



THE CHANCELLOR

John Robarts, prime minister of Ontario, 1961–1971

BY STEVE PAIKIN

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Imagine a time when the premier of Ontario was indisputably admired and respected not only by his fellow first ministers from coast to coast to coast, but also by most Canadians. Imagine a time when Canada's biggest province routinely balanced its books. Every year. Imagine a time when growth was so buoyant, and revenues flowed so voluminously into the treasury, that the minister of education often attended the ribbon cuttings for three different schools a day.

1960S ONTARIO

Well, if you were alive in the province of Ontario during the 1960s, you didn't have to imagine this. You lived it. The Sixties were, plain and simple, the best time to be an Ontarian. The province was emerging from the sleepier Fifties with a 44-year-old prime minister who was so handsome, and conveyed such leadership chops, that comparisons to America's 40-something President John F. Kennedy were made and the nickname "chairman of the board" stuck.

And no, that wasn't a misprint. John P. Robarts was, in fact, called the "prime minister of Ontario." When reporters asked him whether Ontario's first minister shouldn't return to being called "premier" (as the job was called a few decades earlier), Robarts sheepishly replied, "Well, that's the name that was on the door when I got here." (It would be left to Robarts's successor, Bill Davis, to switch the title back to "premier" a decade later.)

Robarts assumed the leadership of Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party in one of the most exciting leadership conventions ever. It was held at Varsity Arena in Toronto in October 1961 and turned into a six-ballot marathon. But Robarts eventually emerged victorious and, thanks to two majority government victories in 1963 and 1967, maintained the Tory dynasty, which began in 1943 and would last until 1985.

It was a great time to be the prime minister of Canada's richest and most populous province. These were boom times, and the government intended to bring an increasingly urbanizing province into the Go-Go Sixties. That meant an unprecedented school-building program for the baby boomers, whose generation was born immediately after the end of the Second World War. It also meant post-secondary options as never before, with the province building five new universities (including York University in Toronto) and, for those who wanted a more practical post-secondary alternative, the entire college system. It also meant upgrading the teaching skills of teachers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and lifelong learning on the country's first television channel dedicated to education, TVOntario. All of these initiatives were undertaken by Robarts's trusted education minister, Bill Davis.

Robarts saw that a burgeoning province would need significant new electricity generation, and so he ordered the building of Ontario's first nuclear power plants in Pickering, just east of Toronto. Commuting to jobs was becoming increasingly necessary thanks to the construction of new suburbs. Thus, GO Transit was built. ("GO" stood for Government of Ontario—maybe not a sexy acronym, but it certainly conveyed the service's mission.)

Robarts thought kids from lower-income families who couldn't afford summer camp also needed a place to play. And so we got Ontario Place, a wonderful locale on Toronto's waterfront. He thought science ought to be fun and, as a centennial-year project, had the Ontario Science Centre built. More than four million people have since visited the centre.

CONFEDERATION OF TOMORROW CONFERENCE

But Robarts also saw bombs blowing up in mailboxes in next-door Québec and wanted to better understand what Canada's French wanted. Robarts was a London-born, unilingual anglophone, yet what came next was an almost unprecedented attempt at nation-building. He invited every Canadian premier to come to the Confederation of Tomorrow conference, on the top floor of the newly constructed and stately Toronto-Dominion Centre, in hopes of having a conversation about the state of the country in its centennial year. And consistent with his statesmanlike approach to politics, he invited both the Liberal and New Democratic Party opposition leaders to attend and sit in the Ontario delegation.

Robarts led the most important gathering of Canadian first ministers since Confederation in Charlottetown a century earlier. Observers agreed: he was likely the only politician in Canada with enough political currency and gravitas to pull such an event together. (More than half a century later, there is still a plaque on the wall in the lobby of the TD Centre showing the seating plan of the conference attendees.)

After serving nearly a decade as premier, Robarts announced his resignation in December 1970 with the succinct statement: "I am a product of my times exactly, and my time is finished."

POST-POLITICS

Robarts went on to have as spectacular a post-political career as anyone in Canadian history. He was ensconced at the Toronto law firm Stikeman Elliott and sat on more than a dozen well-paying boards. And yet, he still made himself available when public service called. He co-chaired the Pepin-Robarts Task Force on Canadian Unity, chaired a task force on the future of governance in Metropolitan Toronto, served as chancellor of his hometown University of Western Ontario (as it was then called), and then did another stint as chancellor at York University, which went on to name its Centre for Canadian Studies after him.

Despite a brilliant political and professional life, Robarts's personal life was complicated and ended in tragedy. He divorced his first wife (and mother of his two adopted children) and remarried an American divorcée 28 years his junior. London was scandalized. Toronto, less so. In 1981, he suffered a debilitating stroke and never recovered. On October 18, 1982, Robarts walked into the shower stall on the second floor of his home in Rosedale and took with him the shotgun the Ontario PC Party gave him as a thank-you gift for his years of public service. He was lost to suicide.

So much of Ontario today has its roots in decisions made by Robarts and his government. We should never allow the shocking nature of his death to obscure the enormous contribution he made to Ontario and Canada. ■