

Stanley's still crystal clear

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Not all politicians get more lucid as they age. One reason is that politics and governing get or seem to be getting more complex. The leviathan of government grows. Interest groups spawn and swarm like smelt. The sharks of the media slash here and there. So one admires the clear-headed veteran who cruises along, steady and sure in his constant themes.

I refer to Stanley Knowles, definitely Mr. Parliament now the Chief has gone to his last rest. Last Sunday the NDP house leader was quizzed on CTV's Question Period. It was a delight to get such clarity of expression, whatever cavils one might have of the propositions.

Off the top they hit Stanley with his recent proposition to raise old age pensions to \$400 a month and to wipe out the income supplement paid to those pensioners in need. Didn't the \$3.5 billion increase this would cost annually bother him? Why insist on universality, paying equally to the rich and poor? Why not funnel the aid just to those who need?

Those who get too much said the New Democrat, should be taken down by the income tax structure: "Whenever you put on a means test of any kind, then you make these programs one of welfare instead of matters of right . . . when people have served their day in Canada . . . they should achieve a quality of status in old age."

But how can the economy afford it? Stanley remembered that the Finance minister back in the '20s when the first old age pension (\$25 a month) was introduced by the King government after it was pushed by the CCF's founder, J.S. Woodsworth, had first said the country couldn't afford it. "What determines the capacity to pay is not funds that have been put away . . . It's the state of the

economy at the time . . . we can afford to do better by our old people now."

They switched to foreign policy and the split in NDP thinking which surfaced in the last campaign. Broadbent saying, "This is not a pacifist party," and getting mauled for it by Pauline Jewett and others in the party.

It's being reviewed intensively within the party, said Knowles. He wouldn't predict the result but he knew where he stood: "We've gone too far in military commitments . . . real moves to disarmament are better." He still holds to the Woodsworth line of peace through disarmament but he knows this is not universally held in the party. He simply can't see peace standing up forever on the basis of terror about a nuclear holocaust. One Canadian party is needed to stand for disarmament.

They got to Parliament and what a crock of ineffectiveness it has become. What would he do about it? Well, he loved the institution, even now, for some of the good it did. (Such as the recent bill to provide for war veterans' widows.)

He said essentially that the reforms mooted by the new Liberal house leader, Yvon Pinard — eg. shorter speeches, daytime hours — would be largely cosmetic. There had to be basic changes in dealing with legislation. In point, the government must let MPs of all parties take part in creating bills. There should be an end to presenting the House with a bureaucratic product on a "take it or leave it" basis. There was lots of talent in the whole House which fairly represented the interests of all the people. It wasn't being tapped.

Stanley has been advocating Senate abolition in the House for 37 years. Reform of the second chamber is in the air. What would he do about it?

"So far as the Senate we've got, its days are numbered." However, something else will take its place to reflect regional opinion. He hopes it will be a smaller second chamber based on the Trudeau proposition that the provinces will appoint senators on the basis of the share of the vote the parties get in each province in a federal election. Of course, the new second chamber should not have the right of permanent veto over House legislation.

Why has the NDP done so badly in Quebec? Here Mr. Knowles was banal rather than dodgy. He lives in "hope" that sooner or later Quebecers will realize they need MPs with the NDP's economic and social policies.

Where did he stand on coalition talk, encouraged by Mr. Trudeau? A Liberal-NDP merger? "We're not going to do it," said Stanley. Yes, Ed Broadbent had discussed it in a post-election chat with the prime minister, but it was at the latter's instigation. Why would the NDP throw down the drain both its policies and hard-won support? And so Mr. Knowles left the air as serene and determined as ever: "We're going to push for our own program for a better day for all the people of Canada."