

Interview: Ken Novakowski (KN)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
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Transcription: Pete Smith

RM [00:00:06] Alright, here we go. This is a big thrill for me. One of my heroes, Ken Novakowski, is with us. Without whom the BC Labour Heritage Centre probably wouldn't exist. So Ken, what do you think of me? (laughter) Sorry, sorry, we can cut that out. Alright, you've had an amazing life and you've given so much to public service, but let's go right back to the beginning, which we like to do. Tell us about your origins. Where were you born and all that sort of stuff. What was it like growing up?

KN [00:00:36] Well, I was born in 1944 into a family of ten. I was the eighth child. Of ten, yes. Both by the same mother and father. And we lived in this town of Mundare, which was a small farming—.

RM [00:00:56] Spell that?

KN [00:00:58] M-U-N-D-A-R-E —a small farming community that was 75 kilometers directly east of Edmonton. And my dad was a garage owner. He owned the Dodge Chrysler dealership and the Esso station and the Oliver Farm Machinery. And he was a socialist and his grandfather and his father before him. So I always considered myself a third generation socialist. So as I was growing up, I knew that he had been arrested at one point in his life and I found out about that. It was in the hunger march in 1932. He was one of the organizers and he actually went to trial and was acquitted by a jury of his peers. So it was an interesting story there. And then I also know that he, even though he wasn't a farmer, he was very sympathetic to the farmers who were trying to deal with the big banks and the big grain companies and so forth. And so there was a grain strike that was actually initiated in Mundare in November of 19—.

RM [00:02:10] A grain strike?

KN [00:02:10] A grain-strike by the farmers in November of 1934. And it started in Mundare and my dad had something to do with that. Even though he wasn't a farmer, he was very supportive as a businessman, a local businessman and stuff like that. It spread to many communities in that part of the province and was significant.

RM [00:02:34] They were refusing to sell their grain because they wanted a better price?

KN [00:02:36] That's exactly what they were doing and they were blocking the highway to prevent other farmers from taking their grain in and stuff like that. They would actually dump their grain if they refused to turn around and go back. It was a very militant strike and it's part of BC's, Alberta's labour history rather. So I grew up with that knowledge and knowing that, and of course I talked to my dad a lot. He was a great influence on me in terms of—

RM [00:03:02] He would talk about those old days.

KN [00:03:03] Oh yeah, and he would talk about politics of the day too, and it was always interesting to get any information I wanted from him. When I was a student in current

affairs, the teachers often asked me what was going on because I knew my current affairs so well, and I got a lot of that from my dad.

RM [00:03:24] Always one in every class.

KN [00:03:26] I know.

RM [00:03:27] What about your mom? Was she a part of it all too?

KN [00:03:29] She was, she was. They belonged to the Farmer Labour Temple in the community, the Ukrainian Farmer Labour temple. It was a Ukrainian community, people of Ukrainian descent. And participated in the musicals and so forth. But she raised ten kids and I always thought she was— Every time I think of bread and roses—

RM [00:03:56] You think of your mom.

KN [00:04:00] Yeah. Because she worked so hard.

RM [00:04:02] Yeah, yeah. So what was it like also growing up in a family with ten kids? I mean, the older kids probably already gone by the time you came along?

KN [00:04:09] Some of them, and it was—as I grew up, as I grow older into my youth, they were more like aunts and uncles, because they would come to visit and so forth. They always came to see mum, of course, but I got to know them all very well. It was quite an exciting family to grow up in, in a lot of ways.

RM [00:04:35] So just one other question about your dad. So he was a socialist and yet he was a small businessman. He ran, he ran, he was a boss. I mean, did that cause conflict within him or?

KN [00:04:48] I'd, none that he ever mentioned.

RM [00:04:50] Was he good at it?

KN [00:04:51] Oh, he was good at it. He had one employee that, mechanic that he hired, and he paid him a good wage, as far as I'm concerned, and treated him well, and that was never an issue. It was very interesting because my dad was also an atheist. Our family, we grew up as atheists in a very, very Catholic community. And so there were some hard things about that growing up, going to school and stuff like that. But it took me a while to accept the atheism because all of my friends were Catholics and so forth. But I eventually became very comfortable with it. I remember being in grade four, and I wanted to take, and I did take catechism. My dad didn't know I did. It was a class that in previous years—

RM [00:05:43] You wanted to fit in.

RM [00:05:44] —when the priest came to teach catechism, I left, but I wanted to find out what it was all about. At the end of the year, the priest was praising me because I was such a good student, and I had the gall to tell him I didn't believe in God. And he was shocked.

RM [00:06:01] The church lost the prospective priest! Did you bring your views to school?

KN [00:06:10] In my later years. Yeah, I did I did.

RM [00:06:14] Are you talking about high school?

KN [00:06:16] Yeah, high school. I shaped my views basically when I was 12 years old. I read a book called 'The Scalpel, The Sword', which was the biography of Norman Bethune. It was in my dad's library at the home. A fascinating book by Allan and Gordon. This Canadian, what an incredible guy he was. It really impressed me. And then in the same year, so not to be too enthralled with communism, if you like, Khrushchev had revealed—the Congress in the Soviet Union revealed Stalin's atrocities to the world and it was really eye-opening for me that this had happened and I had, after that point, I had no love for the Soviet Union anymore. It was just that simple.

RM [00:07:13] Which you might have— you were kind of—

KN [00:07:16] Well, I was looking for which way my politics was going, and Bethune, as I said, was a communist, and he impressed me by what he did, and so I was taken by that. But that was offset by what Khrushchev had done at that, and Khrushchev was a Ukrainian.

RM [00:07:35] He was, that's right. I had forgotten that. Farm boy. How did that affect your dad?

KN [00:07:43] I think Dubček affected him more, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, but it did affect him because Stalin was a hero to him because of his role in the Second World War in defeating fascism.

RM [00:07:57] So that was pivotal in sparing you away from communism towards, I guess, social democracy.

KN [00:08:02] And yeah, and what was the final—

RM [00:08:04] Or a milder form of socialist.

KN [00:08:06] What was the final thing there was the CCF [Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation]. There were only two CCF MLAs in Alberta in 1957. And one of them was my teacher.

RM [00:08:17] Really?

KN [00:08:17] Stanley Ruzycki. Yes, and he knew me about my politics, because I was— So he showed me a copy of the Regina Manifesto. I remember it.

KN [00:08:34] Isn't that great?

KN [00:08:35] Yeah.

RM [00:08:35] You read it?

KN [00:08:35] Well, yes, I read it and the eradication of capitalism was in there and that really hit me.

RM [00:08:46] So there you are in the mid-fifties, calling for the eradication of capitalism.

KN [00:08:53] In 1957, I was all for the CCF. And I watched the founding of the NDP [New Democratic Party] on TV. It was actually carried on TV in August of 1961. I was very into it and really, really keen.

RM [00:09:10] And so, okay, you graduated from high school. And you went to university.

RM [00:09:14] I went to the University of Alberta.

RM [00:09:16] What'd you take there?

KN [00:09:18] Actually I started off, we talk about older brothers. My oldest brother was a biologist. He was with Canadian Wildlife Service. Worked in, at that time he was stationed in Fort Smith. Eventually he went to Ottawa as the chief homologist for the Canadian Wildlife Service. He had a PhD. He was very well educated and stuff like that and he had a lot of influence on me because I wanted to take something about politics, naturally. But he said, you won't get a job. You have to think science. And so my first year was all science. I had four lab courses. And I did OK, but I didn't really like it. And so I continued to take science the next year, thinking that I might go into medicine and do what Bethune did and go and fight with the revolutionaries of South America. But that was a dream. But instead, I took an ethics, a senior philosophy course in ethics from Tony Mardiros and a senior political science course on international politics from Neville Linton and changed my life.

RM [00:10:32] They had that influence on you.

KN [00:10:35] Both of them. I mean, Mardiros became a friend and a very well-known person in philosophy. And I switched to political science and philosophy, and that's what I got my BA [Bachelor Of Arts] in.

RM [00:10:54] And did you plunge into politics on campus?

KN [00:10:57] Not right away, as I might have. Once I switched to political science and philosophy, I met a lot of other kids who thought like me, who were in the NDY [New Democratic Youth]. I got signed up in 1965, and believe it or not, I was convinced to run for the president of the Alberta Young New Democrats in October of that year and I defeated the incumbent by one vote.

RM [00:11:29] Really? Was it like one vote, like eight to four, eight to seven or like 120?

KN [00:11:33] No, 16 to 15. But the convention was in Calgary and that was his home turf.

RM [00:11:41] So did you have a platform? Vote for Novakowski and this will happen?

KN [00:11:47] I did, yeah.

RM [00:11:49] Legalize pot?

KN [00:11:50] Nothing like that. I was never into pot. Believe it or not, I wasn't into drugs at all.

RM [00:11:56] So there you are and so you had that aspiration to lead.

KN [00:12:01] No, I didn't. I was really talked into it. I mean, I didn't offer myself. Other people talked me into it.

RM [00:12:11] So what was that like being a leader of the Alberta Young New Democrats?

KN [00:12:14] Well, it was quite exciting. I took to it right away, of course. I didn't know how much I would like politics or being— but I ended up really, really getting into it. And I grew the Young New Democrats. We formed new clubs in Red Deer and Lethbridge and Grand Prairie and outside of Edmonton and Calgary. It was something to do. So I got involved in the party, too. I had a seat on the party executive, which was fine. A year later, I ran for one of the general vice presidents of the party at top of the poll. So clearly, I had some political understanding of what was going on. And I was always on the left of the party and recognized as such. And there were a lot of old CCFers who really liked me and stuff like that, as well as young people, the youth movement. I might say the use of movement grew, it really grew.

RM [00:13:17] It's the 60s, eh?

KN [00:13:18] Yeah, exactly. It was a time for that. We got active in the anti-war movement, anti-Vietnam War movement. In Edmonton we had picket lines supporting the Packinghouse Workers Union when they went on strike, NDY picket lines.

KN [00:13:37] Was that your first experience with a union?

KN [00:13:39] I mean, I had experience with unions in the NDP, but it was my first experience, if you like, in a support position with the union, yes. And when I was federal president of the Young New Democrats, we launched a Canada-wide NDY support pickets for the postal workers when they went out on their first strike in '68.

RM [00:14:09] Is that Joe Davison? Is that the guy that said 'to hell with the public?' Sorry, I'm off-topic.

KN [00:14:15] Yeah, so anyway it—

RM [00:14:17] You just slipped that in Ken, but somehow you became president of the Canadian arm or whatever it is of the Young New Democrats. Talk about that.

KN [00:14:26] That was even more disarming for me. I went to the convention. It was the first convention I went to. We had a delegation.

RM [00:14:36] Where was it?

KN [00:14:37] In Toronto at the Royal York. And here, there were more than 100 delegates. But probably a couple hundred people at the convention, and it preceded the party convention. And I was drafted while I was there, by people to run. And so I did, and I ran again on the left platform. And there were two other candidates, a clear right-wing candidate who we saw, the right-winger candidate who simply thought that the youth was there to help people get elected, in the party elected, and that's all they were to do. They didn't have a separate role, whereas we wanted to build a youth movement on issues that were important to youth and stuff like that. And then there was the so-called moderate, Stephen Langdon, from the University of Toronto, who had—

RM [00:15:31] I know Stephen Langdon. [unclear] student president.

KN [00:15:31] That's right. I was going to say he had a name because of that.

RM [00:15:38] He was a very good speaker.

KN [00:15:39] I got to know him a lot better later and I got to like him a lot, but in this case he said he could bring the both sides together. He was third on the first ballot, so he dropped out and I got elected on the second ballot.

RM [00:15:55] So you beat Stephen Langdon, who was student council president at U of T, and a really successful politician.

KN [00:16:02] Well, I guess I might have been one too.

RM [00:16:04] That was the point I was making. So obviously you could give a speech and you could address people. I mean, where did that come from?

KN [00:16:12] I don't know. I guess, if I was to say anything, my father was a good speaker. English was his second language. He's a terrific speaker in Ukrainian. Wonderful speaker. He could get audiences going. Not so much in English, but so who knows.

RM [00:16:31] And I gathered, was there a piece about you in the Globe and Mail?

KN [00:16:34] Oh yeah, well that was the thing here. I was the kid from Mundare. I always saw myself as the kid from Mundare. Even in Edmonton, I was going to university, all these students from all the university, from all of the big high schools in Edmonton who had labs in their schools and everything. Here I come, kid from Mundare. And it was the same thing in Toronto, the kid for Mundare, and yet there was a headline in the Globe and Mail, 'Democratic Youth Revolts, Moves Left.' The lede story, electing 23-year-old Ken Novakowski, blah, blah. On the front page of the Globe. This is unbelievable.

RM [00:17:08] Did you cut it out?

KN [00:17:11] I still have it.

RM [00:17:12] That's great.

KN [00:17:12] Yeah, yeah, and the highlight for me was, I should say that just, this is an add on, but at the party convention, I got to speak to the party convention and I said 'we shouldn't forget that nationalization is still an instrument that we should be able to use, use effectively.' I'm not talking about wide scale nationalization at that time, but the selective nationalization because we seemed to be running away from it. Anyway, got a lot of applause. But the highlight was after the convention was over, I got asked by Tommy Douglas to go on a national television program with him, CBC National, a live program on the Vietnam War. And so yeah, that was really incredible. Tommy Douglas, wow. Of course, I got to know him really well over the next two years as the youth president.

RM [00:18:09] That was a two-year term?

KN [00:18:11] Yeah, two-year term.

RM [00:18:11] So talk about Tommy Douglas. What were your impressions of him?

KN [00:18:14] Well, he was very, very easy to talk to at a personal level and to share thoughts with and ideas and stuff. And he talked about, I can remember on a number of occasions talking about his family and Shirley, his daughter, and married to Donald Sutherland, all of that. And it was always neat. And that continued, when I ran federally in Burnaby, Richmond, Delta. Douglas was no longer leader, but he agreed to come and speak in my campaign. The only campaign he spoke in, outside of his own riding of Nanaimo at the time.

RM [00:18:55] So he saw something in you.

KN [00:18:56] Yeah, and when I said I wasn't running again, he wrote me a letter, which I still have, saying I should reconsider and thinks I should run again—because I came very close to winning.

RM [00:19:06] And there are some though that consider Douglas a bit on the right wing of the party.

KN [00:19:11] We never did. David Lewis to us represented the right wing, and Tommy Douglas was more in the center. Even on the left, if you look back at his history, and in terms of Saskatchewan, a lot of his early history is not well known, but he was really, the Estevan workers strike, he supported that and all kinds of things that he did.

RM [00:19:37] He really spoke out forcefully against the Vietnam War.

KN [00:19:41] And that was why he wanted me there, because the Vietnam War was a big issue at our convention. It also made news in the Globe and Mail, and so there it was.

KN [00:19:52] And the NDP, to its credit, voted against the War Measures Act.

KN [00:19:56] That's correct.

RM [00:19:56] It really hurt them politically.

KN [00:19:57] I know, but I just thought they were so, so courageous to stand up to that, yeah.

KN [00:20:04] So, anything, any highlights of your two-year term as president of the Young New Democrats?

KN [00:20:09] Well, again, the highlights would be the anti-war movement we supported across the country. We were very vocal, very much a part of it. The support for the postal workers. But we also grew the federal NDP. We had new sections, a new section in Manitoba, and grew the membership across the county. We were trying to attract young people into activism. A lot of them were rejecting political parties as a way to go, and we tried to counter that by offering ideas.

RM [00:20:53] It's the time of the new left, right?

KN [00:20:54] It was, very much so.

RM [00:20:55] And the NDP wasn't really part of the new left.

KN [00:20:57] That's right. They were looked upon as just another party, and we tried to tell them, no, that wasn't the case, and that was part of our mission. And we published a magazine, a newspaper, rather, that we circulated wide and far, called Confrontations, if you can imagine [laughter]. Yes.

RM [00:21:22] Against the old guard. I guess there was some resentment probably about you guys in the party.

KN [00:21:27] There was, there was, but I have to say this, that because we worked so hard and we were so successful in growing the youth movement, that I can—one of the highlights, I can remember, because I was also on the party council, I had to report at every party council meeting on the youth. And I can remember giving this report in 1968. And Terry Greer, who might have been secretary of the Ontario NDP or whatever, he was a big, strong person in the NDP in Ontario at the time, stood up and just glowingly talked about us. Because I saw him as the right, right? Glowingly talked us about us and how amazing this was, what we were able to do, and stuff like that. And that was a highlight for me.

RM [00:22:14] It's too bad you grew old and couldn't stay with the Young New Democrats.

KN [00:22:19] Well, in a way.

RM [00:22:20] Anyway, and so then at a certain point the Waffle came along, so talk about the Waffle.

KN [00:22:25] And there's a bit of a transition there because the NDY, one of our buttons was 'For an Independent Socialist Canada.' And that became the slogan of the Waffle. That's really what they—

RM [00:22:40] Is that your slogan?

KN [00:22:41] Not necessarily. I don't know where it might have come from. It might have been Victor Rabinovitch. It might've been, who was our national secretary. It might be, I don't know where, but it was a great slogan. And the Waffle picked it up. And the Waffle was a broad movement within the NDP for the NDP, again, to move left. To take on the issue of American ownership of our industries and so forth as a very serious threat to our independence. And so I became involved in that after I finished my term as NDY president and became one of the chairpersons of the national caucus, actually, and chaired caucus meetings, chaired conferences, and stuff like that. For some reason or another, I was able to handle the chair well.

RM [00:23:36] For some reason anyway.

KN [00:23:40] What really was a highlight for me was the 1971 leadership convention in Ottawa, where Jim Laxer was running as one of five very credible candidates.

RM [00:23:54] He was the Waffle candidate.

RM [00:23:55] He was the Waffle candidate and I was chair of the floor committee as well, in terms of trying to make sure that our positions and our issues were put on the floor

effectively and getting people on the mics to speak and stuff like that. And we did very well. I mean, Laxer got 40% of the vote. He was on the fourth ballot with Lewis.

RM [00:24:18] Lewis was really if I can, was kind of an enemy, right?

KN [00:24:23] Well, he was—and again, if you look at his roots, and his earlier time in the party, and I read 'Make This Our Canada,' a book that he wrote with Frank Scott back in the '40s, and it was good. We really had more left-wing. For some reason or another, he drifted more to the right in the Party, in my view. Although, I did have some conversations with him when I was a candidate in '72 because he was leader then and he came and spent some time in my riding because it was a winnable riding.

RM [00:25:01] Well, that was a great campaign for the NDP.

KN [00:25:03] It was, that was the corporate welfare bombs and that was really populist and very good and it made a difference.

RM [00:25:13] Well, let me ask you then about the Waffle, though, again. So David Lewis was obviously anti-Waffle and so on. And I'm wondering if one of the reasons that he was perceived as the right or maybe was the right is that he spent a lot of time with the Steelworkers Union and the unions. And those unions were considered on the right of the NDP. So how did you cope with that? I mean that there's the unions, you support the unions and yet they're opposing your movement.

KN [00:25:46] Yes, that was, that's true. That's a really important— And we tried, we tried to work with a lot of those unions. And some of them we got onside and so forth, but you're right, the majority of the unions did not come onside, and that was significant. And my experience working with unions was very limited. It was always from the outside, never from the inside, up until that point in time. But we had some support.

RM [00:26:19] Did that colour your view of unions?

KN [00:26:24] Not in, I was always pro-union. For example, in 1974, when the, in 1976, when there was a one-day, October 14th, 1976, when the one-day strike against wage controls by the CLC. In my district, I think I was the only teacher who took the day off and went on, and went on that demonstrations and so forth in Vancouver. So yeah, I was always very pro-union. I guess my dad drilled that into me and no matter what, if there was a strike or anything like that, I was going to be sympathetic to the workers on strike.

RM [00:27:13] I shouldn't really add this, but like David Lewis was known as basically a commie killer in the raids in Sudbury against the Communist unions.

KN [00:27:23] Mm-hmm.

RM [00:27:24] Mine Mill and Smelter Workers and other unions and was really a heavy on support in support of the Steelworkers. So that probably coloured too his anti-leftism that the Waffle might have represented.

KN [00:27:38] Well, that's interesting because in fact, Stephen Lewis, who was the leader of the Ontario Party at the time, his son was instrumental in getting rid of the Waffle. And Stephen Lewis was an interesting guy because I think he later came on to be someone who I felt could have been Canada's greatest Prime Minister that never was.

RM [00:28:05] What was that like when they turned on the Waffle and turned their heavy guns on you successfully?

KN [00:28:12] It was mostly in Ontario that that happened. I was in BC, and when I ran, I actually ran after that had happened. And I was a known Waffler. I mean, I even, I got campaign donations from across the country from Wafflers. And—Gave rise to one of the stupidest slogans I ever ran on. Because I had these signs all over the place and part of my riding was Tsawwassen, which is right next to Point Roberts, so forth. And now, of course, remember my name's Novakowski, right?

RM [00:28:50] I do remember that.

KN [00:28:51] So we had the sign up saying 'End Foreign Domination: Vote Novakowski.'

RM [00:28:57] I know, that's the best. [laughter]

KN [00:28:59] Yeah, it just, it didn't—it's amazing. It didn't strike us then, that that was problematic. But when I reflected upon it afterwards, I thought, what were we doing? Like, this was ridiculous.

RM [00:29:13] What was your reaction when the NDP turned its guns on the Waffle something you'd thrown your heart and soul into?

KN [00:29:19] Yeah, I was very, very upset with the NDP for doing that, very upset. Yeah, that was there's no question about it. It was hard to take. And particularly when you think in BC, Barrett had signed the Manifesto, most of the ministers, cabinet ministers in BC had signed the Manifesto. It was a profound document. I think that a lot of people wanted the NDP to be the progressive party it was supposed to be. And not this continued move to being another centrist party. And so I think we missed a moment there in terms of what happened, and I think historically an important one.

RM [00:30:05] And you mentioned the Waffle Manifesto, which was big. That was not quite the Regina Manifesto, but it was quite a significant document that suggested the NDP had to go to the left and Canada should go to left. It was quite radical.

KN [00:30:18] It was, it was, but again this was at a time when there were a lot of people thinking that way and wanting to go there and a lot of people who were disaffected by politics and it was our opportunity to capture them and bring them along with us to make change.

RM [00:30:36] Looking back on that, was the NDP right in a way? Because you were a party within a party, that was the argument against you, and they couldn't tolerate that.

KN [00:30:47] Well, we were a caucus within the party. And I think, yeah, we probably had a higher level of functioning structure and so forth, and we spoke publicly. That was the thing I think that was hardest to accept, and I can understand that. It's a democratic process, and if this is what the party is saying, it represents the majority of the party. Yeah, it was a difficult thing to do. I still think overall, I think probably if Stephen Lewis is reflecting on his life, he probably says maybe we should have moved left then because of where we are now.

RM [00:31:31] Alright, so that was your involvement in the NDP, and you ran as a candidate, and we can get to that in a sec, but you ended up, of all places, in BC, in Langley. You became a teacher. So where did that come from, that you wanted to be a teacher? Because you have all this political involvement, I guess you had to get a job, but still.

KN [00:31:52] Well, when I finished my BA. I decided I did need to get a job. I mean, I had a job with the Canada Land Inventory at the time, which was quite an exciting job, but it wasn't something I don't think I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. Canada Land Inventory was land assessment of the whole country, and there were different aspects to it: agriculture, forestry. And I was involved in the outdoor recreation study in Alberta. So the potential the land has for supporting outdoor recreational activities. That was well paid and so forth, and I did some significant planning reports for the Parks Planning Branch of the Alberta government. But one of the reports I spent a year working on, not by myself, but I was the lead on it, and after we completed the report, it came back stamped confidential. I said, well, why is that? Because they don't want it circulated. They don't circulate in the communities that I had written about.

RM [00:33:11] Is this a provincial government report?

KN [00:33:14] Yeah, Social Credit government. And I realized then, not that I hadn't realized earlier, but it was significant to me that you had to be in politics. You had to change this, and it couldn't happen. This was a very progressive report that would affect a lot of communities in a positive way, and it was being kept from them. That was a significant factor. But I realized if I wanted to have the freedom to do what I wanted do and so forth, I needed a job that gave me that opportunity and I decided to become a teacher.

RM [00:33:59] And where did you get your teaching training?

KN [00:34:01] I got it at the University of Alberta. I took it part-time while I was working for the Canada Land Inventory to finish my BEd. And here's the thing, when I ended up doing my teacher practicums both at Harry Ainlay and Victoria Composite. Big schools in Edmonton. I realized I loved teaching. Just loved it. It was just a real passion.

RM [00:34:29] You're emotional about it yet. Imparting knowledge to kids. Yeah and you of course you were good at it

KN [00:34:38] I liked it, and that made a difference.

RM [00:34:41] What did you like about it?

KN [00:34:43] Well, it was, the contact with—I mean, these were high schools, it's a high school. I was secondary, secondary social studies. And so they were more mature, I'm not sure I could feel the same about younger children, but I loved children, generally, and so, maybe so. But you just, it was a challenge to get them to be inquisitive, to make them, and eventually to really promote their critical thinking and their capacity to look at the world in the way I did.

RM [00:35:19] Molding them.

KN [00:35:21] Not so much molding them, but giving them the tools to shape their own world.

RM [00:35:28] And how did you end up though in Langley?

KN [00:35:30] Well, this is another story. When I was in Edmonton, of course, we were involved in recruiting high school students to the Young New Democrats. So we would stand outside the schools, distributing Confrontations and other leaflets to these students to try and form—

RM [00:35:50] No bubble zone then?

KN [00:35:52] —trying to form NDY clubs in the high schools. And the superintendent of schools came out in the media attacking us and saying no. And strangely, really strangely, the Edmonton Journal wrote an editorial supporting us. No, students should have politics. They should be aware of it. They're gonna be voters. They need to know.

RM [00:36:12] Remember what year this was?

KN [00:36:13] Yeah, well this was '69 probably. I still have the editorial. Leif Stolle, who was a New Democrat and a teacher, and he was actually the social studies coordinator for the city of Edmonton, and I knew him basically from the anti-war movement because I was also the chair of the president of the Edmonton Committee to End the War in Vietnam. And he approached me and called me aside and he said, 'Ken, I know you've applied for a job in Edmonton.' That's really where I wanted to teach. I loved Edmonton. I knew people there. It was a great city. And he said, 'You won't teach in Edmonton. The superintendent will never hire you.' I told the superintendent that I was, he said 'You were my first choice to hire for social studies because of your qualifications and stuff.' And he didn't want to hire me. And it was because of that. Because of the NDY clubs. Because I made him look bad in the media, egg on his face. So I had a brother in Richmond and a sister in Vancouver and I liked the West Coast, came out here at spring break and applied to five or six districts and Langley phoned me, gave me the job. That was it.

RM [00:37:42] Did they know about your background?

KN [00:37:48] No. I didn't try and hide it. I mean, it was public.

RM [00:37:51] And do you remember your first day on the job and teaching and you're a teacher at last?

KN [00:37:57] Yeah, It was, it was very, and it was very exciting. It was great.

RM [00:38:02] It's actually not rural, but I mean, you're not in downtown Vancouver, you are not in Vancouver.

KN [00:38:07] No, not in Vancouver. I got to like it. A lot of the kids were bussed in at that time from the surrounding farming areas, which was something I was used to in Mundare. There were a huge number of school busses bringing kids from farms all around.

RM [00:38:30] They did that in Newmarket too. Farm kids.

KN [00:38:31] Yeah. Farm kids. Townies and the farm kids, yeah, yeah. And that was the case there. But it was good.

RM [00:38:42] Did you have a family then?

KN [00:38:48] Yes. I had a two-year-old daughter and eventually in 1972 got another daughter, Krista, yeah.

RM [00:39:01] So you were a new teacher there. You liked it. And then you ran for the NDP there. As a new teacher, wasn't that a little much?

KN [00:39:10] Yes it was. I ran for the NDP nomination in Burnaby-Richmond-Delta. My brother lived in Richmond. He was a councilor on the municipal council. So I got involved in the NDP there because Mark Rose, who was a friend of mine, was the MP in Fraser Valley West at the time. And I liked him, I supported him. A really good guy. And so I ran in Burnaby-Richmond-Delta. Got the nomination and so forth.

KN [00:39:50] But I had an experience in my first year teaching that was quite disarming because I got along very well with my staff at the school. The principal loved me, you know he was very supportive. Even though I made it clear I was going to be running for this nomination and so forth. And then Roger Winter, who is the guy that hired me, who by the way, is Connie Jervis's husband. Connie Jervis, the teacher that historically was significant in the evolution of bargaining rights for teachers. Anyway, Roger was the director of instruction, and he was going to come to my classroom as he had come to all classrooms because on our first year teaching, we were on probation. And he was gonna visit me. And I was told by other teachers on the staff, that Roger really likes stuff on the walls in your classroom. I didn't have anything on the wall. So my wife and I, Marina and I, worked tirelessly on putting together this huge collage of front covers from the Marshall Cavendish History of the 20th Century, which was a British magazine that I used to get because I loved history. And so just a collage of all these front covers. I had that on the wall at the back of the room. And so after Roger visited my classroom, I get this report from him, and he says a few things here and there, but he says 'This artwork of yours at the back of the room,' he said, 'I really had difficulty with it because it seemed to be making the Western powers look really bad and glorifying the Russian Revolution.' Holy, where did this come from? What's this all about? And it's tantamount to indoctrination. There's a problem here.

KN [00:42:09] So I ran into Mark Rose, in downtown Langley, and he says; 'Why don't you and Marina come over for dinner? Isabelle and I would love to have you over.' And so, sure. He lived in rural Langley, I lived in rural Langley. Went over there for dinner. And he said; 'Roger Winter is a good friend of mine.' He said 'I've known him for a long time and he's a good New Democrat too.' I said, 'oh.' And he said 'And I ran into Roger the other day in town and he said Mark, you wouldn't believe this. I made a really, really big mistake.' Oh yeah, what's that? And he says; 'Well, I hired a subversive.' A subversive that was the word he used, subversive. And Mark looked at me and he said; 'Would you be that subversive, Ken?' I said; 'Yeah, I think I am.' I mean, I dotted all the I's and figured it out. Yes, that was what he had. Turns out that the RCMP had paid him a visit and said that I was a subversive. Of course, anybody to the left of—

RM [00:43:25] But also your dad's background.

KN [00:43:27] Well, that's another factor, but in terms of my background, the only party I ever belonged to was the NDP.

RM [00:43:40] So what happened?

KN [00:43:42] So Mark talked to Roger. Next time I got a report from Roger, it was glowing.

RM [00:43:49] But that was close.

RM [00:43:50] That was close. If it hadn't been for that, I might have ended up being out of teaching and my life would have taken a big different turn.

RM [00:43:57] It's hard to imagine you not teaching, somehow. Anyway, but it's still, that was a big step for a teacher, I think, anyway. To run for the NDP and to be political because you're supposed to be objective in the classroom. Was that a problem? Were you attacked?

KN [00:44:15] No, it was fine. Well, no, I wasn't attacked on that occasion, maybe because I wasn't running in my own community, but no.

RM [00:44:23] Because people wanted to end foreign domination and vote for Novakowski.

KN [00:44:26] An awful lot of people did. 18,000 people wanted to.

RM [00:44:32] You didn't win though.

KN [00:44:32] No.

RM [00:44:32] What was it like campaigning? Did you like campaigning?

KN [00:44:35] I loved it. Yeah, what I found also, that I had an incredible capacity to get media attention and to issue press releases that they printed in full and stuff like that. I think I was winning the campaign until the last week when there was a shift nationally towards Stanfield, and there's nothing I could do about that. The conservative beat me, and so, just narrowly.

RM [00:45:08] Disappointment.

KN [00:45:10] Yeah, I was disappointed, but when I reflected back on it, I'm not sure, because I ended up having such an incredible life otherwise that I'm not sure about going to Ottawa all the time.

RM [00:45:23] Well, you're like me, Ken, where there's so much to cover in your life. I'm being immodest when I say that about myself. But let's move on to this really quite interesting, it was the Barrett government, as you pointed out. And so things had been changing in education, although not changing enough under Eileen Daly, who was, if I may say so, a disappointment as Education Minister, also a teacher, you probably knew her. But you ended up getting a, you left teaching, you got a leave of absence and ended up working for the government in the Research and Development Department of the Ministry of Education. So tell us about that and then what happened?

KN [00:46:05] Oh wow, yeah, well Eileen, I think she wanted to do the right things and she brought in this guy, John Bremer from the States who was a progressive educator and she gave him a lot of authority to make, to do things and stuff like that. I actually did some work

for John Bremer. I was hired to, over the summer when I was teaching, to work with the student task force. Bremer just—I guess things just never—

RM [00:46:49] Never worked.

KN [00:46:49] Never worked. And he was actually, Barrett actually fired him on TV.

RM [00:46:53] On the Jack Wasserman show.

KN [00:46:55] It was very, very embarrassing.

RM [00:46:57] He called him a bit of a flop.

KN [00:46:58] Exactly. So their next attempt, the government's next attempt because there were really no changes in the Ministry of Education except for the deputy ministers. The deputy minister was picked by Eileen and they decided they would structure this Research and Development Division to sort of be a catalyst for educational change. And I was encouraged by my friend Jim McFarland, who was the president of the BCTF at the time, to apply for the job, one of the jobs. And I did. I applied for a job that was supposed to have the area of authority and responsibility. And it was a civil service appointment. It wasn't a political appointment. I had to win a civil-service competition, and I did! Because of my previous civil service experience in Alberta, I think, I had a lot to do with that, and then my education experience and so forth. And so I got the job, and along with, there were four others who won different positions in the civil service competition, and there were a couple of people that Eileen actually hired on contract. So there were seven of us plus the director, which had hired before, that's Stanley Knight.

KN [00:48:29] And we gelled, we formed into a real group of what you would call typically in the bureaucracy of Young Turks. And we were all for promoting all kinds of changes, and we were very conscious of the fact that most of us, or I think if not all of us were NDP supporters. Coincidentally, I guess that's what attracted people. People like us were attracted to apply. So we began to do things. And we ran headlong into the bureaucracy that was in the ministry. All the directors, they all circled their wagons against us and made it very difficult for us to do anything. I guess the Deputy Minister had talked to Stanley Knight who was our director and trying to get us to move in a different direction. And I guess we could have and just sort of given up any hope for change. That's what we would have had to do in our view because that's what they were resisting. They were resisting the changes that we were trying to advocate and advance and do research on. And so Stanley Knight got fired in December because his six months' probation was up before ours because he was hired first. And we were warned that, unless we changed. And then, so we debated and discussed it internally and we just, we felt we needed to carry on and do what we had set out to do and so forth. And so at the end of February, when our six months' probations were up, We were all fired. Again, front page news. This time I wasn't so excited about making front page.

RM [00:50:22] Was that my good friend Paul Knox and the Vancouver Sun that broke that story?

KN [00:50:26] It probably was. It probably was.

RM [00:50:28] He broke the Stanley Knight story.

KN [00:50:30] I have the clip. He probably did, yes. And I can remember Lorne Parton.

KN [00:50:36] Parton with your dollar.

KN [00:50:37] Yeah, he was a columnist, right? Province columnist. And he wrote the story about 'Ken Novakowski had run for the NDP and blah, blah', and I was also involved in it because on the editorial board of the Democrat and stuff like that. 'I wonder how he feels now, getting fired by the NDP.'

RM [00:51:00] Well, let's put the question to you. How did you feel? Here's your government firing you.

KN [00:51:04] That's exactly right. I felt pretty bad. I knew an awful lot of the cabinet ministers, personally, like through my experience in the party, just even though it was a very short experience, it was a fairly intense one for a period of time. And I'd worked full-time over the summer in Harold Steve's campaign, which he won, and I got to know a lot of, a lot, of people. And I just couldn't believe it. And I actually ran into Dave Barrett, whom I knew as well. This was actually before I was fired, but after Stanley was fired. I asked him: 'What's going on? What are you doing?' He was not friendly.

RM [00:51:50] You know Barrett, that's exactly right. He got a bit bitter towards the end about being attacked from the left because he was doing all these things and yet the left was still attacking him.

KN [00:52:01] But we weren't attacking him.

RM [00:52:03] No, no, but yeah, but that was his view. He felt, he felt aggrieved. Of course, he was under all this pressure. He could feel it slipping away and it was a terrible time for him actually, but anyway we can't get into the Barrett government. So that disillusioned you and you went back to teaching?

KN [00:52:20] Yes, and I put my heart and soul into teaching at that point in time. Yes.

RM [00:52:27] And then you had to fight off the back-to-basics guys in Langley, of all places.

KN [00:52:33] That was another thing that—

RM [00:52:34] That bastion of progressivism.

KN [00:52:38] Langley had always been considered part of the Bible Belt, but the way I saw Langley at that time was that it was beginning to change. It was becoming more of a suburban community, more of commuter community, and a lot of people living there were working people, and it was changing. And I thought there were other people in the community that recognized that changing bar too. So we—I basically initiated the formation of a political party called IDEAL: Independent Electors Association of Langley, municipal party because the Langley Voters Association, which was a very conservative party had controlled who sat on council, who sat in the school board, everything else. And so we ran and we actually pulled together—Langley municipality is really Fort Langley, Aldergrove, Brookwood, and so forth, a number of communities that we pulled together. And then there's Langley City. And so we got people involved from all parts of the municipality and the city and ran candidates and we did well. We didn't—30% of the vote

or something like that. And then a couple of elections later, particularly for school board, the opposition to the Back to the Basics, which was a movement that resulted in fundamental schools being established. It was sort of like, you hear a lot of this talk now, let's go back to the basics. We don't want to get kids thinking too much, basically.

RM [00:54:20] Learn your multiplication tables.

KN [00:54:21] Yeah, it was the way we saw it, we don't want them into critical thinking or whatever, we want just the basics, give them the basics. And a very conservative, very conservative movement and they controlled the school board and they were making it hard for teachers and hard for others to function in that system and so we took them on. And after a couple of elections we realized that in the election, I think it was in '78, there was a group, another group that had formed that was opposed to the basics, that was basically more—actually I classified it as having the hobby farm academic sort of community. The well-to-do people who were liberal thinking, and so forth, who had problems with the basic bunch as well. And so we split the vote. And I looked at the votes, I was always analytical, and figured out, well, next time, next year as we were coming towards the election, I pulled together people in my living room from all across the political spectrum. I actually had a Socred there. George Preston, who was a big-L federal Liberal, who had been the mayor before and had been defeated by the Langley Voters Association and sort of, and a guy called Ross Jewell, who was the critical element in this other group. I said, we gotta get together. And we formed a group called Citizens for a Better Government. Beat them all.

RM [00:56:04] Ken, the way you organize it—

KN [00:56:06] In the next election, next election we wiped them all out.

RM [00:56:10] And you're just driven to do these things. Get people together in your living room to fight the good fight and so on. I just have to say, I'm very impressed. Like, where did you get this, how to be a doer?

KN [00:56:28] I think that came from my mom, because my mom was, you had to be a doer to raise ten kids at the time that she did when you didn't have a lot of the conveniences that we have today. And she had, she was a ball of energy. She just went, went, and she also helped my dad in the garage by doing the books. You know, like, she, she was—

RM [00:56:55] Get that grease gun out and.—

KN [00:56:56] She was incredible and so I attribute a lot of that to my mum.

RM [00:57:03] So, okay, you got involved in the social studies conference area, and of course you got elected president. I'm going to leave that out at this point, because I really, we still haven't got you into the BCTF yet, and we sort of talked about all these other things you were involved in, but of course, you got involved with your union. Was that right off the bat, you were involved with the BCTF, or did it take a while?

KN [00:57:29] Oh, no, I got involved.

RM [00:57:31] The BC Teacher's Federation.

KN [00:57:33] But at the level of going to the convention once a year and so forth, and I was involved in organizing at that time a caucus within the BCTF called Teacher Viewpoint.

RM [00:57:45] I'm not surprised. Oh oh, here comes Novakowski. He'll be organizing a caucus.

KN [00:57:54] Because the BCTF was basically dominated by administrators and hence Teacher Viewpoint and the administrators were members of the BCTF at that time and they tended to be, for the most part up until a few years before, all our presidents were former administrators.

RM [00:58:20] When you say administrators, do you mean principals?

KN [00:58:22] Yeah.

RM [00:58:22] Because principals were part of the union.

KN [00:58:24] Yes, they were. They were. And every right to be, and so forth. And it's just that we had difficulty getting progressive views expressed. And so we formed this caucus, and we organized, and eventually we prevailed. And interestingly, that was my involvement, really. I spoke a lot at the microphone at AGMs, and that was basically it. I didn't get involved beyond that, except eventually I decided I'd run for local president. After we defeated the Basics bunch, I thought it would be probably good to work with the new school board in that capacity, and so I ran as president of the LTA in 1980.

RM [00:59:16] The Langley Teachers Association.

KN [00:59:18] Langley Teacher's Association. And it was a full-time position.

RM [00:59:21] Oh. You gave up the classroom.

KN [00:59:23] I gave up the classroom.

RM [00:59:25] Was that a hard decision?

KN [00:59:26] It was a hard decision for a couple of reasons also, because in the meantime, I had split—my wife and I had separated, and I was a single parent. I had a daughter who lived with me. So that was why the decision was hard because I wasn't sure what that would mean in terms my life with her. Anyway, she was too young to really have a point of view on that. But I decided I would do it and got elected.

RM [01:00:12] Were you good?

KN [01:00:15] I don't know.

RM [01:00:15] What did you accomplish?

KN [01:00:19] In my first year, I had to establish an office because we didn't have an office. The previous president, who was full time, worked out of his home. So I set up an office and hired a support staff. And we went from there. But basically, in the first year, 1980, that fall, the Social Credit government had moved full indexing from our teacher

pension plan. So we were fighting to get that back. And the BCTF, for whatever reason, didn't feel they could pull off a provincial action. So locals were taking different actions. Sort of letting it be known how unhappy teachers were.

RM [01:01:09] But there was local bargaining at that point.

KN [01:01:11] There was a local bargaining, yes. We could only bargain for salaries and bonuses. We couldn't bargain anything to do with pensions or anything else. It was just salaries and bonus. And so one of the first things that we did, it was the first local action, was the Langley Teachers decided—at that time, the cabinet used to meet once a year in Langley on Douglas Day. And this was November 19th, 1980. And we decided that we would have a protest and we invited other locals to join us, Surrey, our neighbor particularly. And so I got release time for all our staff reps, so someone from every school, and we would be there with protest signs as the cabinet went into meeting on Douglas Day in Fort Langley.

RM [01:02:12] Well as a history teacher, Ken, I don't know whether I approve of this. Its Ford Langley, man, that's history.

KN [01:02:17] Well, yeah, we were making history too.

RM [01:02:20] Right on. Yes, and what happened?

KN [01:02:23] And what happened was Surrey actually shut down schools for the afternoon, so every teacher from Surrey was there. So they one-upped us. It was massive. It was just really, really effective in terms of a demonstration. And what that triggered was on December 4th, Surrey, VESTA [Vancouver Elementary and Adult Educators' Society], Vancouver Elementary teachers and a number of teachers from Nanaimo and from the Island, all converged on Victoria protesting against this and calling for full indexing for pensions. We had a huge rally at the Orpheum packed for this purpose. And then on December 11th, and this was the challenge because you have to remember that, like you said, we did not have full bargaining rights. So teachers did not have the right to strike, so they were not used to striking. But on December the 11th, Langley teachers, Coquitlam teachers, Delta teachers, Vancouver secondary teachers, New Westminster teachers, all converged on Vancouver for that day, walking through the streets of Vancouver with protest signs calling for full indexing for teacher pensions. So that was my first challenge, And, surprisingly, we got probably 95% of Langley teachers to participate.

KN [01:03:50] The more exciting challenge was the following year in 1981. And eventually we did prevail and we did get full indexing of pensions. The following year, in 1981 under the leadership of Larry Kuehn, who was BCTF president, we had what we called an expanded scope of bargaining campaign. We were trying to get local school boards to bargain with us for more than just salaries and bonuses. They were only required to bargain for salaries and bonus, we wanted more. And so locals across the province in various degrees were running these campaigns and we ran a big one in Langley and we made a big issue, a duty-free lunch hour for teachers. A lot of people didn't realize that teachers didn't get their lunch hour, they had to supervise students in the hallway and so forth. And so that was the big issue and we made it the big issue. We had what we called a chili lunch. In three locations in the district at the Langley Rod and Gun Club, somewhere in Fort Langley, somewhere in Aldergrove. We asked all teachers to come for lunch and they did. And today, that would be ruled a strike. But in those days, it was just a political

action. And so we were trying to convince the school board, which we had helped to elect, which we really liked, that they should do something at the bargaining table. And they did.

RM [01:05:31] That reminds me of the political strike. You said you were the only teacher that walked out on—

KN [01:05:36] Oh, that was on—

RM [01:05:36] Wage controls? Yeah. What was that like?

KN [01:05:38] The only teacher in Langley.

RM [01:05:40] Yeah.

KN [01:05:40] Well, no, I talked to the principal and superintendent beforehand, and they were fine with that. I just didn't get paid for the day.

RM [01:05:51] Did you go into Vancouver to take part?

KN [01:05:54] Yeah. Oh yeah.

RM [01:05:54] Why weren't there more? Just one lonely Ken? And why did you do that?

KN [01:06:01] Because of my labour connection, I felt I had to. I didn't want to. It was a general strike, first general strike in a long time called across Canada. It was very significant, and I wanted to be part of it. Going back to '81 and the expanded scope, one of the other things that happened during that campaign that I'd like to mention. In October, like I was in the media, local media, the The Langley Advance all the time. Local labour leader, right? As people saw it, you know, I was leading the teachers and this action we were taking and so forth. And one Friday evening in October I had a cross-burning on my lawn.

RM [01:06:59] Really. Wow. Was your daughter at home?

KN [01:07:05] She was at home, I never woke her up, but I got a phone call at about two o'clock in the morning and I said hello, I knew there was somebody else on the line but they hung up. So I got up to check on my daughter as I always did when I woke up during the night and I looked out her window I could see a light and there's this cross on the lawn.

RM [01:07:31] So, wow. How were you feeling? What were your implications of that? That's amazing, I didn't know that. Did it deter you at all?

KN [01:07:46] No, it was a horrible experience. And my daughter stayed, and she slept. I phoned the police. And I started phoning friends, and some friends came over. And it was hours before the police got there. And this is absolutely strange, really strange. Because I'd never seen a Black police officer in Langley. RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]. But that's who came to my door at five o'clock in the morning. I guess they must have thought it was the Ku Klux Klan or something. I don't know. Maybe they thought I was black. But anyway, it was just a — And the Ku Klux Klan was active in Langley at that time. There were no other cross-burnings that I know of. But the media, the Langley Advance, the people that I knew there knew about it. And I just did not want it to become an issue because I would become a target for the right and I just didn't want that. And so I tried to

keep it quiet. Everybody in the educational community knew and I got support from a lot of places. But it was one of the most horrible experiences of my life.

RM [01:09:11] Did it change anything?

KN [01:09:15] No. It just made me more resolved.

RM [01:09:17] You didn't look behind you or anything like that?

KN [01:09:19] No, well I kept my carport lights on for years after that. Other than that, no.

RM [01:09:24] They didn't catch the culprits or anything.

KN [01:09:27] No, they didn't. I had my phone. I agreed to let them tap my phone, nothing else ever happened.

RM [01:09:35] And it didn't make the media. You didn't want that.

RM [01:09:40] I didn't want that. The very next morning I had a big rally on my front lawn, support from, the word had gotten out in the progressive community.

RM [01:09:51] That's pretty amazing. That's Langley for you, but sorry go ahead.

KN [01:09:57] But we did get what was tantamount to a duty-free lunch hour. And so that was a great victory, and I was very, very happy about that. And we also got a 17% salary increase.

RM [01:10:11] So not content with getting the summer off, and two weeks at Christmas, and Easter holidays off, you wanted your own lunch hour too. Bloody greedy teachers.

KN [01:10:21] The button that we had all teachers wearing was, 'Even Teachers Deserve A Lunch Break'.

RM [01:10:27] Slogan.

KN [01:10:29] Yes.

RM [01:10:30] So okay, and then you ended up working for the BCTF in their Bargaining Division and you were there for one of the most momentous events in BC history and for the BC Teachers' Federation - Operation Solidarity. In which the teachers for the first time went out on strike on an illegal strike. So talk about that, I mean that is as momentous as it gets, right?

KN [01:10:58] Yes, I think it is. Oddly, like the government employees' union [BCGEU] were negotiating—one of the pieces of legislation that we were fighting was called Bill 3, which was, in its most caustic sense, supposedly gave the employer the right to fire employees without cause. Without any reference to seniority or severance or anything. We, the BCTF of course, in our agreements, teachers in their agreements did not have anything with reference to seniority and severance in any event because we weren't allowed to bargain those. But the view was, Larry Kuehn was our president at the time and Larry fought a courageous battle in terms of leading teachers into that in a particular foray. But I was identified as someone on staff, first of all that I could work and should work and I

did spend a lot of time working with Solidarity Coalition in terms of coalition building, but also I was nailed with the task of trying to find a local on the school board that would negotiate a seniority severance agreement so that that could become the model that we would use to be exempt from Bill 3, which is what the GEU was trying to do. And I came very, very close in Richmond, where I knew some of the people on the school board and stuff like that. But in the last minute they backed out.

RM [01:12:42] There was incredible pressure on them from the government, right?

KN [01:12:44] I'm not sure, but definitely they backed out. So I tried in North Vancouver. Now the teachers were supposed to go out on the Tuesday.

RM [01:13:00] In November of 1983.

KN [01:13:04] November 8th of 1983, and on Sunday night, before that, the 6th, well into the night, I was there, David Yorke was with us, but I was the negotiator for the teachers. And we negotiated a seniority-severance agreement with the North Vancouver School Board. The superintendent was a very progressive guy and he was really good. And we got the local, it was one of my locals, North Vancouver. And that's I think why I was pegged, it's because my locals were all on metro and that was because I was a single parent and my director was very good in that respect. So I wouldn't have to travel all over the province, I could be home every night. Yes, so we negotiated this.

RM [01:13:57] At that point, it looked like that could avert the whole thing.

KN [01:14:01] That's right, it looked like the strike would not go ahead. The teachers wouldn't have to go out and nothing would happen. Except that the government got to the school board in the meantime and really put the pressure on them and the school board turned it down. And so we were on strike the next day.

RM [01:14:18] And if we could just set a bit of the background. First of all, there was the incredible summer of fight back and so on and the huge demonstrations and everything. Can you just, without getting into too much detail, can you just talk about what that was like to be part of this amazing movement, which really is unprecedented in the history of BC.

KN [01:14:38] It was. It was quite, quite phenomenal. And those of us who really looked at it, saw it as the—BC being on the spearhead of what we called the neoliberal agenda. We didn't call it that at the time, it wasn't called neoliberal, but it was basically this move to attack labour rights, to attack social programs, human rights, one of the things they abolished was the Human Rights Commission. To do all of that was part of what was called the Reagan-Thatcher movement. Milton Friedman had come out here to BC and actually met with the cabinet, the BC cabinet. The Fraser Institute was on the cabinet's back all the time to do all this kind of stuff. So we saw it almost as an experiment that had to be defeated because if it wasn't defeated, it would spread across the rest of Canada and whatnot. And so we felt a lot of responsibility to do what we could. And we did go all out. We just went all out to try and stop it. And for teachers it was a baptism, a real baptism of fire because they had never before supported going out on strike and they did this time only by 60% majority but the thing was that teachers went out in overwhelming numbers because that was the vote, that was the decision, and they followed it.

RM [01:16:27] If I can just add some stuff to that for your reaction. It became once it was clear the government wasn't going to back down on all the bills that they had passed, it became more than just demonstrations. It became the possibility of a general strike in the public sector. And the strategy was various public sector groups would actually go out on strike against the bills and first up, I mean these were illegal strikes, and first up was the teachers who had never gone on strike before and they were being asked to go out in the foul weather in November out on strike and with only a 60% majority voting in favor of it. Attempts were made to get injunctions against it and the whole thing. I mean the atmosphere and the pressure on the teachers as I recall was phenomenal. I mean how did you bear up under all that and what did you think of the teachers actually going out on strike on an unprecedented part of an unprecedented general strike.

KN [01:17:42] I think that somehow I knew the teachers would go.

RM [01:17:47] Because people didn't think they were going to go.

KN [01:17:48] I know, I know and of course we didn't until it actually happened but we believed that they would and it was an amazing turnaround for teachers in terms of their thinking on many of these issues like strikes and so it changed the BCTF. This experience, this single experience really dramatically changed the BCTF. In 1982, we had a member vote, a referendum, trying to get teachers to support us, the BCTF, going to government to ask for the right to strike. And they voted no. 60% no, 40% yes. In spite of the fact that all local leaders were supporting it, everything else. So this is 1983, we're out on the strike. In 1984, '85, they pass overwhelmingly a vote taken by the BCTF to ask for the right to strike, to support the right to strike. I mean that just changed everything.

RM [01:19:11] That's interesting because, as you know, the ending to Operation Solidarity, with the Kelowna Accord, which really didn't give anything, was supposed to put money, savings from the strike, back into education, none of that ever happened. People were very bitter about the way it all ended and it was considered a big victory for the Union, and a defeat, a victory for government, and defeat for the unions. But you don't see it that way.

KN [01:19:39] I think the one positive that came out of it, I mean, because I did see it as, I think if the strike had gone on and escalated, we would have been in a different ballpark in terms of what could have happened. But as it turned out, we at least gained, as did other public sector unions, the right to negotiate exemptions to Bill 3 in the form of seniority severance agreements, and we did that in every single, 75 of our locals.

RM [01:20:10] Which you actually achieved.

KN [01:20:12] So we actually achieved bargaining for something more than salaries and bonuses and so we did achieve that across the province and that gave teachers an understanding of what the potential for expanded bargaining rights were actually.

RM [01:20:30] What was the mood on the line when you went out?

KN [01:20:33] It was good, it was actually quite positive. It was, nobody was, I think people felt they had to do it and they did it. And I think it was more they felt they have to, whether they wanted to or not was not the question. They had to, and they did. And that was really the feeling that I experienced. And all of the locals, like I had Metro, Metro's my zone. So I was all over Metro and they were all, all the meetings were really quite something.

RM [01:21:08] We're talking too long, I'm sorry. But I have to add this great anecdote, is that on the Friday, after you'd been out for a week (my cousin tells this story) out in Coquitlam, they were meeting, a huge meeting, packed. And it looked like there was not going to be a settlement. And the local president had to—

RM [01:21:31] Gord Rickerson, yeah.

RM [01:21:32] And they said, 'You know, I'm really sorry to have to tell you it's not looking good and it looks like we might still be out on Monday and that's too bad' and this voice came out of the hall among the teachers 'no problem,' and the whole place went absolutely nuts. He didn't have to say anything, people were cheering and emotional and crying, this one reaction - 'no problem.' But then you would have been facing an illegal strike then, because injunctions were starting to pile up against the teachers. So that must have been at least a worry.

KN [01:22:11] It was a worry, because the initial injunctions were against picketing, and of course we cross-picketed. Other people would be picketing schools, we'd be picketing in other places. But the injunctions were now coming out against strike, and so there was a concern about what would happen. They were throwing everything at us, they were just really—it was really taking the state head on.