

HUGH CURTIS: 1931-2014

VHS CLASS OF 1950

Editorial: We need more like Hugh Curtis

Times Colonist
May 30, 2014 03:44 PM

Some go into politics for what they can get out of it; those who make a difference are the ones who go into politics for what they can put into it. Hugh Curtis's record of public service shows he was in the latter category. We need more like him.

Curtis, who died Tuesday at the age of 81, spent 25 years in public office, first as a councillor and mayor of Saanich, then as an MLA and cabinet minister in the B.C. legislature.

A broadcaster by profession, he entered politics in 1961 when he was elected to Saanich municipal council. He became reeve, a position later called mayor, in 1964.

Saanich Mayor Frank Leonard says Curtis served at a time when the municipality blossomed. During that period, Saanich installed its first street lights, opened four recreation centres and added four parks.

Curtis was elected to the B.C. legislature in 1972 as a Progressive Conservative, switching to Social Credit in 1974. Crossing the floor is sometimes seen as an opportunistic move, but in Curtis's case, it's an indication that he put the welfare of the province ahead of party politics. He could not be effective in a party that had all but disappeared from the B.C. political scene.

Under Bill Bennett, who became premier in 1975, Curtis held several cabinet portfolios, most notably that of finance minister, and in 1983, decided he'd had enough of politics. He was contemplating a return to broadcasting, but Bennett wouldn't hear of it and persuaded Curtis to run for re-election in the 1983 election.

Those were tough times, with the economy in a tailspin and the Bennett government trying to put together its restraint program. That became the chief election issue, with the New Democrats under Dave Barrett promising to scrap the program. Social Credit won handily, gaining four seats while the NDP lost four.

But there wasn't much of a honeymoon with voters. Curtis was tasked with quarterbacking the restraint program, and his budget speech and subsequent legislation in July 1983 brought a huge negative response, especially from social activists and unions. When the Socreds gathered for their convention in October in Vancouver, about 50,000 protesters took to the streets.

Governments these days seldom talk about budgets without mentioning the word "restraint," but it was new then during a time when governments were growing at alarming rates. Curtis directed

that annual wage increases should be from eight to 12 per cent, and his “restraint” budget called for a spending increase of 12 per cent, positively lavish by today’s standards.

It was tough slogging then, but it was necessary. For Curtis, necessity took precedence over popularity.

“Hugh broke the ground on [restraint] in Canada — on being tough during tough fiscal times,” says Bob Plecas, former B.C. deputy minister and Curtis’s former policy adviser. “He certainly knew that he had to make the right decisions, and he did.”

Curtis has been praised as a “classy politician” at a time when that, too, often seems like an oxymoron. His dignified appearance and professional voice would have been desirable attributes for a politician, yet his class came not from appearance, but from his integrity and abilities. He will be remembered not so much for how he looked or sounded, but for what he achieved and how he dealt with people.

In retirement, he became the editor and driving force behind the newsletter for the Association of Ex-MLAs. It’s a must-read for retired politicians of all stripes because his wit and gentlemanly nature shone through every issue.

Politics and scandal seem never far from each other. We have become accustomed to disappointing behaviour from elected and unelected public officials whose sense of entitlement has exceeded their good judgment.

More should follow the example of Hugh Curtis, who saw in public office the opportunities to serve, not to be served.