

POLITICS AS CONSISTENCY OF PURPOSE:
RUSSELL ELLIOTT IN CONVERSATION WITH CAROL HARRIS



Those who attend general meetings of the NDP, or fundraising dinners and other merrymaking Party events, will know Russell Elliott. At 95, he is there as a firm supporter not only of our activities but also of any other cause for social justice. In this article, and through an interview with Russell held in January, 2012, I highlight a few connections between his life as a clergyman and the values that drove New Democrats in last century. His memories and actions remind us of the reasons we became New Democrats and of the values that we strive to maintain today. Today, in this period of high capitalism, the challenges we face differ from those of Russell's early affiliation with church and politics, but our choices and his are none the less controversial.

Russell was born in New Ross, educated at the local rural schools and the University of Kings College in Halifax, and ordained as an Anglican priest in 1941. He served in several parishes throughout Nova Scotia. He was made an honorary Canon in 1968, and awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Kings College in 1979.

This conversation touches on five topics that connect Russell with social democratic movements: his early, formative years in the home of his conservative, yet socially responsible, grandparents; his activism as a young Anglican clergyman to revolutionize a "sleepy" church; his growing interest in the CCF and NDP; his work beside Lloyd Shaw with people in need at Lantz and Halifax; and, finally, his time at Wolfville where he continues to consolidate his commitments to God and fellow citizens.

The Early Year

Reading two of his autobiographical books¹, I was curious to find out exactly how he had become politically engaged. So often when I knock on the doors of clergy during election campaigns, I receive a message about 'political neutrality': clergy of all faiths tend to believe that, because they serve a diverse flock, they can't be seen to be attached to any one political party. Russell Elliott, however, is not among those shy to voice an opinion, and you will hear a few of these below. He spent much of his childhood at New Ross, at the home of his grandparents.

From *As the Twig is Bent*, I knew that Russell's grandfather was an adamant Progressive Conservative. I asked him about the parallels he saw between his grandfather's conservatism and the route he, himself, later took.

C: You said in your book that your grandfather would be OK with your choice – if he knew it.

R: *New Ross was 100 years old when I was born, but it was still a pioneer community. Not only that, but it was isolated. It was off the beaten track. People weren't involved much in what was going on in the world. In New Ross, everyone had to be self-sufficient. They had to look after themselves, and they didn't depend on anybody. They certainly didn't depend on government doing anything. So that sense of independence and looking after themselves were good conservative principles.*

But the other side isn't conservative; not only were we individually self-sufficient but we had to be responsible for everyone else. We couldn't exist as a community unless we were. That's where the socialist ideal comes in, in the sense that if a man across the road became ill, just automatically you went over and milked his cows for him. Or if he had a deep field of hay down and rain was coming, we all ran and helped put in his hay. If the house caught fire, or a barn, we worked the bucket brigades – or we would rebuild the barn. So, those two aspects were there, the independent and the dependent. My grandfather was very conservative politically, but before that he was conservative as a true person. I'm sure that, as I became CCF and NDP, he was concerned that I would vote another way, but the way I am would not have worried him. He would want me to be responsible for other people, as he himself was the day I turned 30, he came to visit me, concerned because he had heard that I was voting another way, and that I was getting involved in radical kinds of things. But we talked for an hour or two, and he found out all he needed to know and went home quite happy about it. He was relieved. The fact that I voted another way wouldn't have concerned him after that.

When I left New Ross and went to university [Kings College], I roomed with a Cape Bretoner.² His father was a labour union man. As you know, the history of Cape Breton had to do with labour struggles. The responsibility I felt [towards others] in my own community, I began to transfer to labour unions and the down-trodden. I noted how strikes were being handled by the big companies: killing people and turning the police loose on them – that kind of thing.

Enter the Briefcase Boys

C: This growing awareness of inequity led you, and five of your friends, to form the Anglican Fellowship for Social Action (AFSA). As Dr.

Perkins said, in the introduction to your *Briefcase Boys*, you "saw some of the ways in which the church would have to adjust if it hoped to meet the new and urgent needs of the first post-war generation."

R: *We had no CCF movement in Nova Scotia for quite a while. That*

started in Cape Breton with the election of Douglas MacDonald in 1939 as the member for Cape Breton Centre. The labour unions were becoming quite militant and strong by then. People had to listen. From the very beginning, the unions were talking not only about labour problems. There were many resolutions in their annual meeting that had to do with community affairs. They wanted to improve the community, bring in a good health programme, hospitals – that kind of thing. Their resolutions, at their AGMs, were in many cases better than what the Church was doing at its synod meetings by way of community concerns.

C: And how did you first get involved in the larger community?

R: It was really the time, the moment that I left university. When I was posted to parishes, mixing among people, getting involved in what they were involved in.

C: By this time, you were already involved in this group of radical clergy. From your book, I realize the principles of AFSA apply as much today as then: "Live together in brotherhood, holding the natural resources of the Earth as a common trust for all mankind." You have that idea of the commons there

R: Although people didn't talk about the environment until after that.

C: Let's move on to the idea of sharing. You mention, early on, your dislike of the concepts behind competition. Do you still feel that competition is an 'evil'?

R: Oh yes, but I might put it differently today because the situations are different. In fact, all of the welfare things that we got – like women's allowances, all that sort of thing – we were thinking of them as an application of that principle of sharing everything. I remember, along this same process, that each parish had its own way of paying the clergy.

I remember all of us [Briefcase Boys] getting together and working out a system, trying to get the diocese to pay all clergy on the same basis. It didn't go over for a long time, chiefly because there were a few parishes that were better off than others and they didn't want to lose any of their independence. What did happen, eventually, was that they set a minimum system for everybody. No clergyman, wherever he was, would get less than that. And if he had five years experience, he should get a [raised] minimum amount.

If you carry that principle to its limit, you'd have to say it applies to everything in the world. That is, all the natural resources of the world. We have to take care of them for everybody, not just for ourselves.

C: So it has an ecological aspect in today's context.

R: Exactly.

Growth of the CCF/New Democratic Party

C: Well, to take you back a bit, you heard about the new party, the CCF, but when did you, yourself, become involved?

R: In my first parish (Pugwash) during the War, and then when we went to Bridgetown in 1946, there was no actual CCF organization. We knew of it, and could approve of it, but there was no organization. So if I was going to vote, I'd have to vote either Liberal or Conservative. But in Bridgetown -- I was there nearly 11 years -- about half way through, there was a provincial election and we had a Liberal candidate, and a Conservative candidate. But I had a Sunday school teacher who was CCF. I think she got three or four votes.

The Conservative candidate was warden of my parish, and Henry Hicks was the Liberal candidate. He was United, but his law partner was my other warden. Two days before the election, when I came home there was a phone message. I called back and my warden said, 'Can you come down to my office for a few minutes?' He didn't tell me what the problem was so I went down and the two wardens were there and two others – one was the Treasurer of the parish and the other was a very active member of the church (and he was another Conservative). The Conservative candidate, who eventually became a judge, was very nice person. He shuffled around a little bit, grinned and said, 'The real reason we asked you to come down – we were just sitting here and talking about the church and things the last while back. And it seemed to us that, in your sermons last while back, that you were pumping for the CCF.'

I thought, oh dear, how am I going to handle that. This was all new to me, I mean, new tactics. But I was never known for being diplomatic. So I said, "You know, I think that if you have a problem with my preaching, you really should go to the Bishop, because I'm responsible to him. Then I said, 'However, I really try to preach the Kingdom of God – and this was true; if that sounds to you like CCF, perhaps you'd better do some more thinking about this.'

He laughed and said, 'I always thought the Conservative Party was closer to the Kingdom of God than any of the others.' You know, that ended it. They never followed up. They made their point, and I made mine, and we were the closest friends for all the rest of the time that I was there. And when the Bishop asked me to go to another parish, they did their best to keep me there.

But there was no flood of CCF activity, or anything like that. I wasn't afraid to join organizations, but I was very busy. I was involved in Farmers' groups, education groups and social service groups, Home and School, and others. So, in a sense – and I had strong political beliefs -- I felt that I was able to accomplish more in these directions. Until I got to another parish. When I left Bridgetown in 1957, I went to Lantz; the headquarters of Lloyd's [Shaw] company

The Lantz Experience

Russell's time at Lantz, and his friendship with Lloyd Shaw, Alexa McDonough's father, seems to have provided the most formative period on his route to becoming affiliated publicly with social democracy, though, as his words indicate, his beliefs and values were never in question. Here the story weaves back and forth between Lloyd and Russell's generation and the groundwork for industrial social action that was laid down by Lloyd's father, L. E. Shaw.³

R: I was one of a few people in the parish who had any education. There was no doctor, there were no professionals, except school teachers. So that almost every problem landed on my doorstep, whether it was an alcoholic or a break-in.

C: Were there other churches involved?

R: Well, 99% of the people there were Anglicans. There were a few United people but they didn't have a church to start with. So they held services in our church. I was the only local minister (the UC minister came from Stewiacke).

C: Would you call it "rural"?

R: It was rural in some ways, but not rural occupationally. It was industrial, in a country setting. I kept after Alexa – later on, as she was only a girl when I first went to Lantz -- for years and her brother to hire somebody to write a book about the Shaws. About old Mr. Shaw, because he was about the most wonderful person you could imagine. He wrote a book of his own, but it was personal, and he wasn't trying to put his face into history. He needed someone [else] to do that. There were many brick plants around NS – all independent. After the first War, they got together. They were failing, one by one; they organized the Nova Scotia (NS) Clayworks or something like that. Old Mr. Shaw was in charge of the one in Avonport; that was part of the NS Clayworks. He decided that he knew how to handle this. They were going to lose all their money. So he went to the local banks and said 'I want to borrow some money.' 'What do you want it for?' He said, 'I want to buy the NS Clayworks.' They said, 'You're crazy. It's dying. Besides that, they owe us a lot of money.' And Shaw said to them, 'Well, if you lend me the money, I'll pay it back and you'll get your money from the Clayworks. But if you don't lend me the money, you're going to lose it all.' The Bank of Nova Scotia was the only bank that would listen to him. So they loaned him the money.

That was Lloyd's father, L.E. So he bought the NS Clayworks -- all their debts as well as their assets. He immediately closed several of them. He made Lantz his headquarters. And decided that he was going to modernize it. Lantz at that time had 15 or more big beehive kilns and not much more than that. He decided he was going to make it totally modern. He put in a long tunnel kiln, electric. You'd put a load of raw or wet bricks in one end, and it kept working its way until it came out the other end as finished bricks.

Most of the people who lived in Lantz had 1 or 2 years of schooling. That was about all. The man who was foreman of the plant, when they took it over, had two years of schooling. Old Mr. Shaw was faced with this problem: would he fire them all and bring in skilled workers, or would he train the ones who were here? He decided to train them. When I went there in '57, these people for the first time in 3 or 4 generations were getting good salaries, going to work every day at 7 and off at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. They had money that they'd never had in their whole lives before. And the man who was foreman of the company – before I left the parish – went into Halifax one night a week for a year or two to Dalhousie University to take a managerial course. And that was with two years of schooling.

They didn't have any education, but they had skills. Practically every worker in Lantz was also a mason. They could do anything, as masons. They built the church themselves, that big brick church.

C: By this time, you are married – with children?

R: We had two children in Pugwash, two in Bridgetown. So we went to Lantz with our four children. They were the hardest, but the most wonderful years, of my life.

There I got involved in everything – I can remember one family that was now getting good money. But they were deeply in debt. They were buying things, paying \$10 a month on this bill, and \$5 on that. I remember that this man had a long list of people that he owed money to. And he was paying just a few dollars a month to each. And he was going in the hole; he just couldn't do this. So I went around to all of the companies, and said, 'How much would you take for your bill?' They said, "Oh well, we'll just hold it for awhile." I said, "Well, they can't pay anything on it. You're not going to get anything." They reminded me that he had signed a chattel mortgage. And I said, "He doesn't own anything." So, eventually, they all came

down with a figure – and I totalled it up, and went around to various places (banks and so on) to see if I could borrow that much money for him. Only the Credit Union would give me the money. We paid off all his bills, and he started paying it back to one source each month.

This was a social problem, but also an economic problem. I learned so much about these companies, and what was going on, that I wrote a paper – quite a booklet it was – for our national office of the Anglican Church, and they published it, on consumer credit. A few years later, the Nova Scotia government appointed a lawyer in Halifax to study the possibility of some consumer legislation. So he had some hearings [about this issue] and I went in and presented a copy of this paper. Later on, he told me “You practically did all my work for me.” He presented his report to the NS government that brought in the very first consumer protection legislation in NS. From this legislation, we eventually got an Ombudsman for the first time.

This kind of thing that I got involved in [educated me.] I didn't go to many meetings [of the CCF], but I used to meet with Lloyd every time I'd go into the City. Lloyd and I would go out to have lunch together. We were very good friends. Young Lloyd had run several times. But, even before the CCF days, there was an organization – what was it called? Community Development?

C: The Independent Labour Party, or United Farmers Party?

R: Something like that. Once I got into Halifax, I had eased back on some of these things. There was still some social welfare sorts of things – the Halifax/Dartmouth Welfare Council and so on. I had a little more time. So I started going to meetings then.

That was when Alexa was going to go into politics, and I had the privilege of nominating her. This would be in the 1960s. I went to Halifax in 1963, so it would be the latter part of the '60s.

C: Did you ever feel that you needed to keep your Party affiliation divorced from your church activities?

R: I didn't mind letting people know where I stood. Anything that I stood for, I could back it up from a Christian point of view, as well as from a CCF perspective. So I had no problem about that. But I guess, instead of trying to defend myself, I started to attack. I used to say, “You fellows are just the Conservative Party at prayers.

Wolfville, a Time for Reflection

Russell has lived through many political and social changes. His early activism took place in an “old fashioned world where lines were very hard, and you were either right or wrong. If you weren't a die-hard capitalist, you were a communist. But the world is quite different now.”

C: How so?

R: Well, Different in the sense that all the things that we were fighting for, that we would consider politically Left, many of things now are just taken for granted. We've got them and we take them for granted. So that the centre between Right and Left is way to the Left now to what it used to be. That's the new centre. I think that's probably due, in Canada, to the liberal influence on the political scene. It's also due to the fact that even Conservatives in Canada couldn't go quite as far to the conservative side [as they once did].

C: As the Republicans in the U.S., for instance?

R: Yes. The centre, politically and economically, has shifted and the things that we are fighting for now – even the Occupy group

[for the Idle no More coalition today]– that kind of thing can be done now and understood. If that was attempted in my day, it wouldn't have been possible at all.

C: I see what you mean. The issues that are going on in protest rallies now, however, are just as serious. They are protesting the difference between abject poverty and outrageous riches. Gay marriage, women's ordination – that sort of issue – wouldn't have been heard of in the days of your early ministry.

R: The centre has shifted, but it's pretty unstable. Let me give you an illustration. We fought against the 2nd World War as long as we could because we thought it was wrong – not just wrong, but the wrong way to try to solve problems – but about half way through, as I recall, we gave up fighting against the War and started to prepare for the end of the War, the kind of world we wanted. We had lots of help there, because all the churches were getting behind it; there were big church conferences in England and everywhere, trying to decide what kind of world we wanted for "our boys" when they came back from overseas. From the end of the War until the middle of the 1960s everything was progressing wonderfully. We all thought the Kingdom of God was going to come almost immediately. Things were happening. We were beginning to get welfare programmes, national insurance, hospitalization & medicare – all of these things were happening. By 1966, I remember, making a list of all the things belonging to what I called Canada's Social Welfare Network. Everything was going to be beautiful.

But, at the mid-1960s, a change came. And since then, things have been going downhill. A lot of these things that we worked for, bit by bit are being whittled away. One of first things was the means test placed on our old age security. Then they began to farm out some of the services from our health system.

And now we have to start fighting for those things all over again. But we made a mistake. We were working for these things, and getting them. But what we didn't do – we didn't take everyone along with us. In other words, there was still a lot of opposition, and that opposition is part of the dialectical process working against us.

C: You said "we made a mistake."

R: We didn't make a 'mistake' exactly, but we did overlook the possibility of ongoing opposition. You can see this today in the cooperative movement. They were doing a wonderful job building co-op stores here and there, and a few producer co-ops, but they were supposed to carry on a strong educational programme. The Antigonish Movement was given a grant of money for education, not for co-ops. They were given money to do community education, or adult education or continuing education. And they did, and co-ops and credit unions were just a project of their education. It was a way to put their education to work. But we placed so much emphasis on the work, that we didn't do the education part. So, right now, our co-op stores are closing, one at a time, like the one in New Minas.

It isn't that the Antigonish Movement has failed, but they overlooked that one vital aspect – education at home. Through their Coady International Institute⁴, they got interested in other parts of the world and really educated the people from [developing countries]. Those people are going back and starting credit unions in their own communities.

C: Thank you, Russell. We can no longer show those from other countries, when they come here to Nova Scotia, so many examples of excellence in co-ops. Even when I was at the Coady in 1962, we could take people out and show

them the credit unions and co-ops at work. Your criticism about education will be helpful to those of us who are trying to establish a new consumer/producer cooperative store here in the Valley.

The words of Russell Elliott here, and in his two books, give social democrats much food for thought. The first source of sustenance for me, comes with Russell's example of how to live a life. As he approaches 96, he is still engaged in the world, still in conversation with others about the tensions found within capitalism and the fierce challenges facing politicians in a neo-liberal world. Yet, he reads widely on subjects such as dialectical forces – and has lived long enough to see that each socio-economic and political victory meets opposition and, gradually, a counter-movement forms and flourishes. Thus, he views the human quest with cautious optimism.

Of his two books, one recaptures values and actions that provide a primer for parenting and rural living in general. The other, which chronicles his work as a young activist priest, stands as a fundamentally important story in the struggle to bring a more equitable world into being.

Russell, like all who reach their nineties, has experienced many personal losses including the death of his son Michael and daughter Martha, his wife Dorothy of 46 years and, later, his second wife Carol. One daughter, Mary Ellen Clark, survives as does a son Charles. Russell Elliott knows that he can turn personal tragedies to advantage by helping others who are undergoing the pain of losing a loved one. He has a huge talent for ministering to others on an individual basis and, socially and politically, for uncovering uncomfortable 'truths.'

We Democrats have been enriched by Russell Elliott's support and companionship for more than seven decades. I leave the last word –a call to action -- to him:

To believe that what is happening in the world today is external to us, a process that belongs to the natural order of things and beyond our control, is to succumb to a 'laissez faire' approach to life and history; beyond our ability or even our right to challenge or affect. History and life manifest a particular kind of change: one that can be initiated, directed, delayed, and even removed (Briefcase Boys, p. 163).

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The Briefcase Boys: Reflections of a Church Activist, Lancelot Press, 1996. *As the Twig is Bent*, Gaspereau Press, 1999.

2 This was the

Rev. Mel French, who also became an AFSA member and one of the 'Briefcase Boys.'

3 In 2008, Allan

Shaw with Paddy Muir produced a family history called *In Safe and Sound Hands: The Story of the Shaw Group (published by The Shaw Group Ltd.)*

4This Institute is named in honour of Father M.M. Coady, a pioneer of the Antigonish Movement to help marginalized people become "masters of their own

destiny" (M.M. Coady, *Masters of their Own Destiny: The Story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education through Economic Cooperation*. New York; Harper & Bros., 1939).