

# Who's New in Cabinet

by Patricia Elliott



**Janice  
MacKinnon**

**H**eels banging on cold marble, Janice MacKinnon's footsteps echo harshly in the long hallway outside her office. The door swings open and Saskatchewan's new minister of social services sweeps through the waiting area, flanked by two assistants. With a quick hello to whoever might be waiting, the trio disappear into her back office. A conversation with MacKinnon is as rushed and controlled as her entrance. Already this abrupt style has cast its shadow on her ministry: just into her third week as minister she is publicly under fire for allegedly "lecturing" band members of Beardy's and Okemasis Reserve on Indian child welfare. Chief Rick Gamble complained that the minister didn't even bother to take a seat - she just walked in, let them have it, and left. MacKinnon described it as "a running meeting" and made no apologies.

The source of MacKinnon's steely approach is her perception of the job of a social services minister. According to MacKinnon it's a tough job, in a tough economic situation. The word "tough" is front and centre, as if she has grasped on to toughness as the key to survival in the portfolio. "It's a tough one, too, because you're dealing with poor people, and it's very tough to deal with poor people when you have no money," MacKinnon says.

A University of Saskatchewan history professor, MacKinnon has little experience to draw on in terms of working with poverty issues. She's learning as she goes along. For example, she's learned that about 40 percent of welfare recipients are single parent women. She thinks one idea might be to place them with the New Careers Corporation. The corporation has a controversial record, because in several instances it has reportedly acted more as a broker of free labour drawn from the department's workfare pro-

gram, called Saskatchewan Works, than as a training program. But as far as MacKinnon is concerned, the New Careers Corporation is fine, "and it's totally voluntary - you have to apply to get in."

MacKinnon is looking at existing programs because she's not confident the province will be able to come up with substantial additional money to deal with the problems in her beleaguered department. The province is nearly bankrupt, she explains.

Although she won't directly answer the question as to why she was chosen as social services minister, MacKinnon's description of a "crisis portfolio" with limited resources indicates that, to her mind, having a hard nose is part of the job description.

Janice MacKinnon is one of six new faces in premier Roy Romanow's 11-member Cabinet. At the November 1 swearing in, Romanow told the press he wanted a lean Cabinet with a balance between experience and fresh ideas. The experienced members included Romanow himself, justice minister Bob Mitchell, finance minister Ed Tchorzewski, health minister Louise Simard, and government house leader and economic diversification and trade minister Dwain Lingenfelter.

The "fresh ideas" team contained a number of surprise choices: Carol Teichrob, education; Benny Wiens, agriculture; Carol Carson, environment; Darrel Cunningham, rural development and parks and renewable resources; John Penner, energy and mines; and MacKinnon, social services. Significantly absent were former Cabinet ministers Herman Rolfes, Ned Shillington and Murray Koskie, as well as a number of high profile critics, including Eric Upshall, Pat Atkinson, Doug Anguish, Keith Goulet and John Solomon.

In any case, the fresh ideas and experienced teams soon found their balance. The experienced members, along with newcomer Benny Wiens, formed a high-powered planning and priorities committee, while the remainder of the freshies quickly proved themselves adept at echoing the cautious, economically conservative line coming out of the committee.

To understand Romanow's unexpected choices, one must understand the playing field as the premier and his most trusted lieutenants see it. Soon after the election, finance minister Tchorzewski announced that the province was in far worse economic shape than the former Conservative government had let on. Indeed, the projected \$265 million deficit mushroomed overnight to the \$900 million mark. In a decision based partly on this new estimate, Dominion Bond Rating Service Ltd., a major debt monitor, lowered Saskatchewan's credit rating from triple-A (low) to triple-B (high). Only Newfoundland, at triple-B, stands lower.



The most immediate conclusion to be made of this is that the government is economically crippled. However, there has been a dissenting opinion from the Canadian Bond Rating Service. "In no way, shape or form has its credit been impaired," maintains CBRS president Brian Neysmith. According to Neysmith, Saskatchewan is performing exactly as a resource-based, cyclical economy should.

Then there is the confusing matter of the missing crown dividends, which make up \$250 million of the projected deficit. The province's crown corporations have said that they will not pay any dividends to the government this year. But the Opposition has pointed out that the size of dividends paid is a Cabinet decision, not a crown decision. The question is: who exactly decided to tack this additional \$250 million onto the provincial deficit, and to what end?

From the New Democrat perspective, it's a matter of ending the practice of milking the crown corporations. But when this situation combined with lower tax revenues and federal transfer payments to prompt a reduced credit rating, a political spin-off was noted by *The Globe and Mail*. "The negative [credit rating] review provides Mr. Romanow with extra ammunition in his stated effort to rein in spending and bring debt under control." In a most dramatic fashion, the province had turned out its empty pockets for public display.

Frugality and caution, then, is the refrain of the new government. There's the deficit, the debt, the disastrous farm economy, the delicate relationship with oil and gas corporations, and a series of unfavourable decisions and deals made by the former Tory government to hamper progress on social issues. Hence the choice of six newcomers to the Cabinet, people who have more loyalty to the premier who led them to victory than to the party's long-standing ideals.

A case in point is environment and public safety minister Carol Carson. Carson began her political career in 1982 as an active campaigner for Progressive Conservative hopeful Grant Hodgins. Therefore, her appointment to Cabinet raised more than eyebrows - it raised rumours of a backroom deal to encourage her to switch sides.

However, according to sources close to Hodgins, Carson's relations with the Tories soured much earlier in the game, and by 1986 she was no longer a supporter. Carson went on to become mayor of Melfort and a thorny opponent to Hodgins. Hodgins in turn ordered the PC caucus research staff to begin compiling information on the woman who he expected would one day be the New Democratic candidate for Melfort.

Hodgins' instincts were correct. Early in 1991 Carson resigned the mayoralty to run for the New Democrats. Her subsequent Cabinet appointment was more likely linked to questions of gender and geography than to any backroom enticements.

Tory background aside, there are other reasons why Carson draws negative reviews from environmental activists like Tim Quigley of Pokebusters, a Saskatoon-based anti-nuke, anti-uranium coalition. "I think she will be ex-

**Carol  
Carson**



tremely weak as an environment minister. I don't think she sees the importance of the environment first. She's very much in favour of development in the broadest sense, and I don't think she is much aware of the effect on the environment," says Quigley.

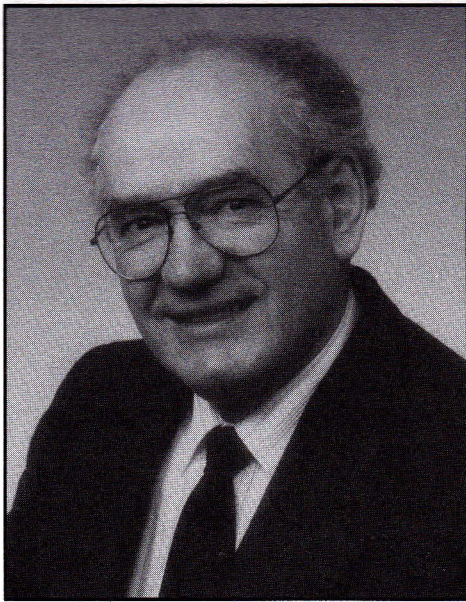
Members of the agricultural sector are also eyeing Carson nervously. Jim Robbins, chair of the National Farmers Union government relations committee, was surprised at the choice. "We're not aware of Carol Carson having any particular background or interest in environmental protection," says Robbins. "We would have been more pleased if an appointment would have been made of someone who has a history in environmental issues."

It's not entirely true that Carson has no experience - she did chair SUMA's standing committee on health, the environment and policing services. But she certainly hasn't fought in any of the tough battles on issues such as uranium development. She has no allegiances, no promises to break. A small-town civic booster by experience - illustrated best by her reluctance to come out against Fair Share - Carson has a natural bent toward jobs and development for rural Saskatchewan by any means. She is in an excellent position to promote continued uranium and nuclear development.

This seems to fit the bill perfectly for Romanow's Cabinet. It's "business as usual" in the uranium industry, according to energy and mines minister John Penner. Unlike Carson, Swift Current's Penner is reportedly a long-standing New Democrat. His background fits the type. A retired school teacher and principal of 31 years with two summers working in Africa under his belt, Penner has served as a Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation councilor and Western Credit Union board member. But, as a previously low-profile, rather conservative party member, Penner is as much an unknown quantity as Carson.

"I would certainly not position myself left of mainstream," Penner told *The Leader-Post*. The energy and mines minister doesn't believe the oil and gas industry





**John  
Penner**

**Carol  
Teichrob**



profited from Devine's royalty holiday program. One of his first acts as minister was to announce there would be no changes to royalty rate structures. "They're too smart to kill the golden goose," noted North Canadian Oils president Norman Gish.

Despite the industry's positive reviews of the new regime, the government is walking a very delicate line. The Saskatchewan North Canadian Oils general manager has said drilling for natural gas could stop if changes are made to royalty rates. Romanow's choice of a "business as usual" minister is no doubt intended to ward off a show-down with the industry. As well, Penner's lack of leadership experience will likely make him more inclined to follow Dwain Lingenfelter's lead in favour of managed uranium and nuclear development.

The same might be expected of Carol Teichrob, minister of education and the family. It didn't take long for Teichrob to apply Romanow's economic crisis model to education funding. In November she told the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association it will be "extremely difficult to provide capital funds" for education. Her message was that there wouldn't be any financial miracles.

Teichrob is a new party member whose political experience is as a former reeve of Corman Park, a rural municipality outside Saskatoon. Her background is not in education, but in poultry farming. She served as director of the Canadian Egg Marketing Agency and is an avid supporter of supply-managed agriculture. It is this background that has raised Teichrob's standing in Cabinet somewhat, and earned a cautious word of support from the NFU's Jim Robbins. "Teichrob comes from an agricultural background that ought to make her sympathetic to many of the policies that we support and push," says Robbins. However, Robbins notes that Teichrob is not someone the NFU knows well in terms of important issues like farm debt.

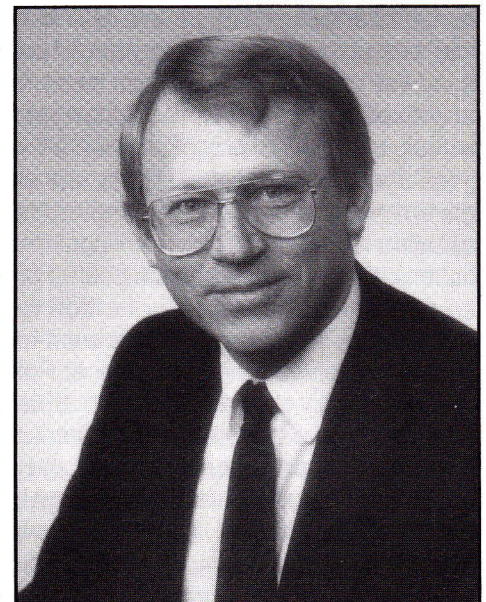
Robbins is less qualified in his support for Berny Wiens, whom he feels was a good choice as agriculture and food minister. Wiens, an NFU member, is the one new face in

Cabinet who has a demonstrated involvement in the issues concerning his portfolio. He is also the only new face to take a seat at the inner circle of the planning and priorities committee.

The NFU seems confident that Wiens will be an energetic, concerned fighter for farmers. Robbins notes however that the province is likely to take a softer approach on farm debt than the NFU would like. "We're worried about the talk of a voluntary moratorium. I guess we have difficulty imagining how it might work. There are a lot of legal arrangements in terms of farm debt right now that simply aren't honoured by the financial institutions," Robbins explains.

Wiens disagrees. As a guest on a live CBC open line show at Agribition, the agriculture minister said he had met with bank representatives and was confident they understood the crisis and wanted to help. He promised a debt restructuring program would come with the spring session

**Berny  
Wiens**





of the legislature. One member of the audience seemed convinced of the minister's good intentions but added this advice: "Don't rely exclusively on those venders. They lie."

Wiens replied: "I guess I've always liked to operate from a position of trust, and until it's proven to me that I can't I will.... The banking community is willing to make adjustments and has made adjustments, and I appreciate that."

Rural development minister Darrel Cunningham also prefers a voluntary moratorium. The banks aren't profiting from the situation, he claims, and therefore they should be willing to co-operate.

Looking a little ill-at-ease in his own office, Cunningham comes across as a soft-spoken, honest farmer. To hear him tell the story, no one was more surprised at the Cabinet posting than he himself. He's still slightly in awe of the whole experience, having been transported to a world of speeches and television camera lights. Unlike the impeccably-dressed MacKinnon, Cunningham's shirt sleeves are a little frayed at the edges, and he doesn't consider it out of line for a journalist to ask why he was chosen for the job. Instead he considers the question seriously and answers truthfully: it was based on the politics of geography and occupation, and "hopefully qualifications are taken into account as well."

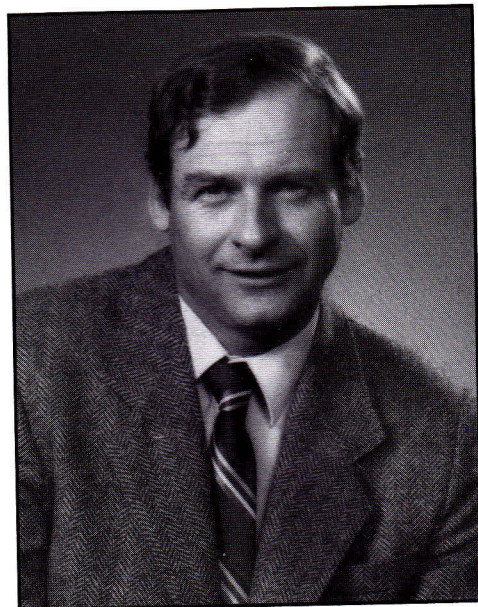
In fact, the Lintlaw-area farmer has a better grounding in the issues than many have given him credit for. He is a former farm management instructor, has a degree in agriculture, and has sat on his local co-op and credit union boards, as well as on his local Wheat Pool committee. His own farm operation has been "not very profitable" in recent years but is surviving with the help of his wife's off-farm income.

Perhaps Cunningham's credit union involvement has made him no hard liner on debt moratoriums, but there's more to his reasoning than that. The rural development minister takes a broad view, in which a debt moratorium, legislated or voluntary, is no panacea. He sees restructuring GRIP and NISA, and raising and stabilizing farm income as the essential issues. "Instead of a billion dollars here and a billion dollars there, we need to put that money into a stable, effective program," he says. And unless headway can be made on farm income, a moratorium will only forestall the inevitable. "No farm is viable at two dollar wheat, and that's the bottom line," he warns.

Cunningham seems slightly uncomfortable with the government's emphasis on restraint. He knew the financial situation would be bad, but still couldn't help getting "fired up to do things" during the long campaign. Now comes the let-down: "For me, it's sort of a boring time to be a New Democrat. There are ideals you want to pursue, and we're finding ourselves governing almost like Tories."

There's no observable sense of resentment or anger attached to this admission. It comes across as an honest statement from someone who feels the pull between policy and ideals. Nonetheless, Cunningham is willing to see past his doubts and follow the line. "From a government perspective the one accomplishment we have to see over the next few years is progress in balancing the budget. We

**Darrel  
Cunningham**



need to demonstrate that for ourselves, and that is sort of over-riding all the high ideals," he says.

It's one of those nutshell observations - the desperate need of Romanow and his Cabinet to prove they can balance the budget. When Romanow unveiled the new Cabinet, he said: "In ideological terms we are left-of-centre and social democrats. The No. 1 priority is what's on the public mind, and that is to have a lean and efficient government." In reality, the six new faces in Cabinet are not very left-of-centre, and some of them are quite new to social democracy. But then they are not being called on to be socialists - far from it.

As for what's on the public mind, it's true many are looking for a balanced budget and reduced deficit. But that has changed over time. In the June 5, 1991 Angus Reid poll, only 31 percent supported a balanced budget while 51 percent said no. However, after the Tory and NDP leadership both supported a balanced budget, 79 percent voted for it in the referendum.

Romanow and his priorities and planning committee have internalized this as a personal challenge. With the remainder of the Cabinet being acquiescent and eager to please, there is danger of the challenge deteriorating into unchecked obsession.

In a few month's time, the premier will unveil the expanded Cabinet. He has indicated that there are "geographic holes" to be filled. It is hoped that, in addition to geography, the premier will take a serious look at other factors. There is need for a few experienced, savvy men and women who can raise the right moral questions when decisions are made. A balance of ideas is at least as important as a balance of geography.

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