sacrilege—it was worth more than that. He was ahead of his time."

Fraser took his father's message seriously during his time as a practising attorney. By the 1960s, he was already warning corporate clients in the forestry industry about impending changes to environmental legislation and regulation.

"There used to be people who said, 'We have a timber licence, we have a contract, and don't you dare tell us what to do.' My partners and I were trying to tell them that the days when companies could lock everyone out were nearly over. That the land being harvested was also essential for water, for wildlife, for the resources it holds, for recreation, for spiritual aspects. That these are beautiful places. And that they needed to take a more holistic view." A shift in thinking was underway, Fraser warned, and so were criticisms from the populous.

It turns out Fraser was right. Today, he illustrates this shift by referring to the arrest of 800 protestors at Clayoquot Sound in 1993; and more recently, to the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement, which is an innovative new conservation and economic development model.

This ability to calculate the future ramifications of action—and inaction—in the present has been invaluable throughout Fraser's career. He was the first Canadian politician to instigate negotiations with the US on the issue of acid rain; and as early as 1984, he was discussing climate change and global warming in cabinet meetings. In 1994, he was appointed Canada's Ambassador for the Environment, serving for nearly five years. Along the way, Fraser has engaged in a delicate juggling act, managing the needs and desires of competing stakeholders. He believes his grounding in law was an asset to his political career, and sees similarities between courtroom work and political life.

"There are rights and wrongs; there is innocence and guilt. There are people who are good most of the time but not all of the time, and people who are bad most of the time, and every once in a while, they surprise you by doing something good. The great thing about the legal profession is that we have striven mightily to keep all of these contentious issues within the framework of civility. It is harder to do that in the political world, but you have to strive for it."

An address by Dean Curtis to Fraser's first-year class continues to resonate deeply. "[Dean Curtis] spoke to the importance of the rule of law, without which you cannot have a democracy. Without the rule of law, we get the rule of the whims and caprices of individuals, and sometimes with pretty terrible results."

Although now retired from the political arena, Fraser is still active with a number of organizations dedicated to the environment and sustainable development. From 1998, he chaired the Federal Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, tasked to report on the state of salmon stocks and habitat, until he was appointed by Premier

Campbell in 2005 to chair the independent BC Pacific Salmon Forum, mandated to resolve fish farm and wild salmon issues, and to advise the provincial government on ways, within its jurisdiction, to conserve salmon, steelhead, and their habitat.

"Obviously, in an organization like this, you have to work with a lot of people, some of whom don't like each other. You also need to maintain a relationship with government... unfortunately, the antagonisms between certain people in the industry and those who are fearful that fish farms are going to diminish or extinguish salmon is very deep-seated."

Still, the forum has made progress. Fraser says it remains "amazingly independent," spending over \$2 million dollars on research, and recently publishing a study on the Broughton Archipelago over three decades.

With issues like fish farms, fossil fuels, and global warming persisting as hot topics for public debate, the word "change" is on the minds of many Canadians. Does Fraser think we are ready for change? It depends, he says. He believes that some people want a change in human nature, but that will always remain an unattainable goal.

"There is no one great battle out of which will come a victory for goodness... where evil will be banished and we will all walk arm-in-arm along the high road of good sense and amicability."

Instead, those who strive for change will encounter a never-ending series of battles and challenges. "What keeps you going is the obligation to do your duty. We have to strive to cope with the world we find ourselves in and to make it better—to get things done that need to be done."

"The great thing about the legal profession is that we have striven mightily to keep all of these contentious issues within the framework of civility. It is harder to do that in the political world, but you have to strive for it."