MULTIPLE LEGACIES

Chrétien had no vision, no grand ideology, and no special purpose for building the nation or saving it from itself. He was not a thinker, or a “thinker,” nor even much of a technocrat. He left those tasks to others. But he was a perfect leader in an unheroic time as a clever tactician and a man of shrewdness. Like every other prime minister, he awarded his friends mightily and skated dangerously on the edges of patronage with what many in public thought was a government with few if any ethical standards.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary reminds us that a legacy is something handed down by a predecessor. From both the left and the right sides of the political spectrum there is much to mull over. Readers to this issue will discover there was no single legacy. Legacy is in the eye of the beholder. Experts, like the public, are deeply divided over Chrétien’s failures and accomplishments. Social policy analysts give Chrétien low grades on social and health policy. Federalists cheer Chrétien while Quebec nationalists jeer. If you believe that Charter activism and the constitutionalization of Canadian politics produced a revolution then you’re a Chrétien loyalist. If you believe that the absence of political will tells us more about the Chrétien years than any other factor, then Chrétien was the perfect man for this age of B-grade political leaders worldwide.

Still 10 years is a lifetime in politics and Chrétien was cleverer than the Toronto media ever reckoned him to be. He surprised himself and easily romped to three successive electoral victories. He was no Trudeau, Roosevelt, De Gaulle, or even a wannabe Tony Blair. He did not have to be innovative because his political opponents were so weak and uninspiring.

STEALING QUEBEC’S THUNDER

After the defeat of the Quebec referendum in 1995, many Quebec nationalists believed that the within-a-nose-of-victory referendum gave them the forward momentum to realize their final goal.

But Chrétien out-gunned, out-fought, and out-mobilized them, and his nationalist enemies were never able to recover and regroup. Lucien Bouchard’s search for the right conditions ended in failure and he quit politics for good. The Quebec nationalist project did not collapse, but it was no longer politically viable. The sovereigntist movement couldn’t win and Chrétien knew it. He forced the Clarity Act through parliament with barely a whisper of opposition in the country outside of Quebec.

Crippling the Right

With his principle rival boxed in, Chrétien had only the once mighty western-based Reform/Alliance movement to manhandle. Under Manning, the right had gained a national audience and credibility. At the height of its popularity, neo-liberalism had created a broad audience for its template ideas. Preston Manning was the smartest politician that the Canadian right ever produced after Mulroney was driven from office and the Tory party reduced to rump status. With Manning at the helm, Reform’s standing in the polls jumped from 12 to 25 percent.

The million dollar question for Chrétien was, could a revitalized Alliance Party convince voters in Ontario to send a whack of Ontario MPs to Ottawa as Reform loyalists?

Regional political movements are boat-rockers and have repeatedly transformed Canadian national politics—the CCF gave rise to the NDP, the Progressive movement merged with the Conservatives, and Bouchard left Mulroney’s Conservatives to organize the Bloc Québécois as Quebec’s “official opposition.”

Uniting the right proved to be an exercise in masochism. Moral conservatism and fiscal conservatism became a witch’s brew, which Canadian voters would not imbibe as Michael Adams so vividly and convincingly explains. While Canadians value fiscal prudence, they are socially progressive. Politics must have a moral and ethical dimension that reflects Canada’s social values. The Alliance ignored this basic rule at their political peril.

For Ontario voters, Canadian western Conservatives and Stockwell Day looked like the archetypical brothers from another planet somewhere south of the 49th parallel—Ohio or Michigan perhaps—when they campaigned against abortion rights, against immigration, and in favour of American-style gun laws. Even someone as politically smart and effective as Deborah Grey could not make a difference in Ontario, the heartland of Liberal support.

In the end, Chrétien brawled with, outlasted, and outsmaerted all of his rivals. He kept Paul Martin out in the cold, for what must have seemed to Martin as an eternity.

A master of spin

Where does he belong in the House of Commons hall of the political greats? Pearson was admired but not loved;
He did not act from ideological conviction, but more from his own temperament and a belief in Canadian internationalism and support for the UN.