

Opponents abandon discretion to vilify controversial Ruprecht.(News).*Globe & Mail (Toronto, Canada)* (Jan 1, 1985): pM1. (1654 words)

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Byline: STEPHEN BRUNT

By STEPHEN BRUNT

Tony Ruprecht stands in familiar surroundings, an accusatory finger extended while behind him all hell breaks loose.

For the MPP from Parkdale, fear and anger are not strangers. Throughout his short political career, Mr. Ruprecht has been at the centre of controversy. Among area politicians from all shades of the philosophical spectrum - Liberals, Conservatives and NDP - he has provoked harsh public criticism well beyond the normal decorum of opposition.

On this occasion, it is a public meeting of the Board of Health to discuss a health-testing program in Toronto's pollution-plagued Junction Triangle (a heavily industrial area roughly bounded by Bloor, Dundas and Dupont Streets and Lansdowne Avenue.) In another time, the issue could have been group homes for the mentally ill, illegal bachelorette apartments, or the skin disease epidemolysis bullosa - the so- called "Crisco kid" syndrome.

Mr. Ruprecht is never the screamer - he remains calm and collected, leading his constituents against the enemy. He works independently of other politicians, a loner - "a real oddball," one colleague remembers - both during his time on city council (1978-1980), and within the Liberal caucus at Queen's Park. He has no higher profile than other Opposition backbenchers, confining his questions to pet issues.

But while other politicians may find him unpalatable, to some of the people in the Junction Triangle who must spend every day living with intense industrial pollution, Mr. Ruprecht is a hero, the white knight. He alone champions the cause of the ordinary working stiff in the face of big industry, big government and the ponderous bureaucracy.

Those Junction residents, alerted at one of Mr. Ruprecht's community meetings, are worried that their families will be harmed by dangerous PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) stored in a nearby factory. Studies have shown that Junction children suffer from more pollution-related symptoms than those in other parts of the city.

The terror rests at gut level, the emotions are genuine and the shouts from the heart. "It's just like India," a woman hollers. "We'll all have to die before they do anything." "They don't care," says another. "They don't live here."

Mr. Ruprecht does live in Parkdale. He is quick to point out that most of his political opponents do not. "Some of these people who belong to the left are not used to people who live in an area . . . You're on the street, you hear from the people every day, they knock on your door at all hours of the night. That's responsible government as far as I'm concerned." His tactics are classically populist, organizing meetings, forming committees, staging protests and making a lot of noise. On the PCB issue, he has called information meetings, assisted in the formation of a network of residents' committees and helped constituents research the problem. "Usually you only associate those kind of activities with the NDP," he said. "The tensions that come from such activities are not appreciated by opposition parties." "Not appreciated" is putting it very mildly. Mr. Ruprecht has been called a fearmonger, a political opportunist and much less flattering things. His enemies are legion and of every political stripe.

While politicians are normally guarded in their on-the-record criticisms of colleagues, Mr. Ruprecht's foes pause only to consider libel laws before they let fly. "First and foremost in Tony's mind is, 'I need to get elected,'" Alderman Anne Johnston, a fellow Liberal and chairman of the Board of Health, said. "That comes before everything else. It's only when a provincial election comes along that Ruprecht gets involved." "Tony has almost a magical quality of being able to attract issues and giving the impression that he and he alone is doing anything. And while you listen to him, nothing is going to happen and nothing is going to get solved. It's a very dangerous thing. There's no way you can deal with a person like that." Ross McClellan, the provincial NDP member for Bellwoods, is even more direct. "He's totally unscrupulous. I don't think that there's anything that he wouldn't do or wouldn't say to further his own political career . . . He seems quite willing to use scare tactics, or to tell one story to one part of his riding and another story to another part . . . He always attaches himself to legitimate concerns and exploits them - exploits the hell out of them." In a letter to Mr. Ruprecht, Environment Minister Andrew Brandt accused the MPP of distributing "misleading and irresponsible" information, of being "totally self-serving and alarmist" and of "deliberately creating roadblocks" preventing the solution of the pollution problem. "When you speak up you get criticized," Mr. Ruprecht calmly explained when confronted with the charges. "That's politics. I don't mind that." Mr. Ruprecht, 42, has two graduate degrees in political science - specializing in U.S.-Canadian relations - from U.S. universities. Before running for alderman in 1978, he taught at Carleton and York universities.

His single term on city council was a stormy one. As senior alderman in Ward 2, he was paired with Barbara Adams, another political novice and a member of the NDP.

They fought bitterly - "like cats and dogs, she being NDP and I being a Liberal," he recalled. Ms Adams accused Mr. Ruprecht of backstabbing. When she chose not to run for re-election, she blamed Mr. Ruprecht for driving her out of politics.

At the same time, Mr. Ruprecht was firmly establishing his political style. Working alone, he set up grassroots protests against the establishment of more group homes in Parkdale and against the conversion of apartments to hotels.

On a more moderate level, he was the man who turned up at every community event, the man who could get a pothole filled in, or a tree cut down. "He was a fixer," a former city politician remembers. "If you were a constituent and you needed something fixed, he'd get

it done." He ran for the provincial Legislature in 1981 in what had been an NDP stronghold, knocking off incumbent MPP Dr. Jan Dukszta by more than 900 votes. "(The NDP) looked on Parkdale as their enclave. And that's why a lot of them are mad at me," he said. "We've been successful taking some of them out." But the latest round of angry rhetoric stemming from the PCB question crosses party bounds.

Everyone agrees that PCBs, which have been linked to cancer, represent a potential health hazard that must be eliminated. As far as the Toronto Board of Health and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment are concerned, however, testing indicates there is no evidence of PCB contamination in the Junction outside of the Canadian General Electric site on Lansdowne Avenue where the chemicals are stored.

The provincial Government has set up a commission which is holding public hearings to decide how to dispose of PCBs located in industrial facilities throughout the province. Current Environment Ministry guidelines allow the burning of PCBs provided it takes place at least 120 metres from the nearest residence. The city and the health board oppose burning at anything less than 300 metres from housing, which would effectively rule out the CGE site. But they do allow for exceptions.

Mr. Ruprecht isn't satisfied with that. In a letter to his constituents dated Sept. 3, 1984, he said that "the Ministry of the Environment is now considering burning these PCBs in our neighborhood. I have discovered that burning PCBs here could cause health problems to nearby residents." He wants burning ruled out anywhere in the city, and a testing program for neighborhood children to measure possible contamination. PCB testing is normally done through a painful biopsy procedure.

It is true that the ministry - through the PCB committee - is considering burning PCBs as a method of disposal. It is also true that one burning method involves the use of mobile incinerators where the PCBs are stored so that the chemicals do not have to be transported. If burning is approved on site, CGE has said it would go ahead.

But Mr. Ruprecht's opponents think he has misrepresented the issue by suggesting there are definite plans to burn PCBs in the Junction Triangle. No decisions have yet been made and they believe there is no point in scaring people about something which may or may not happen.

It has also been suggested that PCBs are a red herring, dividing the community and distracting attention from the over-all pollution problem in the area.

Mr. Ruprecht takes no responsibility for the fear and anger of the people in the Junction. They are simply tired of waiting for studies to be completed and committees to finish their work, he says. They want action now. "I'm not surprised the residents are mad. If you were living in the area, if you had children in the area, how would you act?" Within the Junction, Mr. Ruprecht undeniably has a core of support.

His foes maintain that the people in the Junction are being led astray by their MPP, tilting at windmills and attacking straw men while nothing is solved. They believe that as long as

Mr. Ruprecht is involved in the issue, there will be no co- operation, and no solutions.

He doesn't see it that way, retracing the line between them and us. "Some of these people are very jealous. They think they are the only ones who see the truth. They think that they are the only ones who can speak on the pollution issue. "I may be criticized, but what's happened. You can see that everyone is scrambling to change their positions. "The residents don't need to be scared. They're intelligent enough.

Some of these people can hardly speak English, but they know what they want. They want the area cleaned up, and they don't want any burning of PCBs . . . They're smart enough to know that the stuff is dangerous."

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