

It's a classic winter morning in Winnipeg—bright blue skies, well below zero—as I cross Portage Avenue on my way to the University of Winnipeg. I have a meeting with its president, Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, former Canadian foreign affairs minister, Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and son of this city's storied North End.

After his years on the front lines of Ottawa politics, Axworthy is proving you can go home again. In 2004 he returned both to the city he loves and to the university from which he graduated in 1961. He remained connected to university life but is best known for his career as a tough, successful politician. As Canada's foreign affairs minister, he travelled widely, accomplished much, and shared the

gave us \$18 million for a new science centre.” Growing this downtown university, making it accessible to less-privileged students, keeping it engaged in the community—these are Axworthy's goals now.

Consistently listed as one of Canada's top undergraduate institutions, the University of Winnipeg now boasts some 9,000 full- and part-time students. When Axworthy first walked these halls, it was known as United College and the student body numbered about 1,200. Who was he then? “A smart-ass kid, I guess, from the North End,” he says, relaxing with a cup of green tea in the oak-panelled president's office. “I came here because my parents were very active in the United Church. It wasn't a matter of choice. I was grateful for it; in my graduating

You Can Go Home Again

Still in demand on the world stage at 70, former MP Lloyd Axworthy has come full circle—back to Winnipeg and back to academe

By Peter Feniak

stage with world figures as varied as Princess Diana and Fidel Castro.

Today, an energetic 70, Axworthy is still a prominent Canadian on the international scene and remains plugged into numerous global initiatives. The lifelong Liberal grins, noting that his work these days is non-partisan. “To be honest,” he says, “the federal government has been very good with us; it just

class from Sisler High School there were probably only four or five of us who went on to university. It was a big deal to do it.”

Soon after he arrived, another big deal erupted at United College: an angry student protest over a fired professor which drew national attention, some years before such student activity became widespread at universities. The burly Axworthy, a self-described jock, found himself politicized.

“There was huge convulsion. The college had basically fired one of Canada's most distinguished historians, Harry Crowe, because [he] had written some nasty letters about the influence of the United Church to his colleagues. This was something you didn't do. It was a classic faculty versus administration confrontation, but it burst like a bombshell. You had classes being disrupted, fights in the hallway. I was taking a general arts degree, interested in history and political science and fooling around and



Photo: AP Photo/Visar Kryeziu/CP Images.

playing football. I thought, *What's all this crazy stuff?* This was real trench warfare. As a student here, you sure learned on-the-street politics in its roughest fashion." In the end, 14 professors, including Crowe, left the institution because of the so-called Harry Crowe Affair. Canada's academic community vowed such a purge would never happen again.

A top student, Axworthy won a Woodrow



Lloyd Axworthy with students of the University of Winnipeg's Eco-Kids program.

Wilson Fellowship and left for graduate studies at Princeton, where he found more campus ferment. The civil rights movement of the early 1960s and the violent reaction against it in the South electrified students. Axworthy joined thousands in the march on "America's most segregated city"—Birmingham, Alabama—in May 1963. "After Birmingham," he recently told the University of Winnipeg's alumni magazine, *The Journal*, "we were all camped out and people like Mahalia Jackson and Harry Belafonte were there. It was a very special time. When you're 21 or 22, that stuff makes a big difference to your life."

A new kind of politician was influencing him, as well. Axworthy watched President John F. Kennedy speak from the steps of the courthouse in Trenton, New Jersey. "We all fell in love with John Kennedy," he recalls, "because after Eisenhower and Diefenbaker and Adenauer, you saw this bright, brilliant young man who spoke your language and you said, 'Holy cow!'"

Axworthy would go on to complete an MA and eventually a PhD at Princeton, but despite

his academic credentials he chose politics over professorship. "Am I a competitive person? I think that would be a nice way of putting it," he laughs, acknowledging that as a hard-hitting football fullback he has always liked the contact. He embarked on a long career as "a lion of the left," as *Maclean's* once described him.

The roots of that political leaning reach back beyond university days, to home and the North End. (Born in North Battleford, SK, he grew up in Winnipeg.)

"We would come home for dinner and there'd be some ex-murderer sitting down and having roast beef and apple pie," Axworthy smiles, recalling home life on Radford Street. "Yes, my mother was very involved in prison reform." Gwen and Norman Axworthy, parents of four sons, were deeply committed to church and community, believing, as Lloyd, the eldest, once explained, that your faith is demonstrated by your actions.

Gwen Axworthy urged her sons to get involved, too; Axworthy recalls going to Youth Parliament and to the model United Nations assembly, finding he had a natural inclination for such things. After raising her own children, Gwen went on to manage one of the city's first daycare centres. His mother was the activist, but his father also led by example. "My dad had a small business and just went out and sold insurance. When I first ran for office, I'd knock on the doors of people's very small, modest homes and they'd say, 'You're Norm's son,'" Axworthy says. "And they'd say, 'I know Norm because back in '52 I was out of a job and he carried me on a policy for a year and a half.' He wasn't out there on the front line like my mother, but he was a very decent man. One thing you can say for all of us, we take people as they are and enjoy it."

Negotiation and Human Rights

Winnipeg's North End, also once home to famous Canadians such as David Steinberg, Monty Hall, and Burton Cummings, has changed since Axworthy's youth. Today, new immigrant groups have moved in, along with a sizable aboriginal population. In Axworthy's day, the potent multilingual mix was largely Eastern European. "I was a kid from a WASP

background—English/Welsh—but I remember taking out girls whose mothers made great *holopchi*, and we would play baseball at the Community Polish Association. Our friends were kids who were Ukrainian or Jewish or German or whatever. That was a terrific community and there were not that many divisions.”

His upbringing in a multicultural district prefigured Axworthy’s role on the world stage. So too did an unwelcome assignment he received in high school.

“One of our history teachers, R.J. Phillips, said the class had to go to listen to some politician down at the old Civic Auditorium. We were all moaning and groaning, then he said, ‘25 per cent of your term mark is going to be based on going.’ So we went and there was this little roly-poly guy with a polka-dot tie and a little bit of a lisp, not your Hollywood casting agent’s view of a [political spellbinder] and this was Mike Pearson, just after his Nobel Peace Prize, talking about what it was to be a Canadian, that we grew up in a place where we had the privilege of not having a war, about learning how to negotiate our differences, having a belief in things like human rights.” If he had one political hero, Axworthy says, it was Lester B. Pearson.

Axworthy became a committed Liberal and an effective politician (beyond his international achievements, he’s been jokingly called a godfather for his ability to promote federal funding for Winnipeg). He was 27 when he first sought public office, losing at the provincial level in 1966. At age 29 he ran for a federal seat, coming a surprisingly close second to North End NDP stalwart Stanley Knowles. He finally won a race in the provincial election of 1973, joining party leader (and later media tycoon) Izzy Asper. It was a lonely life as a Liberal in Manitoba in the 1970s; eventually, he was the only member of his party left in the legislature.

He set his sights on Ottawa again, winning the Winnipeg-Fort Garry seat in the 1979 election and then again in Pierre Trudeau’s comeback election of 1980. He survived the Mulroney Conservative landslide of 1984—one of only two Liberals west of Ontario—and became a vocal critic of the Free Trade

Agreement. He was considered when the Liberals searched for a new leader in the early 1990s, but the prize went to Jean Chrétien, who led the Liberals back to power. Tapped as minister of employment and immigration, Axworthy guided a major overhaul of employment insurance. Finally, in 1996, he was given the post he called his dream come true: minister of foreign affairs.

In that portfolio, Axworthy emphasized the issues of human security and freedom from fear. He argued effectively against the use of child soldiers, against the persecution of tribal minorities within nations, and for the establishment of an international court to try war criminals. Most notable was his role in the fight to ban deadly anti-personnel land mines, which resulted in the Ottawa Treaty of 1997, which today has 156 signatory countries.

“The day the treaty was signed, 50,000 people a year were being killed—now it’s five,” says Axworthy. World figures who joined him in that fight included Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu and Princess Diana, who, Axworthy adds, was heavily involved in the cause and very sincere about it. (The day before the crash that killed her, Axworthy had invited her to Ottawa to be present for the signing of the treaty).

His work to ban land mines led to his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. More controversial was Canada’s 1999 decision to support the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia because of the genocide in Kosovo. It marked a change in Canada’s traditional non-aggressive posture, spurred by the international inaction against the genocide in Rwanda. The issue is now summarized as R2P—the “Responsibility to Protect”—and Axworthy remains an international proponent of it.

A Time for Change

In September 2000, Axworthy stepped down. “My wife and I decided it was time. I had been in politics since I was 32 and I had no capital, didn’t own a house, had no savings. And I had a son who at that time was just 14 years old and I didn’t see much of him and didn’t see much of my wife. I just said, ‘Time for a different life.’ (Axworthy is married to Quebec na-

tive Denise Ommanney, whom he met in Ottawa; he is also stepfather to her two sons, and a grandfather.) His first post-politics stop was as the director of Vancouver's Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. In 2004 his alma mater called, and his heart drew him back to Winnipeg.

"I don't say it's a perfect city, but it's just a great place to be and live in. Winnipeg's changing; there's a real undercurrent of buzz in this town now. People are seeing that they've got things here. You can have a very satisfying life. I can get to work in five minutes. I can go to a golf course in 15. I have a cottage up on Lake Winnipeg where my wife and son and I can go, and be there in an hour. We put out ads now for new faculty positions, we'll get applications from former students who may be teaching at Stanford or at U of T who say, 'Hey, can we come back?'"

Axworthy recently committed to another five-year term as the University of Winnipeg's

president. He teaches a course in foreign policy and admires the energy of students who still want to change the world, though fewer of them now choose politics. In the halls near his office are framed photographs of his life on the global stage—here with Pope John Paul II, there with former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. He remains close to Madeleine Albright, former U.S. secretary of state.

The world still calls him: "My agreement with the university is that they approve my doing international jobs. I just came back from a meeting in Washington on Afghanistan. A week before I was giving lectures at McGill on Canadian policy and the week before in Berkeley on R2P. I belong to the Aspen Commission on Northern Climate Change, and I've just taken a commission from NAFTA to do a thing on environment and transportation."

As he rhymes off his commitments, Axworthy grins and adds that at some point he'll slow down. When they can, he and Denise travel together to meetings then branch off to visit grandchildren, see old friends, or take in some jazz—he says they want to do more of that. He's been thinking a lot about mortality since last year: his mother, Gwen, passed away in June at age 92 (his father died in 1990), and he also lost one of his closest friends and a cousin who was like a sister.

Looking back on the path he chose, Axworthy reflects, "I could have settled into a life that was a pretty good one. But whether it was the gene pool or not, I kind of liked the action. I didn't come from a wealthy family—politics was one of the venues where you could make a difference. If I was going to do something, I was going to do it in public office."

Asked if he still hears the voice of his activist mother supporting him and urging him on, he smiles. "Oh, yeah. I hear her every day." ■



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