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Liberals on the eve of destruction?

The story
so far...

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On the brink of election day the political winds of change seem as inevitable as the changing seasons. Few are questioning the wisdom that Brian Mulroney will be Canada's next Prime Minister, although some may question whether it will be wise. The only question that remains for political hacks to decipher is whether or not it will be a rout.

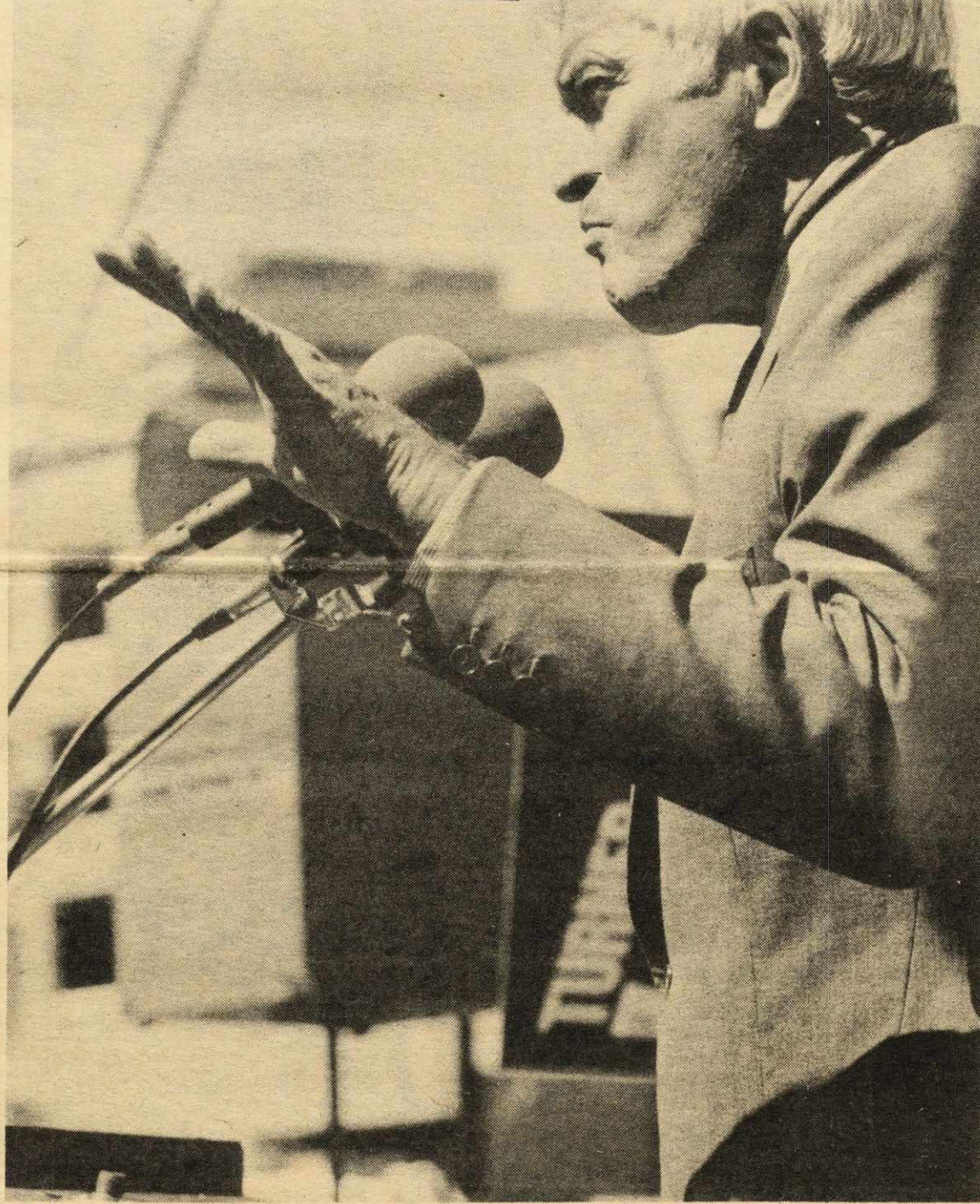
The election campaign that started in early July had promised a closer race as two untested leaders played see-saw with the polls. Inevitably though, it was as much Prime Minister John Turner's to lose as the Tories' to win.

The advance billings had illustrated an epic struggle. After nine years on the political sidelines, the Liberals' messiah in exile had returned to reawaken a party that seemed destined for a long slumber in Canada's political history. As John Napier Turner's coronation ground to its pre-ordained conclusion, public opinion polls showed Liberal fortunes steadily rising and overtaking what seemed an invincible Conservative lead.

Buoyed by the sudden change in fortunes, the Liberals wasted no time in dissolving Canada's 32nd parliament and plunging the country into a long overdue election that seemingly everyone was salivating for.

Calling the summer election was indeed a gamble for the Grits. The country was in a volatile mood politically. Canadians were uncertain of the economic future after struggling through a recession with massive unemployment and high interest rates. As people were losing their jobs, their homes, their businesses and farms, parliament was often hamstrung with acrimonious debate and procedural manoeuvres designed to slow down what the opposition saw as a government stomping on their rights. While unemployment climbed up as high as 13 per cent, the government was preoccupied with Pierre Trudeau's self-appointed mission of bringing home the constitution.

Five years of political frustration came to an end for Canadians on July 9 when Turner called the election to "clear the air"—to give a new government a "fresh mandate" as soon as possible. Turner seemed confident that the new government would be his.



Prime Minister Turner addresses the crowd at Halifax's Historic Properties.

Peter Katsihtis, Dal Photo.

The Grits counted on the momentum of the leadership convention to take them through the next two months to the Sept. 4 election date. While both the Conservative Party and the NDP were amassed at the starting line, the Liberals found themselves in disarray. With all attention focussed on the convention, Turner inherited a party with no election plans. There was little time to assemble a campaign team, coordinate policy and recruit the kind of high-profile candidates the Liberals needed in order to put a new face on the party.

A new face was desperately needed, for the public was clearly hungry for change. Turner's challenge was to convince the electorate that his Liberals were different and at the same time remain loyal to the party's past.

The election had hardly been called when ghosts of Liberal past quickly caught up with Turner. Canadians were outraged by an agreement previously reached between Turner and Trudeau to appoint 18 Liberal faithful to patronage posts on the same day the election was called. The appointments could not have

been made earlier without the government losing its majority in the Commons. The massive number of appointments immediately tainted the campaign and put the Grits on the defensive.

Error compounded error for the Turner team. After reluctantly agreeing to a televised leaders' debate, Turner put in a poor performance against both Broadbent and Mulroney. At one point he criticized Manitoba's relatively low unemployment rate stating it was the result of an exodus of people from the province. In fact the situation was the

reverse and Turner later apologized.

Playing the role of the "tactile politician," Turner was caught on camera patting the behind of party president Iona Campagnola. The act sparked debate on his behaviour and his sincerity on women's issues. Again Turner later apologized.

Mid-campaign the Liberals recruited Senator Keith Davey to help out with their faltering campaign. Within two days Davey became campaign chair, and the man Turner originally appointed to the task—Bill Lee—stepped down. Davey had long been associated with Trudeau's electoral victories and was nicknamed the "reignmaker." The old Liberal party was visibly moving in on Turner's "fresh face" image.

The Liberals were not the only party to make mistakes. Immediately after the starting pistol went off, the Tories were caught debating the costs of their own election promises. A leaked document belonging to Conservative finance critic John Crosbie suggested Mulroney's election promises would cost as much as \$20 billion. Mulroney challenged the figures and said the cost of Tory programmes would be off-set by increased government revenues from an economy Mulroney thinks he can set straight.

About a week later the Conservative leader had a lot of explaining to do after making statements to a reporter he thought were off the record.

After denouncing Liberal patronage appointments as "vulgar...shameful and scandalous," Mulroney told a reporter aboard his campaign plane: "Let's face it, there's no whore like an old whore. If I'd been in Bryce's (Liberal MP Bryce Mackasey) position, I'd have been right in there with my nose in the public trough like the rest of them." When reminded that he once told a partisan Tory crowd that he saw a lot of potential senators in the audience, Mulroney was quoted as saying: "I was talking to Tories then, and that's what they wanted to hear. Talking to the Canadian public during an election campaign is something else." Mulroney later apologized for the remarks, claiming he wasn't serious about them at the time.

The only campaign devoid of major errors was that of the New Democrats. The party faced its biggest test in years with polls indicating at the start of the campaign that they would lose all but a handful of their seats. Calling the NDP the choice for ordinary Canadians, Broadbent brought his party back from the brink of extinction. Only a year before a nervous party membership had publicly ruminated about the future of Broadbent's leadership.

Labelling the two frontrunners "the Bobbsey twins of Bay Street," the NDP emphasized the lack of difference in policy between the Conservatives and the Liberals.

The presence of an active women's vote paved the way for a leaders' debate on women's issues. Although Broadbent clearly stole the show from the other two leaders, most

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