

[Page 29 - From 'Company Town' to 'Labour Town'](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 37](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1984/8/1

great majority of the coal miners resided; in 1921 the three major towns had populations of 5,615 (New Waterford) 8,327 (Sydney Mines), and 17,007 (Glace Bay). In these towns the residents enjoyed a significant amount of self-government, a feature not always associated with the company town. The incorporated municipalities included Sydney Mines (1889), Glace Bay (1901), Dominion (1906) and New Waterford (1913). Smaller settlements, including Reserve Mines, Florence and Dominion No. 6, remained unincorporated districts under the formal jurisdiction of the county council. Although the social composition of the mining towns offered opportunities for working-class influence, in all the coal towns local government was first dominated by company officials, local merchants and professional men. The immense personal authority of the mine manager, who often ran for office, compelled deference, especially when unions were weak. Ethnic and religious loyalties, often reinforced by the direct intervention of the clergy and lay societies in politics, also influenced voting patterns. Provincial legislation presented other obstacles: the municipal franchise included all taxpayers, but only ratepayers were eligible for office, "For a long time," recalled one coal miner, "the miners themselves wouldn't vote for a miner. They'd figure he wouldn't know enough." A common recollection of this period was that the establishment of effective trade unionism in the coal industry in 1917 was decisive in giving the coal miners the confidence to seek control of local government. The evolution of town politics in Glace Bay revealed the gradual erosion of the coal company's influence in local government. The first mayor of Glace Bay, David M. Burchell (1901-7), was also superintendent of the Dominion Coal Company's stores. 7' Atomic Energy of Canada Limited L'Energie 'Atomique du Canada, Limitee CANDU Nuclear Information Centre An Insight into Canada's Advances in the Nuclear Age' OPEN 9 - 9 : SEVEN DAYS A WEEK JUNE TO SEPTEMBER AT THE ROTARY IN PORT HASTINGS, N. S. Under his stewardship the town acquired a basic network of unpaved roads, an electric light plant, a water system, town hall, police force, fire department, and a public debt of more than \$750,000. These heavy capital expenditures aroused the opposition of many middle-class ratepayers, and in 1907 John C. Douglas, lawyer, landlord, and publisher of the Glace Bay Gazette, won the mayoralty. Nevertheless, the coal company retained a strong influence on the council, and in 1909 seven of the twelve councillors were company officials. During the bitter strike of that year the coal company was able to win the support of the town council for the use of military forces in Glace Bay. At first the council divided evenly on the company's request for military aid. On the deciding vote of Mayor Douglas, a supporter of the United Mine Workers (UMW), the council rejected the need for troops and repudiated any expenses in this connection. A week later the issue was reconsidered. On this occasion the company officials attended in full force, two middle-class councillors changed their vote, and a resolution was endorsed to support the use of troops. The following year "friends of the working men" were elected in five of the six wards, but with the decline of the



UMW after the defeat of the strike, the company regained its influence on the council. An analysis of the composition of the town council in 1917 reveals: four mine managers, two petty mine officials, one railway station agent, one company relief association official, one merchant, one contractor, one clerk, and one coal miner. The turning point came in 1918. The incumbent mayor was Allan J. MacDonald, a lawyer, landlord, and son of the town's most prominent Tory, Senator William MacDonald. In 1918 Mayor MacDonald was challenged by Alonzo L. O'Neill, a former councillor, O'Neill had been a supporter of Mayor Douglas in 1910. Together with his brother, O'Neill was part-owner of a small store, but, most significantly, he was also a working coal miner. O'Neill polled 1,556 votes to MacDonald's 924 votes. The election of a coal miner as mayor was regarded as a triumph by the town's working-class.

How to Order Back Issues, Books and Subscriptions
ISSUES 1 TO 18. EACH \$1.00 (EXCEPT 2 AND 5)
FOURTH COLLECTORS' EDITION \$6.00 (ISSUES 19 TO 24)
FIFTH COLLECTORS' EDITION \$6.50 (ISSUES 25 TO 29)
ISSUES 30 TO 36, EACH \$1.75
Send cheque or money order to Cape Breton's MAGAZINE
SUBSCRIPTIONS: 4 ISSUES IN CANADA \$7.00 (4 issues foreign) \$8.00
DOWN NORTH PAPERBACK \$12.95 HARDCOVER \$19.95
Edited & Published by Ronald Caplan with the help of Bonnie Thompson & Ruth Schneider
AUGUST 1984