

THE CSC AT

40

DIEFENBAKER

LOOKING BACK at ELECTION '57

By Don Angus

Photos from Fritz Spiess csc

It was arguably the most pivotal election in Canadian history, certainly in terms of demonstrating the power of fledgling television to sway a pliant electorate.

On June 10, 1957, the rejuvenated Progressive Conservative party under fiery Prairie lawyer John Diefenbaker ended the 22-year rule of the Liberals with a slim plurality at the polls and a consequent minority government in Ottawa.

It was television that did in the Grits, Fritz Spiess csc recalled for *CSC News*. "They did not understand the power of the medium at the time."

Spiess was cameraman for the Liberals during that federal campaign 40 years ago, the first to be covered by television. TV,

already a news and entertainment force in the United States, was only five years old in Canada, but CBC-affiliated stations had been established nationwide and sets were glowing in nearly two million homes across the country.

S.W. Caldwell Ltd. of Toronto, who hired Spiess not long after he had immigrated from Germany, produced the Liberal TV spots. Spence Caldwell, "an experienced broadcaster who was one of the first in Canada to produce television commercials, was backing the Liberal government and was hoping to be awarded the second TV station in Toronto.

"Every minister of the Liberal government was invited to come and do a speech that was usually around 13 minutes in

length," Spiess recounted. "We were filming at the Liberal party headquarters in Ottawa. We also had a live TV camera there just to check out wardrobe, to avoid any flickering with busy ties or jackets which could be disturbing to watch. We had an identical set in Toronto at the Queensway studios, owned by Caldwell."

Shooting stretched over several weeks during the campaign, using a 16mm Mitchell with 400-foot magazines. Producer and director was Syd Banks, Carl Heydeman was in charge of the TelePrompter, and Harry Lake csc was camera assistant.

"When we started there was an evening set aside to discuss with the CBC people what we could and should do for these programs. It was very surprising how patiently the government representatives, including campaign manager Gordon Atkinson, listened to what the CBC people had to say. For example, Syd Banks suggested that in order to have Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent introduce local candidates we would send a crew across Canada filming these candidates and then add what St. Laurent had to say about them.

"The CBC said, 'No, no, no, you can't do that. You can only use one camera,' which would mean bringing 200 or even more people to Ottawa. Furthermore, they said: 'You cannot use any big theatrical lighting things, curtains opening or trickeries with filters or whatever you have in your bag of tricks. It has to be an absolute honest rendition of what the camera is seeing.' That restricted very much our ambitious plans."

The government did not put any pressure on the CBC, Spiess said. On the contrary, a request to use radio microphones, which were in their early days, was turned down, although "it would

have taken only a phone call" from Liberal headquarters to get the special government permission needed. So just standard overhead microphones were used.



MAN ON A TIGHTROPE: Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent (seated), fighting for his political life in the 1957 election, checks his speech in preparation for one of the Liberal party's TV campaign spots. Standing from left are Harry Lake csc, camera assistant; campaign manager Gordon Atkinson; producer/director Syd Banks; and the late Hans Klostermann, assistant director. Note the overhead microphone and the camera, without TelePrompter.

No Make-up, Please

"We had a make-up lady there," Spiess continued, "but most of the ministers, including St. Laurent *very vehemently*, refused to use any make-up. It was at the time when the film material was very contrasty and the transfer to telecine to show it on television did not help matters."

Banks, still active in film production in Toronto, said St. Laurent was "a wonderful looking gentleman, certainly photogenic in normal terms, but this was television."

"I said to him, 'By the way, sir, the make-up room is just down the hall.'"

"I beg your pardon? What make-up?"

"Just a touchup. You may be perspiring a little bit. That's all."

"Not for me!"

"So we started shooting. Anyway, we knew. Fritz knew, I knew, the crew knew. So St. Laurent comes on the air—he looked 190 years old. He looked tired, worn out, all the things we knew. This is the man that's going to lead Canada?"

"Then Diefenbaker comes on," in a live broadcast right afterward. "Now Diefenbaker was not a young man. But in comparison, he looked like a 20 year old—sprightly, alert, with a sense of humour, a twinkle in his eye. I felt badly, because this was my product against somebody else's product."

"Another problem," Spiess added, "was that while a few members appreciat-

ed using a TelePrompter, which was then in its early stages, St. Laurent refused. The result was that St. Laurent was reading from a script and he sort of looked up and over his glasses and would say, 'We like to think that we have done a good job . . .,' and he looked like an old man.

"Plus there was very little eye contact to the camera and to the audience, and what he and other people—including cabinet minister Jack Pickersgill who was the man behind the scene approving what tie the prime minister should wear—did not realize was that behind that camera there were a couple of million people in Canada who had television watching what was being said."

Carl Heydeman, in notes faxed from his California home, said the TelePrompter was a vital tool in the task of completing an efficient production schedule in the shortest possible time. Special arrangements were made for St. Laurent "to become familiar with the 'feel' of live television. Once a week prior to the beginning of the campaign, a live television camera was set up in the prime minister's office . . . and for a short time a familiarizing session was held with the prime minister under the careful direction of his television advisers.

"I will always remember the honesty that became so apparent during these production sessions. Anything that was not 'him' he would reject, not always for his or his party's benefit."

"Sometimes," Spiess recollected, "St. Laurent didn't give us more than an hour and a quarter, which left hardly any time for English and French versions and any rehearsals. So the assistant, Harry Lake, had to change magazines even more quickly than usual because the 400-foot magazines would not run for the full length of the speech.

'Team Looks Too Old'

"After the first showings of St. Laurent and other people like C.D. Howe, who was also getting older, a Young Liberal group from out West sent a message to Ottawa saying, 'The team looks too old.'" After the first broadcast, St.

Laurent phoned Banks "and apologized for having refused make-up."

Banks remembered: "Later that night, or early the next morning, my phone rang and it was the prime minister. He said, 'Do you have time for me today? I'd like to



THE HOT SEAT: Producer/director Syd Banks goes over last-minute details with prominent Liberal minister Paul Martin Sr., while cameraman Fritz Spiess csc takes a light reading. Banks said the bright lights hurt Martin's sensitive eyes, but he was always patient and agreeable.



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reshoot everything we did, and you can have all the time you wish. And by the way, make sure you have the make-up lady there.' I told him we would make the arrangements, but we didn't do it. It was too late, the damage had been done."

Spiess also recalled that film coverage of St. Laurent's whistle stops was "not even shot on sync-sound cameras; they were just pictures which later on somebody did a commentary for. They just did not realize

that wasn't selling their message. You couldn't even hear him speak."

As Banks described, the Tory TV campaign was distinctly different. Spiess said that when he first saw Diefenbaker on television, he thought, "My God, this is powerful."

He said Diefenbaker was trained to project himself by Joel Aldred, the top commercial announcer in North America. "He trained Diefenbaker to get up from his

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desk and walk around; it was very dynamic, with constant eye contact because they were using TelePrompters. This is when the government people were getting worried. They had been very high in early pre-election polls, with all the indications that they would be re-elected."

The Liberals still had the big names of Lester Pearson and C.D. Howe, who ultimately lost his seat in the 1957 vote, and "I found them very honest and almost innocent like children, but not exploiting the possibilities of what could be done. They were simply sitting behind a desk, it was always the same desk, the same background.

"We were disappointed that we could not apply our craft and our knowledge, and, of course, it was disappointing to find out that those limitations led to a large extent to the defeat of the Liberal government. But we could obviously see, when we had to film children listening to the prime minister's speech, that he was wasting his time and did not understand the power of the medium."

What if, Spiess mused with a smile, St. Laurent had used make-up and the TelePrompter? Perhaps Diefenbaker would

not have been elected and perhaps the Avro Arrow would not have been scrapped. And perhaps Spiess's footage of the world-beating, supersonic warplane, just before the project was killed in 1959, might not have been the last.

But that's another story.

Footnotes:

—Spiess pointed out that Spence Caldwell did not get the second TV station in Toronto. Instead, Joel Aldred and John Bassett founded CFTO, "with the slogan 'TV as it ought to be.'" Caldwell, although smarting over his rejection, went on to establish the CTV television network "and in fact CFTO became the flagship of CTV."

—"Diefenbaker refused to wear make-up, too," reminisced M. Jackson-Samuels csc, who shot both the Chief and St. Laurent in 35mm black and white for the theatrical *News of the Day* newsreels for Universal. "He thought it wasn't manly."

—Richard Nixon declined make-up for the televised 1960 presidential debates with tanned, handsome John F. Kennedy, noted the recent CBC mini-series *Dawn of the Eye*. ●



READY WHEN YOU ARE, J.W.: Carl Heydeman monitors the then-new TelePrompter as Liberal kingpin J.W. (Jack) Pickersgill warms up for a TV pitch during the 1957 election campaign. Pickersgill, key cabinet minister and his party's TV adviser, was one of the few ministers to appreciate the TelePrompter.