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Ottawa *Watch* 286: Peter, Peter, Helena and Rahim

By Lloyd Mackey

A Google check of both Guergis and Jaffer shows that the period in which this piece was written was, indeed, a chequered point in both of their lives, separately and together. As far as I am aware, they are both still married to each other. Jaffer has obtained his MBA and Guergis, her law degree. Other things being equal, they should have something substantive to contribute to public life.

Helena Guergis has now been interviewed by two of Canada's best-known journalists – both, as it happens, named Peter.

On August 6, the former minister of state for the status of women was the subject of a question-and-answer piece by Peter C. Newman, for *Macleans Magazine*, the publication he once edited. Newman, now 81, has written numerous books and articles about Canada's establishment, including such as John Diefenbaker, Conrad Black and Brian Mulroney. His treatment of his subjects has often been considered controversial, but his research has been meticulous, if not occasionally almost over-the-top.

And CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge did an extended television interview back on May 10, with Guergis.

Both Peters picked up on themes worth exploring, in trying to understand the Guergis/Jaffer story and the ramifications it holds for Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the federal Conservatives.

Toward the end of the Mansbridge interview, Guergis pled emotionally for understanding by pointing out that she was a Christian and that she believes in forgiveness.

In the *Macleans*'s interview, Newman pointed out that “on one occasion, Mr. Harper came over to you in the Commons and sounded encouraging. Can you remember his exact words?”

Guergis' response: “I said, ‘if you sit here, I don't know if I'm strong enough not to start crying,’ and he just sat quietly for a minute. Then he said there had been a lot of bad stories written about him in the past and that I should just keep my head up high and I'd get through this sort of thing. He was trying to reach out to me. At least that was what I thought.”

The Newman interview also revealed Guergis' assertion that Harper had agreed to a meeting with her recently – then cancelled it when she said she was not prepared to talk, in that session, about her husband (former MP Rahim Jaffer, under fire for, among other things, attempts at unregistered lobbying.)

Guergis also noted that Harper had advised her: “Helena, you shared something with me about your marriage. From one friend to another, you need to know what your husband is doing.”

I am grateful for these two interviews, because they provide important clues that are vital in understanding a range of faith, political and personal interfacing that help shape public life in Canada.

Please bear with me while I take them one at a time.

1. The Guergis/Jaffer narrative has the makings of either a great tragedy or a love story of biblical proportions. Helena Guergis and Rahim Jaffer could benefit, if they have not already done so, from a close reading of the story of Ruth and Boaz – an Old Testament saga of inter-racial, inter-religious and intercultural cross-pollination. Harper, if he was quoted correctly, gave Guergis some very good advice. By God’s grace, it could sustain both herself and her husband, during the hard times, including the not-too-distant birth of their first child. Someday, I hope to find out more about Guergis’ Christian faith and Jaffer’s adherence to the Ismaili form of Islam. Meanwhile, I would refrain from asking them about it, on the basis that they need to work with each other, not with an inquisitive journalist.
2. Harper also did the right thing when he cancelled his meeting with Guergis after she was not prepared to talk with him about her husband. A spouse in politics is not responsible, alone, to his or her partner. Unanswered questions about one’s spouse’s business associates, especially if they are rumoured to relate directly or indirectly to illicit activity, may well result in the need to put a distance between a government, a political party, a politician and or all of the above. To that extent, life isn’t always fair, but God’s grace can prevail.
3. Guergis will be wise if she takes her own advice and keeps on asking for – but not demanding – a meeting with Harper. But she should do so quietly and without fanfare, so that the prime minister and his advisors will not feel intimidated. There might or might not be a good time to meet. Let the opportunity arise naturally, not by force.

It may well be that Guergis and Jaffer will wait many years before gaining the kind of acceptance that had marked the first few years of their separate and joint political experience. But they have a few things going for them.

Since his involuntary departure from politics, Jaffer has gained a master’s degree in business administration and, along with that, a grounding in some of ethical precepts that are so important in corruption-free public and corporate life.

And, they have a family coming along. They will be responsible to role model for their progeny, the highest and best values of their respective and shared heritage. That is a privilege worth nurturing.

They need to keep in touch with their political, familial and spiritual cohorts. And they need to avoid those who would drag them into situations that would undermine the values that have provided them with their sustenance thus far.

Any political movement that can keep touch with the commonly-held spiritual values of its participants will stand well against the kind of corruption that comes of overly-extended pragmatism. It takes discipline but it is worth the effort.

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