

INTRODUCTION

WHO SHOULD WRITE autobiography?

Normally, one thinks of the famous: prime ministers, generals, movie stars. I am none of those things. Outside of health and political circles, mine is hardly a household name.

However, my years in government in this country have afforded me the extraordinary privilege of meeting and working with many fine public servants and dedicated politicians as well as a smattering of world leaders. Among our Canadian prime ministers, I have had the opportunity to dine with Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Joe Clark, Jean Chretien, John Turner and Paul Martin. I have also met with Prime Ministers Mulroney and Turner. I have had only two encounters with Prime Minister Harper—once in an elevator and once on national television. Beyond Canadian prime ministers,

in my government and post-government days, I have met President Bill Clinton, His Holiness Pope John Paul II and Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II as well as Princess Anne.

Among our recent governors general, I have enjoyed the hospitality of Rideau Hall during Edward Schreyer's term as our head of state. Much later and to my delight, I was presented the Order of Canada by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. I met our elegant Governor General Jeanne Sauve when she visited Manitoba. My very young and very nervous son, Riel, presented her with a bouquet of flowers on that occasion.

Twice in my life, electoral politics beckoned me in a very direct way. On both occasions I was asked to seek political office as a Member of the Parliament of Canada. On both occasions, despite the enormous and seductive pull of political life, I declined to enter the fray. These occasions were two decades apart. It was my second refusal that convinced me that a life in electoral politics was not to be. This struck me as odd because a part of me always believed that someday I would cast my hat in the political ring. It may well be that too long as an observer makes for a reluctant participant.

Political fortune first knocked on my door in 1983 in the form of the constituency executive for Winnipeg North Centre. Stanley Knowles, the legendary house leader of the federal New Democratic Party, had decided to retire from politics following a stroke. The riding executive wondered if I would consider standing as a candidate at the next general election. At the time, I bore the onerous duties of cabinet secretary in the government of Manitoba. Premier Howard Pawley had taken a risk in appointing someone as young as me to such a critical position. I had no intention of deserting him.

There was another equally important reason. I also had the responsibilities of a young family. When our children were young, I promised my wife Lucille that I would not seek political office until they were both in university. We had watched the hardships of too many young families with someone in politics. The hours of politicians were as relentless as the rewards were bittersweet. I kept my promise.

In 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin called to ask me to seek office as a Liberal candidate and to consider becoming health minister in his government. We met in a hotel 'lawn' in Toronto for a long discussion. It was only our second conversation. Earlier, while he was still finance minister, Martin had arranged a lunch and interrogated me about health care. I remember it as an unusual experience. Often when someone in political life

asks you your opinion after a very short period of tulle they will tell you their opinion, often at great length. Paul Martin did exactly the opposite. For over two hours at lunch he sought my views, in meticulous detail. I was both intrigued and flattered. Martin proved to be that rare creature, a politician who really could listen.

This rime, our discussion was once again engaging and flattering. Martin brushed aside my hesitations about stepping into the political arena. He told me that I would have a far greater impact as health minister than as chair of the Health Council of Canada, the position I held at the time. He was probably right. I asked him to wait until the last possible minute to formally ask me. The call came several months later. The prime minister was on a plane bound for Washington to meet President George W. Bush. His approach was direct.

"Michael. I am asking you to run."

My reply came in the form of a question, "How long do I have to think about it?"

The prime minister chuckled. "When Raymond Garneau asked me to run for the very first time, that was what I asked: 'How long do I have to think about it?' He told me that if you think about entering politics you would never do it."

The longtime Quebec politician who had served ably as finance minister proved to be wise on the decision to enter politics. I thought about it and the doubts overwhelmed me. I didn't do it.

These were both golden opportunities for anyone with political ambition. The first offer was of one of the safest and most historic NDP seats in Canada following in the footsteps of the giants of the movement. Cooperative Commonwealth Federation founder J.S. Woodsworth held the seat for seventeen years and Stanley Knowles, who followed him, held it for twenty-five more years.

The second invitation came from an incumbent prime minister who had been Canada's best finance minister. Yet I declined both offers. Why?

By the time Paul Martin asked, one of my children was in university and the other had already graduated. Still I declined. The partisan feelings that I had when I was younger had long since departed. I am no longer one hundred percent for any political party, left or right or wrong. Over the years in public service I came to admire individual politicians from various parties. I became more concerned with pragmatism and compromise than the pure 'octane of ideology. The more I witnessed the behaviour of "true believers" of any ideology, the less convinced

became of the virtue of rigid views. Much progress in our nation has been achieved through hard work and compromise based on pragmatism, Still, I readily concede that politics would be a dull place if every decision was made by consensus.

Politics may have passed me by but its stories have not. Stories are as important to politics as facts are to science. In the end, politics must be entertaining just as life must be entertaining or who could bear either? It must also be purposeful, earnest, and by its nature, contentious, but without the entertainment value, why bother?

What follows is an effort to distill some entertainment value from five decades around politics in my younger years and in and out of government in my middle life. As my late Irish mother Una Barry McGilligan Decter would be careful to note, stories are improved by their telling and re-telling. Many of my stories have grown better in their telling over the years. Does this undermine their historical accuracy? Perhaps. Others, who lived these events, may well remember them differently. That is as it should be. At their core these tales are as I remember them. No claim is advanced for their complete accuracy. Memory plays tricks. Historians beware. Lovers of politics draw near. Enjoy them for what they are, simple stories of politics and political life in all its curious glory.

I know that the telling of political stories is infectious and contagious. Nothing would please me more if reading these accounts convinces others to write their own tales from the back room.