FEATURE

Mulroney: 'the lost years'

BY MARIE-FRANCE LEBLANC

Saints should be judged guilty until proven innocent, argued George Orwell. Does this also apply to politicians, especially when they are leaders of a country?

This is the question that many have been posing since John Sawatsky wrote *The Politics of Ambition*, a biography of Brian Mulroney which has been raising eyebrows across Canada.

Sawatsky is a journalist well known for his in-depth research. This is what, he says, makes this critical tome so enlightening.

Critics accuse him of having painted fine cracks on an otherwise smooth veneer. They say the book adds nothing new to the mystery of the Canadian Prime Minister. Everyone knew he was a womanizer and a boozer of sorts, so why write a book about it.

The Mulroney camp is going to great lengths to minimize this book which they say attacks the man without giving him a chance to explain himself. Mike Duffy writes, "The only problem is, Sawatsky, unlike other reporters has never exchanged a single word with Brian Mulroney!"

So, I asked Mr. Sawatsky what he thought of these harsh criticisms. "There is a campaign going around to discredit the book which was started by Mulroney's network. [The campaign] itself has been discredited."

But he says the campaign has been picked up by journalists in Mulroney's circle, such as Mike Duffy. They do not like what he wrote and that it was written by an outsider.

The lack of corroboration by Mulroney of the research in book means nothing, Sawatsky says.

"How much time does a journalist get with the Prime Minister of Canada. An hour if you are lucky. And even if I had an hour, I couldn't have gotten him to grade six given the depth of the research. So really it makes no difference."

The only thing Sawatsky allows is that it might have answered a few critical questions here and there.

Having answered these questions to my satisfaction I lead the interview in the direction of "Brother Bones'" years in Nova Scotia.

I really did not learn anything that wasn't in the book, but for those of you who do not wish to spend $35 to read about it I will let you in on what he did tell me.

THE MARITIME YEARS

Sawatsky says that although Mulroney appears to have gone through three dark periods in his life, the darkest was his year at Dalhousie University. "He couldn't deal with Dalhousie and he flunked."

It wasn't Nova Scotia which hindered him, it was the freedom of living in a city and attending a liberal institution. Until his sojourn in Halifax, Mulroney had lived with his parents in Baie Comeau, gone to a strict Catholic boarding school in New Brunswick, and attended St. Francis Xavier University.

In those days St. FX still maintained strict curfews, dress codes, and mandatory chapel attendance twice a day. Mulroney thrived under this regiment, without it he was lost.

Sawatsky says the Prime Minister got to know the sororities and the watering holes of the city more than he did his books.

When pressed Sawatsky said his research showed Mulroney was also a regular at the Lord Nelson Beverage Room and at the Zeta Psi Fraternity house.

"It was at Zeta Psi of all places where he made a phone call to John Diefenbaker the Prime Minister of Canada just to show that he could do it."

Mulroney felt he could pull off all the socializing and school. "He was going to have a few more flings," Sawatsky says.

But then he went to the hospital. In itself, this is very interesting because Mulroney was very secretive about the whole thing. To this day people are denying that he was ever in the hospital.

Sawatsky pulls out a memo written by a good friend of Mulroney's at Dal, and addressed to Pat MacAdam, one of the people that today is denying that Mulroney was ever at the Victoria General. The memo explains why Mulroney missed the executive PC meeting in Montreal that March in 1960.

It read "Brian was unable to [attend] the executive meeting last Saturday in Montreal. I guess he had some type of minor operation."

Sawatsky comments that even his closest friends did not know why exactly he was in the hospital. This has led to much speculation.

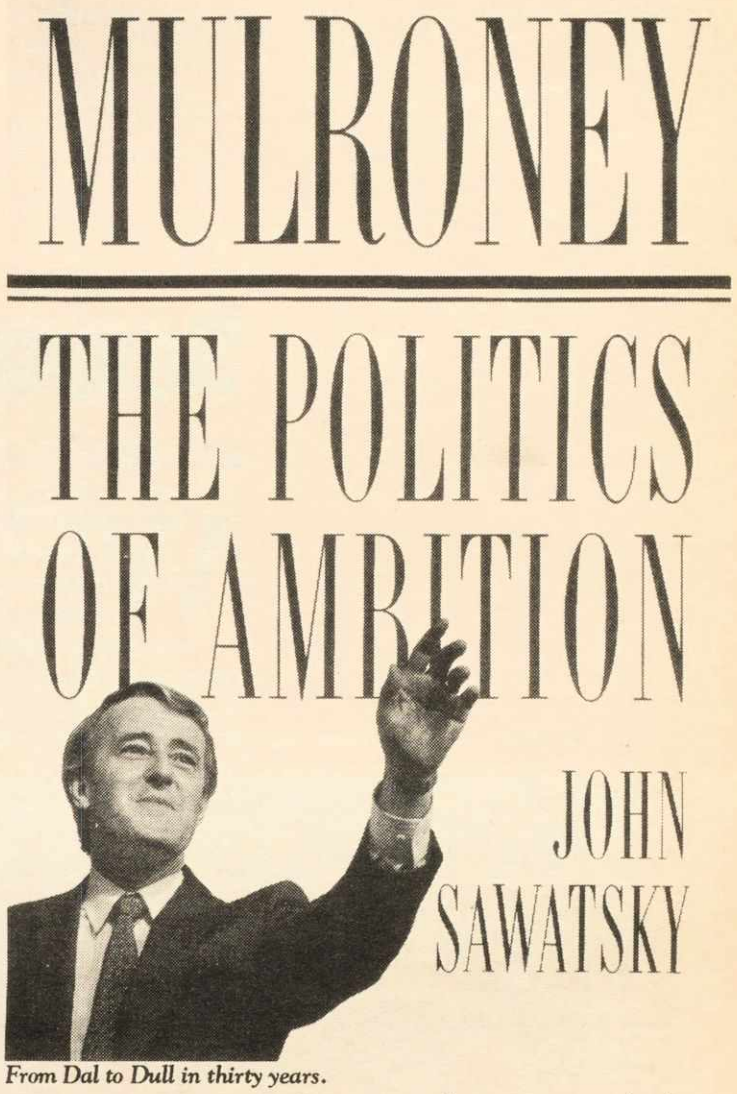
The real story, says Sawatsky is how Mulroney chose to overcome this "Lost year."

"Failing is something he can't deal with - in his own psyche he believes he can do anything in the world and nothing can stop him – that the potential is unlimited. And so, his way of dealing with the Dalhousie failure was in wiping the record."

Sawatsky says that even today Mulroney never talks about Dalhousie, and that in some strange way he doesn't even realize that it existed.

When asked whether taking the polish off the now-elect Prime Minister is a wise thing Sawatsky answers that he thinks his book has humanized Mulroney. He would vote for him, because he now has more respect for the man.

Getting back to our original question, should Mulroney be judged guilty on the basis of this book or until proven innocent? Sawatsky says this book does not prosecute Mulroney but rather humanizes him in the eyes of the reader.



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