

## **Martin refused to be a Cabinet eunuch**

His knowledge and connections gave him personal stature

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A crisis can reveal otherwise obscure realities, and the implosion of the federal Cabinet should remind us how our government has changed, for the worse, in recent decades. From 1968 to this moment, the authority of federal Cabinet ministers has been shrinking. The absorption of power by the Prime Minister's Office has turned the Cabinet into a collection of eunuchs. Until yesterday afternoon, Paul Martin stood as a shining exception, a politician of independent stature and reputation. That was his great asset and also his great problem.

Once, he would not have been so lonely. Once, it was commonplace for a senior minister to possess an individual identity. Ministers often had ideas of their own and constituencies of their own. As recently as the 1960s, there were policy struggles among Cabinet ministers, many of them discussed in public. One minister was known to be a nationalist, another was not. This one favoured greater involvement in NATO and that one favoured less. In the 1950s, a Cabinet minister, Lester B. Pearson, won the Nobel Peace Prize for creating the UN peacekeeping force that eased the British and French out of a failed Egyptian military adventure, something he managed independently of the Prime Minister, Louis St. Laurent, though with St. Laurent's support.

It's hard to imagine a Cabinet minister of today doing anything remotely like that. Most ministers now do what they are told and the people who tell them (always on the Prime Minister's authority) are usually civil servants or political operatives of whom the citizens know little or nothing. This process began under Pierre Trudeau, who wanted above all an orderly government with no surprises. He showed no enthusiasm for originality in anyone except himself and he tried to control in close detail whatever his ministers did. In the 1980s, Brian Mulroney tried even harder and Jean Chrétien has tried hardest of all and with the most success.

Art Eggleton's time as Defence Minister demonstrated that the stature of ministers has shrunk nearly to the vanishing point. Without his limousine, it was hard to tell the difference between Mr. Eggleton and a backbencher. Typically for a Minister of the Chrétien era, he made news only when he made a mistake. No one ever claimed he had defence policies of his own, good or bad. There was no evidence that he knew what the generals were talking about and some evidence that he did not. Clearly, his main ambition was to stay out of trouble and in power. He failed at both.

He was fired because he personally gave a former girlfriend a contract, not because of departmental failure. That's how it works now. Journalists and opposition MPs claim that the doctrine of ministerial responsibility requires a minister to resign when something goes wrong in the department. But that kind of responsibility no longer exists. Ministers rightly believe they shouldn't have to leave the Cabinet for failing to exercise authority they no longer have.

Something similar has happened in Washington: More and more, power has drained out of the departments and concentrated in the White House. But that matters less in the United States, where Congress has great powers of its own. In Canada, with the shrunken ministers, all power has shifted to the Prime Minister and the little group he trusts to do his bidding. Nobody dares cross him.

This context made Paul Martin the great anomaly of Ottawa. Over nine years, his knowledge and connections gave him a separate following, personal stature and a reputation as the jewel in the Liberal crown. From 1993 until this weekend, the government's credibility rested on his shoulders. It was Mr. Martin's determination that pulled Canada back from looming insolvency and most of us know it. He imposed budget restraints in a way that no one even tried to do in the Trudeau era and Michael Wilson wasn't allowed to do when he served as Finance Minister in the Mulroney era. Mr. Martin's reputation affected even the kind of opposition that formed on the other side of the House: By winning the confidence of business, he made a conservative party, whether old or new, seem less necessary than it otherwise would have been.

For all these reasons, the Prime Minister had to depend on the man who had the effrontery to run against him for the leadership. Never one to exult in the success of underlings, Mr. Chrétien apparently regarded this situation as somewhere between seriously irritating and totally intolerable.

In modern history, the closest parallel was the unhappy marriage of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Nixon desperately needed Mr. Kissinger's skills in foreign policy -- and, therefore, hated him. Their mutual jealousy, contempt and dependency became a legend of 1970s Washington and remains part of political lore.

Politicians nearly always put their own pride and reputations ahead of all other factors. (Lacking that impulse, they would not be in politics.) But even among politicians, Mr. Chrétien appears to be burdened by an exceptionally bloated ego. He retains the raw, angry sensitivity of a man who grew up feeling like an outsider. He has been hugely successful for longer than most Canadians have been alive, but apparently he nevertheless feels scorned and mistreated.

He knows that Montreal intellectuals, whom he once dreamt of impressing, consider him a hick and always will. This may be why power itself interests him more than the uses to which it can be put. His public remarks on Friday made it clear that after all these years he was still spoiling for a fight, even a pointless and self-destructive fight with his own Finance Minister. Under the pressure of unfolding scandals, he instinctively returned to his old self-image as an indomitable battler, though he probably forgot long ago what the fight was about.

Those who knew him as a Cabinet minister under Pearson and Trudeau remember well that he was always less interested in the work of whatever department he headed than in the fact that he, Jean Chrétien, was a Cabinet minister. His pride in becoming the first francophone Finance Minister, for example, was much more important to him than the dollar or the debt. At one point, Pierre Trudeau announced a major change in the budget without consulting him. Many assumed Mr. Chrétien would be humiliated, but if he was, he hid it. He retained the title of Finance Minister, after all, and that was more important than actually making decisions. The debt load we were all amassing was no more than a footnote in his career.

One day in the late 1980s, when he was out of the House of Commons and plotting to return as leader, I sat beside him at a luncheon. He was the agreeable, folksy, boyish Jean Chrétien that we often read about in the papers.

But there was one odd thing about his conversation. In 90 minutes or so, no one, no matter how hard they tried, could get him off the subject of Jean Chrétien. It was the only topic that interested him and he seemed to believe sincerely that it obsessed everyone else as much as it did him. At that moment, since he was so far removed from power, his enormous ego was no more than a psychological curiosity.

When he left the room, the people at our table chuckled over his narcissism. Someone said that lunch was one thing, but being with him for much longer would be unendurable.

Everyone seemed to agree. We of course had no idea that one day the monumental self-regard of Jean Chrétien would be a grave problem for the whole country.

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