

Montreal Conservatives give a prime minister's grandson a difficult debut

MONTREAL

If there is a gentle corner of heaven reserved for politicians who have had a rough time on earth, Arthur Meighen was there this week, looking down on his grandson and wondering if miracles can still happen.

The scene that he looked down on Wednesday night must have seemed both familiar and extraordinary to this Prairie lawyer who became prime minister of Canada in 1920, lost the election the following year and was replaced as Conservative leader in 1927 by R. B. Bennett. In Victoria Hall, in the centre of Westmount, in the heart of English-speaking Montreal, 32-year-old Michael Arthur Meighen was accepting the nomination as the local Conservative candidate in an effortless mixture of McGill University English and Laval University French.

If Arthur Meighen, on the far side of the great language barrier, understood what his grandson was saying, he must have been astonished to learn that one out of four Westmounters today is a French-speaking Canadian and that eight out of 10 live not in the fabled mansions of Westmount but in something called "habitations a logements multiples." In other words, flats, apartments and single rooms.

Admiration and horror

But in another respect, the late prime minister must have looked down on his grandson with total understanding. A veteran of some of the bitterest election battles in Canadian history, he must have regarded the task accepted by Michael Meighen with a mixture of admiration and horror. In the election of June, 1968,



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Charles Drury, president of the Treasury Board and one of the inner circle in the Trudeau cabinet, was elected in Westmount with 30,732 votes against 5,909 for his Conservative opponent. And while Conservative Leader Robert Stanfield tried to reassure the audience on Wednesday night that "after all, 24,000 votes or so isn't really that much, when you remember what happened to our majorities in this province in 1962," Arthur Meighen knew from personal experience that being a Conservative in Quebec during certain periods of history is the loneliest vocation in the world.

The party has just witnessed one of those periods. It elected only four members in Quebec in 1968, losing one of these last spring when Roch LaSalle of Joliette resigned to sit as an independent in the House of Commons. At the same time, Fernand Alie, the president of the party's Quebec association, also resigned after attacking the party, in an open letter in the Montreal newspaper *le Devoir*, for failing to accommodate the national aspirations of its French-speaking members. These events led to speculation that the Conservatives might be wiped out completely in Quebec in the next election.

But officials of the party in Montreal this week claimed that the resignations had not jeopardized a basic reorganization that has been under way since the 1968 election. In the wake of that disastrous campaign, Conservatives in Quebec realized that the party really had never recovered from its suicidal alliance

with the late Maurice Duplessis in the '30s. The unexpected Conservative majorities in Quebec in 1962 had to be regarded as a freak phenomenon. In 1969, the evident disintegration of the National Union in Quebec also influenced a basic reconstruction attempt by the Conservatives.

According to Alie's successor, 48-year-old Montreal lawyer Claude Nolin, this effort has now given the party, for the first time in decades, a sound organizational structure of its own in Quebec. Two full-time organizers with paid help are working out of offices in Quebec city and Montreal. There is an active provincial council and 10 regional councils, four in Montreal and six in rural Quebec.

Finances improving

Nolin claims that party finances are improving. There will be a public test of this claim on Nov. 21 in Montreal when Stanfield is scheduled to speak to a \$50-a-plate dinner. Organizers of the event already are going out on a limb and predicting that more than 2,000 people will attend.

Equally important is the fact that Alie's resignation seems to have ended the "two nation" debate within the party that hurt it in all parts of the country in 1968. Nolin now insists that "the Conservatives are the staunchest federalists of anyone in Quebec" and it's clear that the party is not going to debate federalism with Prime Minister Trudeau on the hustings the next time around. The campaign will focus on Quebec's economic problems—an interesting attempt to beat Trudeau with the weapon used so effectively in 1970 by Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa.

"There's no other issue in Quebec right now," according to Nolin.

The party's most glaring deficiency continues to be the lack of an effective spokesman in Quebec. The whole picture in Quebec could change if the Conservatives could come up with "a bold man and an aggressive fighter, a master of satire and caustic wit, and fond of picturesque language." That was the description of Arthur Meighen written in 1965 by party historian Heath MacQuarrie.

Last Wednesday night, looking down on his bachelor grandson charming the matrons of Westmount in Victoria Hall, Arthur Meighen might have recalled another description of himself written when he attended the 1921 Imperial Conference in London as a freshman prime minister. They said he was a "debutante among dowagers."



PRIME MINISTER MEIGHEN
He had a rough time



GRANDSON MEIGHEN
He's got a tough job