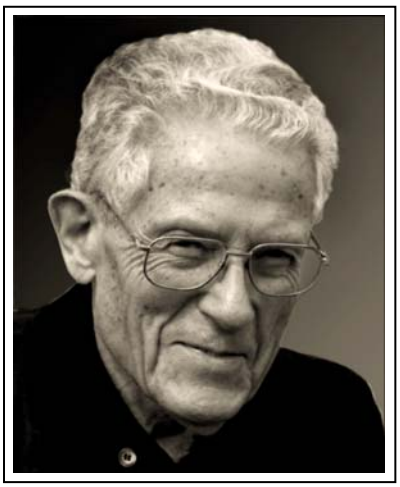
Johnson, Albert (Al) Wesley, C.C.



Died peacefully following a long illness on November 8, 2010 in Ottawa, Ontario. Mr. Johnson is survived by his wife of 64 years, Ruth, his children Andrew (Moira), Frances (David), Jane (Robert), Geoffrey, granddaughter Hannah, sisters Mae Barichello, Ollie Miller and many nephews and nieces. Pre-deceased by brother Carman and sister Margaret. Born in Insinger, Saskatchewan in 1923, Al Johnson was a "child of the manse" and the searing Depression years.

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. He received his PhD in political economy from Harvard University in 1958.

Johnson's "first career" was as a senior civil servant in Premier T.C. Douglas's government of Saskatchewan, where, in 1946, he was appointed to the Budget Bureau. Named its head as Deputy Provincial Treasurer in 1952 at age twenty-eight, he was closely involved with building one of Canada's most admired public administrations, with public policy initiatives from the innovative Wascana Centre, Canada's first arts granting council, and the introduction of universal medicare.

In 1964 Johnson moved to the Government of Canada as the senior official in the Department of Finance. He contributed to major public policies including fiscal equalization, reform of federal support for provincial post-secondary education, a national art bank, and the launch of medicare as a national policy, as well as constitutional review and the 1973-74 social security review.

From 1975-1982, Johnson served as President and Chairman of the Board of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, motivated by a passion for creativity and a belief in the CBC as "the single most important institution for Canadianism outside the Parliament of Canada".

In 1982, Johnson "retired" to a fourth career as teacher, scholar, policy consultant and professor at Queen's University (Skelton-Clark Fellow) and the University of Toronto. These years occasioned new writings on public issues of the day such as free trade, Canadian federalism, federal-provincial fiscal arrangements, constitutional reform, and public broadcasting.

Concurrently, Johnson began an international career - first in Indonesia before participating in South Africa's rapid movement from apartheid to multi-racial democracy under the inspirational leadership of Nelson Mandela. Following a 1992 request for Canadian support from Mr. Mandela to Prime Minister Mulroney, Johnson developed and directed the South Africa/Canada Program on Governance, where he served for six years.

In 2004, he published “Dream No Little Dreams: A Biography of the Douglas Government of Saskatchewan, 1944-1961”, which won the Canadian Political Science Association’s Donald Smiley Prize and cited as best book of 2004.

Since 1997 Johnson wore 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’s personal and professional values were whole: integrity, pride in being Canadian and from Saskatchewan, instilled in his family by fondly-recalled long driving trips across the country, a passion for creativity in public service and in the arts, idealism triumphant however bruised by reality, putting humanity first.

The family thanks The Ravines and their caring and devoted staff, the CCAC, and the doctors and nurses at the Civic Hospital. Friends and family are invited to visit at the Central Chapel of Hulse, Playfair & McGarry, 315 McLeod Street, (at O’Connor), Ottawa on Thursday, November 18 from 12 noon until time of Memorial Service in the Chapel at 2pm. Reminiscences and condolences at www.awjohnson.net. For anyone so wishing, in lieu of flowers a donation to contributions in Al’s memory may be directed to the Kidney Foundation, Juvenile Diabetes or charity of your choice.