

Book Review

Allan Blakeney

An Honourable Calling: Political Memoirs

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008

Reviewed by Eleanor Glor

In his “funeral oration,” Pericles praised the *politikos* — the “politicians,” the people who attended to the concerns of the “polis” — and dismissed the *oekos* — the “economists,” the people who were mainly involved in their own private interests. If we fast-forward to today, it is remarkable how our perspective has been altered. Aristotle said that we were *zoon politikon* — political animals — yet now we have become *Homo economicus* — economic man. The systematic demeaning of the public sphere and its association with corruption has turned our polity upside down. Now, the revelation that corporate executives are crooks seems shocking (I simply assumed that this was the case). In the alternative, the discovery of an honourable politician seems unusual if not unique.

Allan Blakeney, a politician of 28 years and premier of the Canadian Province of Saskatchewan for eleven years, practiced politics as an honourable vocation. A Rhodes scholar, trained in law, he was also a senior public servant before entering politics. His government came into power in 1971 with a detailed program platform, developed in an inclusive manner, the implementation of which he tracked and reported on to his annual party convention.

I was a junior official in his government for six of its eleven years, four of them in central agencies, where I sometimes produced information that he would see, and occasionally had contact with him. My first meeting with him was terrifying. He asked me clear, well-informed and pointed questions that no one had asked before. I remember one in particular. Luckily, I knew the answer. Premier Blakeney was clever and well-informed, sometimes more so than I was as the public servant expert, but what was more interesting was the way he made decisions, and wanted them brought to his Cabinet. Options were always to be laid out, along with an analysis of their implications.

After he retired, former premier Blakeney worked in universities, on boards, and abroad advising other governments. He continues to live in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I attended his book launch in Ottawa. Those I recognized at the launch included two former national leaders of his party, former public servants of his government, and national leaders in public policy associations who originally came from Saskatchewan. While he obviously touched and connected with many people, his balanced, rational perspective is what always appealed most to me. While political leaders have sometimes been thought to introduce an irrational element into government, in the Blakeney government good information was wanted and decisions were made on a rational basis, taking into account the information at hand. I remember one member of the Treasury Board, for which I worked. He always asked the same question: “How will this initiative affect my constituency?” I found this check on the impact of policies and programs an

effective way to keep me as an isolated public servant working in an urban area focused on the people of the Province. The rationality and the absence of an explicitly political framework for decisions, was unique in my experience working for four different Canadian governments.

Political leadership can be an honourable calling, especially when practiced by people with the skills, perspectives and ethics of people like Allan Blakeney. The ethics of his government were revealed through its focus on the impact of policies on people but also on what the people of the Province could accept. Blakeney was a great believer in the long-term ability of voters to make the best possible decisions. In selected areas involving the disadvantaged, the government was willing to provide leadership for moving beyond this comfort level. One area where the government consciously moved past what it knew the majority would favour was in aboriginal policy. While giving credit to the efforts of the previous government in this domain, premier Blakeney's government introduced many measures to support aboriginal people; for example, a unified department to service the northern half of the Province, whose population was 80 per cent aboriginal. His government funded a new status Indian college at the University of Regina. Because status Indians are the responsibility of the federal government, he sought their participation, but failed to secure it. His government funded it anyways, along with other educational and post-secondary education programs for aboriginal people. The first aboriginal community college was funded in Regina. At the University of Saskatchewan aboriginal law and social work programs were introduced. Resource development programs in the north were required to favour the hiring of northerners and to set up training programs to make it possible. Premier Blakeney and his government were democrats who set the groundwork for social justice.

This book describes an innovative, active and compassionate government, led by a compassionate but also a demanding leader. Public innovations introduced by his government improved the lives of many people—through the first human rights and heritage legislation in Canada, through balanced resource development, and through children's, aboriginal, health and family income programs. The increase in quality of life and economic power that the people of Saskatchewan secured through the good management of resources, windfall profits, and taxes was lost again when the first neoconservative government in Canada replaced his.

Mr. Blakeney reveals in his book what he is passionate about and what he is not passionate about. He accepts completely the right of others and other governments elected by the people of Canada and the Province of Saskatchewan to have different opinions than his own. He asserts and holds to the opinion that government is about negotiation, not fiat, but he reserves his fire for the damage those governments did—the loss of programs for the poor, children, the elderly and Northerners, the loss of any control over Saskatchewan's boom bust economy. As he puts it so mildly yet so precisely, the people of Saskatchewan deserved better.

At a personal level, too, Premier Blakeney was an ethical man. I saw this up close when I was selected one year to prepare the briefing book for the Premier's annual tour. He spent a week travelling the province in a bus with his wife and maybe two or three staff. I was asked to come along to brief the Premier when asked to do so. He never saw him take drink, except when a bar owner invited him to his establishment. He was served an alcoholic beverage, but he did not drink it. I do not believe he is a teetotaler, however; he was just doing his job. At one town, the council had arranged for him to be driven around town in a large, 1960s convertible. He would

not do it. His wife and I had a lovely drive. At each talk he gave, people were invited to stay and speak with him afterwards. Large numbers wanted to do so. Many asked questions, and if he could not answer the question, I was asked to take notes and get contact information, then to secure the information and get it for the requester.

I saw this kind of openness in other parts of the government. Unlike in most other governments, ministers did not maintain the illusion that they personally answered all correspondence to them. Rather, if the issues related to the work of the department, the best informed public servant was asked to answer. I remember hearing a junior public servant who had telephoned someone who had written to the minister, explaining at length the reasoning behind a policy, fully engaged with the good will, intelligence and commitment of the citizen.

I remember too how Premier Blakeney dealt with the defeat of his government in 1982. As always, he spoke with balance and realism. He said that the New Democratic Party (NDP) would return to power. Perhaps it would not return at the next election (they had almost been wiped out), but assuredly at the one after that. This turned out to be an prediction. Two elections later the NDP was back in power, but with a new premier. The two NDP governments that have followed since were good governments, but they were not great governments. Premier Blakeney's government was a great government. Each time, however, right-wing governments have replaced the left-wing or middle-of-the-road NDP governments. Such are the swings of Saskatchewan politics and the wisdom of the crowd.

This is the political memoir not only of an honourable calling, but of an honourable man, who brought a combination of rationality, practicality and rational risk taking to the official Opposition, then to the Government of Saskatchewan, then again to the Opposition.

The Canadian Province of Saskatchewan has been written about a good deal, because it has, several times, had the only social democratic government in North America that was in power long enough to fully implement its programs. Saskatchewan's most famous premier, Tommy Douglas, brought publicly insured hospital and medical care to Saskatchewan. Mr. Blakeney became the Minister of Health after the doctor's strike that unsuccessfully resisted the introduction of Medicare. In other words, he implemented it. Saskatchewan paved the way for the introduction of publicly insured hospital and medical care nationally.

Premier Blakeney oversaw periods of both bust and boom, turning the bust years into periods of greater support for vulnerable people and the boom years into ones in which the people of Saskatchewan secured programs and resources unknown elsewhere in North America. These included a publicly-funded children's dental care program, a provincial drug program, and three unique aboriginal educational programs. He also secured, through a variety of taxes geared to company incomes, a reasonable but substantial share of the windfall profits generated during the boom years especially by the petroleum industry, but also by the uranium and potash industries. With this money his government created a Heritage Fund that invested in those industries and in the people of the province.

Political leadership can be an honourable calling. This book outlines some things about former Premier Blakeney's passions, his tolerance of other opinions, his pragmatism, his clarity, and his

compassion. On a national level, his role and that of his Attorney-General, Roy Romanow, in the constitutional negotiations is perhaps where the ethics of his government has been most controversial. The Premier of Québec, René Lévesque, accused the federal government and a group of provinces, of which Saskatchewan was a part, of the “night of the long knives.” They were accused of excluding Québec from negotiations that went on through the night to resolve the constitutional negotiations that led to the patriation of the Canadian constitution from the United Kingdom in 1982. Mr. Blakeney describes this negotiation in detail, framed by his desire to see the constitution brought home to Canada and to see aboriginal rights included. He indicates that Québec chose not to participate and that he did not know (and presumably Québec did not know either) that they were close to resolving the issues, and that the Canadian government led by Pierre Elliott Trudeau would accept the proposal. Rather, Premier Blakeney saw the night of the long knives as the development of yet another proposal. Québec subsequently refused to sign on to the agreement and has held to the position since that the Constitution excludes Québec. This is a valuable first-hand account of a controversial negotiation. The hostility described between the federal and Québec governments is also remarkable.

At the end of his term in office, Allan Blakeney played an important role in negotiating and helping to bring Canada’s constitution fully under Canadian control. He helped to negotiate the provincial position and provided leadership for a positive resolution of the negotiations. He gives full credit to other premiers as well. This effort fully occupied him and his government for many months. The lack of support for his government surprised him and his government in the election that followed shortly afterwards. I have always felt that part of the reason his government fell was because he gave his full attention to this national project. Mr. Blakeney gives no indication of regret for making this choice.

Premier Blakeney’s strategy could have continued to benefit the province in the long term, but the industry investments were sold off by the next government. All was not lost, however, because now there is a potash head office in Saskatchewan instead of in Toronto or the USA. This would not likely have happened otherwise. Likewise the provincial dental and drug programs were abolished, but half a generation of isolated and poor children received good dental care and elderly people who could not afford them received the drugs they needed while Mr. Blakeney was in power. No government has more power than that. The province was driven into deep debt by the conservative governments that followed, and has never again been able to afford such programs.

I commend this memoir of a rational, innovative, pay-as-you-go social democrat to you.

About the Author

Eleanor Glor was an employee of the Blakeney Government of Saskatchewan from 1976 to 1982, and has edited two books on innovations of that government, *Policy Innovation in the Saskatchewan Public Sector, 1971-82* (Toronto: Captus Press, 1997) and *Is Innovation a Question of Will or Circumstance? An Exploration of the Innovation Process Through the Lens of the Blakeney Government in Saskatchewan* (Ottawa: The Innovation Journal, 2000).