



CANADA WATCH

Practical Analysis of Constitutional and Other Key National Issues

ODDS FAVOUR MULRONEY DEPARTURE

Game of Cat and Mouse Keeps Official Ottawa Guessing

by Patrick J. Monahan

With a federal election now mere months away (the election must be called by December 5 of this year), the main topic of conversation on Parliament Hill is the growing speculation over the future of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

By mid-January, the prime minister had given no public hint of his intentions. But his mini-Cabinet shuffle, highlighted by the move of Justice Minister Kim Campbell to Defence, was deliciously ambiguous, serving only to heighten the guessing game that appears to have stalled the government and consumed official Ottawa.

TWO VIEWS OF THE SHUFFLE

One interpretation of the mini-shuffle argues that it confirms Mulroney's intention to stay on and fight the next election. On this "stay and fight" interpretation, the move of Campbell to Defence was a demotion. Defence may have a whopping \$12 billion budget, but the politics of the portfolio are all wrong — closing military bases or signing contracts for military helicopters does not make for good "optics" for an aspiring prime minister. By demoting the minister widely touted as his probable successor, Mulroney demonstrated that he is still calling the shots and is prepared to lead the party forward into the next electoral campaign.

Another view suggests precisely the opposite interpretation of the significance of the mini-shuffle. This "cut and run" interpretation sees in the mini-shuffle firm evidence of the fact that the PM has already made up his mind to go gracefully. On this view, the most important feature of the mini-shuffle was its cosmetic character. The prime minister thus signalled that he was leaving to his successor the hard choices that have to be made about the Tory lineup for the next election.

The apparent plausibility of both the "stay and fight" and the "cut and run" interpretations ensured that the mini-shuffle would only add to the speculation frenzy that has gripped the capital — suggesting that the PM must be getting immense enjoyment out of the rampant speculation over his intentions. It also may signal that Mulroney has not yet made up his mind whether to resign or to fight a third national election.

HOW THE DECISION WILL BE MADE

But there are two fundamental realities that together will shape that decision — and that suggest that the Conservative party will be led by someone other than Brian Mulroney on the day the writ is dropped for the 1993 campaign.

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 5
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1993

ARTICLES

- Odds Favour Mulroney Departure
by Patrick J. Monahan 61
- New Language Debate in the Offing
by Kenneth McRoberts 63
- The Changing of the Guard in Washington
by Stephen Clarkson 65
- What Did the Judges Know, And How Do They Know It?
by Thelma McCormack 66
- Women's Fear of Male Violence
by Michael Smith et al. 68

REGULAR FEATURES

- Western Report*
by Roger Gibbins 70
- Quebec Report*
by Guy Laforest 72
- Legal Report*
by Jamie Cameron 73
- CW Update*
The Month in Review 74
- Canada Watch Calendar* 75

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1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

The first fundamental reality is Mulroney's continuing low standing in the public opinion polls. The Tory party has been languishing below 20 percent in decided-voter support for over two years. But Mulroney's personal popularity has been even lower, with most polls showing that less than 10 percent of Canadians believe him to be the best candidate for prime minister. Keith Spicer's observation in the summer of 1991 that "there is a fury in the land against the prime minister" seems no less true today than it was 18 months ago.

The second fundamental reality is time. The sands of the electoral clock have just about run down for Brian Mulroney. Relying on Mulroney's own method of "picking the election day and working backwards" (as described in his infamous "roll of the dice" interview in June 1990), a new Tory leader would have to be in place by July 1 at the very latest in order to prepare for a fall campaign. The planning and preparation for a national leadership convention would require a minimum of three months. This suggests that the PM could conceivably wait until sometime in March before announcing definitively his intentions.

But in practical terms, Mulroney can't afford to wait until March. The government appears paralyzed while waiting for the PM to clear the air in a definitive fashion. The national media will write and talk about little else once Parliament resumes sitting on February 1. Effectively, this means the PM has until mid-February to make a final decision.

ANSWERING THE QUESTION

Will Mulroney stay or will he go? The answer to that question depends almost entirely on the way in which the PM answers the prior question — can he win? If the prime minister concludes that he has a reasonable

chance of besting his opponents in an election campaign, he will almost certainly stay on and try to win a third term. But if he determines that he has no reasonable prospects of victory, the only practical option is to go gracefully now rather than be thrown out of office by the voters within a few months.

Notice that the critical factor is Mulroney's own subjective belief about his electoral prospects, as opposed to an objective, independent assessment of those prospects by a disinterested observer. Yet, even discounting the fact that prime ministerial advisers typically paint the rosiest picture possible of their boss' political shelf life, combined with the ten-

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dency of most politicians to overestimate their own persuasive abilities on the hustings, there seems little escape from the conclusion that defeat is inevitable in any electoral campaign featuring Brian Mulroney in 1993.

Those urging the PM to stay will argue that the public opinion polls are misleading because they do not tell us how voters will actually behave when they are asked to mark a ballot on election day. According to this line of argument (one that the PM has appeared to endorse on occasion), voters will make their final decisions based on a comparison of Mulroney with the available alternatives. Since the public has shown remarkably little enthusiasm for either Jean Chrétien or Audrey McLaughlin, Mulroney still has a chance to make up sufficient ground so as to form a minority government.

The problem with this scenario is that it underestimates the very deep

voter antipathy toward Brian Mulroney, particularly outside Quebec. It also overestimates the degree to which voters cast their ballots based on a careful assessment of the policies and performance of the opposition party leaders. In the recent Ontario election, for example, the electorate was primarily voting *against* the government of David Peterson, rather than *for* the policies and the leadership of the NDP. (Those NDP policies, embodied in a document entitled "Agenda for People," were known to only a handful of voters, as Dan Rath and Georgette Gagnon demonstrated in their book *Not Without Cause*.)

This same process would undoubtedly manifest itself in any 1993 campaign featuring Brian Mulroney. The relative lack of enthusiasm for Jean Chrétien and Audrey McLaughlin will be an interesting but irrelevant footnote to a campaign that will provide the electorate with a long-awaited opportunity to administer a political defeat to the most unpopular prime minister in Canadian history.

Of course, the virtually self-evident character of this conclusion is no guarantee that the PM will necessarily come to it of his own accord. The history of world affairs is littered with examples of political, military, and business leaders who were simply unable to come to terms with the fact that their imminent defeat was inevitable. Whether Brian Mulroney is destined to join their ranks, or whether he will rightly conclude that his run in the Prime Minister's Office is about to end, will be known in the space of the next few weeks.

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