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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Liberal Convention Stirs Speculation

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial Farm Editor

THE LIBERAL leadership convention is now official, with an announcement by President E.D. Reid of the P.E.I. Liberal Federation. That is what was expected and mark an early September date as the best date for a province-wide meeting that either will confirm present leader Alex Matheson or name someone to replace him.

The convention just had to come, for enough questions have been raised as to Matheson's leadership status, to call for "the air to be cleared", as several prominent Liberals remarked to me after I predicted a convention call several weeks ago.

Mr. Matheson will definitely be a candidate. The only question is who will oppose him. I haven't anything definite on probable candidates but I'm told, for instance, that one group that opposes the present leader will back Lorne Bonnell, the Murray River doctor who headed the health and welfare department in the Matheson Government.

LORNE GAVE some evidence of leadership ambitions in that TV speech last year when he was lambasting the PCs for not using the sales tax revenue to pay hospital insurance premiums. I'm referring to the "my platform" reference in the speech. It was brushed off as an error but I wondered how such an error could get into something as carefully rehearsed as a TV speech usually is.

Dr. Bonnell has youth on his side at 36 and he has 10 years of legislature experience behind him. The fact he's Matheson's colleague in 4th Kings may cause some embarrassment but that is not necessarily an insurmountable bar.

Former Highways Minister MacKay

FROM PEOPLE I have talked to and they were necessarily limited in number - I get the feeling that former Highways Minister George MacKay would be the most acceptable leadership material available. But I rather doubt that the Albany farmer - I'm told he's 68 - will take on such an onerous task.

His farmer status should make him politically acceptable in this largely rural province. The PCs have Walter Shaw with his farm background and his years as deputy minister of agriculture. And already, I'm told, many of them are glancing at Agriculture Minister MacRae as future leadership timber. I've no idea what Mr. MacRae may think of it, but his farm background is second to none in the province.

I CAN'T think of a more respected or better known farm family than the MacRae's and the fine reputation traces back to Andrew MacRae, the minister's grandfather, who, with his sons Major and Fred, became nationally known as A. MacRae and Sons for the fine Ayrshire cattle they showed in provincial, Maritime and National competition.

Mr. MacKay also has 10 years service in the legislature and no man that I know in the House on either side carries more respect or prestige.

Keir Clark and Watson MacNaught

OTHER NAMES I've heard mentioned are Keir Clark and J. Watson MacNaught.

Mr. Clark, 51, is the Montague man who has held health and welfare and provincial treasurer portfolios. A sound businessman and able administrator, he has had 12 years in the house although he does not hold a seat now. But I can't see him leaving his business interests for such a demanding career.

Mr. MacNaught had 12 years in the House of Commons, nine of them as parliamentary assistant to the ministry of fisheries.

HE MAY not agree with me, but I think "Lady Luck" passed up the Summerside lawyer when he missed out on the Senate appointment in 1955. Watson could have had it for the taking, but he was looking for bigger things, and they looked attainable at the time.

Watson was in line for a cabinet post in 1957 after the federal election of that year but it was John Diefenbaker who made the selections, instead of Louis St. Laurent, after the Canadian people got through telling the Liberals they had tired of them after 22 years. And Watson, like myself and a lot of other Liberals, was one of the casualties.

Mr. MacNaught who is 57, was first elected to the Commons in 1945 after serving as clerk of the legislature from 1935-41. With three election wins and 12 sessions under his belt he is eligible for a pension of \$2160 annually, the way my figures work out He may be looking to another try at the Commons. Another session could boost his pension. The top limit is \$3,000 annually which calls for 17 years service. Or he could be thinking of the leadership competition.

Matheson Backers Are Confident

RIGHT NOW Mr. Matheson is at the top of the heap, and his greatest weakness, as I see it, is in the complete confidence his backers voice that he will take the convention easily. That sort of thing could be fatal.

The present leader has enemies. Perhaps that is inevitable - and many of them are willing to do anything they can to depose him. Right now I don't think there are enough of them, though, to push any other candidate ahead of him. The leadership campaign, however, may paint a different picture, particularly if the opposition can unite their forces behind any one candidate.

I MENTIONED four possible candidates. I'm told that Eugene Cullen, former agriculture minister, may be in the field. Another group tells me B. Earle MacDonald must be considered. Earle is a former minister of health and welfare and provincial secretary-treasurer.

Because I'm filling in at a demanding desk job these two weeks for a colleague who is on vacation, I haven't had a chance to talk to those men and get their personal reaction. So I'm merely passing on some of the speculation that has come my way.

Byelection Winners Congratulated

SPACE RAN short on me last week so I didn't have a chance to congratulate PC Lloyd MacPhail, Cornwall and George Ferguson, the Murray River Liberal who won the provincial byelections. Both are young men and come to the legislature well recommended. Mr. MacPhail has been an effective man behind the scenes for the PCs for some years. Now he's in the limelight.

I'm told Mr. Ferguson is one of the province's best organizers. He made a splendid impression on a large Montague meeting the only time I ever saw him in action, and already some of the top Liberal brass are talking of him in terms of future leadership status.