

Reflections with Jean Friesen



With the dust now settled after an exciting month of campaigning, it's back to business for the New Democrat Party. However, there will be a significant face missing from the Cabinet as it begins another term in office. That missing face belongs to **Jean Friesen**, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs from 1999 to 2003.

The *Municipal Leader* profiled the Minister when she was first elected to office and to her new position as Minister of the amalgamated departments of Rural Development and Urban Affairs. Now that Mrs. Friesen has resigned from politics, we talked with her again to reflect on her years in Cabinet.

Q *Could you tell us about your background, including education, family, places you've lived and interests?*

A I'm a historian by education. I grew up in England and came to Canada when I was 17. When I arrived, I went to university at McGill and British Columbia. After graduating, I lived for a year in an Inuit village in the Northwest Territories. Then, I went to the National Museum in Ottawa for six years as a western Canada historian. In 1973, I came to Manitoba to teach and found myself immersed in politics. I spent nine years in opposition, but continued to teach a night course during that time.

My interest in history and politics stems from my father. He liked to tell historical tales and it was very difficult to ask my dad a question without getting a three-hour lecture on history. As a family, we used to

go and visit historic sites. Even though my father wasn't a historian, his interest was something he passed on to me.

Q *When and how did you first become involved in politics? What were some of your goals as a member of the New Democrat Party?*

A I joined England's Labour Party in 1959 at the age of 16. When I came to Canada and went to McGill, I joined the CCF, which became the NDP a year later. I was young then and mostly was an observer. Again, my family had been very interested in politics. My mother's family members were trade unionists (they were railway workers). My father had run for the Labour Party after the Second World War. He didn't get elected then, but that was one of the great sweeps Labour had at the time.

What drew me to the NDP was the sense of equality and the kinds of equality that the Party has always pushed for through public service – public sector, public schools, public hospitals and a public health care system. It doesn't matter what colour your skin is, who your family is, or how big your chequebook is. I don't think the party expresses it in those terms, but I think much of what we value about our public school system and our public health care system is that sense that we are all treated equally.

Q *When you became Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, what were some of your goals? Do you feel you have accomplished them?*

A I think one of the important things about creating this department out of the former department of municipal affairs, rural economic development and urban affairs, was to try and work across the kind of boundaries that Manitobans have become accustomed to. When I speak, I try to speak across those boundaries. In rural Manitoba, I talk about the importance of revitalizing downtown Winnipeg, and when I speak in Winnipeg, I emphasize how important the health of rural Manitoba and rural communities is and how important the state of agriculture is to all Manitobans. It's sometimes considered an unusual message in some places, but it is one I have continued to use.

I try to remind Manitobans that we are all part of one province – that we are very much dependent upon each other and upon

the health of our communities. It's been my job to make that case. I think the amalgamation of departments was very timely as it came when there were forces beyond our control that were tending to exaggerate some of the divisions that may have been present for a long time. For example, the move to a more globalized economy has had a very serious impact upon rural Manitoba – perhaps more so than urban Manitoba. Rather than see those gaps between rural and urban Manitobans grow, part of my job has been to make those connections, to make that argument, and to ensure that people understood that we are interconnected and interdependent upon each other.

I think it is very hard to measure our accomplishments. I've certainly been conscious of making that case everywhere I've been. And I'm not the only one that does that. Many of the groups in agriculture make that case very well. AMM is, of course, one of the reasons that we created this department because it had shown us the way. We'd seen that amalgamation of urban and rural municipalities a couple of years before we came into government, and it seemed to us a very sensible direction to go. It was creating a very powerful community of municipal governments that were sharing what they had in common and being a very strong voice. We had hoped that that was something we could follow as well.

Q *What are some of your career highlights?*

A Four years is not a long time to make significant changes, but I think what we have been able to do is to make some very visible and powerful changes in inner city Winnipeg with the *Neighbourhoods Alive!* Program, along with considerable success with *Neighbourhoods Alive!* in Brandon and Thompson. For example, in Brandon, we just completed our 400th house. We've completed twice that number in Winnipeg. We also have five community development corporations that are up and running in Winnipeg as well as in Brandon and Thompson. This is a testimony to the energy of a community – they were ready, they saw the needs in their communities, and were ready to work with us when we came in with programs to support them. I think that has made a very visible difference and given a message of hope in each of those communities.

For rural economic development, I

think we have been successful in talking to people about regional development corporations. We have continued with many of the economic development programs that have now become traditional like the REDI programs, infrastructure programs or programs dealing with individual entrepreneurs. We have worked with a number of communities through the Water Services Board and the Canada-Manitoba Infrastructure Program. I think we have been successful in ensuring Manitobans have clean, safe water. We established training programs, re-introduced training programs for municipal water operations, re-introduced subsidies for testing of water. We established a series of protocols not only in our department and Health but also in Conservation that enables Manitobans to feel secure about their water systems. Again, four years isn't a long time to make a big shift – we know there's a great deal more to do in municipal water systems.

I'm also pleased with the expansion of Conservation Districts and am grateful to the municipalities that have been involved. I am really keen on that program and it's one that we depend on cooperation with municipalities. We've expanded that program by two or three new districts per year. That's the biggest expansion we've seen in the last 10 or 15 years, and it's one which I think holds a lot of hope for the long term planning for soil and water conservation.

Q *What are your plans after you retire from politics? What will you miss most?*

A I'm looking forward to going back to teach history at the U of M. I'll miss my colleagues in caucus and cabinet. I will miss the collective group of people that have come from many parts of Manitoba and many walks of life. I've had a wonderful experience working along side them and the Premier for the last 13 years.

University tends to be much more individual – you are on your own in the classroom and you tend to be much more on your own in your field and in working with students. It's a different kind of satisfaction that you get out of university. But, I'm hoping to take into the classroom some of what I've learned. I have learned an enormous amount about rural Manitoba. I have learned a great deal about drainage, and soil and water and municipal government. As Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, I've travelled to a great many communities. I hope that I can take that

experience, understanding and grassroots perspective of Manitoba into the classroom with me. I hope to teach young students what I've learned and where it fits in the history of the changes in this broader community.

Q *Could you discuss your relationship with the AMM?*

A When I first came into this office, I made two calls. The first was to the AMM and the second was to the Conservation District Commission. I made a third call to the Mayor of Winnipeg. I think this reflected the nature of the new department. With the AMM, I've always had a very frank and trusting relationship. I hope it has been mutual, I certainly have the sense it has been. It has also been a very consultative relationship. I think we've both tried on each side to ensure that we kept each other in touch with what was happening and where we were going. We've had a lot of very specific partnerships with the AMM that have been very productive. And I'm not speaking just to this department, but to the government generally, whether it's been on education taxation or economic issues, or working with the AMM to provide the tool kits for the kinds of changes that municipalities are facing.

I have worked with two AMM presidents and with the executives that have been there over that time. I've noticed how the organization spends a great deal of time talking to its members. I have been able to go to a number of AMM meetings and, whether it's the annual meeting, the June District meetings or some of the Mayors & Reeves meetings, I am always impressed by how close the AMM is to its membership. From a government perspective, you know when you're talking to the AMM that you are talking to a group of people very close to rural Manitoba. It requires a lot of effort on behalf of your executive and your staff to get a good grasp of the issues and to deal with them very quickly. It is amazing to me how much time and energy and how productive that is, at least from the perspective of a Minister who needs to be in touch with urban and rural communities.

Q *Now that you are leaving politics, what do you see as Manitoba's biggest challenge?*

A It's hard to focus on a single challenge. I think all the prairie provinces are facing issues of very

rapid change as a result of globalization. I think the withdrawal of support by Ottawa for farmers and for rural transportation has meant that rural communities and families have had to make some very rapid transitions. I think those are difficulties many people are still facing.

On the other side, I think the future is something Manitobans are facing with a lot of confidence. I think our approach to Kyoto, to the use of hydro, and to the way Manitoba is positioned economically through hydro and through the great demand internationally for that is important.

I also think Manitoba is a province that has a long experience of adapting to change, whether it has been from the fur trade to the wheat economy, or from the wheat economy to the new diversified economy. Manitobans have also been able to integrate new people into the community at various periods of very high immigration. It is a community where we speak many languages and I think that is something that will be increasingly important in the international field and the international economy. I think building on that diversity, building on our economic position in the world, building on our ability to meet change and to adapt are what we need to foster and grow. ●

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