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By Andrew Snook

Plunging into the family business

Don Plett was introduced to the plumbing trade in 1957 at the age of seven when his father, Archie Plett, bought a small plumbing company and founded Landmark Mechanical. Don began learning the trade from his father and took up an apprenticeship in his youth. He worked on the tools for his dad at the company until the late 1970s when his father asked him to learn the management side of the business. Don eventually took over the running of the family business in 1987.

He still remembers some of the biggest challenges the company overcame, including operating during the National Energy Program in Alberta.

"We had an office there. Those were the 21 per cent interest days. It was very hard to make money," says Don. "Fortunately our debt load wasn't too high at the time, but it was a huge challenge."

Another hurdle he had to overcome those days was finding and keeping reliable tradespeople for the company's contracts in various remote northern communities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Canadian arctic, which already came with its own set of logistical challenges.

"It was very interesting work, but extremely difficult work," says Don. Back in the mid-80s, it would cost him \$1,500 to send a tradesperson up to Pond Inlet, near the top of Baffin Island.

"[We] couldn't have turnarounds every two weeks, we needed someone to stay there two to three months," he explains. "There's a lot of turnover of staff when you do that kind of work, but it's certainly exciting work. I've been able to see an awful lot of our country."

Don continued to run the family business as he became more and more entrenched in the world of politics. He only completely removed himself from the company in 2007, when he passed control of the family business on to his two youngest sons, Howard and Kevin. Plett was appointed to the Senate by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2009.



Don Plett:

The plumber's politician

Albeit for different reasons, plumbing and politics are two professions that are sometimes referred to as dirty jobs, but rarely are they echoed in the same sentence. One of those rare exceptions is the Honourable Don Plett, Senator for Landmark, Man. The former owner of the plumbing and heating firm Landmark Mechanical is flush with experience in both the plumbing trade and Canadian politics.

Challenges are with numbers, not skills

Don says the biggest problem in the trades today is finding enough skilled tradespeople, and definitely not finding a decent place to work. "I believe if you are a tradesman worth your salt you can demand a good job," he says.



Don Plett, Senator for Landmark, Man. (bottom right), poses with his father Archie, the founder of Landmark Mechanical, and his four sons Jason, Howard, Kevin and Brad. Howard and Kevin (top middle) took over managing the family business from Don in 2007. Don gives a lot of credit to his late father. "My father taught me work ethic. He was an example even to his grandsons."

A conservative upbringing

Although Don's father wasn't interested in becoming a politician himself, he was always a staunch conservative supporter.

"He had a passion for what he believed in, for good government," says Plett. "He raised all his children to be the same. He got me involved in campaigning."

Plett's was first introduced to politics at the age of 15, when he volunteered his time as a scrutineer and eventually got involved in running political campaigns in the Provencher riding for current Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews and former MP and cabinet minister Jake Epp.

It was during his time managing Toews' campaign that Don became active in the Canadian Alliance Party. This is where Don would eventually work alongside Stephen Harper in uniting Canada's political right across the country.

"I just felt in order to form government we had to get every conservative in the country to be singing from the same song sheet," says Don.

After being named the founding president of the Conservative Party of Canada, Don spent several years travelling from coast to coast in an effort to merge the Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada.

A tough transition

The most difficult part of leaving the plumbing and heating industry for full-time politics was missing out on the relationships he built over the years, says Plett.

"I had made a lot of friends in the industry," he explains. "I always enjoyed the industry, especially a lot of the work we were doing up north."

A couple of Don's friends in the industry who he holds in high regard are former vice-president of Wolseley Canada (Calgary) Brian Wilcox and Ross Robinson, president of Winnipeg-based B.A. Robinson (check out his profile on Page 22).

"Both of these men display professionalism, courtesy and integrity," says Don.

Although he is no longer active in the plumbing and heating industry, many of the relationships Don built over the years are still alive and well today. He was a keynote speaker at CIPH's annual business conference last year, held at the Chateau Montebello in Montebello, Que., and is hosting a visit to Ottawa for tradespeople later this year (see sidebar, "A Day on the Hill").

"I was so happy to speak at the CIPH ABC in Montebello," he says.

Don currently sits on the senate committees for Agriculture and Forestry, National Security and Defence and is the deputy chair for the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs.

"There was never a day in my life that I ever dreamed of being a senator," he says. "It is one of the most humbling positions I could possibly imagine. When I walk into the Red Chamber even today, and realize the awesome responsibilities that we have, I know that the work that we do here is tremendously important."

And despite his pedigree, his work today has more to do with politics than the mechanicals. When asked if anyone around Parliament ever asks him for advice with a plumbing problem he laughs and says "no."

Work hard and succeed

For Don, the key to success in both the trades and in politics is a strong work ethic and perseverance.

"If you want to be a good tradesman you start at the bottom and work up. If you're not going to be a good plumber, you won't be a good plumbing contractor."

Don's success in the world of Canadian politics didn't come overnight, and in his view, there's always room for improvement. "I'm 62 years old and I think it's still a work in progress."

Of course, he can't take all the credit for his achievements to date. He says his wife of 45 years, Betty, has always been a key part of his successes, supporting him through all his decisions.



A Day on the Hill

On April 30, 2013, Don is sponsoring "A Day on the Hill" event with MCA Canada and CIPH. He chose to sponsor the event due to the work that organizations like CIPH and MCA Canada do to promote clean drinking water and good sanitation practices throughout the world. He adds that Canadians don't need to look outside of their own country to find communities in need. He says there are many First Nations communities that currently suffer from a lack of clean drinking water. For more information about the upcoming event, contact your local MCAC or CIPH office. mca.ca ciph.com