

A photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie, sitting on a ledge. In the background is the Parliament Hill clock tower in Ottawa, Canada, with a Canadian flag flying from the top. The sky is overcast.

IMPACT

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THE CANADIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

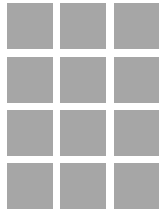
MAN AT THE TOP

Rolf Hougen elected Chamber's new chief

MAN AT THE TOP

by Donna Morrison

Newly-elected Chairman of the Board, Rolf Hougen brings a unique Northern perspective to the Chamber's top job.



iving in Northern Canada, in Whitehorse, Yukon, Rolf Hougen says he sees everything “on top of the world looking down.”

Since the newly-elected chairman of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has a “bird’s eye view” of Canada’s “ribbon of development”, he can look at national issues on a broad basis apart from the heartland, and at the country as a whole.



OUTLINE: PATTY GOWER - TORONTO STAR

Birds eye view: Rolf Hougen is the first person from the Yukon to head the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. He officially took over at the 60th Annual Meeting, September 18th in Saint John, N.B.

Hougen says often “you cannot see the forest for the trees” in Toronto because it is so highly industrialized and highly centralized.

“It is important that such a prominent businessman is going to bring a Northern perspective to the national scene.”

Hougen’s appointment to chairman of the nation’s largest business association is seen as tremendously significant to the Yukon. “It is important that such a prominent and important businessman is going to bring a Northern perspective, more importantly a Yukon perspective, to the national scene,” says Ken McKinnon, commissioner of the Yukon and a longtime friend. “It is refreshing to get out of the golden triangle to a much more global, broader approach to Canadian and international problems,” he says.

“It’s about time someone from the North has been given this opportunity to show the rest of Canada where its future lies,” says Flo Whyard, friend, business and Whitehorse chamber associate. “A third of Canada is in the North and most Canadians have never been here.” Hougen’s appointment as chairman is “very timely,” she adds. “The future of the country will depend on the North. If it weren’t for the North, there would be nothing to distinguish Canada from the U.S.,” she asserts.

“It’s time Canadians realized we have more here than igloos and polar bears we are very competent people who can compete in any industry. We have some very sharp minds and some very successful resource people. And Rolf Hougen, he’s the tops.”

McKinnon agrees. “Rolf, through his absolute ability and coming from Whitehorse, is tremendously successful in all aspects of his life.” His becoming national chairman is just another example, he adds, of the ability of Yukoners, with a population of only 30,000 and some 207 square miles, to take a position in national affairs. While the rest of Canada sees the Yukon as the backwash of the nation, ever since the Goldrush, “Yukoners have become almost blasé about the ability of our people to rise to preeminence in all aspects of society.”

Erik Nielsen is another member of the “Yukoners gone National” club. He rose to the political height of deputy prime minister, and currently is chairman of the National Transportation Agency. Hougen



At the Annual Meeting, Hougen announced the Chamber would withdraw its support of the Goods and Service Tax if changes were no! made to the present proposal.

and Nielsen go back since 1952 and consider themselves best friends. Nielsen was Hougen’s best man at his wedding. The two families are considered the most prominent families in the Yukon, says Whyard. Last year, they inter-married when one of the Nielsen sons married Hougen’s daughter. It was Nielsen, McKinnon and Hougen who were at the forefront of bringing forth the political evolution of the Yukon to fully responsible government.

Nielsen agrees that Hougen’s rural roots are beneficial to the kind of national perspective he brings to the Chamber. “That sort of experience is rare in today’s world where most successful businessmen go to the urban areas.” He adds, “although he may be a resident in Whitehorse, it’s never hurt his business activities” which are national in scope and which he has broadened to the international level based on their success.

“The Canadian Chamber is fortunate to have obtained the services of a person so wholly dedicated to business and community service. His undoubtedly excellent talents will serve the Chamber and its members very well,” says Nielsen, who likes to describe Hougen in two words: “dynamic and determined”. A third, he adds, would be “Canadian.”

Fresh out of high school, 17-year old Hougen was the youngest person to join the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce. At this time he took over the family business. “He’s never looked back,” says

Whyard, once editor of the Whitehorse Star and former mayor. His involvement with the Chamber has done a great deal for the North, she says. His membership on the national board has acted as a venue to keep the issues and the perspective of the Yukon in front of his fellow prominent business leaders at the Chamber.

This special “Northern”, “Yukon” perspective is a valuable asset to the top job at the Chamber, which represents 170,000 business people across Canada — from large corporations to small companies. Hougen’s experience is equally representative of the diversity of business interests.

“Rolf was probably the premier leader in what will go down as a real revolution in the Yukon.”

Hougen has a great deal of experience in small businesses, valuable since 80 per cent of the Chamber’s members are small business. As chairman of the Hougen Group of Companies, he is president of Hougen’s Limited, which he pioneered into the largest retail operation in the Yukon; Klondike Broadcasting company, the first commercial radio station “North of 60”; Northern Television Systems, WHTV; and Whitehorse Motors Ltd., now the largest automotive outlet in the Yukon. He also controls a number of real estate developments.

"So, I can represent the viewpoint of all business communities because I have a great deal of experience with them," Hougen says.

In addition, "Rolf was probably the premier leader in what will go down as a real revolution in the Yukon," says McKinnon, referring to the "communication revolution" the North experienced from the late 80s to the 70s.

Hougen recalls the starting years of WHTV, which commenced operations in 1958 with one black and white channel operating four hours a day with prerecorded, six-month-old programming from the National Film Board and the CBC so that they got "Christmas in July." Adds Hougen, "when we weren't broadcasting for the full four hours, we would put the camera on a fish bowl in the studio so we could have live TV. Or, we would put the camera out the window aimed at the entrance of the liquor store." WHTV is now the largest cable company in the North.

"I can bring a very broad base to the Chamber as chariman"

Hougen's greatest accomplishment in the communications field came in 1978, when he founded Canadian Satellite Communications, a national company in which he currently serves as a director. "Cancom", affectionately referred to by Hougen as "my baby", originated in Whitehorse because of the need for quality and diversity of cable television

and radio programming. Cancom now serves over 1,700 communities all across Canada. Its revolutionary delivery system sends broadcast signals via satellite. Hougen obviously values the importance of communications, a philosophy shared by the Chamber as it launches ChamberNet, an electronic data base offering two-way communications to its members.

"There's not a single person in Northern Canada who is not a beneficiary of Rolf's forward-looking attitude," says McKinnon, who managed WHTV in its early years. It is almost certain that others are yet to benefit from this progressive attitude, appropriate for chairman of an organization moving toward the 21st-century with such pro-active movements as Focus 2000.

Sixty-year-old Hougen also travels a great deal. He flies all over Canada to serve on the national boards of several major corporations — Finning Ltd., Alberta Power Ltd., Cominco Ltd., NorthwTel., and the Asia Pacific Foundation. He has served on the board of the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada since its inception. His national involvements and international dealings give him the perspective of the larger corporation —in communications, distribution, mining, power, and electrical generation

"Combining these experiences (in small and large business), I can bring a very broad base to the Chamber as chairman."

Hougen also is a member on the national council for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Canada, the advisory board for

The National Northern Development Conference, Canadian Cable Television, the Vancouver Consular Corps and is former vice-president of the Progressive Conservative party of Canada. This type of volunteer experience has also given him a larger scope from which he views Canada —from all corners of the country.

Hougen's travels have taken him to every corner of the world as well — places like China, Tasmania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, and most of Europe. Though most of Hougen's travel is for business purposes, he gets a great deal of pleasure from seeing new places and meeting new faces across Canada and around the world.

Travelling has allowed Hougen and his wife, Margaret to pursue their hobby collecting liqueurs from all over the globe. They have a special room which houses the collection of over 800 full-sized bottles of liqueurs from 90 different countries. "Unlike a stamp collection," he says, "this is a living collection which you can sample."

"It will be very interesting to visit all parts of Canada to convey the messages of the Chamber."

When not traveling, Hougen spends his time in hometown-Whitehorse catching up on his business and his family. He and Margaret have six children ranging in ages from 22 to 33, four grandchildren and two more due by year's end. All of his children have become involved in the family business after attending university.

While at home, he also is actively involved in the community. He is a member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, the Yukon Historical and Museum Society, the Yukon Parents for French, and the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce. Quiet time in the summer is spent at his remote lodge (only two cottages are on a 30-kilometre lake) that he often flies to for a week-end of solitude and fishing.

Hougen's extensive and impressive portfolio has not gone without notice. He was appointed an officer of the Order of Canada in 1987 and an honorary French Consul in 1980. In 1986 he was awarded Yukon Businessman of the Year, and in 1987 he received Tourism's "Yukoner Award."

The successful Northern businessman estimates he spends 40 per cent of his time



Being president of Hougen's Ltd. allows the chairman to press for changes to the goods and service tax from the perspective of small business

traveling now. His new job as chairman will increase his travel time to 60 per cent, he says. This is one part of the job that Hougen very much looks forward to — “it will be very interesting to visit all parts of Canada to convey the messages of the Chamber.”

Hougen’s own message, he says, is that at all levels, from the local chambers and boards of trade to the national chamber, “you do indeed make a difference.” Whether through the involvement, the strong commitment, expressions of view, letters to government and to the editor, the preparation of briefs, expertise on Chamber committees — “you do make a difference.

“This is the message that I look forward to conveying.” He wants to convince members that with the difference they make, “a strong, united, voice of 170,000 will be much more effective on issues.”

Hougen sees the role of business and the Chamber evolving. “I hope we can expand our membership and encourage more activity,” he says.

It is this kind of enthusiasm and dynamism that Hougen hopes to generate during his 12-month term as chairman. The kind the Chamber needs to bolster the impact it has on national issues such as reducing the federal deficit, cleaning up the environment, leading Canadian business into a more competitive and productive 21st century through Focus 2000, and getting changes made to the proposed Goods and Service Tax.

These four issues are Hougen’s personal list of priorities for Chamber business in the upcoming year. There are others, he adds, such as the on-going monitoring of the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, but these are the big four.

Members will need to work together on the issue of the Goods and Services Tax, he says. The tax is due for implementation by January 1991. This is also an issue in which Hougen himself plans to spend a lot of time and effort.

“The Chamber has always been for changing the archaic manufacturers’ sales tax to a more visible tax . . . we would hope the government is still flexible and that changes can be made in the upcoming hearings,” he says. The Chamber voted at the annual meeting to withhold its support of the tax unless the government lowers the rate to 6%, collects the tax on more goods and services, works out one system for collecting federal and provincial sales

taxes and makes bigger cuts in federal government spending.

Hougen predicts that trying to influence a change in the GST will perhaps be the biggest “battle” facing Chamber members while he’s chairman. He estimates the “united” support and lobbying needed from all members in the GST issue will require enthusiasm like that generated by the Chamber in support of the free trade agreement.

The new chairman is optimistic about the outcome. “I think there’s so much optimism that there will be modifications —with submissions and hearings, the collective view will create a better tax.”

Hougen is also looking forward to seeing the implementation of the recommendations of Focus 2000’s first four task forces and is anxious to see the wheels turning with its two new task forces — on the environment and on education. The project shows “outstanding initiative, the whole objective is really ‘first class”, he says, very pleased with what the project is accomplishing and the positive direction it has taken.

“I don’t think I’m going to have a specific impact - the Chamber is, after all, guided by its membership, board of directors, and committees”

Like Focus 2000, Hougen himself has always been an initiator. If he believes in something or sees an improvement to be made, he’ll do it. Hougen founded the Yukon Research and Development Institute, the Young People Association, the Yukon Foundation, and was a founding member of the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous.

Hougen has been a go-getter in other ways, too. At a time when French schools or courses did not exist in the Yukon, Hougen was determined that his six children be bilingual. Simply and surely, Hougen packed up the family in 1976 and went off to live in Grenoble, France for one year. There he enrolled his children in school not only to learn the French language, but also to introduce them to a world other than North America, he says. Hougen’s family still considers France their second home and return to Europe every year.

Hougen was one of the key founders of the Whitehorse Board of Trade back in 1948. This interest led him to the presidency of the board where he realized the

North should have a place on the national board of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. Hougen’s heavy involvement in Northern

business issues as well as his national interests earned him a seat on the national board of directors in 1959-61, 1978-82 and from 1985 to the present. His election as chairman of the board is obviously an appropriate culmination of his distinguished career with the Chamber.

Looking forward to his term of office, Hougen says he sees no need for a change in direction for the Chamber, only continuity of what began two years ago with the pro-active stance taken through Focus 2000. He does, however, predict an expanded role. ChamberNet, for example, allowing Chamber members to communicate and access information stored in a central data base, is a “very significant move, a very useful move. I think its very important added service to our membership.”

Says Hougen, “It’s also very important that we involve ourselves in international affairs. We should strengthen our relations with independent Canadian chambers in places like Hong Kong and Japan. Such global liaisons establish contact points with business people around the world. This is of great value.” Hougen points to the fact that the Chamber now has a very strong Asia-Pacific focus. With Europe 1992 around the corner, he adds, greater focus must be put on Europe, while at the same time, maintaining the emphasis on Asia-Pacific ties.

Hougen admits his chief expectation is to be able “to contribute to the national well being by making the views of 170,000 members known to government, and to be able to influence government.”

Such a modest expectation is paired with a modest assessment of his impact as chairman. “I don’t think I’m going to have a specific impact — the Chamber is, after all, guided by its membership, board of directors, and committees.”

Whatever lies ahead, his friends back home will be proud of what he does with his new position. “Dynamic, Determined, Canadian,” are words Erik Nielsen uses to describe Rolf Hougen. To others, he’s also a “great Yukoner.”

