

The Joe Clark I Know

48 Years of the “Outrageous Fortune” of Politics

By Douglas Roche

When I received an invitation to attend, on June 4, an “Evening to Celebrate the Rt. Hon. Joe Clark,” my mind instantly went back to 1971 when I met a gangly, earnest young man working for the Progressive Conservative leader, Robert Stanfield. I had been invited to have lunch with Mr. Stanfield in his suite at the Macdonald Hotel in Edmonton. The door was opened by Joe Clark, and thus began a relationship that has endured for 48 years through, as Shakespeare would put it, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

Joe’s praises will rightly be sung to honour the 40th anniversary of his becoming Prime Minister, the 35th anniversary as Foreign Minister and his 80th birthday. You couldn’t keep me away from this historic occasion.

In my political lifetime, I have known 23 Canadian foreign ministers, and Clark, who put the Canadian values of strength, compassion and peace on the world stage, was the best of them all. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

I have to tell the Clark story my way, not just because I have known him probably longer than any political figure in Ottawa today but also because no other person in Ottawa so affected my political career.

I struck a bond with Joe right away in Stanfield’s suite because his father, the High River, Alberta, newspaper editor, Charles Clark, had served on my Board

of Advisors when I was editor of the *Western Catholic Reporter*. Joe was bright and ambitious, his rivalry with Brian Mulroney, which proved so devastating to Joe years later, already underway in the Young Progressive Conservatives.

Mr. Stanfield asked me to run for the House of Commons in Edmonton-Strathcona under his banner, Joe was enthusiastic, and when I left the luncheon, Joe had given me the outline of a plan to get elected.

My fate as a politician was determined the night of my first election in 1972, when Stanfield, the soundest man I ever encountered in politics, missed forming the government by two seats. Joe was also elected as the M.P. for Rocky Mountain, and both of us entered Parliament as Red Tories on the Opposition benches. I hated the bellowing and cant of opposition, but Joe seemed to thrive in political combat. He was clearly a rising star.

When the Progressive Conservatives went down to defeat again in the 1974 election, I wrote a piece for *The Globe and Mail* urging Bob Stanfield to stay on as leader. But Stanfield, knowing better than I that politics, stripped to its essentials, is about winning, signalled that the Party should prepare for a leadership convention. On behalf of 10 M.P.s from 10 provinces, I went to see the powerful Alberta Premier, Peter Lougheed, to convince him to run for the leadership. Alas, he said no.

Clark invited me to a small meeting he was holding in Toronto to examine the viability of his candidacy. I was scheduled to be in Edmonton and couldn't attend, but I told him I admired his guts and political ability, and his command of the French language. Campaigning for the leadership now would set him up beautifully next time around; he would come out of this race an established national figure. Joe spoke clearly: he was not running for the next time, he was running for this time.

I was in a difficult position. I liked Clark and believed in him, but felt he didn't have the experience to handle a fractious caucus of growing hard-liners. I

stalled for a while, and then one day in the Laurentian Hills I went for a long walk to make up my mind. Claude Wagner, a crime-busting attorney and judge from Quebec (the father of the present Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Richard Wagner), who had entered Parliament in 1972, had also asked me to support him. His first major speech on Canada's peace-keeping role in Vietnam had been a commanding performance and revealed a sensitivity obscured by his hard-line image. His colleagues looked on him as a leader.

Wagner or Clark? Quebec or Alberta? Experience or freshness? Which one? They both wanted me. Finally, I settled my mind. Clark next time. Wagner this time.

On the night of the candidates' speeches, I told Clark that he had run a great campaign and Alberta was proud of him. He was gracious enough — and professional enough — not to remind me that I hadn't been much help to him. The final ballot was Wagner (with a slight lead) vs. Clark (who had the momentum). In the end, Clark won by 65 votes.

The next day, I went to see Clark to congratulate him. We should put the campaign behind us and work together, he said. I agreed, and asked whether he would consider going to Wagner's office that afternoon to show that he was personally reaching out to Claude. "He's bruised," I told Joe. Clark did so, and the salve helped somewhat. **But** Wagner moved on to the Senate.

During his years as Opposition Leader, Clark asked me a couple of times to escort his wife, Maureen McTeer, to a dinner when he had to be out of town. In early 1979, he assigned me to organize a P.C. foreign policy conference to chart a new course for the 1980s. I was pleased that our healing process was deepening. The election was called for May 22, 1979, and Clark emerged, at the age of 39, as Canada's youngest Prime Minister.

He invited me to accompany himself and Maureen on a four-country trip to Africa for a Commonwealth meeting. When we arrived in Tanzania, Clark and I and one or two others got into a very small plane to fly to the highlands to see a wheat project Canada had financed. When I saw the strip of grass the Prime Minister of Canada was landing on, I thought he was carrying his inspection responsibilities a bit too far.

In retrospect, Clark probably should have stayed home shoring up his shaky government that summer when the polls started to dip. But he was determined to show that he cared about the human condition. He rescued American diplomats in Iran and brought 50,000 Vietnamese “boat people” to Canada. Had his government survived, I think he would have grown with the job and become a great prime minister. But his hubris gave his political opponents, led by Pierre Trudeau’s right-hand man, Allan MacEachen, the opportunity to bring him down.

Much has been written about why Clark allowed a confidence vote (following an economically tough but fiscally sound budget) to take place on December 13. All I know is that a panic-stricken whip called me in New York, where I was a Canadian delegate to the U.N., and ordered me back for the vote that night. Clark’s short-lived government fell.

The next years were miserable for Clark, once more facing his old adversary Pierre Trudeau across the aisle. The caucus rumbled and Brian Mulroney began organizing. Clark strangely decided that a 66.9 percent approval rating was not enough and called a leadership convention.

This time I supported Clark as strongly as I could, and so did much of the caucus. But Brian Mulroney, who by this time had established himself, won on the fourth ballot. Then Mulroney won the government by a landslide in the 1984 election.

Disenchanted with parliamentary life, I had decided not to run in the election. I flew back to Ottawa to clean out my office. The pundits were speculating that Mulroney, to placate the right side of his caucus, would name Sinclair Stevens as foreign minister. I sat in my office pondering this unpleasant possibility when an idea struck me. Without talking to Clark, I picked up the phone and called William Thorsell, editor of *The Globe and Mail*.

“William,” I said, “do you want Sinclair Stevens to be the foreign minister of Canada?”

“No,” he said, “he’s too right-wing.”

“Well,” I said, “you’re going to get him unless the *Globe* comes out right away for Joe Clark. You’ve got to show Mulroney there’s strong support for Clark.” I’m sure others were lobbying for Clark too.

Two days later, the *Globe*’s lead editorial strongly endorsed Clark. Clark’s and my offices faced each other in the East Block. The morning Clark went to see Mulroney, Maureen came by to chat. After a while, Clark came in with a big smile on his face.

The government needed a new Ambassador for Disarmament to work at the U.N. and deal with Canadian civil society. Clark nominated me, and Prime Minister Mulroney made the appointment. Clark, 10 years younger than me, became my boss.

The department wasn’t happy that I had direct access to the minister. All those fights are another story. Clark immersed himself in the countless files on his desk, and he and Mulroney shone in pushing Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to support Nelson Mandela’s crusade against apartheid. The Joe Clark era was a proud time for Canadian foreign policy.

Though my appointment wound down, Clark and I were not yet finished.

When Prime Minister Jean Chretien appointed me to the Senate as an Independent in 1998, Clark was running — again — for P.C. leader. This time, he would be running from his new base in Calgary, the centre of the Reform Party's call for an elected Senate. Clark, **needing to get the right-wing off his back**, issued a statement: "Mr. Chretien's appointment of an Alberta Senator was cynical, provocative and wrong. This controversy has little to do with the qualities of Douglas Roche, who is a sincere and able person. I regret that he has been used by the Chretien government." The media, of course, played up the angle that Clark was attacking his old friend, Doug Roche. It stung me that Joe would suggest I was being "used" by Chretien, as if I were some political neophyte who didn't realize that just as my appointment served Chretien's desire to give the back of his hand to the Reformers, it served my interest to get a wider platform to discuss peace issues.

Then the media asked me whether I would support Clark in his campaign for leader. In the absence of credible opponents, I thought Clark's election would be virtually automatic. But I hadn't been involved; Clark had not approached me. I merely said, "I'm giving this very serious consideration." I should have immediately jumped on the high road and said, "Yes, of course, I'm supporting him" But in the heat and haste of the moment, I let an opportunity to extend a hand of reconciliation slip by. Clark, of course, went on to victory.

Our relations were a bit strained, but thankfully no permanent damage was done. Both of us understand politics all too well. Several months later, we bumped into each other at a social event and chatted cordially. This happened a few times and I could tell he was crushed by the sad fate of the Progressive Conservative Party, to which he devoted his life.

A few years went by. I left the Senate and wrote my memoirs, *Creative Dissent: A Politician's Struggle for Peace*, in time for my 80th birthday. I called Joe and invited him to have a glass of wine with me at the bar in the Chateau Laurier. I

handed him the memoirs manuscript. “Joe,” I said, “I would be honoured if you would write the Introduction.” He scanned the pages. Then he looked at me and smiled. “Yes, I will.” His five-page thoughtful Introduction brought our lives full circle.

The Rt. Hon. Joe Clark deserves a lot more than the few words in this article. His outreach to Quebec, his defence of the provinces’ legitimate interests, his support for the United Nations and international development all are hallmarks of a very caring man. He believes passionately, as he put it in his book, *How We Lead: Canada in a Century of Change*, that Canada can “make a difference” in the world by employing soft-power engagement with international partners. That’s the best of Joe Clark that ought to be celebrated in today’s chaotic world.

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