

Brian Mulroney's Death Incites Profound Nostalgia for the Extraordinary Life and Career of the Former Canadian Premier



by Conrad Black

The death of Brian Mulroney on February 29, not unexpected to his friends but still so hard to accept, has incited a profound nostalgia among us. This very gregarious and loyal man assembled a huge number of friends. It has also stripped away the last of the cant and emotionalism of partisanship

that for many years partially obscured his extraordinary life and career.

As a good friend of nearly 60 years, my mind was flooded with thoughts of uproarious camaraderie and the bacchanalian excesses of youth of far-off days. I never knew anyone as entertaining, engaging, and persevering at the customary pleasurable pursuits of that stage of life. Mulroney was always ready for another drink, always ready to approach another table of possibly amenable young ladies, always a riveting raconteur, and yet always a gentleman and never a cad, much less an outright debauchee.

His was one of the very few English-speaking families at Baie-Comeau, Quebec 240 miles northeast of Québec City, in 1939. Mulroney's father was a mill-worker for the company that produced newsprint for and was owned by the legendary publisher, Colonel Robert McCormick, the proprietor of the Chicago Tribune and the New York Daily News, then the two largest circulation newspapers in the United States. As a child, Mulroney sang Irish songs for Colonel McCormick on his summer visits. As a mill-worker's wage was far from opulent, Mulroney offered to his father to quit secondary school and take a menial job to contribute to the family's income. His father thanked him and said: "The only way out of a mill-town is through university and that is where you must go."

However thoroughly Mulroney relaxed at times, in important matters he always concentrated fiercely, acted decisively, and had almost unerring tactical judgment. He never forgot his friends, and never forgot his alma mater, Saint Francis Xavier University: he raised tens of millions of dollars for it and is monumentally remembered there by the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. He went on to the faculty of law at Laval University and quickly found himself a place in Montreal's largest law firm.

From there he became one of the most successful labor lawyers

in Canada and while maintaining friendly relations with the labor leaders of French and English Canada, he also became a close and trusted friend of some of Canada's wealthiest industrialists and financiers. He also became the very successful head of the Iron Ore Company of Canada, of which our company was a large shareholder.

When the time came, in his early thirties, to stop carousing and start a family, Mulroney proved as successful in this second phase of his adult life as he had been as a bachelor. No marriage is perfect but his and Mila's came close and they and their three sons and daughter and their own flourishing families celebrated the 50th anniversary of Brian and Mila's wedding in Italy last July. He never had an alcoholic beverage after about 1975 and retained the inner strength of the reformed drinker.

From his earliest days, Mulroney was fascinated by politics. He saw it as the place of the greatest possible positive impact on society. He was the perfect progressive conservative, as the Conservative party was then known: he wished to conserve everything that was worthwhile and accelerate objective progress as quickly as possible.

His entire political career was a very successful effort to calibrate those two tendencies that can so often be contradictory, and to arrange and navigate the ever-mobile political currents to facilitate his objectives. He developed a technique, unique in the history of Canada, for catapulting himself from the private sector into high office.

He did not toil in the political vineyards of parliamentary candidacy to assume party leadership from the inside. Nor did he move swiftly into an apprenticeship: Louis Saint Laurent was 60 years old and had never thought of seeking public office when he was invited to become wartime minister of justice and leader of the government in Quebec. Pierre Trudeau had no serious thought of elective office and was not even a

Liberal when he was induced to come to Ottawa to defend federalism in 1965 and was promised a fast track; he was Liberal prime minister two-and-a-half years later.

Mulroney worked hard in the Conservative organization, which did not really exist in Quebec: he built it. He concluded, and persuaded many others, that the Progressive Conservatives could not succeed without a breakthrough in Quebec and that this could not be accomplished without a thoroughly bilingual party leader. After 20 years of non-stop networking at Conservative party functions and conventions, Mulroney threw his hat in the ring at the age of 36 to seek the succession to Robert Stanfield as leader of the federal opposition.

He came third at the convention in 1976, behind Joe Clark and Claude Wagner and was the bright and coming debutant of the political season, like Roosevelt running for vice president in 1920, or John F. Kennedy seeking the vice presidential nomination in 1956, both, like Mulroney in 1976, in their 30's, emerging promisingly on the national scene for the first time.

Wagner soon retired from politics and Joe Clark became the only person in history to inflict electoral defeat on a Trudeau in becoming prime minister in 1979, but mishandled his minority parliamentary position, and then committed to a leadership review. Mulroney's time had come, with some luck but with great astuteness and unwavering concentration.

When the next general election came in 1984, the Liberals had been in government for 66 of the last 88 years. In that time the Liberals had only lost Quebec once, in 1958, and that was due almost entirely to the intervention of Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis, settling old scores with the federal Liberals. Wilfrid Laurier, Mackenzie King, St. Laurent, Lester Pearson, and Pierre Trudeau had in those 88 years, faced 17 Conservative leaders, none of whom had had two consecutive full-term elections. (Robert Borden's re-election in 1917 was

as head of a coalition.)

Mulroney became the first prime minister since Saint Laurent in 1953 to win two consecutive majority elections and the only prime minister in history never defeated personally or as leader. (Jean Chretien replicated that feat when the Conservatives fragmented but was then forced out as leader by his own party.)

He used his office with great originality. The Free Trade Agreement demonstrated that Canada need not continue as a branch-plant country and could survive and prosper in free trade with the United States, even if the exchange rate between the currencies had to be managed carefully at times; the other parties opposed free trade but were soon converted to it. He reorganized the tax system to alleviate income taxes and partially replace them with essentially voluntary taxes on goods and services that the taxpayer had the option not to buy.

He made a heroic attempt to complete the new constitution and was very narrowly prevented from doing so though all the provincial governments supported him. In this, he memorably demonstrated that it is more admirable to attempt great things even if not wholly successfully than safely to avoid them. He played an important role in ending the Apartheid regime in South Africa, led the world in saving millions of starving Ethiopians and moderating the scourge of AIDS in Africa, and played a vital role in ending the Cold War, converting an Open Skies conference in Ottawa into agreement on the reunification of Germany.

He was the most admired Canadian leader in the history of Canada-America relations and was invited to be a eulogist at the state funerals of Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush. This is a reminiscence and not a history; he was undoubtedly a very capable and successful prime minister.

All of us who have known him through the years and have enjoyed, benefited from, and reciprocated his friendship, have had a great and irreplaceable privilege. All politicians know many people but if Mulroney had never entered active politics or held a great office, those who mourn him today would be no less numerous nor grieve less than we do. He was a great man and a dear friend and takes away with him the respect and the goodwill of all who knew him well.

First published in the [National Post](#).