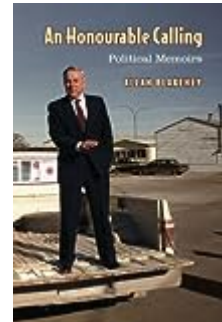


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Allan Blakeney. *An Honourable Calling: Political Memoirs.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Illustrations. viii + 258 pp. \$40.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9891-7.



Roy MacLaren. *The Fundamental Things Apply: A Memoir.* Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3843-6.



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Published on H-Canada (May, 2011)

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Political Memoirs

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the world, especially its Western nations, seemed locked into an immutable yet secure Cold War political and economic order. Abroad, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact, as well as the United Nations and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, promised a soundly structured global system, buttressed at home by an unquestioned set of Keynesian prescriptions about the domestic economy. Sure, there were signs

of change. The political stirrings of postcolonial Asia and Africa, the vast migrations of rural peoples to cities and the rich West, and the compressed horizons of contemporary pop culture impinged dimly on postwar consciousness in Canada, as elsewhere.

These changes were noted, and just as often dismissed as insignificant or misunderstood as singular rather than as related phenomena. But related they were. And by the late 1960s, globalization had begun to lap at the edges of

Canadian life, eventually kick-starting a process of adjustment that profoundly reshaped the country's economy and its political order. Two recent memoirs—*An Honourable Calling* by Allan Blakeney, the New Democratic Party (NDP) premier of Saskatchewan from 1971 to 1982, and *The Fundamental Things Apply* by Roy MacLaren, Liberal member of parliament and minister of international trade in the mid-1990s—tell how two leading Canadians of their generation responded to this wave of change.

This transformation was still a long way off when Blakeney was born in Nova Scotia in 1925. A strong whiff of nostalgia lingers about his memoir. His cozy recollections of growing up in Bridgetown and Halifax; building a small legal practice in Regina, where he moved in 1950; and packing the family car for winter holidays in Florida illustrate Blakeney's relaxed and civil style.

Ever the genial lawyer, armed with degrees from Dalhousie and Oxford, Blakeney proved an indispensable technocrat for a series of social democratic governments in his adopted Saskatchewan. As his reward, he was invited to join the government in 1960, when he won election in the safe seat of Regina and was appointed to the cabinet as provincial treasurer. Over the following decade, Blakeney advanced steadily up the hierarchy, serving as education minister, health minister, and eventually leader of the opposition.

Elected premier in 1971, Blakeney came to office as the early forces of globalization began to sweep across rural North America, decimating the family farm through consolidation, greater mechanization, and corporatization. The NDP promised a ârevitalized rural Saskatchewan,â and the memoir recounts a host of imaginative policy initiatives designed to do just that (p. 5). Blakeney's government introduced measures to ensure stable crop prices, maintain established transportation links, and improve rural life, but to no avail. âWe were,â he grimly concludes, âit seems, King Canute trying to hold back the tideâ (p. 125).

Globalization had other implications for Blakeney's Saskatchewan. The province's oil, potash, and uranium boomed in the 1970s and 1980s, boosted by the era's recurrent energy crises. In three compact, carefully reasoned chapters, *An Honourable Calling* tackles each industry in turn, sketching their long-term evolution in Saskatchewan, and their circumstances in the early 1970s. With lawyerly precision, Blakeney outlines the problems encountered in justly dividing the soaring revenues between private industry, the province, and Prime

Minister Pierre Trudeau's federal government. Blakeney's rage at Trudeau's confiscatory measures still simmers beneath his civil prose, a stark reminder of Western alienation.

Blakeney's rage competed with his cooperative instincts. Persistent strains on Canada's national unity were another grim product of larger, more global forces, as historian David Meren has recently reminded us.[1] The effort to resolve them preoccupied Blakeney as it did most prime ministers in the 1970s and 1980s. Quebec's place in Confederation and Trudeau's campaign to repatriate the constitution are themes of important chapters in the memoir. Blakeney gives a clear account of the string of events from September 1980 to November 1981, when he emerged as the key player in the negotiations that led to a constitutional agreement without Quebec's backing. As the memoir makes clear, there was a steely resolve at Blakeney's core. In his view, politics is compromise, and when Quebec Premier René Lévesque proved incapable of it, Blakeney felt little compunction about pressing ahead without him.

The same global forces that shaped Blakeney's career buffeted MacLaren's, but the Liberal politician welcomed them all with greater gusto. One result is a better memoir. A skilled writer, with an eye for sharp, often cutting, descriptions and amusing anecdotes, MacLaren (and his career) swaggered across a bigger, much more international, stage. Confident and sympathetic sketches of a drunken Dylan Thomas at a University of British Columbia piss-up; or lovelorn poet Sylvia Plath at Cambridge; or Cherie Blair, lost and alone at a Buckingham Palace reception, convince the reader that MacLaren's was a life worth living.

The opening chapters are among the best in the memoir. MacLaren shows great skill at weaving his personal story into the backdrop of larger events around him. We learn little of his own family history or childhood in Vancouver during the Second World War, but are delighted by his portrait of that city at war against the backdrop of Britain's fading empire, a theme that reverberates across MacLaren's career and several of the histories he later wrote in his spare time. The memoir follows MacLaren through an English degree at the University of British Columbia, to graduate studies at Cambridge University, and then into the Department of External Affairs in 1957. Over the next eleven years, MacLaren was posted to Indochina, Prague, Ottawa, and New York. Along the way, recalling his experiences as a junior diplomat drafting minor cables and memos, some of which he uses to enliven

his text, MacLaren skewers John G. Diefenbaker, honors Lester B. Pearson, and befriends Trudeau.

MacLaren left the foreign service in 1969, and moved to Toronto to join the private sector. After stints as a senior executive with Massey-Ferguson, the farm machinery manufacturer, and Ogilvy-Mather (Canada), an advertising agency, he and two partners purchased the magazine *Canadian Business* and established a small publishing firm. This provided MacLaren the base he needed to enter federal politics, seeking and winning the nomination for the Toronto riding of Etobicoke North. It also provided economic experiences, only hinted at here, which determined his approach to globalization, fiscal, and tax policies.

Much of the material on MacLaren's political career between 1979 and 1984, when he lost his seat in Brian Mulroney's sweep, is recycled from his diaries, published in 1986 as *Honourable Mentions: The Uncommon Diary of an M.P.* These are undoubtedly good and deserve rereading—he memorably describes the International Monetary Fund as a “Dickensian character on a global scale.”[2] But a memoir, like a poem, demands more, and ought to be distilled “emotion recollected in tranquility.”

MacLaren returns to form in his final chapters, crafting a strong narrative of his place in Canadian political life in the 1980s and 1990s. Rejoining the Liberal opposition in the House of Commons after the 1988 election, the Toronto politician was an influential participant in the national debate over free trade with the United States. For MacLaren, Canada's future meant embracing, rather than resisting, globalization, and he had little time for those like Lloyd Axworthy or the “monochromatic” Shelia Copps who would stand in the way (p. 176). He takes the time to outline the issues at play and carefully explains his own support for both the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and trade liberalization in general, while harpooning Mulroney as “endlessly evasive, smug, duplicitous and fundamentally untrustworthy” (p. 171).

MacLaren's views on the attractions of globalization in its broadest sense are more fully developed in his rec-

ollections of his role and priorities as trade minister after 1993. These chapters also give him scope to recount the Liberal Party's debates over handling the Goods and Services Tax, dealing with the country's declining fiscal position, and managing the 1995 referendum in Quebec. MacLaren is necessarily careful in his descriptions of the personalities involved, but he includes shrewd assessments of John Turner and Paul Martin, as well as a generous and affectionate one of his prime minister, Jean Chrétien. MacLaren ended his public career as high commissioner to the United Kingdom. In this role he remained preoccupied with Canadian trade policy and the pursuit of a Canadian strategy for globalization. It was not a preoccupation that appealed to his ministers or their department.

Neither *An Honourable Calling* nor *The Fundamental Things Apply* are triumphalist memoirs. Change today is too fast and the victories too uncertain. Blakeney, who died earlier this spring, lived long enough to see many of his policies targeting globalization's harmful effects senselessly rolled back by Grant Devine's Conservative regime. MacLaren too worries about the future impact of globalization on Canada, whose policymakers seem too bedazzled by the United States to play the long, global game. But neither are these defeatist memoirs. Both men eschew the simplistic attractions of ideology and pat solutions in favor of good humor, civility, and the virtues of a political life. Creating a just social order, for both men, is a continuing and worthwhile struggle. “There are no satisfactory answers,” Blakeney notes. “Sometimes, when rights collide, all we can do is the best we can do” (p. 44).

Note

[1]. On this point, see David Meren, “La vague des nationalismes: Jules Léger et l'attaché de la diplomatie discrète” (paper presented at the conference Canada and France: A Diplomatic Partnership, McCord Museum, Montreal, October 31, 2008).

[2]. Roy MacLaren, *Honourable Mentions: The Uncommon Diary of an M.P.* (Toronto: Deneau Press, 1986), 156.

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Citation: Greg Donaghy. Review of Blakeney, Allan, *An Honourable Calling: Political Memoirs* and MacLaren, Roy, *The Fundamental Things Apply: A Memoir*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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