

Right, left, and forever the centre

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 “tinkerer,” 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

BY DANIEL DRACHE

Daniel Drache is senior research fellow and associate director of the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies.

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.

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 sovereignist 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 outsmarted 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;

Right, left, and forever the centre, page 6

Trudeau was feared, respected, and admired; and Mulroney was vilified and scapegoated. Even Clark is held in affection by the chattering classes and Canadian public opinion. In a bland, Canadian way, Chrétien was liked and thought to be an okay guy.

He did a lot of harm to Canada's social fabric but it surprisingly did not make a difference to Canadian voters. They liked his franchise even if he was difficult to understand in either French or English. His communication skills were better than his mastery of either official language. It is likely he would not have been remembered for very much because much of the legacy remains a blur with too many broken promises as others have so well-documented in this special issue.

But he was politically savvy and read in the national mood an incredible sensitivity to the damage done by free markets and closer ties with the United States. He understood that the Conservative policies of the past decade had created the conditions for their own demise in Ontario, and he wasn't going to let that happen to the federal Liberals in Ottawa. By far his smartest achievement was to move to the right and cripple the electoral prospects of the Alliance and Progressive Conservatives. With Martin as finance minister, Chrétien stole their thunder and most of their fiscally conservative policies. His government wrestled the deficit to the ground and vanquished the American republican-in-Canada and Tory right to the margins of Canadian political life nationally for a generation to come.

He had the good sense to create the Romanow commission to repair the damage to Canada's health policy, which his government so wilfully and cynically implemented. Unlike other neo-conservative politicians, he was never on autopilot. He could see the limitations of the imperatives of a deregulated economy. He was neither doctrinaire nor unimaginative as the right wing of the Liberal Party normally is. He was most comfort-

He did not act from ideological conviction, but more from his own temperament and a belief in Canadian internationalism and support for the UN.

able at the political margins where moral fundamentalism is less important than maintaining social cohesion in a country already divided along regional and linguistic lines.

CANADA'S COMPETITIVE DOLLAR

His success with crisis management was due to the fact that interest rates were falling and the Canadian dollar was more competitive than NAFTA could ever hope to be. These two factors worked politically in his favour. The economy grew and unemployment did not go through the roof. In the last two years, job creation in Canada outperformed the once mighty US job machine.

Because he was never a man who embraced ideology more than he had to as a practical matter of macroeconomic management, in the end he knew that Canadians were attached to their social programs more than they were to broadening and deepening North American integration. Thus, it was only a small step for him to abandon new right theories when they seemed incongruous and out of touch with Canadian needs.

Chrétien was not anti-American. He admired the United States for its technological smarts and economic resourcefulness, but the Bush government dissed Canada post-9/11 and, much more seriously, made its neighbour into a security outsider inside North America. Chrétien had never liked bullies, and the aggressive unilateralism of Bush and Cheney got his back up. He did not act from ideological conviction, but more from his own temperament and a belief in Canadian internationalism and support for the UN—capstone elements of Canada's

place in the global economy.

In a recent poll, 70 percent of Canadian respondents believe the single most important thing Chrétien did was to be a part of the coalition of the disobedient and not send Canadian troops to war in Iraq. Pearson had his moment of waffle and so had Diefenbaker. By political instinct Trudeau was not a "yes" man either, but no Canadian prime minister had ever refused a top-priority request from an American president.

DOING THE RIGHT THING BY INDECISION

Chrétien made a stand on principle and Canadians supported him for it. Die-hard conservatives, Alliance MPs, and leading voices of Canada's business elites thought they could stir up a hornets nest and cut him down to size. They were wrong.

Standing up for Canadian independence, if only for a nanosecond, proved to be the most important nanosecond of his prime ministership. He understood that the symbolic and real nature of the border mattered a lot to Canadians. In Chrétien's monotone world of never doing the right thing, he followed the map that read "do anything necessary that pays handsome political dividends." With the economy so highly integrated and Canada's business naysayers lining up behind Bush and Cheney, Chrétien took a huge gamble. This was his singular moment in history—as Canadian as necessary in the circumstances. He left his mark in a way no one could have predicted. A savvy Quebecker, he ran the country with as much indecision as street smarts. For Paul Martin, it is a tough act to follow. Or is it? 