

Vaughn Palmer: Bob Williams was his own man, at a time in politics when it wasn't always easy to do so

Former NDP cabinet minister Bob Williams was one of the most polarizing figures in B.C. politics from the 1960s to the 1990s.

By: Vaughn Palmer

VICTORIA — As the B.C. New Democrats enter another chapter in their history, along comes a memoir from a politician, planner and survivor of much of that history.

Bob Williams, 89, was born at about the same time as the CCF, the party of the left that became the modern-day NDP.

He was the most powerful cabinet minister in B.C.'s first NDP government in the 1970s.

He also served as a city planner (Delta) city councillor (Vancouver) Crown corporation overseer (ICBC) credit union board member (Vancity Savings), and private sector entrepreneur (the Railway Club).

Along the way Williams left fingerprints on the agricultural land reserve, Robson Square, Whistler, Surrey Central, B.C. Housing, the Sea Bus and ... well, one could write a book and he finally did.

Using Power Well: Bob Williams and the Making of British Columbia was published last month by Gibsons-based Nightwood Editions.

The title slightly echoes David Mitchell's classic W.A.C. Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia.

Bennett had two decades in government as premier, Williams just under four years as a minister.

But both envisioned an activist role for government, albeit from different sides of the left/right political divide.

Williams was one of the most polarizing figures in B.C. politics from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Just ask his editorial assistants on the memoir, Ben Isitt, a Victoria City councillor, and Thomas Bevan, a university-trained urban planner like Williams himself.

“His inclination to be a straight shooter, as he describes it, who truly tells it like it is, with no bullshit has probably made him more enemies than friends,” they acknowledge in their introduction.

Nor would Williams’ overbearing management style have lasted long in today’s sheltered workplaces.

Just ask the man himself: “It has been said that I didn’t suffer fools gladly, and I didn’t.”

His public policy vision was grounded in the writings of Henry George, the radical American economist who influenced the progressive movement in the late 19th and early 20th century.

George argued that the economic value of land and resources be treated as the common property of society and subjected to a single tax to achieve a more productive and just society.

Williams’ devotion to “one tax George” got him branded as a communist in some quarters.

He styles himself as a “socialist who believes in free enterprise.”

The book delights in recounting how he briefed post-communist-era Russian mayors on how to set up a private land ownership registry on the B.C. Assessment model.

Whole sections of the book are given over to discussions about developing B.C. land and resources, not just in the past but into the future.

Classic Williams. When a few years back, I invited him to appear on the interview show that I hosted on the cable channel, he agreed providing it not just mean looking back.

He then bombarded me with notes and research papers on how forestry in B.C. could be reformed through community control, co-ops, and value-added development.

There’s some political score settling in the book most notably with Dave Barrett.

The two were close during Barrett’s term as premier from 1972 to 1975.

When Barrett lost his seat in the 1975 election, Williams resigned his, allowing Barrett to return to the house in a byelection.

In return, Williams says Barrett promised him that in the next election, he would ensure that veteran MLA Alex Macdonald would retire in favour of the younger Williams.

However, when the 1979 election rolled round, Barrett sided with Macdonald and Williams lost the nomination fight.

“Dave never lived up to our clear agreement,” says Williams, who didn’t return to the legislature until Barrett himself retired in 1984.

The book is also deeply personal.

Williams was estranged for years from his birth father. He recounts his working-class upbringing in moving detail.

He also discusses how “back in my younger years, before my marriage and political career,” he didn’t acknowledge he was gay: “It wasn’t relevant then or didn’t seem to be.”

He then recounts how being gay was used against him in a way that ended his career as an elected politician.

One day in spring 1991, Williams was buying coffee at the kiosk outside the legislature when he was approached by an appointee of the then Social Credit government.

“He asked me a question with a double meaning,” says Williams. The fellow then repeated the question with a laugh.

“I recognized the key code word, in effect: ‘I know you’re gay.’”

Williams didn’t know how they would use the knowledge against him, “but I’d seen what happened to others.”

He resigned his seat, drawing accolades on the floor of the legislature from veteran Sacred Grace McCarthy.

“I think the creativity of Bob Williams in the time that he served as a member of the government was in many ways a great service to our province,” said McCarthy.

“I also want to say that as a member of the opposition, he kept the government side on its toes. I do wish him very well in the years to come.”

Williams went on to successive careers as overseer of crown corporations under the NDP, then to Vancity, all recounted in the book in his provocative style.

There’s an argument on pretty much every page: Snowflakes beware.

But I found it refreshing to come up against the views of a politician who was inspired by something other than the last person he talked to or the latest opinion poll.