

THE HON. DR. LESLIE R. PETERSON, Q.C. (LL.B.'49): CHANCELLOR ELECT (from *Law Faculty Newsletter*, Summer 1987)

The recent election of the Hon. Dr. Leslie R. Peterson, Q.C. to the position of Chancellor of LIBC is entirely appropriate: his concern for education is well-known, and his capability - he served British Columbians as Minister of Education from 1956-68 - is a matter of record. Yet few people are aware of the depth of understanding he brings to the job.

Let us turn back, however briefly, to the '30s and a prairie winter of the son that William Kurelek so accurately chronicled. Peterson's parents were not wealthy; the land they farmed near Viking, Alberta, gave them an adequate living. Evenings would find them together: lamplight, well-prepared food, and the warmth of the family circle.

In 1937 the scene changed for 14-year-old Peterson. Instead he was living alone in town, in a housekeeping room which he paid for by doing part-time janitorial work. He cooked his own meals on a small hotplate in that room. Why this exile? The Peterson family set high standards of self-reliance and young Leslie was no exception. The average education for rural children was then only primary school; they were not expected to go to high school and most attended only the local one-room school - grades 1 to 8 -studying together. To go beyond often meant considerable sacrifice and Peterson, knowing that his absence from the farm meant increased work for the others in his family, was determined not to be the cause of further hardship.

He succeeded, of course, and went on to Camrose Lutheran College, which then emphasized business courses. The war, the Canadian Army, and engineering intervened. Chance, that erratic master, set Peterson down at McGill University where he finished first year. Correspondence courses taken during service with the Coast Artillery in Prince Rupert and, later, time at the University of London, England, added to the Peterson education. On the way home from overseas service, he registered at the University of Alberta, but always ready for new horizons, took advantage of a B.C. discharge number to explore Vancouver. He stayed.

Peterson remembers that the UBC Law class of '49 found it somewhat difficult, at times, to adjust to civilian life and the classroom atmosphere. They were, most of them, disciplined and dedicated, but they were from a different world. Battlefield violence, dismemberment, and mutilation are not quite on the same level as academic casualties.

The faculty, too, found the situation not entirely smooth - these were not green, impressionable students. Never pretentious, and with common sense above all, Norman MacKenzie set about solving practical problems, from living quarters to classrooms. "I remember the first time I saw him," Peterson smiles. "He was shambling along wearing an old cardigan, kicking radiators. No heat. I thought he was the janitor!"

Other faculty members had their own sense of what was necessary, Peterson recalls.

We had great parties. My, yes, the parties! And McAllister. The class of '49 plans a 50-year reunion, you know, in 1999. A number of us have put in \$100 in trust, to fund the celebration. The survivors are going to have one heck of a party!

Entering the profession was, then as now, no easy process:

To get articles I went knocking on doors, using the Yellow Pages as a guide, and, finally, so I thought, success. But the lawyer with whom I got articles gave up law and went fishing - commercially, I mean. There I was, turning up eager to article, only to find he'd gone! I had a heck of a time finding him to get all the paperwork properly straightened out.

Settling in, finally, with the late Howard C. Coulter, Peterson immersed himself in the practice of law. Coulter shared offices with Ernest Silverton, and Peterson, in effect, worked for both of them. It was a very congenial arrangement. Moving on, he opened a law practice, working on his own until 1952 when the firm of Peterson and Anderson came into being. Politics became a priority for Peterson in the mid-'50s; his political career was long and distinguished. Presently a senior partner at Boughton & Co., he specializes in administrative law and transportation issues.

Les Peterson looks back to those early days with a fond nostalgia. "Do anything differently? Not really. I've always envied those whose life was planned. Mine was not, but looking back, I wouldn't want to change much." His law practice was, at first, general: "What's your problem? That's my specialty." He had preferences, though. There is, he emphasizes;

... no greater satisfaction in law than acting as counsel. How I enjoyed the trial work! I remember my first Supreme Court trial. Mr. Justice Whittaker presided; he was a fine judge, a very respected man. I was so pleased when he called me in after that trial and complimented my work. From him, such comment was to be valued, a real compliment. I remember telling him that I had been far from relaxed - it was a knotted stomach and perspiration, a real state of nerves. And he told me, "If you ever lose the butterflies and the tension, you'd better quit."

These words are still good advice to young lawyers, and Peterson adds a few of his own: "Don't be afraid to meet a challenge and respond to the best of your ability. Determination and effort will take you anywhere; there is no substitute for hard work."

Turning to politics, Peterson notes that he has always been interested in people and the political process. In Alberta, when first aware of issues he used to attend all the political meetings of all parties. Then, in B.C., Ernest Silvertown ran for office, years ago now, and Peterson was his campaign manager. It was no surprise when Peterson himself joined the race. He was elected to the B.C. Legislature for Vancouver Centre in 1956 and immediately marked for cabinet service. Minister of Education from 1956-68, he was also given the Labour portfolio in 1960 which he administered until 1971. From 1968-72 he was Attorney General.

It is not difficult to understand Peterson's considerable success in public life. He has great presence: party lines and platforms tend to fade, leaving only his clear Scandinavian gaze, old-world courtesy, and, overall, a deep sense of integrity. For the NEWSLETTER interview, for instance, he wore a UBC tie, a nice touch - typically Peterson - and he set about our examination for discovery with enthusiasm and good humour. Perhaps the most impressive quality Peterson has is his lack of pretension; he is as level and friendly as a good neighbor. Among all the mementos of success - including photographs of the great and near great, many autographed affectionately - he is pleased to point out as one of his most valued possessions a Distinguished Alumnus Award from Camrose Lutheran College.

Another example of his pleasant and thoughtful way of doing things is the amusing "French connection." At various times, particularly on government business in Paris and campaigning with Real Caouette in Quebec, to be bilingual would have been useful. However, Peterson's work had not included the leisure for studying language even though he felt that it was reasonable to accord people the courtesy of addressing them in their own tongue. So he met the challenge characteristically. With the help of Dr. Hickman of UVic, Peterson had translated speeches dictated into a tape recorder. These he memorized - inflection, rhythm, and all - and later delivered to his audiences effective speeches in almost flawless French. His public was delighted and gratified that he would take so much trouble for them. Subsequent or after-dinner conversation took place with the help of interpreters, by which time comfortable rapport had been firmly established. One sees, then, why he is so popular and why he receives recognition not often accorded politicians, like the distinguished investiture as an Honorary Deputy in the French National Assembly.

Dr. Peterson has no plans to retire. Like Roosevelt, he prefers to "wear out, not rust out." In addition to a busy schedule in law, he is active in many community groups. In 1988, for instance, he will assume the position of Potentate of the Shriners which will involve much travel. While not active in public politics, he remains closely associated with the Social Credit Party and was called upon to act as its chairman at the 1986 Social Credit Leadership Convention.

At home, he leads a quiet life. It is obvious that there are strong ties within the Peterson clan and to him the "best times" are spent with his family. The children are now grown, of course, and he is the proud grandfather of five. Son Raymond lives in Kamloops, where Peterson always looks forward to visits with youngsters Erik, Severin, and Lars. His daughter Karen in Victoria has the only Peterson granddaughter, Krista, whose brother, born in August 1986, is the newest addition to the clan.

Looking ahead for a moment, Dr. Peterson considers education in British Columbia:

Basically, I'm optimistic about the future. We must focus more attention on education. Our country is relatively "new" compared with others, yet we do have great strengths. Our system of education may not be so highly developed, or should I say refined, but consider our access to education - very open. And it's really, if one wants it, a life-long process. Still, all things considered, there's a danger of selling education short. It's true we've got to cut back in rough times; that's inevitable and happens in all areas and at all levels. But education is vitally important and we must give it a very high priority if we, as British Columbians and as

Canadians, want to make the move from being a resource-based economy into the competitive area of science and high technology.

Remembering, then, the 14-year-old farmboy exiled from his family, living for four years a spare, isolated existence in order to gain an education, one feels that Peterson has excellent credentials to meet the challenge.