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ACCORDING to a comfortably established Canadian parliamentary tradition, backbenchers in Ottawa are a faceless swarm whose main duty is to vote when division bells ring and whose main concern is never to say anything that might offend either the leaders of their parties or the electors in their constituencies.

A spectacular exception is Douglas Fisher, the bear-sized CCF member from Port Arthur, Ontario, who stands out among backbenchers in the present Commons like a mastiff in a kennel of spaniels. Since he came to Ottawa by defeating C. D. Howe in the most surprising single upset of the 1957 election, Fisher's uncompromising *so-what* attitude has infuriated less unconventional politicians in every party, particularly his own. His lashing eloquence, efficiently exploited by a penchant for publicizing himself, has made him a national figure.

What separates this man from most Ottawa politicians is that he doesn't count power to be as important as the influence of ideas. But in spite of his raging idealism, Fisher has not been able to fit the vitality of his thoughts into any kind of ordered ideology. He is too intemperate, too furiously sincere, to be anything but a political lightweight in a system of government that requires discipline within party organizations. "For a successful political career," he says, "you need to have specific political ambitions and absolute faith in your party. I don't have either."

This attitude isolates Fisher as a politician with a doubtful future. Any parliamentary party in power or in hopes of getting power would hesitate to invest him with authority.

Not one of Fisher's many proposals for parliamentary reform has been accepted but, by his constant prodding and deflating of just about every institution and attitude held sacred by official Ottawa, he has already influenced Canadian politics far more than any backbencher in recent parliaments. "Fisher represents an indispensable type of MP," says Professor Norman Ward of the University of Saskatchewan, a leading authority on Canadian government. "He himself, I think, seriously underestimates how much he accomplishes simply by drawing attention to the House, and arousing others to defend whatever aspect of it he has been criticizing."

Fisher's criticisms are directed mostly at the present makeup of the House of Commons, which he calls "a creaking, senile, inefficient institution." He'd like to liven up its proceedings by televising key debates and providing "challenge hours" during which any MP, by sending a written challenge to any member of cabinet, could debate a specific topic within the minister's authority. He wants to introduce higher pay for MPs, with cash penalties for missed sittings. He also advocates the creation of more free-vote situations that would release

the dissent and energy of the backbenchers—this despite his opinion of the average MP as "a nitwit, reluctant or perhaps unable to struggle through good or great books."

While most English-speaking federal politicians treat their Quebec colleagues with vague extensions of friendship in what Ottawa wags have labelled Canada's third official language—"Election French"—Fisher has instead used his loud northern Ontario brogue to condemn the French-Canadian people as having "a conceit in their Canadianism." He calls them "a force working to the detriment of progress" and ridicules their politicians as "ciphers in national affairs."

His criticisms of the Diefenbaker administration have included calling the prime minister "a man who has never uttered anything but platitudes," and the Conservative cabinet a group that "rarely has an original thought, and almost never a profound one." Fisher's own party has not been immune to his critical darts. Shortly after the CCF and the Canadian Labor Congress got their New Party project under way, Fisher calmly told the Ontario convention of the CCF that the party's tactics had been stupid and its strategy bad. He later predicted in a labor publication that the New Party would fade from the scene in a decade or so, unless there was an internal collapse of the Canadian economy. This prompted Erhard Regier, a CCF member of parliament from B. C., to comment wryly, "It's easy to get headlines, if one is irresponsible."

Even some of Fisher's admirers accuse him of lacking a sense of ultimate responsibility. To illustrate, they point to his military career in World War II. Although he was repeatedly offered promotion, and was obviously fitted for higher duties, Fisher spent the entire war as a buck private in the Armored Corps. When he was finally appointed an acting lance-corporal, he managed to get himself busted two days later.

"All my life," he says, "I've been searching for someone to look up to. But my experience has always been to move from respect, almost awe, through understanding to a mild jeer. In the army, I thought I was involved in a great purpose, and then I realized that rank had almost no relation to ability. At university, I ended up completely disrespectful of most professors. When I came to Ottawa, I thought I would at last find giants before whom I could stand in perennial respect. But I've found no permanent idols here."

And he stands little chance of making any permanent mark. "Fisher's taking a big gamble in not being a party man in a party system. It takes a Winston Churchill to get away with standing alone," says one of the best political strategists in Ottawa. "If Fisher had held his tongue, he would eventually have been a hell of a threat for the New Party leadership, and he'd have made a brilliant leader."

Representatives of CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



Dilemma of a maverick politician

Continued from page 26

He landed in Normandy bearing a sign: VOTE CCF

both the Liberal and Conservative parties have approached Fisher to try to switch his political allegiance. Despite his frequent and unfriendly jabs at them, Prime Minister Diefenbaker and Liberal leader Lester Pearson have each privately congratulated him on the quality of his contribution to House debates. In a Canadian Press poll conducted last year among MPs, Fisher and Diefenbaker tied for top place as the chamber's most effective debaters. When he complained that his salary as an MP was too low to keep him in politics, an unidentified benefactor offered to give him a grant, with no strings attached, because the donor felt that a man of Fisher's quality should not be lost to Canadian politics.

He has so far turned down all offers that might change his status from that of a reluctant and hard-up CCFer. He has chosen the CCF as a refuge because, he says, "It's the only party that gets worked up about ideas." (But he lacks the inner certainty that might make him a dependable party member.) "Doug is a socialist, in the sense that socialism is the twentieth-century adaption of liberalism," says Sid Wise, a close friend of Fisher's who teaches at Queen's University. "He's not optimistic enough or innocent enough to be gripped by a cause; and he consciously avoids all the outworn jargon characteristic of self-righteous socialism."

Diehard CCFers shudder at Fisher's habit of treating party policies and principles as matters for discussion rather than as absolute truths. "To me," he says, "the only logic of socialism is that it embodies the common-sense way of handling the increasing complexities of our economy and our culture. It implies, simply, that governments must lead in these fields if we're to get the best that human beings ever can get out of their own individuality."

Fisher finds expression for his inner rebellion in personal habits as well as caustic pronouncements. Until he gave up smoking a few months ago, he rolled his own cigarettes and lit them with a wooden match, ignited on the zipper of his pants. The horn-rimmed glasses that bisect his alert, rectangular face are kept in position by office elastics wound around their stems. He doesn't like to wear ties, and in summer often works in his parliamentary office with his massive six-foot-five, two-hundred-and-sixty-pound frame bulging out of khaki drill pants, a frayed T-shirt and sandals. The most striking object in his House of Commons office is a set of barbells that he uses daily to keep in physical trim.

Fisher is so intense in his opinions and their formulation that he often appears less than fully conscious of the routine of daily living. "When I travel with him," says his wife Barbara, "I travel as though the children and I were on our own. He gets off trains at every whistle-stop with the greatest abandon and you're never sure that he'll be with you when you arrive at your destination." Once, when the Fishers drove from Ottawa to Port Arthur, he flung his jacket on the car roof while he packed grips into the back seat and drove off leaving it there. It blew away and was never recovered. He has mislaid so many of the railway passes issued to members of parliament that his

family now pins them into his coat before he sets off on a trip.

At least part of Fisher's unworldliness is probably due to his chaotic early education. Born to the wife of a locomotive engineer at Sioux Lookout, Ontario, in 1919, he was a child prodigy at the local public school, graduating with top marks at the age of ten. Then he moved to Fort William for his high-school education but instead of expending his energies on his studies, he began to work his way through the books in the first full-scale library he'd ever seen. For the next few years he read enormously and indiscriminately, sometimes as many as three books a day. In spite of his education and a stay of eight years, he couldn't get past Grade 12. He finally left school to become a mucker for Central Patricia Gold Mines, at Pickle Lake, Ontario, but was fired for organizing the men to vote against what he felt was an unjustified extra payroll deduction.

"A good soldier" but independent

As a trooper in the 12th Manitoba Dragoons, the closest he came to getting into serious disciplinary difficulties was in England during the summer of 1943, when his armored-car unit was issued black overalls. Fellow troopers lettered their initials on the garments but Fisher, venting his disgust with Liberal military manpower policies, painted a large "VOTE CCF" sign on the back of his overalls. Thus attired, he marched up the shore in Normandy, and all through the fierce fighting that followed. His officers were furious, but never directly ordered him to remove the advertisement. "Fisher was a good soldier, but because of his intellectual capacity was resentful of authority," recalls Brig. James Roberts, then his commanding officer, now deputy minister of Trade and Commerce in Ottawa.

Fisher took advantage of the subsidized education offered veterans, and spent the next five years getting honors degrees in modern history and library science at the University of Toronto. There he became an enthusiastic disciple of Northrop Frye, a brilliant professor of English literature and probably Canada's best-known literary critic. "From Frye," he says, "I got much of my intellectual background, including the ideas that human nature doesn't improve, and that the creative genius of man has nothing to do with his life as a natural man." Bill Dray, who went to university with Fisher, remembers him as an unbearable classmate. "Doug ruined lectures," he recalls. "He'd sit in the middle of the hall and ask questions constantly. We'd throw down our pencils and moan 'there goes Fisher again.' It wasn't until later that I realized he was making sure we all got a proper education."

Fisher was a serious student, but his rebellious spirit did find occasional outlets. When students in a university residence were cut down to one glass of milk for breakfast, he stirred up a protest march, and managed to smuggle a cow into the campus to lead the parade.

He met his wife Barbara in one of the university's libraries in the fall of 1946. They were married two years later.

After they both got graduate degrees in

library science at the University of Toronto, the young couple went to England, where Fisher did a year's study in archives administration at University College, London. They returned to Canada in 1951, spent two years at Queen's University in charge of setting up a government documents library, then moved to Port Arthur, where Fisher established a research library for professional foresters. After two years, he switched to teaching history in a high school. He became well known in the district by participating in the school's extra-curricular activities, including radio commentaries on local hockey games. "To the crowds he wasn't Mr. Fisher the teacher, but Doug in his beat-up parka and beret—Doug who knew all the answers," says Peter Hennessy, one of Fisher's fellow teachers at Port Arthur.

Fisher was first attracted to politics when the CCF asked him to do some local publicity jobs. He was unopposed for the party nomination in the 1957 election, to run against C. D. Howe, who had been winning the seat for the Liberals with impressive margins since 1935.

Fisher hardly mentioned the CCF in his campaign, attacking Howe instead for his part-time representation of the riding's interests. He booked all the available free time on the local TV station for the week before the election and starred himself in fireside chats about the theories of democratic government, then visited bush camps around Port Arthur that had always been ignored in Howe's campaigns. Fisher won with a margin of 1,415 ballots, mostly because the candidate run by the Conservatives was too weak to capture much of the anti-Howe vote. He came in with a slightly better majority in the 1958 election, despite the strong national pro-Diefenbaker tide.

Most new members of parliament limit themselves during their first sitting to making a maiden speech that extols the natural beauties of their riding and praises the wisdom of their constituents in having made such a brilliant choice at the polls. But just eight days after he arrived in Ottawa, Fisher blasted off with a maiden address that hardly mentioned Port Arthur. Instead he criticized Tory policies in detail and called Prime Minister Diefenbaker "a sonorous Saskatchewan songster." During his first session Fisher spoke 134 times, an unheard-of total for a freshman MP.

Shortly after he came to Ottawa for his second term he created a furor by announcing that members of parliament were grossly underpaid and that their salaries and allowances should be raised from the present \$10,000 a year to at least \$15,000. He estimated that he was losing almost \$2,000 a year by staying in politics, and declared that he would not run again.

His future is still uncertain though he's not as adamant about his financial crusade since he discovered that most Canadians believe MPs are overpaid now.

"If Tommy Douglas decides to lead the New Party, I'll probably run again, because it could become exciting to be around someone who has the kind of political philosophy I think we need in Canada. But I feel a tremendous pull back to the quiet life of teaching and being able to stay home with my family." He now lives in a rented room in Ottawa's west end, and it takes him 44 hours of train travel to spend 32 hours at home with his wife and four small sons.

Until he drops politics, or it drops him, Fisher cuts a lonely figure in the busy corridors of Parliament Hill. He shambles about like a hibernation-seeking grizzly who'd be happy to stop growling. But he knows he can't. ★