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BOB DEVERELL:

Bob Deverell was a political colleague of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Jim Brady: his philosophy, politics and interests.
- Comparison with Malcolm Norris.

Murray: I am speaking to Bob Deverell of Saskatoon. Bob, you knew Brady quite well and as you know, he was a man who read a great deal. In your political discussions with him, did he indicate an interest in a broad range of issues and developments or was he more particularly interested in the north?

Bob: No, oddly enough, meeting a man like that, who had lived in the north most of his life, he could discuss the Vietminh, the (inaudible) at that time, you know. And of course, the Korean War and also poverty, world poverty. He didn't confine himself to northern problems.

Murray: What were some of the things that he focused on when he talked to you? Were there any particular issues, world issues, that he seemed most concerned about?

Bob: Well, of course, the war in Vietnam and the struggle against the French particularly. And of course, as I mentioned before, world poverty and the lack of intelligent action on

the part of the western powers to do something about it.

Murray: Right.

Bob: A problem we have today.

Murray: Did he talk about the third world revolution in general? Was he interested in other areas of the world too or did he follow that sort of thing?

Bob: Oh yes. You see, he read so much, that is, current affairs, journals of opinion, and so forth. And because he was isolated so much in the north, he just loved to have an opportunity to meet somebody who was similarly interested.

Murray: So he didn't get a chance in the north to talk about these things?

Bob: No. There was very few people up there, you know, who had his interest.

Murray: Was there then, in a sense, a separation in his life of his interest in ideological politics and his practical work in the north? Was there a separation there? How did he join those two things?

Bob: Oh, I don't know. I suppose, though, having such an inquiring mind, you know, bound to have a broad interest. Just as he had in history. He could discuss Periclean and Athens and American Civil War, almost anything.

Murray: Did he ever compare or relate the struggle of native people in the north to third world struggles?

Bob: Yes. He thought it was a great similarity, you know. He felt that, of course, the southern Canada acted as colonists.

Murray: Did he ever expand on that theme in terms of how he saw the best strategy to solve the problems in the north?

Bob: Yes. One idea he had was to hire some good legal minds who were in complete sympathy with the Metis and the Indian people of the north and to be able to fight their cases intelligently. Of course, that was not likely to happen. He didn't think it was, anyway.

Murray: Did he see the land claims and that sort of thing as an important aspect of fighting colonialism in the north?

Bob: As a matter of fact, land claims has only had attention in recent years, you know. At that time, this was twenty odd years ago, and that was never discussed. I never saw it anywhere.

Murray: Brady didn't mention it either or...?

Bob: No.

Murray: Not much, eh. If one goes through his scrapbooks that he kept of newspaper clippings, he seemed to be very concerned and interested in the struggle between fascism and communism in Europe. This was a thing that kept recurring in all his clippings. Was that a major topic of discussion between the two of you?

Bob: Oh yes, it was. You know, he served in overseas during the war and he liked to talk about it, as a matter of fact, and he had deep feelings about the war against Hitler.

Murray: Can you recall some of the things he talked about, any specific things?

Bob: Well, you know, like most veterans of the war, they don't talk about what they did themselves. They talk about what

other people did, things he saw. Just general things, you know. I remember one time he told me when the Americans got involved and after the Normandy landings, this young American kid, he said, "He couldn't be any more than 19 years old," came up to him, cocky as hell and said, "You might as well go home, Canada, we're here." (chuckles) And he said, "He was such a little guy I could have picked him up and eaten him," but he said, "I found it amusing because of the cockiness of him," you know.

Murray: I remember he commented in his writings about how depressing it was when the war was over, to see the feeling of revenge among the people who were now liberated. He seemed to be very emotional about that kind of violence. Was he a pacifist in a sense, or would that be inaccurate?

Bob: No, I don't think he was a pacifist. Any man who would willingly go to fight against Hitler couldn't be called a pacifist. I mean, there is pacifism and pacifists.

Murray: Right, right. According to a letter he wrote to you in 1954, Brady had already quit the CCF in 1952 for various reasons. Did he ever discuss with you the nature of the CCF party and did he have a sort of fully developed analysis of the CCF or was he just disillusioned? What was his position?

Bob: He was disillusioned. You see, when the CCF came into office in 1944, there was great promise of social changes and economic changes and so forth. But he felt that they hadn't fulfilled their promises and that they'd become just another capitalist party. And he used to point out what the social democrats had done in Europe. They made great promises, going to have great social changes and then nothing happens. And he used to point out what the social democrats did in 1914 by voting for the Kaiser's war credits with the exception of two, Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

Murray: So he made a pretty close comparison between the CCF in Saskatchewan and the social democratic parties in Europe.

Bob: Yes. And the Labour party. That was another disappointment to him, you know. He used to say, here was a party that struggled so hard and always talked socialism and then they came to office. He said they did some good things such as granting India its freedom which he said was inevitable anyway. It would come about regardless of which party, but he felt that was a good thing. And some nationalizing but it wasn't enough, he said.

Murray: Did he feel that, because of his experience with the CCF and his observations of European parties, that the parliamentary road was one that was inevitably to fail?

Bob: Yes, he didn't have much hope for the parliamentary system. That is, a victory of the proletariat. He wasn't afraid to use that word. Although, in those days, in the early fifties, if you used such a word as proletariat that meant that you were a Red and...

Murray: You couldn't use the word at all without being branded. He was certainly very interested in the so-called cold war, as well. What sorts of discussions did you have on that topic?

Bob: Oh, just general observations. Nothing specific.

Murray: In our earlier conversation, you mentioned that Brady took part in an anti-bomb march in Regina. Could you describe that march and any talk you had with Brady during that time?

Bob: No. It was just, that was the time when there were many anti-bomb marches and he came down to Regina with Malcolm Norris and took part in it and that's all.

Murray: This was part of the effort to stem the sort of anti-communist tide, in a sense, was it? Was there a great deal of pressure in North America for a war against the Soviet Union at the time?

Bob: Well, the cold war was at its height at the time, you know. But, the anti-bomb people were just anti-bomb. They were all a wide range of people from, not from the extreme right but certainly from the middle, moderate to the left. And everybody took part. I mean, many classes.

Murray: In a few letters to you that you still have, there were two themes that seemed to recur. One we've just been talking about, the threat of war and the peace movement that was fighting against it (if it was actually called a peace movement). And the second theme was the regression of government programs in the north, over a period of years. Did he talk to you much about the latter thing?

Bob: Oh yes, he did. He complained about it as many people in the north did at the time.

Murray: Do you recall at what time period it was that those programs started to fall apart, as it were?

Bob: In the middle fifties, about ten years after the CCF came to office. There was great promise at first about developing the north. The argument by the government was that it would benefit the native people.

Murray: Did he identify to you what he thought the various factors were that led to regression in those programs?

Bob: No.

Murray: He didn't mention any particular things?

Bob: No.

Murray: Brady was certainly well versed in sociology and history and considered himself a Marxist. Did he have a lot of discussions with you about Marxist theory in a theoretical way as opposed to how it is applied? Was he interested in it in that sense as well, just the....?

Bob: Well, anytime you meet a Marxist, you know, it doesn't take long to find it out. And naturally we discussed these things in a general way. He knew Das Kapital and he read Anti-Duhring and Marx's letters and Engels' letters. He read a lot of Engels'. The unfortunate thing was that he had so few people he could talk with up there. Isolated almost, you know.

Murray: Was he an accomplished, well, I don't know how you'd put it, a Marxist theoretician? He was well read and understood Marxism.

Bob: Anybody who has read Anti-Duhring...

Murray: And understood it.

Bob: Yeah, sees it. Well, of course it's easier to read and understand than is Das Kapital.

Murray: Right, right. Could you recall again for me the anecdote about the Korean war in Cumberland? I remember you mentioning that the last time.

Bob: Oh yes, I was with him at Cumberland House for a couple of weeks and the day the Korean war broke out, Jim and I were in his office. He was a field officer, you know. And a young fellow came rushing in from the other room where he had been listening to the radio and he said, "Good Lord! The Russians have invaded Corsica." And Jim said, "Oh you're crazy, it's impossible." And this kid said, "Well, I heard it on the radio. I have to believe my own ears." And then, of course, we learned the the news announcers were saying that the North Koreans, the Communists, had invaded South Korea. Jim liked to

laugh about that later, you know.

Murray: He didn't quite figure out what the Russians were doing in Corsica.

There is a fairly important question you asked Brady once that you mentioned and I'm wondering if you can recall in any detail the answer he gave to it if he did. You asked him what he would do if he found himself lost in the bush.

Bob: Well, Jim knew woodcraft, you know. He knew how to handle a canoe and he could swim and he simply went into some details about what he would do. How he would catch a fish and how he could capture, oh, say a porcupine or some other animal. That is assuming he has no rifle, nothing but a knife. And he said he could survive whether in summer or winter. And he said, matter of fact, winter it would be easier provided you had the proper clothing because it's easier to get food.

Murray: Did he mention in his answer what he would do to attract attention if he were lost?

Bob: No, he didn't.

Murray: It was simply his description of how he would survive?

Bob: Yeah.

Murray: He seemed quite confident then when you asked the question that he would have no problem?

Bob: Yes. Well, if you know the north and, they don't run around in circles. Of course, it's tough country, you know, because one lake starts where another ends and rivers flowing through lakes and so forth. He said he could survive in the north, especially in the winter. "The winter would be better," he said, "because you don't have the blackflies and mosquitoes."

Murray: Did you determine any differences between Brady and Norris as far as their political activity in the north was concerned?

Bob: No.

Murray: In your discussions with them? I've heard other people say that Norris was much more the activist, the organizer, than Brady. Did you ever get that impression from talking to the two men?

Bob: No.

Murray: In your conversations with Norris, did he seem interested in any particular topic other than the development of northern....?

Bob: Yes, it was chiefly about the north.

Murray: Did he have as broad an interest in other issues as Brady did? Was he as well-read about international things?

Bob: No, really not. But he did know the north. He spoke Cree, you know. That's why he got that work as, with the Prospectors' Assistance Program. That was one of the things that Brady praised. He thought this was a good thing. But it's been discontinued, I think.

Murray: No. It's now called the Prospectors' Incentive Plan, I think. It's basically the same program.

Bob: It is, eh.

Murray: Yeah. In fact I mentioned this to a fellow in DNS the other day and he said, "Oh yes, it certainly follows along the lines that Norris had established." So it's still going.

Brady dismissed the CCF party quite decisively in the early fifties and I'm wondering, the one letter Norris wrote to you implies - and this is something that I read between the lines - that Norris at least, was still interested in the CCF to some extent. Is that true? Did he reject it as decisively as Brady?

Bob: Oh no, he had hopes for the CCF. He thought it was so much better than the other parties. Just a matter of degree.

Murray: But he wasn't as pessimistic about it as Brady then?

Bob: No.

Murray: Was he still active in the CCF do you think in the sixties, can you recall?

Bob: I don't know. I don't remember.

Murray: Did either man indicate to you that they were keeping in touch with or following the developments of other native groups in Canada? Or were there native groups active at that time?

Bob: I don't know. We never discussed that. Jim used to talk about his activities in Alberta you know, with the Metis Society. Jim always pronounced it 'Meetiss'. He also would use halfbreed but he didn't like to hear a white man say halfbreed because it was so, not only pejorative but downright riare for white people.

Murray: Right. I know that native people in the north use the word breed themselves without any negative connotations.

Bob: Louis Riel used it frequently.

Murray: It was really only common among the French Metis and

of course, most of the Metis in Saskatchewan, or northern Saskatchewan, are of Scottish and English descent.

Bob: Incidentally the correct pronunciation is 'Maytees'. The s is pronounced because of the accent over the e.

Murray: Oh, I'll have to remember that.

Bob: I notice that Trudeau pronounces it correctly. I've heard him use it two or three times on radio. I noticed all the dictionaries that I've consulted pronounce the s. The feminine, of course, is sse.

Murray: Oh right. That's right.

Bob: Metisse. That's incidental.

Murray: Did Brady and Norris ever discuss with you their efforts in Saskatchewan to organize the Metis Association?

Bob: Oh yes, talking in general terms about it and how frustrating it was, you know. But really arouse interest.

Murray: You don't recall when those discussions first started happening? When they might have begun to organize?

Bob: It was after the Second World War. After Jim had come back from Europe.

Murray: Was it right away that they started working or was it later on that in the...?

Bob: Yes, that's what I understand. It was quite soon after that. Maria Campbell in her book Halfbreed mentions Jim a couple of times, about how impressed she was by his oratorical gifts. Apparently he was good on the platform. I never saw him on the platform. It was always day-to-day conversation, you know.

(End of Side A)

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