



# CANADA WATCH

Practical Analysis of Constitutional and Other Key National Issues

## TIMING OF MULRONEY RESIGNATION PUTS SUCCESSOR IN BOX

Delay in announcement means that new PM's tenure at 24 Sussex likely to be short-lived

by Patrick J. Monahan

In the days immediately following Brian Mulroney's resignation announcement on February 24, many commentators hailed the timing as a stroke of political genius.

According to this reasoning, Mulroney had waited long enough that neither the Liberals nor the NDP would have time to change leaders before the election, which must be called by December of this year. The Tories, on the other hand, would have a fresh (and presumably younger) face at the helm and thus be able to argue that they, rather than the opposition, represented the true forces of change.

But this interpretation of the timing of Mulroney's departure is no more convincing than the PM's claim that he had originally intended to resign back in the fall of 1990.

The reality is that Mulroney appears to have waited too long to announce his intentions, leaving his successor with insufficient time to rebuild the party's popularity in advance of the expected fall election.

### TWO PRINCIPLES

There are two overriding principles that must be kept in mind by a governing party seeking to successfully pass the baton of political

power from one prime minister to another.

The first is that such transitions are rarely successful. On the national scene, there are only two examples of a governing party changing leaders and going on to win the next general election. The first was the transition from Mackenzie King to Louis St. Laurent in 1948 (followed by the Liberal majority in the 1949 elections); the second was the transition from Lester Pearson to Pierre Trudeau in 1968 (followed by the Liberal majority in the elections held later that year). So successful transitions are the exception rather than the rule.

The second overriding principle is that the transition must be accomplished early enough in the mandate to give the successor sufficient flexibility in choosing the date of the next election. In both the King-St. Laurent and Pearson-Trudeau precedents, the successors were in place before the end of the fourth year of the government's mandate.

This "four-year rule" was also followed by the Tories in Ontario, who accomplished the rare feat of passing on power from one premier to another and winning the next election on three successive occasions

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during their 42-year hold on power that ended in 1985.

Mulroney falls well outside the "four-year rule"; his successor will not be in place until June 1993, some four years and eight months after the last federal election.

This gives the new PM precious little time to distance his or her gov-

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ernment from the unpopular legacy of the old. It also means that one of the most powerful prerogatives of a sitting prime minister — the right to determine the timing of an election — is effectively denied to Mulroney's successor.

#### **KIM CAMPBELL'S PROSPECTS**

Many Tories have already begun to convince themselves that Kim Campbell will be able to overcome these obstacles and lead the party to a third majority government in this fall's elections. Her youth and gender, combined with the fact that she is not personally identified with the most unpopular policies of the Mulroney years, are seen as making her a formidable opponent for either Jean Chrétien or Audrey McLaughlin.

Indeed, the belief that Campbell can lead the party to electoral victory in the fall has established the defence minister as the early and prohibitive favourite in the leadership race, just as a similar belief propelled John Turner to victory in the Liberal leadership contest in June 1984.

Hopeful Tories also point to the fact that John Turner came out of the June 1984 convention with an eight point lead in the polls. They argue

that he turned a possible victory into massive defeat only through his complicity in the final wave of Trudeau patronage appointments, and that Kim Campbell will make no such mistake.

But Kim Campbell, along with all the other Tory hopefuls in the race to succeed Brian Mulroney, has political problems that are far more serious than the patronage issue.

The major problem facing Mulroney's successor will be his or her connection with the unpopular initiatives of the existing government, including free trade, the GST, and deficit reduction. The new PM will be unable to distance himself or herself from these policies for the simple reason that, although they are massively unpopular, they are also unavoidable.

The simple reality is that the Canadian government lacks the fiscal flexibility to significantly alter course from that charted by Brian Mulroney. The necessity to carry on with Mulroney's economic program will be the millstone around the neck of the new Tory PM.

#### **THE NEW ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE**

The critical question is how Mulroney's departure will alter the electoral prospects of the major parties this fall.

The major impact of Mulroney's departure is to increase the likelihood of a minority or coalition government coming out of the next election.

Had Mulroney stayed on, the Liberals under Jean Chrétien appeared poised to sweep to a majority government. With Mulroney gone, Liberal support is likely to soften, putting a Liberal majority out of reach.

By the same token, the new Tory leader will certainly make the Conservatives more viable, but without

giving them the support necessary to form a third majority government.


This means that negotiations among the party leaders following the elections this fall may well prove

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to be the critical factor in determining who will be prime minister a year from now.

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Canada Watch welcomes submissions on issues of current national interest. Submissions should be a maximum of 1,000 words. The deadline for consideration in our April issue is Friday, April 2. Write or fax us at:

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