

## **THE CAREERS OF AL JOHNSON (1923-2010) ... with instances from his work**

*“...Till we have built Jerusalem...”*

A.W. (Al) Johnson was one of Canada's pre-eminent public servants through five careers spanning the last half of the twentieth century, associated with Premier Tommy Douglas of Saskatchewan, Canadian Prime Ministers Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau, and President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; and with public finance, administration and public policy, health, education, social security and the arts, public broadcasting, international governance, federalism and constitutional reform. Throughout, Al Johnson was a prolific analyst of government and public policy – surely the most continuously and widely published of all Canadian civil servants. This web site brings together and makes accessible a growing selection of these writings, including classics of their kind.

### **Roots**

Al Johnson was a “child of the manse” and the searing Depression years. He was born in tiny Insinger, Saskatchewan, in 1923, the son of a Methodist minister, the Rev. Thomas Johnson, who had immigrated to Canada from England's “dark satanic mills” and married Nova Scotian Louise Croft. Johnson's ideals were influenced by his parents' unselfish, personally austere pastoral values, and by his father's work in accord with preachers – literally and figuratively -- of the Canadian “social gospel”: J.S. Woodsworth, founding leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party and a Canadian political legend (whom Al knew as a teenager), and the young Rev. T.C. Douglas who preached during the 'thirties to Rev. Johnson's congregation in Wilcox, Saskatchewan.

The personal keystone of Johnson's life was his marriage in 1946 to Ruth Hardy – daughter of Thomas Johnson's fellow minister Ralph Hardy and Myrtle Watson, both from Ontario. Ruth Johnson, like Al, was born in small-town Saskatchewan, in Hafford, though brought up in interior British Columbia where she and Al met. Ruth's constant support, with their four children, was the private anchor to Al's life and career.

Following Regina College, a B.A. at the University of Saskatchewan, army service (medical discharge) and wartime work in Boeing Aircraft of Canada's factory, Johnson graduated from the University of Toronto in 1945 with an M.A. in public administration. Twice in mid-career he returned to university at Harvard in what is now the Kennedy School of Government, first taking a Masters degree as a Littauer Fellow in 1950 and then in 1957-58 for a PhD in political economy.

## The Saskatchewan Years

Johnson's "first career" was as a senior civil servant in the provincial government of Saskatchewan, North America's first democratic socialist government during the revolutionary years of Premier Tommy Douglas (1944-1961) and his successor Woodrow Lloyd (1961-64). The Douglas government has been characterized as "not just reforming but revolutionizing Canadian understanding of the meaning of modern government. The Douglas years marked a political transformation in three respects: the creation of an expert bureaucracy, the introduction of universal social policies and the establishment of active and, on balance, profitable federal-provincial fiscal relations."<sup>i</sup>

Johnson was recruited from the government's adult education service to join the Budget Bureau in 1946, and appointed its head as Deputy Provincial Treasurer in 1952 – at the age of twenty-eight "Canada's youngest deputy minister", announced Provincial Treasurer Clarence Fines: "His example should serve as an inspiration to our young people in realizing that there is room at the top for those that have been well trained and have given outstanding service".

From then until 1964, Johnson was closely involved with building one of Canada's most admired and professional public administrations, and with public policy initiatives ranging from the famous introduction of universal medicare to proposing and with others planning the Wascana Centre complex of parkland, arts facilities, university and Legislature in the heart of Regina; from governance of the University of Saskatchewan to strengthening open financial accountability of the government to the legislature, and establishment of Canada's first arts granting council – all while playing a key role in support of the Provincial Treasurer in sustaining balanced budgets year after year. Johnson's writings on public administration, beginning in those years, reflected as well his view of the responsibilities of senior officials to explain and educate as well as advise and administer.<sup>ii</sup>

- > As an administrator, Johnson devoted particular efforts to the recruitment of talented young Canadians graduating from universities across the country – a remarkable feat for a small province, made possible by Johnson's personal talent-spotting and recruitment travel as well as to a network of professorial friends – and to their training and development. He implemented a development plan that brought these recruits into the Budget Bureau (ministry of finance), developed and "graduated" them, and placed them for further careers in line departments. As Johnson later put his long-standing views on "productivity and people in the public services of Canada": "To begin at the beginning – the simple verities of personnel management, as I see them. There are only two. First, we must create in government a climate within which creativity will flourish – an environment which will attract and keep the best people in the country. Secondly, we must identify and treasure the 'precious people' in the public service – the talented, the devoted, the hard-working."<sup>iii</sup>

More widely, Johnson's his responsibilities made him familiar with the workings of economic markets and financial institutions; and took him into across Canada for federal-provincial fiscal and economic discussions establishing trustworthy relationships with fellow provincial government officials and premiers.

- > One fruit of that experience was the comprehensive, national fiscal equalization principles and approach only later implemented by the Government of Canada. Johnson developed the principles and broad design while on leave from the Government of Saskatchewan at Harvard in 1957-58, and advanced it with the assistance of a few

colleagues in Saskatchewan. Premier Douglas felt any such proposal should come from the national government, however, and officials there did not then take up the idea. But when Johnson brought the design with him to Ottawa in 1964, he was able to have the formula worked out further and was given the green light to table the proposal for consultation with provinces at the Continuing Committee of Officials on Fiscal and Economic Matters, and subsequently to consult with premiers and their officials: on that basis, the Government of Canada adopted the new equalization approach as its policy and legislation was passed in 1967. As he summarized the new arrangements, "The federal government has said to each province, in effect, that if the average provincial tax rate when applied in that province were to yield less than it does in Canada as a whole, less than the national average in other words (calculated on a per capita basis), the federal government will make up the difference. This applies to virtually every provincial revenue field... And even if these provinces were to apply above average, or below average tax rates, for their own reasons, they would still be entitled to an equalization payment as if they were imposing taxes at the national average rates. The automatic equalization of provincial revenues, based upon actual provincial tax rates, has substantially solved the problem of how to deal with jurisdictions whose revenue potential differs widely. The federal government now is in a position to suggest to provincial governments that because they have access to virtually all tax fields, and because their revenues are equalized automatically, they rather than the federal government ought to raise the necessary taxes to meet rising provincial expenditures. So long as the provinces, taken together, do so, the equalization formula will guarantee to the lower income provinces the national average yield from the tax increase. Put in more general terms, it now is practical to provide a system under which the poorer governments which have access to the tax fields which it is thought ought to be used can use them to finance rising expenditures without having to impose excessive levels of taxation".<sup>iv</sup>

Johnson revisited the extraordinary "Tommy Douglas years" much later as public policy analyst, historian of public administration and "biographer", in his book "Dream No Little Dreams: A Biography of the Douglas Government of Saskatchewan" (2004).

### **The Government of Canada Years**

A second career opened with Johnson's move in 1964 to the Government of Canada, attracted to behind-the-scenes of the national stage by legendary "mandarin" R.B. Bryce. As the senior official in the Department of Finance responsible for federal-provincial relations and tax policy during the government of Prime Minister Pearson, then successively as economic advisor on the constitution to Prime Minister Trudeau, Secretary (deputy minister) to the Treasury Board and Deputy Minister of National Health and Welfare, Johnson contributed to major public policies including, as well as establishment of comprehensive, principled fiscal equalization, reform and enhancement of federal support for provincial post-secondary education, fostering and meeting the needs of an educational revolution echoing today; a national art bank; and the launch of medicare as a national policy, modeled on Saskatchewan's pioneering.

- > As Prime Minister Pearson's principal policy advisor, Tom Kent, recalled, "That a workable form of nation-wide medicare was arrived at so quickly is remarkable. The credit belongs chiefly to...Al Johnson... (who) originated the kind of solution that, once you have heard it, you kick yourself for having failed to think of. It was so simple but so effective. The federal government did not need to legislate the details of a shared-cost

program. It needed only to define, clearly, the principles of what it meant by medicare. Then it would contribute to the costs of any provincial program that satisfied those principles. The contribution would not, however, be based on the particular provincial program. There would be periodic estimates of the average per capita cost, nationally, of programs conforming to the principles. The federal contribution to each participating province would be half of this amount. The consequence would be not only to avoid the need for federal audit of provincial expenditures. A province that ran a program more expensive than the average would thus get a lesser share of its cost from Ottawa. The incentive to extravagance, inherent in any program in which the province got back 50 cents of each dollar it actually spent, would be avoided".<sup>v</sup>

- > Johnson later summarized the Pearson government's new arrangements for federal support of postsecondary education: "federal fiscal transfers for post-secondary education were tied to the levels of provincial support to universities and colleges, albeit indirectly....The government of Canada undertook to pay to the provinces, on behalf of the universities and colleges, 50 percent of the operating costs of all accredited post-secondary institutions... No conditions were attached to the federal transfers: it was unequivocally clear that the government of Canada had no intention of meddling in the provincially-directed educational systems. But it was clear, at the same time, that the arrangements provided to the provinces a powerful incentive not only to pass on to the universities and colleges the full amount of the federal fiscal transfers, but also to maintain their own levels of provincial support. For if they were to do otherwise, the operating expenditures of universities and colleges would decline, and this would trigger a reduction in the federal fiscal transfers to the provinces for universities and colleges." This "single, and simple, arrangement" contributed to remarkable results: "Enrolment in universities and colleges more than doubled in ten years. It more than responded to the postwar baby boom. The proportion of young people able to take advantage of university or college education rose from an estimated 8 percent of the 18-24 age group in 1960, and 11 percent in 1965, to 16 percent in 1975."<sup>vi</sup>

On behalf of Prime Minister Pearson, Johnson and Cabinet Secretary Gordon Robertson, with Jean Baetz, prepared a fundamental policy statement by the Government of Canada which launched in 1968 a comprehensive review process aimed at "adapting Canada's constitutional and governmental arrangements so as to better achieve the goals of our federation", and encompassing guarantee of individual rights in the constitution (proposed as the first step), adaptation of the national institutions of government (the second step), and reviewing the division of powers of government between the federal and provincial governments (the third step). Much of this statement is of enduring interest today.

- > In that statement, "Federalism for the Future", "The Government of Canada believes, as we are sure virtually all Canadians do, that this country can achieve its goals only under a federal system...The Government of Canada rejects both centralization and fragmentation as alternatives to federalism...Canadian federalism must be a balance between these extremes, and we should expect to find this sense of balance expressed in our constitutional arrangements. We should expect to find a sense of balance in the constitutional rights of Canadian citizens, including their linguistic rights, balanced as to the rights of individuals and their obligations to one another and to society... We should expect to find central institutions of Canadian federalism capable of ensuring a balanced representation in the governing of the nation... We should expect to find a balanced division of the power to govern between the federal and provincial governments – balanced in the powers it assigns to each and balanced in its concern for the needs of

the present and those of the future". With respect to the division of powers, the Government advanced four principles: "First, we are committed to the view that Canada requires both a strong federal government and strong provincial governments. The field of government now is so wide, and the problems of government are so many, that it is not a contradiction to speak in these terms. Governments themselves confirm this view when they argue that their spending responsibilities exceed their ability to raise revenues. There is another reason for achieving a balance between the powers of the federal and provincial governments: the freedom of the individual is more likely to be safeguarded if neither order of government is able to acquire a preponderant power over the citizen. Secondly, the Government of Canada believes that there are certain areas of responsibility which must remain with the federal government if our country is to prosper in the modern world... (including) the major and inextricably inter-related instruments of economic policy....; the power to redistribute income, between persons and between provinces...; (the ability) to speak for Canada, internationally, and...to act for Canada in strengthening the bonds of nationhood... Third,...most services involving the most immediate contact between the citizen and the government, and which contribute most directly to the traditions and heritages which are uniquely provincial, should generally be provided by Canada's provincial governments... Fourth, ...concerning...the effect each government's activities inevitably will have upon the activities of the others...We question whether it is any longer realistic to expect that some neat compartmentalization of powers can be found to avoid this...The federal government must remain responsible to Parliament, and the provincial governments to their legislatures: federal-provincial conferences must, it seems to us, occupy themselves with the art of influence rather than the power of decision-making".

Prime Minister Pearson wrote to thank Johnson and sent as a memento a copy of the policy statement inscribed "In sincere appreciation for all your help in fashioning the 'federalism for the future'".

As the review continued, Johnson was responsible for the preparation of key working papers on the constitution, on behalf of Prime Minister Trudeau and the Minister of Finance, notably on "Income Security and Social Services", "Federal-Provincial Grants and the Spending Power of Parliament", and "Taxing Powers and the Constitution of Canada"(1969). No government statements since, on these issues, have been so comprehensive and forthright.

In 1973, on behalf of the Government and of the Minister of National Health and Welfare, Marc Lalonde, whose deputy minister Johnson then was, he drafted the "Working Paper on Social Security in Canada" – known as "the orange book" and still repaying consideration – which launched a comprehensive national and federal-provincial review.

- The orange book on social security began "with a statement as to what the Government of Canada believes (Canada's) community attitudes, or values, to be... First, we believe that Canadians hold to the value of *independence*, or self-dependence. They expect to meet their own needs through their own efforts, and they expect others to do their best to do the same. This sturdiness of outlook is not a matter...of sheer selfishness: rather it is a matter of believing that each should contribute, to the extent he is able, to his own and his family's well-being, and that through this contribution he will be contributing to the well-being of others. Secondly, we believe that Canadians hold to the value of *interdependence*, or to put it in rather more philosophical terms, to the notion that man has a responsibility to his fellow men... It is simply a matter of working, if you are able, to meet your family's daily needs, and of saving, to the extent you are able, to meet the

contingencies of life. And, on the other hand, when it comes to people who are unable or are not expected to work, it is simply a matter of those who are able to work contributing to the welfare of those who are not able to care for themselves... (Third), another value commonly held by Canadians – *fairness, or equity*. It has long been widely accepted that the fruits of economic growth should be fairly distributed: that the increases in income which are the product of a growing economy should not be appropriated by the rich or the powerful. But there is another fruit of economic growth... and that is increased leisure. We doubt very much that Canadians believe that the lazy should appropriate more than their fair share of the increases in leisure, any more than they believe that the powerful should appropriate more than their fair share of the increases in income.” As to directions, “What we propose to do, is to identify the principal ‘strategies’ for achieving a model social security system..., and to put forward for consideration certain ‘propositions’ as to how these strategies might be realized. We have five strategies to suggest: an ‘employment strategy’; a ‘social insurance strategy’; an ‘income supplementation strategy’; a ‘social and employment services strategy’; and a ‘federal-provincial strategy’. And under each of these strategies we have a number of propositions to advance as to how the federal and provincial governments might go about changing the existing social security system... The Government of Canada hopes that this Working Paper will assist in pointing new directions for social security in Canada... This is not to suggest ...that the past has been no guide, or that the present does not provide a framework for reform... (The) present social security system is one of the most advanced in the Western World, and...it provides a solid foundation upon which to build. But it is time to innovate.”<sup>vii</sup>

Johnson’s efforts in the early 1970s to re-orient government-wide management from (in his words at the time) “Kafka’s castle” to a more effective balance of “probity and prudence”, effectiveness and efficiency, with – a Johnson passion – public policy creativity, were informed by a consistent preoccupation with “how reforms would ‘fit’ in parliamentary government”, and paralleled by concern for the thorough education or development of senior executives (for instance, calling for a “civil service college”):<sup>viii</sup> all concerns which read prophetically, if perhaps ironically too, in light of the ebb and flow of administrative fashions since – ebbs and flows which Johnson himself analyzed in writings over the years.

- > Looking back shortly afterwards, Johnson reflected that “the longer I worked in the public service, creativity within the context of large-scale organization became a recurring concern”, and developed his own analysis for creativity in a government bureaucracy. Starting with “the proposition that creativity is a personal act; it is the product of creative minds, not of structures or committees or manuals of instruction”, he distinguished “creativity in government” from artistic freedom from restraints or “undirected creativity, ...personal self-realization”: “No, creativity in government is...a matter of ‘directed’ or ‘channeled’ creativity – directed at resolving public policy problems, at realizing other people’s goals”. He sketched an “individual approach” to policy development and policy execution contrasted to the “representative” approach”: “Creativity in policy development calls for the assignment, as much as is humanly possible, to individual ministries, and within ministries to individual, creative policy-makers, of responsibility for policy development”. The hazards of this “individual ministry approach” were recognized but clearly lesser than the “twin, and fatal, hazards” of the “representative or committee approach”: “the lowest common denominator of policy, and...the paralysis of policy”; and “This proposition applies equally to the execution of policy – but in spades”. “Put in one sentence, only through putting a premium upon creativity, only by creating conditions which will nourish and support it, will we achieve a more effective, more responsible and more vibrant public service.”<sup>ix</sup>

## Public Broadcasting Years

Moving outside the traditional civil service roles in 1975, to a third career, Johnson was appointed President and Chairman of the Board of the Canadian broadcasting Corporation. In many ways his work at the CBC was not only an expression of long-standing love for the arts but also a return to his Saskatchewan roots when public broadcasting was new to Canada, fundamental to a burgeoning sense of nationhood and national growth: “If there hadn’t been a CBC, I wouldn’t have had any real sense of Canada, or of being Canadian, when I was growing up”<sup>x</sup> – a “sense of Canada” still crucial fifty years later: “In broadcast terms, programs which strengthen our institutions, news about national celebrations, Parliament, religious services, historical shows, music and sports events all constitute a kind of social glue of one kind or another reinforcing the sense of belonging to our country”.<sup>xi</sup>

Yet the CBC imposed an essentially different responsibility as head and public visage of a very large broadcasting organization, highly visible, inevitably controversial at times – and uniquely dependent on artistic creativity and journalistic responsibility, with characteristically strong personalities. In this capacity, Johnson prepared and delivered a series of speeches and writings on the Canadian importance and responsibilities of public broadcasting, journalism and the media. The underlying themes were perhaps expressed in 1977: “I believe the CBC to be the single most important institution for Canadianism outside the Parliament of Canada”; its presidency required “a kind of optimism and, if you want, idealism”, and – a recurring theme! -- the ability “to create an environment within which creative people could flourish”.<sup>xii</sup> Years later, Johnson’s leadership of the CBC was recalled by its foremost journalist as “more inspirational than bureaucratic”, expressing “that quality of caring and that almost missionary sense of the principles of public broadcasting”<sup>xiii</sup>.

- Johnson’s presidency of the CBC aimed above all at one goal: “...the presence of Canadianism and the availability of choice in Canadian programmes on our television screen must be increased”.<sup>xiv</sup> “Anything that can be said about Canada can also be said about the CBC. You could describe our country as economically implausible, painfully diverse, and full of contradictions. You could also describe Canada as one of the freest, most creative, most humane, most exciting, most successful countries on earth. And you could describe the CBC in the same terms. The CBC is a mirror of the country and, like Canada, it has many faces and personalities... The CBC’s strategy and planning for the future are based on a belief that the corporation must be a central instrument of cultural policy. It is based on the certain knowledge that a broadcasting system dominated by foreign programs, especially in the prime viewing hours, cannot and will not meet Canadian cultural objectives. The strategy has two parts. Firstly, to bring about a significant increase in the quantity, quality, and exposure of Canadian programming. Secondly, to ensure the CBC’s contribution to the continued development of the broadcasting system by modernizing and revitalizing the corporation’s role as a catalyst in broadcasting and culture”.<sup>xv</sup> “For broadcasting, when seen as something more than mere mass entertainment, punctuated by the occasional newscast, is very much a cultural question. The very case for public support, indeed, lies in the proposition that indigenous Canadian cultural expressions, whether they take the form of drama or documentaries or light entertainment, are among the principal vehicles by which a nation sees itself and renews itself. And if the production and broadcast of these cultural expressions doesn’t pay, in the market sense of the word – and in a country of Canada’s size, it rarely does – then the public sector must come to their support”.<sup>xvi</sup>

## The Professorial Years...and Public Debates

In 1982, Johnson “retired” to a fourth career as teacher, scholar, policy consultant and professor at Queen’s University (Skelton-Clark Fellow), then the University of Toronto as professor of public policy and public administration, and Senior Research fellow at the Government of Canada’s Centre for Management Development. Again this was in part a return, albeit from a new perspective, not only to his own university years but also to his 1962-63 role in establishing the nascent Institute of Public Administration of Canada on a lasting national foundation, and above all to his many analyses as a career public official of public administration and public policy – “governance”.

These professorial years occasioned new writings, sometimes on highly controversial public issues of the day -- and still -- such as free trade, Canadian federalism, federal-provincial fiscal arrangements, and constitutional reform, as well as public broadcasting (freed from the constraints of the CBC presidency).

- Joining, for instance, the highly charged national debate over the federal and provincial governments’ Meech Lake constitutional accord, Johnson wrote of the Constitution’s purpose “to proclaim and define the rights and freedoms of the citizens of the nation, and to establish a system of governance which will contribute to the flourishing of the nation, its citizens and its ‘identities’. Lying behind these constitutional provisions is the manifest objective of affirming and strengthening the bonds of nationhood...” From his scrutiny, he concluded that “First, the accord weakens the potential for Canadians to come to share certain common privileges and benefits of citizenship, wherever they live in Canada”; and “Second, the sense of affinity and association – even esteem – which Canadians feel, or may reasonably come to feel, for their national governmental institutions is weakened”. Moreover, he deplored “the belief of Canada’s leading politicians that constitution-making ought to be the preserve of governments, and not of citizens. It was the Prime Minister, and the ten premiers, and the two opposition leaders of the House of Commons who unanimously agreed that the Meech Lake Accord ought to be approved without any effective public debate”; and that the question had not been asked “of constitutions for citizens versus constitutions for governments”. “Herein lies the root of the flaws in the Meech Lake Accord, as I see them. Both in the process by which the fathers of Meech Lake reached their conclusions about the Constitution, and in the conclusions they reached, the citizens and their perspectives were excluded...A broad and unconstrained debate... is called for, if the citizens are to bring their judgement to bear on the question of how to strengthen the bonds of nationhood”.<sup>xvii</sup> In fact, it was on just that rock that the Meech Lake Accord foundered, first when put to certain provincial legislatures and then when its successor, the Charlottetown Accord, was finally put to a public referendum – and defeated.

Longer essays addressed issues such as the history of administrative reform and the nature of public management in Canada – taking up, for instance, from his classic interpretation thirty years before (during the Saskatchewan years) of “efficiency in government and business”, to analyze the proposition that “the character of public management is more likely to be found in the adjective ‘public’ than in the noun ‘management’”, through exploring “the determinants of public management”: “the role of government in contemporary society; the institutions of governance; and the environments in which governments function”.<sup>xviii</sup>



A history of social policy in Canada discussed “the past as it conditions the present”, with Johnson writing from the special position of a professional analyst who had also been an inside observer and intimate participant in some of the key events. The government of Saskatchewan commissioned Johnson to lead a review of governance of its two universities (echoing, again, Johnson’s service as a university governor in Saskatchewan).

The Government of Canada commissioned a report on its roles in advancing post-secondary education in a decentralized federation: evoking a vigorous analysis with recommendations for “giving greater point and purpose to federal financing of post-secondary education and research”<sup>xix</sup>.

- > Johnson later followed up with an even more emphatic article regretting the “incomprehensible, to me, decision of the Trudeau government” in 1977 “to sever the tie between the federal support for post-secondary education and the level of provincial and other support to universities and colleges”, with the “predictable” consequences that “the rate of growth in provincial support for universities and colleges slowed down, to about two percentage points below the growth in the federal fiscal transfers... The numbers reveal how sharply the provinces reduced their priority for higher education... When the provinces responded to the EPF Act by reducing the growth in their grants to universities and colleges, the Trudeau government responded in kind, by cutting the growth in its PSE transfers to the provinces... (and) The Mulroney government followed suit...”: tit for tat, once support for higher education had been degraded to a purely fiscal mechanism and purely monetary argument. Johnson called on the federal government both to “restore some national purpose to (the federal government’s) fiscal transfer by reintroducing an incentive to the provinces to maintain a high priority on spending for that engine of economic growth called higher education”; and to take a lead in revitalizing university-based research, in the interest of national economic and productivity growth, through increased funding of the granting councils, through funding “of a select number of world-class centres of excellence”, and through “a more explicit partnership” between the private sector and the public and university sectors – all this over a decade before the Chrétien government moved along similar lines of federal support for university research.<sup>xx</sup>

A recurrent theme during this professorial and public career, as he stressed in testimony to Parliamentary hearings on constitutional reform, was that in regionally, culturally, linguistically diverse Canada, “the vehicles by which we develop a common consciousness are very, very precious indeed. They are difficult to find in a country like ours, and they are precious when we find them.”

### **International and South African Years**

Concurrently, Johnson took up the opportunity to branch into what became yet another career: in international development, first in Indonesia on behalf of the International Monetary Fund as Special Advisor on National Provincial Fiscal Arrangements (1988), then as Head of Mission on Administrative Modernization for the Canadian International Development Agency (1991), before participating in one of the great transformations of the late twentieth century -- South Africa’s rapid movement from apartheid to multi-racial democracy under the inspirational leadership of Nelson Mandela.

In 1992 – two years before the historic elections – Mr. Mandela asked Prime Minister Mulroney to assist the people of South Africa in their preparations for democracy: Johnson was appointed as senior advisor to help decide how best Canada could assist. From this quickly grew what became the South Africa/Canada Program on Governance (PoG), with Johnson as founder and its resident special advisor for six years. He retrospectively described PoG's essential method as "transferring the knowledge and experience of real life practitioners"<sup>xxi</sup>. But that typically underplayed the scope of the PoG: as others recalled, "In the program's first years,... Dr. Johnson, working largely alone, gave considerable advice to the senior officials responsible for guiding the process of transition to democratic government, framing the country's new constitution, and establishing a professional public service that was representative of the entire population of the country. Subsequently...(the program) provided advice on issues ranging from how to improve service delivery, to the executive-legislative relationship and the support required for effective government decision-making, to how to link decision-making and budgeting".<sup>xxii</sup> When President Mandela appointed Johnson in 1996 as a Commissioner of South Africa's Presidential Review Commission on the Public Service, the announcement was recalled as being received with unusual applause in the National Assembly.<sup>xxiii</sup>

- > Ironically, perhaps, Johnson wrote little about those years of advice on governance, feeling their assessment was for South Africans themselves. However, an independent evaluation reported that "all ...South African practitioners (interviewed) praised the PoG for being intelligently modest about Canada... The negative lessons that can be drawn from Canada's Constitution, bureaucratic history, and practice were part of any discussion about options, along with the good points. According to the interviewees, the other "plus" from the pre-election period to the present was the "astounding" knowledge of South Africans and South Africa acquired by Dr Johnson. Most foreigners, even academics, operated with much less depth and less currency in pure knowledge. Equally important, Dr Johnson brought with him a vast and perhaps unmatched experience of Canadian federal and provincial government at the highest levels, which he was able to bring to bear on issues in any venue. From a pragmatic viewpoint, not only did he have a vast network of Canadian contacts, but he also had such a stature in Canada that senior bureaucrats at all levels of government, academics, and business executives were willing to respond to his requests for assistance".<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Dreaming No Little Dreams**

In 1999, Johnson came home to Canada at age 76 truly to retire -- almost!

Others congratulated him and remembered his careers. Prime Minister Trudeau, as he left office, wrote to Johnson recalling that "In our social, fiscal and cultural framework you have left your personal touch and Canadians are better for it... With your wealth of background and your great heart, I know you will continue to educate Canadians about their country in various ways in the years ahead". Provincial ministers still quoted him, twenty years later, on federal-provincial fiscal relations being about "achieving an equilibrium in the potential for both orders of government to contribute to the enrichment of Canada – in both its national and its regional aspects – without diminishing one in favour of the other in the doing of it".<sup>xxv</sup> The Premier of Johnson's home province, Roy Romanow, spoke in 2000 to the provincial legislature upon announcement of a special chair in public policy, named for Johnson and established within his first career home, the Saskatchewan ministry of finance: "I've said many times, and firmly

believe, that service to the public is among the most noble and worthy of professions and nobody in my estimation more clearly exemplifies those values than Al Johnson”.<sup>xxvi</sup> Canada’s Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Stéphane Dion, went out of his way to recall in 2001 “Al Johnson...was one of the greatest public servants in the history of our country”.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Since 1997 Johnson has worn with profound appreciation the discreet button denoting Canada’s highest civil honour, Companion of the Order of Canada. In 1976 he received the Vanier Medal for distinctive leadership in public administration and public service in Canada. In 2007, the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Regina was renamed in honour of Johnson and his long-time friend and colleague Thomas Shoyama. And in 2010, Johnson was awarded the Arthur Kroeger College Award for Ethics in Public Affairs. He received honorary doctorates from Carleton University (1999), Mount Allison University (1992), the University of Saskatchewan (1978), and the University of Regina (1977).

Johnson was awarded the Vanier Medal in 1976 for distinctive leadership in public administration and public service in Canada. In 2007, the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Regina was renamed in honour of Johnson and his long-time friend and colleague Thomas Shoyama, and ‘dedicated to the values and excellence they embraced during their distinguished and influential careers in the public service’. And in 2010, Johnson was awarded the Arthur Kroeger College Award for Ethics in Public Affairs.

But Johnson was not yet content – and never quiescent. He brought his distinguished careers to a fitting public finale by returning to his beloved Saskatchewan in spirit, intellect and endeavour. With the assistance of his colleague Rosemary Proctor, Al devoted five years to reconsideration, research, and reflection upon the Douglas government as “an ideal candidate for a history of a whole government” and “a case study of the art and the practice of governing”, as well as a case study on each of many elements of governance usually studied separately. The result was “Dream No Little Dreams: A Biography of the Douglas Government of Saskatchewan, 1944-1961”, cited by the Canadian Political Science Association as best book of 2004: “Reading ‘Dream No Little Dreams’ creates the sensation that Harold Carter and Lord Carnarvon must have experienced when they broke through into the tomb of Tutankhamon: ‘So this is what it was like’”.<sup>xxviii</sup>

But even more, “what it is like”: a successor to Douglas as Premier of Saskatchewan and a university scholar himself, Allan Blakeney, described the work as “the best book I have read on how governments translate their goals into effectively administered policies”.<sup>xxix</sup>

Another subtle thread weaves through this public finale, indeed wove in and out of Johnson’s whole career: the small-town boy celebrates home – not only Saskatchewan but Canada. “Dream no little dreams” was Al Johnson’s own aspiration throughout his careers, and his exhortation. His satisfaction was to have worked with, and to have contributed in his own ways as a professional public servant to the remarkable accomplishments of “no little dreamers” from Tommy Douglas to Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Nelson Mandela. Al’s characterization of Tommy Douglas’ premiership of Saskatchewan expressed – though he would never say so himself – his, and Ruth’s, own ethos: “putting humanity first”.

Al Johnson died peacefully following a long illness on November 8, 2010 in Ottawa.

*“...Till we have built Jerusalem...”*

By Andrew T.W. Johnson

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- <sup>i</sup> Canadian Political Science Association jury citation of A.W. Johnson's "Dream No Little Dreams" as best book published in 2004 relating to government and politics in Canada (Donald Smiley Prize, 2005).
- <sup>ii</sup> From writings on planning and budgeting in 1959, to "efficiency in government and business" in 1963, via reflections on "the role of the deputy minister", problems of provincial finance, and Canada's national accounts.
- <sup>iii</sup> "Productivity, people and the public service", *Optimum*, 1971 (volume 2, number 1). See also "Education and the Development of Senior Executives" (1972).
- <sup>iv</sup> "Fiscal relations between the federal and provincial and governments and the provincial and municipal governments", in "The Politics of Government Finance: Proceedings of the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Canadian Federation of mayors and Municipalities, June 1968".
- <sup>v</sup> Tom Kent, "A Public Purpose: An Experience of Liberal opposition and Canadian Government", 1988.
- <sup>vi</sup> "Stop Neglecting Research", *Policy Options*, May 1986
- <sup>vii</sup> Johnson later reflected on the experience of the social security review, overtaken by fiscal and electoral developments, and upon its lessons: in "Social Policy in Canada: The Past as it Conditions the Present" (1987) and "Canada's Social Security Review: The central Issues" (1978).
- <sup>viii</sup> For instance: "Management Theory and Cabinet Government", *Canadian Public Administration*, 1971; "Education and the Development of Senior Executives", *Canadian Public Administration*, 1972; "The Treasury Board of Canada and the Machinery of Government of the 1970s", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1971; as well as –a decade earlier – "Efficiency in Government and Business" (1963) and "The Role of the Deputy Minister (1961), both in *Canadian Public Administration*.
- <sup>ix</sup> "Public policy: creativity and bureaucracy", *Canadian Public Administration*, 1978.
- <sup>x</sup> Quoted in introduction of AWJ to *Empire Club*, 1977
- <sup>xi</sup> Speech to the *Empire Club*, 1977, on "Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility".
- <sup>xii</sup> Interview in *MacLean's*, February 1977.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Knowlton Nash, August 24, 2005, in *The Globe and Mail* : "Don't you guys realize what's at stake?"; and interviewed December 2005 for *The Teamakers* blog.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Presentation to CRTC, 1 December 1981.
- <sup>xv</sup> Presentation to the Canadian Cultural Policy review Committee, March 1981.
- <sup>xvi</sup> "The Re-Canadianization of Broadcasting", *Policy Options*, March/April 1983, from Alexander Graham bell lecture at McMaster University, November 1982.
- <sup>xvii</sup> "The Meech Lake Accord and the Bonds of Nationhood" (1988).
- <sup>xviii</sup> "What is Public Management? An Autobiographical View", *Canadian Centre for Management Development*, 1993. And "Efficiency in Government and business" (1963; reprinted 2005 in "Classic Readings in Canadian public Administration", ed. Carroll, Siegel and Sproule-Jones, Oxford University Press)
- <sup>xix</sup> "Giving Greater point and Purpose to the Federal Financing of Post-Secondary Education and Research: A Task Force report prepared for the Secretary of State of Canada", February 1985.
- <sup>xx</sup> "Stop Neglecting Research", *Policy Options*, May 1986.
- <sup>xxi</sup> "Evaluating Governance Programs: Report of a Workshop, April 1999"; IDRC.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Rosemary Proctor and Harvey Sims, "The South Africa/Canada program on Governance: an experiment in supporting democracy", *Canadian Public Administration*, Vol 43, No. 2.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Prof. Sharon Sutherland, *Supporting Democracy: The South Africa/Canada Program on Governance* (IDRC, 1999), chapter 5. PoG was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), through the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxv</sup> Quoted by Western Finance Ministers, 2001, on "Revitalizing Federal-Provincial/Territorial Fiscal Relations", from "Federal-provincial fiscal relations : an historical perspective", in "Ottawa and the Provinces: The Distribution of Power and Money", vol II (Ontario Economic Council, 1985).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Province of Saskatchewan Hansard, April 26, 2000.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Address to the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy, Regina, 6 March 2001. Mr. Dion had shared an office with Johnson for a time during Johnson's professorial years.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> CPSA citation: see footnote i.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Source – U of T Press.