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Ottawa Watch 43: Locker rooms and a one-trick pony

By Lloyd Mackey

Some of the tensions among faith-based politicians of the Conservative and Reform parties in the 90s have long faded into history. But some “secret” Mulroney tapes provided by then-prominent analyst Peter C. Newman, help to place those tensions into context.

The release of *The Secret Mulroney Tapes* by Peter C. Newman, followed closely by the public launch of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy, provides some interesting sidelights for that part of the Christian community that tries to take its politics seriously.

The day after the latest Newman book’s release, Mulroney explained some of its salty and irreverent quotes by suggesting it was “locker room language” that “all of us use” at one time or another.

Mulroney had plenty to say, much of it derogatory, about both colleagues and adversaries, on the tapes that Newman recorded, many of them in late night phone conversations with the former Tory prime minister.

His targets ranged from Pierre Elliott Trudeau to Kim Campbell, from Joe Clark to Pat Carney.

And he had a couple of barbs in there for Preston Manning and the Reform party.

Manning, he suggested, had set himself up like a “Virgin Mary” who was not like the rest of us. If we were to juxtaposition that implied Manning “setapartedness” with the idea that “all of us” use locker room language, Mulroney could be accused of being more accurate than he might have realized.

Manning, on or off the record, has always been fastidiously careful about what he says, particularly regarding either colleagues or opponents. While he has a keen wit and a sense of the historic, he believes that part of doing politics “Christianly” is to closely follow the biblical injunction to be “as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves.”

As to the Reform Party, Mulroney seemed mystified about the growth of the Conservatives’ western-based competitor. He suggested that Reform was a “one-trick pony” that would eventually run out of steam.

Keep in mind these comments were made in the late 80s or early 90s, during the second term of Mulroney’s prime ministerial tenure.

During that time, I faced my own hurricane from Christian Tories who were angry that I had taken a part time contract to edit *The Reformer*, the party's newspaper. While I am sure that Mulroney was hardly aware of my existence, I was well aware that some of those whom he affectionately described as his "God squad" were prepared to communicate his displeasure to any of their fellow Christians involved with this "one-trick pony."

That was then and now is now. In due course, the two rival parties worked their way toward the merger that has placed their successor into the tenuous but unquestioned position of "government in waiting."

But the comments that Mulroney made back then help to explain why that merger was so difficult. Mulroney and Manning have two different and contrasting ways of communicating. A psychologist might describe Mulroney as a "type A" extrovert and Manning as a bright, articulate but shy and cautious introvert.

That was why hearing the announcement about the establishment of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy, hard on the heels of the release of *Secret Tapes*, gave me the sense that what had gone around was coming around.

The Centre is vintage Manning and, in my modest view, will permit him to do his best work. More than that, however, it will allow him to recruit many more people and affinity groups over the next decade or two, to the cause of careful research, thinking and communication in the interests of a more effective Canadian democracy. And I look forward to seeing a number of Christian universities being pulled into the process.

And the following might be too much to hope for, but let's suggest it for fun, anyway.

I hope that Manning will be able to persuade Mulroney and Newman to make available some of the more congenial and constructive secret tapes, for those higher purposes.

Just a thought.

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