

Ontario Power Centenary Speech

A presentation to “The Megabash” on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Ontario power system, June 7, 2006, by Sean Conway, Visiting Fellow at Queen’s University, former cabinet minister



and provincial party spokesperson on energy policy. Held at the Liberty Grand Ballroom, Toronto.

History, it is said, is the record of the encounter between character and circumstance. Well, my friends, in that event, we celebrate this warm June evening a remarkable centennial in the history of Canada for it was 100 years ago this week that the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario was established and Adam Beck’s spectacular career was launched.

It is almost impossible for us today to imagine the pre-electric world of late 19th century Ontario – a world of rural isolation, back-breaking manual labour, and most of all, darkness – a darkness relieved only by daylight and kerosene. Ontario’s emerging manufacturing economy was being fuelled by imported coal from western Pennsylvania, the supply of which was seriously threatened by the coal strike of 1902.

It was into this world that Ontario Hydro landed 100 years ago. And Beck’s Hydro did not arrive without a fight. On the one hand were those who believed that this new-fangled “electric business” should remain the business of the private sector. These were the men of Big Business – men of railways, banking and insurance.

On the other side were those from small business and the municipalities, especially those in western Ontario, who argued for “public power.” It was this group that the cigar-box manufacturer and then-Mayor of London, Ontario – Adam Beck – led on to decisive victory. The resilient and often ruthless Beck was one of those who believed that “the water-power of Niagara should be as free as the air.”

Beck led not just a small business and municipal lobby but also a moral crusade. Listen to these words from Beck as he outlined his duties as the first Chairman of the Hydro Commission in 1906:

“My task,” he said, “is to lighten the load of the poor, the housewife, the farmer, the merchant ... and to build a new citizenship based on service, progress and righteousness.”

Variouly called a Prometheus, a Canadian Napoleon, an Electrical Messiah, Chairman Beck used all of his considerable skills as a communicator and propagandist to carry this message from rural, small-town western Ontario to Toronto



City Hall and Queen’s Park to win his case and crush his opposition. The Ontario Power Debate of that time made headlines not just in this province and country but in the United States and Great Britain. To many in the financial capitals of London and New York, this state-sponsored scheme for “public power” represented a very dangerous form of economic and political radicalism.

Adam Beck was determined to spread his “hydro gospel” to all parts of Ontario and to enlist support wherever he could find it – or manufacture it. Early in his campaign, Beck helped organize the Ontario Municipal Electric Association, a very important extra-parliamentary lobby that took the debate – and Beck’s side in it – from rural concession to industrial town. One of Beck’s great successes in the pre-World War I era was the Electric Circus, a very impressive ‘road show’ that demonstrated the wonder of electrical appliances to hard-pressed farm wives.

And the arrival of world war in 1914 provided Beck with the perfect opportunity to expand the original mandate of the Hydro Commission from transmitting the power at Niagara to actually building Hydro-owned generation. By war’s end in 1918, the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario was well on its way to constructing the largest generating facility in the world.

All of this activity placed Beck in constant conflict with his political masters at Queen’s Park. And there is a significant irony in this situation for not only was Adam Beck a Mayor of London but he was also, after 1902, a Conservative M.P.P. and cabinet minister. And while Beck and his Premier James P. Whitney agreed on some aspects of hydro policy, they strongly disagreed on others. Whitney, the progressive but cautious lawyer from small-town eastern Ontario thought that “the hydro” should be clearly under the Legislature’s control whereas Beck, the messianic populist, imagined a public utility beyond the control of the petty politicians!

When he died in the summer of 1925, Beck was hailed as one of the greatest Canadians who had ever lived. Municipal offices all across Ontario were closed in his honour, his funeral service was broadcast over radio and a funeral train carried

his body from London to its final resting place in Hamilton – through the very countryside that he had so effectively mobilized in support of “the people’s power.”

One of Ontario’s most successful politicians – William Grenville Davis of Brampton – once observed that “Bland Works” in this province. Well I must say that the life and times of Adam Beck contradict that observation, for Beck was the absolute antithesis of bland. He was colourful; he was courageous; he was single-minded; he was capable of generating fierce loyalties and passionate resistance.

Overall, Adam Beck represents a larger-than-life personality who should today be the stuff of the movie theatre or the stage. If you tried, you simply couldn’t invent a richer story than “Beck and his Hydro.”

But what we celebrate this evening is not just a remarkable personality. The “white coal” of Niagara changed Ontario forever. Electricity helped make this province one of the most successful economies of the 20th century. Difficult and divisive as the debate often became, “the coming of the hydro” opened up the north, expanded and advanced our industry and democratized so much of our community.

The dream of an earlier time – that the worker, the homemaker, the farmer – would be able to share in the benefits of modern technology, was realized by the electricity revolution of the past century.

Excerpted from IPPSO FACTO, November 2006
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IPPSO FACTO

Journal of the
Association of Power Producers of Ontario (APPrO)

Published six times per year Volume 20, No. 5, November 2006

Editor/writer: Jake Brooks ISSN 0847-1460

Publisher: David Butters

Editorial Board: Mike Crawley, Sam Mantenuto, Linda Bertoldi,
Tom Brett

Subscription Price: \$500/yr. (Individuals); \$250 (Seniors & students), \$500
– 2000 /yr. (Institutions, depending on size) — Plus GST/HST. Please address
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