

Cabinet post eluded Art Evans

By JOHN SLYKHUIS

Arthur Evans' 13 years in the Ontario legislature—now coming to an end—were not without disappointments.

The position of cabinet minister has always eluded the Simcoe Centre MPP, and he frankly feels it was because he supported the loser in the progressive Conservative leadership race of 1981.

"Politics being what it is, I guess I could have been a cabinet minister if I had supported John Roberts. I supported Bob McLean," Mr. Evans said in an interview.

During that critical leadership race, John Roberts approached Mr. Evans for support. "He indicated to me that I would have a chance of getting into the cabinet if I would support him."

HARD WORK

Many of the top Roberts supporters who came to persuade Mr. Evans to change his mind ended up with cabinet posts.

"All I got was hard work," Mr. Evans says. "That's politics...there's nothing you can do about it, and that's the only regret I have, the fact that I wasn't able to be a cabinet minister."

And now that his political career officially ended with the election announcement, Mr. Evans, 62, is busy campaigning actively for his successor as a PC candidate George Taylor of Barrie.

"Yes, I'm trying to help George get elected. As far as I'm concerned we need a province conservative government in this province. That's what made this country great."

Arthur Evans' fondest memory is not one of a political triumph or an election victory.

It's one of an elderly lady who travelled by bus from Barrie one cold and snowy Christmas season, walked the half mile or so to Mr. Evans' home in Bradford, just to give the family a turkey for Christmas dinner.

"This is for all the things you've done for everyone," she said.

REMEMBERING

It's the kind of memory that indicates the man he is, the grassroots, close-to-the-people politician on which the Conservative party of Ontario built and maintained such a powerful level of support.

Mr. Evans' long and distinguished political career began in 1969 when he was elected to the Bradford Public Utilities Commission.

The following year he led the polls and captured a seat on council.

Running on a platform of building a new community centre and providing increased parking, Mr. Evans was elected Reeve of Bradford in 1973, defeating Frank Allan by only 29 votes.

That was the year of the Hurricane Hazel disaster, and Mr. Evans had to forge building the community centre to handle the sudden emergency.

"I was responsible for organizing the rescue of people on the beach. When the first call came to me I had to ring the firebell, get the firemen, help get the sandbagging operation going on the dykes. I never went to bed until these 2,000 people had found a place to sleep."

After that came the long period of retreating with his establishment of the Holland Marsh relief fund in which he had \$90,000 in personal cheques sent to him. He turned them over to the national hurricane relief fund.

With the financial skill that had made him a successful businessman—he ran a bakery and clothing store—Mr. Evans managed to turn the massive clean-up of the marsh refugee trailer camp into a plus for the taxpayers.

ASSISTANCE

He went to the relief fund organization in Toronto to ask for assistance. "I wanted to

make sure that I had enough money to clean up so that the taxpayers of Bradford wouldn't have to pay a cent. I said, 'I want to be guaranteed \$2,000 plus whatever I can salvage out of the trailer camp.'"

When it was all over, he still had \$2,000 left, and this became the first contribution to the arson fund, listed in the Bradford Witness of the day as an "anonymous" donation.

After the completion of the Bradford community centre, Mr. Evans was elected Warden of Simcoe County in 1978.

And while ordinarily this post means retirement afterward, he was re-appointed after the sudden death of the succeeding warden to deal with the separation of Barrie from the county in 1980.

"We did settle the financial situation between the city of Barrie and the county in about one year...it was an unusual thing to settle in so short a time. It took York and the city of Toronto over seven years to settle."

FIRST MAYOR

With Bradford growing enough to achieve town status in 1980, Mr. Evans decided to stay on to run for the first post of mayor. He was acclaimed to office.

He had decided the previous year to run for a potential post, but the Progressive Conservative incumbent, George Johnson, decided to stay on and Mr. Evans withdrew in favour of him.

Mr. Johnson died the following year and Mr. Evans was persuaded to run in the by-election.

"I didn't really have any political aspirations then. I had just gone through the fire (which destroyed his business) and rebuilt everything. I was quite happy. I was just going to finish off the year as mayor and get out."

Little did he realize then that his political career had another 10 years to run.

He was that by-election on September 29, 1980 and four other elections since then in 1983, 1987, 1991, and 1995.

Several of his committee appointments in the legislature have been vital ones, including heading the select committee on conservation authorities 1984-85, which laid the foundation for much of the government legislation on preserving farmland and protecting the environment.

DIPLOMATIC

With a unique display of diplomacy and political skill he also averted a showdown with unions over a bill which would see non-engineering personnel involved in boiler maintenance.

"When the bill was going through committee and they (the union members) came, there wasn't room for them to all get in to hear the bill. I had to ask the speaker of the house if I could see the Legislature...This had never been allowed and he said no."

"So I called the speaker, John Roberts, and I told him the situation. I said, 'you could very easily have a riot on your hands if you don't allow me to do this.' He said, 'Do you think you can handle it?' and I said 'I think I can,' so he said OK and called the speaker."

The manoeuvre worked, and the union members went away satisfied.

"I'm going to miss politics," he admits, but he vows to keep active in a variety of things.

He hopes to do more work for the Lions Club of which he was the district governor in 1980, and continue as director of a savings and loan corporation.

Not today!

"Well I'm painting the house. I'm just about finished now."

The kind of thing that appeals to people, a man just like them, not concerned with appearances or image.