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A cultural federal bureaucrat, Bernie Ostry was one of a kind



BY
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If you didn't have a chance to work with Bernie Ostry you have missed one of a kind. There won't be another like him in the civil service, so you better enjoy these reminiscences of mine.

I was in government relations at TVOntario in the 1980s. This is the time Bernie (how he introduced himself to me) slid over from Deputy Minister at Citizenship and Culture to Chair and CEO of the provincial educational broadcaster.

His reputation preceded him. Bernie the academic. Bernie the author. Bernie, the cultured, profane, smooth-talking street fighter.

I won't forget the gleam in his eyes that I could just see over his gold reading glasses that he kept perched on his nose. He was very small physically, even frail, but he could intimidate with his intellect. He had a soft, powerful, silica-sand voice that commanded attention. But it is the slightly crooked finger that gently beat a tattoo on a spot about three inches from my chest that also still resonates.

Bernie the friend of Pierre Trudeau (same gleam, by the way). Bernie, the inventor of Canadian multiculturalism (while an Ottawa Mandarin). Bernie the natty dresser--in 15-year-old suits.

Shortly after Bernie arrived at TVOntario, we were due to go in front of the ministerial "estimates" committee at the legislature. Opposition politicians were ready to grill the minister, deputies, and agency heads on big picture spending.

I'd prepared a briefing book for my new chair and presented it. "Lookit..." (Out came the finger.) "The thing you need to tell me is the three things you want me to say to these guys,

regardless of what they ask." (Pause.) "But, I'm not going anyway, because of the constitutional issue--you go."

Constitutional issue? Bernie had cooked up this notion that a former deputy minister could not be compelled to appear in front of a standing committee of a legislature if he'd just been deputy of the ministry under scrutiny.

Legal scholars will know this as the "Notwithstanding the invitation, Ostry doesn't want to go" clause.

It was nonsense, but I soon found out Bernie usually got his way.

Off I went, sitting with the chairs of the Royal Ontario Museum, Ontario Science Centre, McMichael Canadian Collection, etc. I pulled it off.

Then there was the "Northern Ontario" advisory council meeting of TVOntario. Bernie got a government plane to take us up to Kirkland Lake where he gave the locals a lecture in geography. He'd been born north of this spot and most of Canada was North of this spot.

On that trip, our car got to the plane first. Bernie got in and told the pilot to take off--without my colleagues in the other car. As the propellers turned over, I grabbed Suzanne Grew-Ellis and, in a loud voice, started the Humphrey Bogart speech from *Casablanca*. "If you get on the plane, you'll regret it, maybe not today, but soon, and for the rest of your life."

This stalled for enough time that we didn't leave anyone behind. Bernie seemed to like my sense of the absurd.

But the best stories were ones I only heard about. Bernie ordering a bottle of champagne in a restaurant and giving the waiter hell for pouring a little for others at the table. Bernie getting a call from Conrad Black, bragging about his new toy--London's *Daily Telegraph*. Bernie having breakfast at the Park Plaza in Toronto and shouting over the

room to a government official, "Where's my hundred grand?" (They were late on a funding cheque.)

I once took a deputy minister on a tour of TVO. He asked what I did. I said I was in charge of government relations. After a pause I added, "It's kind of like being Pierre Trudeau's foreign minister--I don't do much of anything." He got it.

One of Bernie's first acts at TVO was to pry almost double the budget out of the province. (We weren't sure what to do with it, frankly). The other was to take a five-year experiment in French language broadcasting and turn it into a full French network--TFO. We did it, but when Bernie tried to take credit for doing this, one mid-level provincial mandarin responded, "But, who asked you to?"

Then there was Sylvia. Mrs. Ostry was deputy at Industry and Trade (writing an economics text on the side) while Bernie was being Bernie. In a later life in Ottawa, I'd bump into her, bum a smoke, and we'd chat. I told her Bernie stories and she'd laugh that throaty, dirty, Rothman's laugh that she has.

But I made her look off into the middle of the room when I told her how I coped with some of Bernie's lectures. I'd just look over to the framed glamour shot of Sylvia that Bernie kept on his desk. It was a real 1940s, Hollywood diva profile. Sylvia said she had no idea he even had it. It was a nice moment, and the only real favour I actually did for Bernie.

Bernie died last month in Toronto at the age of 78 of metastasized prostate cancer.

Allan Bonner left TVO to start a media and crisis management company, which he has been running from Toronto since the late 1980s.

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