

Reflections on John Napier Turner

David Kilgour

Rotary Club of Ottawa West

Travelodge Hotel, 1376 Carling Avenue

Ottawa

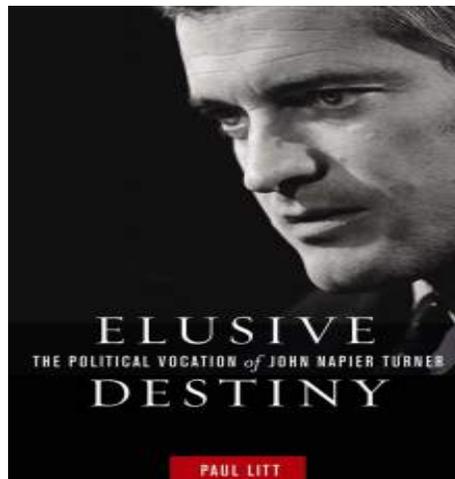
3 January 2012

John Turner is an Ottawa son, who, with his mother and sister Brenda, moved to a rented duplex on Daly Avenue in Sandy Hill at the age of four in 1933. His widowed mother, Phyllis Turner from B.C., became a highly-respected economist in the 1930s when there were very few women in the upper reaches of our public service. She had taken her children to the national capital via B.C. from Britain after her husband's death at 28 from thyroid complications. John attended three different schools in this city before, at age 16, accompanying his mother and sister to Vancouver to join her new husband (Frank Ross).

At UBC, Turner studied political science and economics (the latter perhaps from his mother's influence). In 1949, he won a Rhodes scholarship and went to Oxford to study law and then to the University of Paris to work on a doctorate. He was admitted to the Quebec bar in 1954. In 1962, he was nominated as the Liberal candidate in the downtown Montreal riding of St-Laurent-St-Georges and won handily. In 1965, he joined Prime Minister Lester Pearson's cabinet as minister without portfolio. By 1967, he was Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

When his riding disappeared with electoral redistribution in 1968, he put the interests of his young family ahead of running in a constituency more politically useful for a prospective national party leader in Quebec or B.C. by running in Ottawa-Carleton, where they lived and where he'd grown up.

Elusive Destiny



The recently-published biography of Turner, *Elusive Destiny* (UBC), by Paul Litt, a historian at Carleton University, is important from many standpoints, but perhaps mostly because it opens the

eyes of those of us who were misled about events and motivations by journalists and Turner's rivals within and outside the Liberal party. Readers now understand the often submerged challenges Turner faced in public life. Certainly, as one who has known him for half a century, I found that many of my own misapprehensions were corrected.

Here are four significant instances where Litt corrects the record by presenting less known material favourable to the subject of the book:

1968 LEADERSHIP

The conventional opinion is that Pierre Trudeau, as a Quebecker and Justice Minister, was an obvious choice to replace Lester Pearson as Liberal leader and prime minister. In hindsight, Turner was probably more sensitive than Trudeau to the seriousness of the then rising separatist movement in Quebec and had noted— a dangerous heresy in political circles at the time-- that, in future, government spending must be closely linked to revenues. Litt describes how the two rivals differed:

Turner was married with children; Trudeau was a bachelor who played the field. Turner was strikingly handsome in a conventional fashion; Trudeau had unconventional looks that were oddly beguiling. Turner was gregarious; Trudeau, a loner. As Keith Davey put it later, "Turner wanted to be loved. Trudeau just wanted to be left alone." Even though Turner was a Rhodes scholar and Trudeau an unsuccessful applicant for the award, Turner came across as the jock, Trudeau as the intellectual.

1984 Election

The general conclusion is that Turner, whose lead over the Tories in opinion polls after becoming Liberal leader in June 1984 soared as high as eleven points, lost the election to Brian Mulroney during the English leaders TV debate when Canadians saw him say that he "had no option" but to make Trudeau's nineteen patronage appointments, including seventeen sitting Liberal MPs, to the Senate, judiciary and other positions. Mulroney eloquently delivered what the CBC described as "the verbal equivalent of a sucker punch" by forcing a somewhat flustered Turner to defend the appointments and then by making his rival pay for his predecessor's legacy. Mulroney effectively argued, "You had an option sir to say 'no' and you chose to say 'yes' to the old attitudes and the old stories of the Liberal party. That sir, if I may say respectfully, that is not good enough for Canadians". He was deemed the clear winner of the debate. As prime minister from 1984 until 1993, Mulroney's patronage practices differed little from Trudeau's.

Turner erroneously but in good faith had accepted an ill-conceived constitutional opinion from the Clerk of the Privy Council, which concluded that if Trudeau as prime minister appointed so many Liberal MPs to patronage posts that the government lost its majority in the Commons then the Governor General might not be able to call on Turner to become prime minister. Turner therefore agreed to make the appointments after he had been called on by the Governor General to replace Trudeau as prime minister and formed a new cabinet. Trudeau insisted he put the commitment in writing.

There were many other negative factors at play for the Liberals in the '84 campaign, including a premature snap election, a less effective campaign organization, a strong desire for change among

voters, overblown expectations about Turner as an ideal alternative to Trudeau, which the media began to ridicule, and Trudeau's lack of support for his successor. As Turner later revealed, the election disaster was partly due to inheriting a party "without policy, without preparation, without recruitment." The tide went out for the Liberals, leaving them only forty MPs in the new House and its new leader as the scapegoat. Having resolved to rebuild the party as leader, Turner faced four subsequent hellish years.

Trudeau and Chrétien 1984-88

In late 1984, Trudeau told a reporter that the party was in fine shape and would have won the election if he'd remained as leader. Jean Chrétien's campaign to unseat Turner began soon after the election; Chrétien played the heir apparent role far more actively than Turner ever had. Party president Iona Campagnola warned that "Mr. Chrétien must follow the example of Mr. Turner when Pierre Trudeau won the leadership." Both Trudeau and Chrétien criticized Turner's conditional acceptance of the Meech Lake Accord, the latter's supporters also using it to appeal for support against Turner at the party leadership review in November 1986. Trudeau's close friend Marc Lalonde wrote all 3500 delegates to the convention, asking them to vote for review. The party's historic support for its leaders was under siege from both former colleagues. Intra-party mutinies and feuding would cost it dearly well beyond 1988.

FREE TRADE

The Mulroney government's proposed Canada-US Free Trade Agreement quickly became the dominant issue of the 1988 general election and incidentally Turner's finest hours in public life. He set the tone with his statement, "It's not a trade deal-It's the 'Sale of Canada Act'." In mid-October, he added, "Any country that is willing to surrender economic levers inevitably yields levers politically and surrenders a large chunk of its ability to remain a sovereign nation. I don't believe our future depends on our yielding those economic levers of sovereignty to become a junior partner in Fortress North America to the United States."

When seven million Canadians watched his English television debate with Mulroney on the issue, they saw a "new" Turner who was confident, knowledgeable and patriotic. His party soared temporarily in the opinion polls to 43 per cent, with the Tories at 31 per cent and the NDP at 22. In response, the Tories used the rest of the campaign to attack Turner's character, even calling him a 'traitor'. Businesses, many US-owned, donated \$10 million to their campaign.

On election day, the Liberals doubled their seats from 1984 to 82, obtaining almost 32 per cent of the votes cast nationally, with the Conservatives receiving 43 per cent and the NDP 20.4 per cent. The Liberals and NDP had split the anti-free trade vote and the Tories, with 170 MPs, had a majority to pass the agreement. In conceding the election, Turner noted, "(I have) promoted my vision of a strong, independent and sovereign Canada and have done so with all my heart and all my strength... I have no regrets at all."

Conclusion

Paul Litt concludes:

..Turner was honest and conducted his political dealings honourably. He was, like most politicians, ambitious and competitive...Yet he had also entered public life due to a sense of duty, a love of country and a desire to give something back. He had democratic sensibilities and the courage-if not foolhardiness-to run an open party...He had exceptional talents, a middle-class upbringing with a taste of wealth, and the best education available, yet he wanted to pass as one of the guys. He was a man's man conditioned by 1940s gender conventions yet was influenced profoundly by the many strong women in his life. He was ambitious and driven yet caring and thoughtful of others, gregarious and fun loving yet private and self-sufficient. He was a small and large "I" liberal ... a buddy of both Duplessis and Diefenbaker. He could be ribald and profane yet was guided by an ethical compass oriented by Catholicism and theological reflection.

Litt's conclusion is correct. John Turner is certainly human, but he is a quintessential Canadian, who loves this country, and was a highly principled national leader, diminished by so-called political allies.

Permit me to end on a personal note. Litt's book opened my eyes fully to the man my brother-in-law is, the person I somehow too often missed seeing. History will be kinder to him than some of his supposed friends were. Certainly, I see him now with new, more understanding and admiring eyes.

Thank you.