



THE COLOURFUL TOM COSSITT

By Brenda Visser

If you grew up in the 1970s, you may remember hearing about Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. If you grew up in the 1970s in Brockville, then you might remember how local Member of Parliament, Tom Cossitt, was a long-time adversary to Trudeau, and not afraid of controversy. Cossitt had formerly been the vice-president of the Ontario Liberal Federation, but before he was elected to the House of Commons switched allegiance to the Progressive Conservatives. He won the local riding in 1972, 1974, 1979, and 1980. A newspaper article from 1982 described him as having “fanatical persistence”.

Thomas Charles Cossitt (1927-1982) was born to an established Brockville family. His ancestors owned the highly successful Cossitt Brothers Agricultural Implement Factory in the late 1800s, making farm implements such as hay rakes, disc harrows, cream separators and the like. The family business eventually dissolved, with some of the family moving into the insurance business, which Tom also operated after

graduating from the University of Toronto. The Cummings-Cossitt website today says they have been in business since 1870.

The Cossitt family was known for their advocacy of and involvement in sports. Tom particularly liked hockey and was the Brockville Hornets midgets president, while other family members were involved with lacrosse, cycling, golf, rowing, curling, and marksmanship. He was well travelled and a collector of North American patterned glass. Undoubtedly, Tom learned a lot through his family’s entrepreneurial spirit and sportsmanship as he grew. He had a sharp mind, was well educated, and was motivated, leading him to have an illustrious career.

It would seem that Tom Cossitt was not one to be quiet. He worked as a summer student for the Recorder & Times, and for years had a voice through the local newspaper. He became Brockville’s youngest Alderman in 1949 at the age of 26. The files in the Brockville Museum also include letters of reaction from the public to the words of this bold man.

Cossitt used his voice not just for himself, but also for the welfare of others. In one particular case, he lobbied for four years- at first as a private citizen- to have Ronald Patrick Lippert freed from a Cuban prison under Fidel Castro. Cossitt’s voice was eventually heard, and Lippert was released.

Mr. Cossitt was known for his many and complex questions asked during Question Period in the House Of Commons. One newspaper article’s title after his death read, “Tom Cossitt left a small mountain of unanswered questions behind”. The author described Cossitt as an “acid-tongued tormentor”.

Showing tireless commitment until his untimely death in 1982, Cossitt ultimately succumbed to a heart attack. He died doing what he loved- he was in an executive meeting with the Progressive Conservatives when the heart attack took place.

Even his funeral was a little larger-than-life. In a Smiths Falls newspaper, an article describing Cossitt’s funeral includes the fact that “...the accelerator of the hearse bearing the casket got stuck, causing a crash with another vehicle.”

Despite the negative feedback he may have received during his lifetime, and the stir he seemed to create, Cossitt obviously made a difference in his home community. His funeral took place at St. Peter’s Anglican Church which was filled to capacity, and overflow crowds listened to the funeral on radio. His family did not wear black, as was his wish. He is buried in the Oakland Cemetery.

In Brockville, there remains some trace of the Cossitt lineage and contribution to our city and our country. There is the Cummings-Cossitt building, the Cossitt Terrace, the Cossitt Block, and sometimes you may hear mention of the former Cossitt arena. As far as this author is aware however, there is no public memorial to this colourful man, not even a street in Brockville bearing his name. Perhaps this needs to change. [LH](#)

EDITOR’S NOTE: *I Grew up in a neighbouring riding in the 1970’s, Stormont-Dundas & Glengarry and remember as a teenager Mr. Cossitt and the political cartoons he was in and the debates with Mr. Trudeau. There was no doubt of his love of Parliament and the good work he did for his constituents. It is a shame that this year, as we are celebrating in Brockville the Canadian Flag, we cannot find a way to commemorate Mr. Cossitt’s memory somehow with a public tribute/memorial).*