

Chat with man who's seen the lighter side of Lougheed

When a long-time politician is leaving the public scene, particularly one who has a carefully crafted public image and a very distant private life, who better to learn something about that politician than from an individual who has worked with him?

In this case, the departing politician is Premier Peter Lougheed and the staff member who may be looking for a job in the near future is his press secretary, Ron Liepert.

After five years in the premier's office, what does Liepert, biased by his own admission, have to say?

Lots.
For starters: One of the really brilliant moves of the government was the Heritage Trust Fund. Albertans are strong-willed cow-punchers or rugged oil-man very defensive of their territory. The Alberta media has a pack mentality. Peter Lougheed has a tremendous sense of humor.

Some of those things could have been expected from a man who has spent so much time with a masterly persuader. Some will have to be taken with a grain of salt, particularly the bit about the sense of humor.

Oh, but he really does, Liepert insists. He's not a stand-up comic, but some of the things he says just crack you up, he says.

"I guess if there's a disappointment, it's that more people haven't seen the lighter side of Peter Lougheed."

He's got tremendous warmth. He's been accused of being extremely loyal to friends and staff but that loyalty has built up because it's a two-way loyalty. And he has a real caring for people. I sat in a lot of caucus meetings and in the top

dozen people concerned about the little guy, one of them is Lougheed."

Liepert wears his heart on his sleeve for his boss, he's friendly and down-to-earth. It says something for the man who hired him and taught him.



Joanne Helmer

Of The Herald

"I probably wouldn't trade the past five years for virtually anything," he says. "It was a tremendous learning experience."

That's not only because of the satisfaction he got from the job, or the exposure to the people making the decisions, but also because "I couldn't have gone to school and learned the things I've learned in five years. It's the basic things you learn, the human things."

Says Liepert: Lougheed has an exceptional talent for dealing with people, planning, organizing, his ability to get the most out of people and make them feel like what they're contributing is the most important. "That's why he's got a tremendous caucus loyalty."

"And it's not out of fear," he says. "It's because he manages to pull the guy from the remotest point of the province, who may appear to most people he's contributing nothing, and make him feel like he's a vital part of the caucus. That's a trait few people have."

"You learn those leadership qualities from him. It rubs off."

In his mid-thirties, Liepert also attributes some of his own casual manner to his background. He's a Saskatchewan farm kid, and he realized early in the game that association with power and powerful people is fleeting. "November 2nd of 1982 wasn't that long ago and if you (the government) don't continue to maintain the trust people put in you, Nov. 2 1986 is not that far off."

It was Lougheed the individual who convinced Liepert of the virtues of the Conservative Party, he says, despite a family background of NDP sympathy.

"The more I got to know the man the more I liked him and the more you get attracted to the party."

"What I found in him is not found in many other people."

"He's strong in his will and his desire and he has definite goals in mind. He's bold. If it's the right decision, he'll stick to it. He's not a waverer."

"I believe we see too many people in political life waver with polls, with whatever the media has to say on any particular day."

Lougheed may not waver with the media but he has paid a great deal of attention to it during his years as premier, trying to communicate the thinking behind the policies, Liepert says.

"Most people would be surprised at the number of media interviews he does grant, and how many people he does see in a media group."

In spite of being a former television reporter, Liepert feels the built-in alienation apparent in some sectors of the media is unwarranted. He says it was especially evident during the boom

years when reporters fresh out of university decided they would come West and make a name for themselves by turning this government upside down. They had a lot to learn, he says, because the only way you make a name for yourself is by establishing a rapport with people.

"There's probably within the media too much of a herd instinct to follow what the other media thinks about the guy. It leads me to believe one of the problems with the media is they don't travel the province enough." There's too much reliance on what the next guy has written, he says.

Perhaps to deter the thought Lougheed is simply another defensive politician, Liepert gives an example from the last provincial election campaign. It was rumored, he says, the NDP had a tremendous chance of winning the constituency of St. Paul.

"When the out-of-province media would fly in for their one-day report on the Alberta election, they'd come into Edmonton and ask the so-called authoritative legislative reporters where should we go to get the typical story on Alberta, they'd be told to go to St. Paul. The Conservatives could get beat in St. Paul. They'd go out to St. Paul and talk to the same group of people that everybody talks to and go out and write the same thing."

"We (Lougheed and group) went to a noon-hour luncheon speech in St. Paul. There were over 1,000 people there. Friendly, warm response. We walked out of there and knew St. Paul was not a problem."

Common now, Lougheed has had some very gentle press in his years as premier.

Yes, he returns, but a lot of that has been worked on. "He's tried very hard to make people understand his views."

I would venture to say, he adds, there is no

other premier in Canada who has spent more time in the course of a year in meetings with people in the media.

"It's one thing to have a news conference and parade your stuff in front of the media and appear to be accessible but I think it's just as important to sit down for an hour or a half and have a lunch with somebody."

That has been interpreted as manipulation of the media but Liepert counters that as well.

"I believe the person he's talking to has a mind of their own. If they think what he's saying is not right, they still write whatever they want to write. But

you've at least had the opportunity to get inside his head a little bit and do it in a way that you'll remember that for a year or so and not rely on someone else's interpretation of what they see of him."

Example: "That was one of the things we worked very hard at and were very successful with during the energy and constitutional situations, with Central Canadian media. We had endless meetings with editorial boards, columnists, senior writers. By the time it was all over, other than a few who were obviously strident in their views and you weren't going to change, they came away very impressed and said, 'Yeah, okay.'"

So at least you had a fair interpretation of both sides. And that's all we can ever ask for."

The Eastern Canadian media sometimes worked inadvertently for the party, he says (with just a hint of glee). Any time they knocked the Alberta government it produced an opposite reaction among Albertans.

"There's nothing that would help us as a political party more than to have the CBC come flying in and do a national program on what a rotten government this is. You can just see that Albertans get the hair up on their back and they come out fightin'."



RON LIEPERT

What will Liepert do after October if, as he expects, the new premier chooses a new press secretary? He says he hasn't given it too much thought but he figures it will be hard to find anything as challenging and exciting.

So far only one thing is settled: His six-year-old son starts playing hockey this fall and daddy is going to see a lot of sunrises on his way to the ice arena.