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ONE OF A KIND

Canadians will remember John Crosbie for his larger-than-life persona, his rapier-like wit. A modest sampler:

On why Canada switched to the metric system: “The Liberals invented metric so no one would know what they did to the price of a gallon of gas.”

On why he hadn’t read the entire 1988 free trade deal he was promoting: “I once sold the Encyclopedia Britannica and I never read every article in it to sell it, believe me.”

On being a finance minister: “In 1924 my grandfather was finance minister in Newfoundland with a budget of \$8 million. I was finance minister in Newfoundland with a deficit of \$200 million. Now I’m minister of finance of Canada with a deficit of \$12 billion. It makes a man proud.”

On his complaint that the Liberal government had “plucked the Canada goose. Some of my colleagues thought I said something else.”

Well, you get the picture.

When I think of Crosbie, my memories are different. In the winter of 1983 while Crosbie was campaigning for the federal Progressive Conservative party leadership, I followed him for a profile for *Financial Post Magazine*.

On stage in front of large audiences, he was his usual whipsaw-witty self. But in small groups, he seemed diffident, ill at ease. At one point, during a PC youth federation fundraiser in Toronto, for example, he simply ran out of small talk. “Have you met Mr. Kimber here?” he offered plaintively. “He’s doing a story for *Financial Post*.”

During our one-to-one interviews, the reality became obvious. “I am not intimately a hail-fellow-well-met,” he explained. “It’s not my nature. But when you’ve been in politics a while, you know you have to do it. So you do.”

The eldest son of swashbuckling, well-connected Newfoundland businessman Chesley Crosbie, John Crosbie stumbled into politics at the urging of his father’s confidant, Joey Smallwood. But in 1968, Crosbie and Smallwood split bitterly over lending millions to a New York promoter to build an oil refinery at Come-by-Chance.

“If Smallwood hadn’t been this mad power monger [who] decided to try to kill me politically,” Crosbie told me, he might have eventually disappeared into the family business or even gone into academia.

But when his first challenge to Smallwood’s leadership fizzled, Crosbie had to take stock. As Brian Peckford—then

one of Crosbie’s most ardent supporters and himself a future premier—put it baldly, Crosbie’s on-stage personality was “so boring, so uninspiring, so unemotional and cold, you couldn’t believe anything he said.”

Crosbie’s wife and some friends finally confronted him: “You’ve either got to do something so you’ll be more convincing, or you’ve got to get out of politics.” Crosbie signed up for a Dale Carnegie course, then practised speaking in front of his friends. *Et voilà*: a New John Crosbie emerged, the publicly hail-fellow-well-met politician we came to know and love.

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“The only way you get an audience to listen to your serious points,” he told me wearily one morning between entertaining public engagements, “is to entertain them.” But then the media labels you. “They’ve decided to paint me as a joker, a jester, a comedian, light stuff.”

That, plus the reality that, as Crosbie himself joked (of course), “I’m not even functionally illiterate in French” doomed his 1983 leadership campaign.

Twenty years later, he spoke what could have been his political obituary: “I tried to speak my mind, and while it’s not possible in politics or practical always to be truthful and to answer questions truthfully... I did try to be truthful wherever I could, and frank, and so sometimes you become an endangered species.”

John Crosbie, R.I.P.

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FEEDBACK

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