

ESCAPING THE LEADERSHIP MUSKEG

Christopher Sands

OVERVIEW

- Prime Minister Jean Chrétien of Canada has announced his intention to retire from politics in February 2004, responding to pressure from the public and his own party.
- This decision follows that of several other national and provincial party leaders who have stepped down (or were forced out) in the past year in response to the Canadian public's still-unsated appetite for change.
- Chrétien's prolonged departure places Canadian politics and even bilateral relations with the United States into apparent limbo. As a result, Ottawa is losing many of the opportunities presented by the war on terrorism for enhancing its influence with the United States
- Canada may pay a more immediate price in economic terms during this period through an inability to resolve the ongoing softwood lumber dispute.
- Chrétien's successor—likely to be his former finance minister Paul Martin, but this is not certain—will inherit a restive Canadian electorate and a relationship with the United States suffering from neglect.

Chrétien's Long Farewell

On August 21, Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien announced that he planned to retire as Liberal Party leader in February 2004. His reluctant statement came after it began to appear that he could lose a vote of confidence in his leadership at a Liberal Party convention scheduled for February of next year because polls showed that a growing majority of the Canadian public wanted him to retire. It was a poignant moment that seemed to signal the end to a long career in Canadian politics. In 2004, Chrétien will also celebrate the 40th anniversary of his first election as a member of the Canadian Parliament in 1963, setting a new record for longevity in the House of Commons.

This anniversary was one of the official reasons given for the slow 18-month farewell. However, two of the unofficial reasons cited by sources within the Liberal Party are more compelling. First, Chrétien is said to hope that during this period, his archrival, Paul Martin, will somehow stumble and allow another candidate—almost anyone will do—to supplant Martin as the heir apparent and most likely next prime minister of Canada. Second, after nearly 10 years as prime minister and a modest record of accomplishment, Chrétien is believed to want more time in power to strengthen his policy legacy.

There are two groups affected by Chrétien's attenuated departure: first, ordinary Canadians; and second, many Americans. This is because it will be difficult to move ahead on the Canadian domestic

agenda, let alone bilateral political issues, while rivals jockey for position in the race to succeed the prime minister. And this battling for position will make it difficult for Chrétien to accomplish anything he would like as a political legacy despite the time he has given himself. Ironically, Canadians, Americans, Chrétien's eventual successor—and even Chrétien himself—will be best served if Martin is able to quickly consolidate his position as the likely successor by scaring off potential candidates for the Liberal leadership early. But to do so, Martin will have to overcome the inertia that has plagued Canadian politics for more than a decade.

Bogged Down

The word *muskeg* comes from the Algonquin, as their term for the grassy bogs that characterize large stretches of the rugged Canadian Shield and northern terrain. Geographers estimate that there are 1,295,000 square kilometers of this mushy, peat-rich marshland in Canada—larger than the land area of California, New York, and Texas combined.

Unlike the swamps of the Louisiana bayou or Florida's everglades, muskeg is made up of soggy ground rather than water. It forms because organic matter does not have time to fully decompose in the short summer thaws of northern Canada. Instead, the muskeg builds up year after year as fallen leaves, withered grasses, and dead animals rot beneath a blanket of hardy moss and, most of the year, snow and ice.

The current state of political leadership in Canada brings to mind words like *morass*, *mire*, and *bog*. But muskeg describes the peculiar Canadian variation on this theme best. With a weak and fragmented political opposition, Parliament is a place of apparent calm much of the time, but beneath the surface the slow decomposition of leaders continues—before freezing and then beginning again, year after year.

A Market for Muskeg

American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, in his 1990 book on Canada and the United States,

Continental Divide (Routledge, 1990), wrote that the United States is a country of revolution, while Canada is a country of evolution. The histories of these two neighbors, and their political cultures, have been shaped by their beginnings. The United States chose to revolt against Britain, and subsequently Americans adopted the slogan, “throw the bums out!” in regular elections that brought changes in leadership, some of which have been dramatic. Canada was formed out of the loyal

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colonies of British North America, and became a conservative, risk-averse place that does not celebrate an “independence day,” having gradually evolved into an autonomous nation, eventually shedding colonial status but retaining the monarchy to this day (Queen Elizabeth II still proudly holds the title, Queen of Canada).

This traditional voter temperament may explain the longevity of Canadian prime ministers. In 135 years, Canada has had 20 prime ministers (the United States had 26 presidents over the same period). Of these 20, only 9 served longer than a single five-year mandate, and 8 held office for less than 18 months. Those 9 long-serving prime ministers—Macdonald, Laurier, Borden, King, St. Laurent, Diefenbaker, Trudeau, Mulroney, and the incumbent Chrétien—have governed Canada for 113 of the past 135 years.

Canadian prime ministers can hang onto power if they can first consolidate their control over the federal government's patronage. For change-averse voters supporting the government party, the prime minister can provide funds for local infrastructure and provincial social services as well as federal grants for job training, university scholarships, and large public works projects. As the government in Canada with the most constitutional taxation authority, and therefore the largest revenues,

Ottawa can elbow its way into virtually every corner of Canadian life through discretionary spending. For party members loyal to the prime minister, there are myriad appointments available, from obscure boards and commissions to diplomatic posts, from federal judgeships to the Canadian Senate. All pay well, and none requires confirmation—the prime minister’s signature is all that is required for an individual to receive one of these plum positions.

For members of Parliament in the governing party, the prime minister also decides who will serve in

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cabinet, and who will chair parliamentary committees and subcommittees. Prior to an election, the prime minister must sign the nominating papers of every candidate for the party in every riding—and may refuse to sign, even over the objections of local riding associations or local voters, even for a long-serving incumbent MP. Political parties play a large role in Canadian campaign finance, and as head of the party, the prime minister can also affect the flow of funds to individual campaigns, forcing a candidate to struggle more to raise independent funding or go into debt in order to win office, even after his or her nomination papers have been signed.

This combination of carrots and sticks has allowed successful prime ministers to avoid challenges and remain in charge for long periods. Over the past 35 years, however, Canadian political power has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the prime minister. In his magisterial book, *Governing from the Centre* (University of Toronto Press, 1999), New Brunswick academic Donald Savoie writes, “Agencies such as the Privy Council Office, the Finance Department, and the Treasury Board exert their influence horizontally, deciding

how policy is made and how money is spent. These organizations, instituted to streamline Ottawa’s planning processes, instead telescope power to the Prime Minister and weaken the influence of ministers, the traditional line departments, and even Parliament, without contributing to more rational or coherent policy-making.”

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No Muskrat Love Here

Chrétien’s rival is former finance minister Paul Martin Jr., who was fired by the prime minister on June 2. Now an MP from Montreal, Martin continues to sit in the government benches but has spent the past several weeks giving speeches across the country in which he sets out his policy vision.

To understand Paul Martin Jr., it is important to know about his father’s thwarted ambition. Paul Martin Sr. was also a Liberal Party stalwart who hoped to become the party leader. First elected to Parliament in 1935, Martin Sr. joined cabinet in 1945. He served as minister of health, where he was responsible for establishing Canada’s national health care system, and as foreign minister. Martin Sr. ran for the Liberal Party leadership three times: in 1948, when he lost to Louis St. Laurent; in 1958, when he lost to Lester Pearson; and in 1968, when he lost to Pierre Trudeau. Each time, he was favored to win, and each time he was beaten by a rival who went on to become prime minister. Each defeat was harder than the last. Pearson was, after all, not a party veteran but a former civil servant who first stood for election in 1948. Trudeau was a wealthy intellectual who was chosen to lead the party just three years after he won a seat in Parliament.

Paul Martin Jr. eschewed a political career for many years, building up a successful career in business as head of Canada Steamship Lines, the country’s largest merchant marine operator and the dominant fleet in Great Lakes shipping. In 1988, he

was persuaded to run for Parliament to represent the working-class Montreal riding of Émard. Wealthy, successful in business, fluent in English and French, Martin seemed to be the Liberal Party's answer to then-incumbent Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, with whom he shared these qualities.

Chrétien came to Ottawa as a young MP in 1963 and served with Martin's father for five years before Trudeau appointed the elder Martin to the Senate. Chrétien proved to be a Trudeau stalwart and held nearly every major cabinet portfolio in the Canadian government at one time or another. Chrétien served as minister of national revenue; Indian and Northern affairs; treasury; industry, trade, and commerce; finance; justice; energy, mines, and resources; and external affairs (as Canada's foreign ministry was then known). When Trudeau resigned the Liberal Party leadership in 1984, Chrétien ran to replace him, but the party chose former finance minister John Turner instead. After a brief period as prime minister, Turner remained in opposition during the Mulroney years before resigning the leadership in 1990. Again, Chrétien ran for the leadership—this time, his principal rival was a successful businessman with a famous name: Paul Martin Jr. Chrétien won the leadership, and 30 years after first coming to Ottawa, Chrétien became prime minister at the head of a substantial majority government in 1993. He appointed the younger Paul Martin as his finance minister.

Together, Chrétien and Martin tackled Canada's serious fiscal crisis. In 1993, Canada had high taxes, a high national debt, and significant annual deficits. It fell to Martin to slash federal government spending, including transfers to the provinces. Behind the scenes, Chrétien forced reluctant ministers and premiers to swallow the cuts, but he let Martin bear the brunt of public responsibility for implementing this new fiscal discipline. Popular programs, from health care to education and even the state-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were affected.

The 1990s proved to be an ideal time for Canada to undertake fiscal reform. An economic boom in the United States followed a brief recession in 1992,

fueling dramatic growth in Canadian exports. By the end of the decade, 86 percent of Canada's exports went to the United States, and international trade had grown from 30 to 42 percent of Canadian GDP.

This good news led to a cruel irony for Chrétien, as polls showed that Canadians viewed Paul Martin as the ingenious economic manager responsible for the boom. International praise for Canada's fiscal management poured in, mainly honoring Martin,

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and Canada's credit rating improved sharply. Instead of poisoning the career of his rival, Chrétien had placed Martin in the position to become the government's star performer.

Martin's ambition to succeed Chrétien as party leader and prime minister, fulfilling his father's thwarted ambition, was never a secret. Rumors swirled within the party and the media that Chrétien would resign prior to the 1997 and 2000 elections—each time Chrétien stayed and led the party to another majority government. Rumors would then circulate that a frustrated Martin would quit politics—but in fact Martin worked diligently to consolidate his support within the party for an eventual leadership run. Martin's growing following gave him the aura of an heir apparent, and he was treated as such by many Canadians and foreign observers alike. In response, Chrétien temporized, at times encouraging other cabinet members to organize rival campaigns to drain away Martin's support and at other times demanding that all leadership campaigning stop.

Yet with fiscal policy reformed and the economy strong, the Chrétien government did not seem to have any substantive policy agenda after the 1997 election—drift set in, and succession politics

became the leading topic at cocktail parties and in the media coverage of the government. Then a series of corruption scandals began to emerge, one after the other, to plague the government and distract a bored press gallery.

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Marsh Gas Phantoms

None of the government scandals was proven to amount to much, but they combined to fuel a desire for a change in leadership among Canadian voters. None of the putative leadership campaigns went anywhere, but they combined to reinforce the impression that Chrétien had served for too long. Chrétien's retirement announcement taunted voters with the prospect of change that would not arrive soon enough for most.

In the past year, frustrated Canadians looked for change from all quarters—searching beyond the governing Liberals—to the four parties that make up the opposition in Parliament.

The party with the second-highest number of seats in Parliament is the Canadian Alliance. In early 2000, the party changed its name from the Reform Party of Canada in an attempt to broaden its appeal beyond its western base. This re-branding exercise was the brainchild of the party's founder, Preston Manning, who showed the courage of his convictions by also putting the leadership of the party up for a vote. Unfortunately for Manning, a majority of the party decided that if some change is good, more must be better; accordingly, they selected a new leader, Stockwell Day, to lead the party in the 2001 federal election. Day was a new face, but not a gifted politician; the Canadian Alliance gained little ground in the 35th Parliament, and panic set in among the caucus and the party at large. In March 2002, another leadership campaign saw Day replaced with Stephen Harper. Though he

has had little time to make an impression, Harper's novelty is already beginning to fade as other parties rush to replace their leaders—making Harper seem a veteran leader on the national scene.

Quebec's fish-out-of-water *Bloc Québécois* has the third-largest caucus, promoting separatism in the federal Parliament. Founded by Lucien Bouchard, the party has struggled since Bouchard left to become Quebec's premier shortly after the

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independence movement lost narrowly the 1995 referendum. Current party leader Gilles Duceppe is an uncharismatic leader with an unpopular cause (in Ottawa and English-speaking Canada, certainly), and his job has been made more difficult by the flagging fortunes of the *Parti Québécois* provincial government. Premier Bernard Landry heads a government that has been in power since 1992 and has lately been feuding with a frustrated and aging cadre of hard-line separatists within his party, signaling for many in Quebec the decline of the movement for independence—which casts doubt on the viability of the *Bloc Québécois* as well.

Another party with an uncertain future is the New Democratic Party, with just 14 seats. Alexa McDonough led the party for eight difficult years. But with old labor union leaders demanding more radical positions from the party (that often scared away mainstream voters) and antiglobalization protesters capturing young idealists, the party lost much of its grass roots organization. A group of dissidents launched a New Politics Initiative and threatened to turn it into a party or use it to take over the NDP. In June, McDonough resigned, leaving Canada's social democratic alternative to continue the debate in a future leadership convention.

It wasn't frustration that prompted former prime minister Joe Clark to announce in August that he was stepping down from the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party. Rather, it was

pressure from the party's financiers and members who were themselves frustrated that their party—the only one other than the Liberal Party ever to form a national government in Canada—has been the smallest party in Parliament since the 1993 election.

With the Alliance and the Conservatives fighting for support on the political right, and the NDP and the Bloc splitting social democratic support, the poll-driven centrist Liberals can form government with less than 50 percent support from voters at large. Not surprisingly, voter participation in Canada's general elections has fallen steadily since 1993.

Falling voter turnout means that opposition leaders can easily become trapped in the leadership musketry if they linger. So long as they remain without a realistic public expectation that they will form a government, they remain perpetually trapped by the voters and their parties in an icy mire of irrelevance that gradually decomposes their leadership hopes.

Out Across the Moor

Despairing of change at the federal level, Canadians have sought new leadership in the provinces. Of the provincial premiers who were in office when the Chrétien government was elected in 1993, only one remains: Alberta's Ralph Klein.

Some provinces have kept the same party in power when the leader changed: in Saskatchewan, Premier Lorne Calvert replaced Roy Romanow, also an NDP member; in Ontario, Premier Ernie Eves replaced Mike Harris, both Progressive Conservatives; in Newfoundland, Liberal Premier Roger Grimes replaced Brian Tobin, a rare Liberal who has shuttled successfully between federal and provincial politics.

Other provinces have opted for dramatic new directions. In British Columbia, Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell has brought tax cuts and fiscal conservatism to a province governed for several years by successive NDP governments. In Manitoba, NDP Premier Gary Doer replaced Progressive Conservative Gary Filmon, who had been the longest-serving premier in Canada when

he left office in 1998.

In Atlantic Canada, the alternating of parties in power does not necessarily lead to much change. New Brunswick chose 36-year-old Premier Bernard Lord, a Progressive Conservative, to replace Liberal Frank McKenna—although in practice, these two share similar, energetic approaches to government and promoting economic development for the province despite their different parties. In Nova Scotia, Premier John Hamm is a Progressive Conservative who replaced Liberal Russ McClellan in 1999—but here, too, the leaders are similar in approach. But where the New Brunswick duo is dynamic, the Nova Scotians have struggled to make an impression outside their province. In Prince Edward Island, Progressive Conservative Premier Pat Binns has held office since 1996 but is little known elsewhere, as was his predecessor Liberal Catherine Callbeck. PEI voters approve, though: they reelected Binns in 2000.

Quebec's Bernard Landry has not faced the voters at the head of his party, becoming premier when Bouchard resigned in 2001. But Landry was a veteran cabinet minister active in *Parti Québécois* governments in the late 1970s and was already quite familiar to the electorate. Quebecers have not given any party a third consecutive mandate since Liberal Louis-Alexandre Taschereau, who led governments between 1920 and 1936. Few expect that Landry will convince voters to part with this

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a bitter fate for Charest, who was a federal MP as a Progressive Conservative and a member of cabinet under Prime Ministers Brian Mulroney and Kim Campbell before serving as the party's leader in the dark days when it was reduced to just two seats by voters fatigued by the relentless tumult of challenging change brought to them by Mulroney. Charest's vigorous support for federalism,

particularly during the 1995 referendum, won him the leadership of the only federalist party on Quebec's provincial scene, the Liberals. But somehow the musk captured Charest, too, and his aura of inevitable leadership has gradually been composted by his performance in opposition—creating the opening for Dumont.

Peat and Repeat

None of the leadership changes by opposition parties thus far has produced a credible alternative to the governing Liberals, whose leadership convention will select the person who will inherit the prime minister's job until an election is called (the new PM can wait no later than 2005, when the current government's mandate expires).

Although Chrétien is departing the scene, he can do even more to undermine Martin's chances now than he could when he had to protect his own position. All the tools of prime ministerial patronage can be employed to strengthen Martin's rivals—including the appointment of key party organizers and parliamentary caucus members to plum positions that keep them out of the Martin leadership campaign. Chrétien's own veteran fundraisers and campaign strategists can be sent to the aid of a stalking horse candidate. As a result, although Martin remains the front-runner, his position is more precarious than it was in July.

The Liberal Party was the first to select a French Canadian leader, choosing Wilfrid Laurier in 1887. Since then, Liberals have alternated between francophone and anglophone leaders in what has become an informal rule. When Chrétien ran to replace Trudeau as leader, supporters of anglophone John Turner cited this tradition against Chrétien's candidacy—and when Turner won, the principle of alternation gained new currency. Chrétien then cited it against Martin when he defeated him for the leadership in 1990. Today, all of the alternatives to Martin who may run for the party leadership are anglophones, and depending on their ages, it may be last time that any of them can run credibly—the person who comes in second place this time may have to wait not only for the victor's retirement, but that of his likely francophone successor as well. This gives the

campaign to replace Chrétien a winner-take-all quality: whoever succeeds the party leadership wins the job of prime minister automatically and with four parties in opposition stands a good chance of winning a subsequent election; whoever loses is unlikely ever to fulfill their leadership ambitions.

Toronto-area MP Allan Rock, currently industry minister and a former minister of health and justice, will almost certainly challenge Martin for the leadership. Chrétien appears to prefer Ottawa's John Manley, a former industry minister and foreign minister who is considered the most pro-American member of cabinet. Manley responded to the September 11 attacks on the United States with sincere outrage that proved popular with the public, and partly because of this (and partly because Manley seemed to lack prime ministerial ambitions), Chrétien named Manley his deputy prime minister with lead responsibility for homeland security and relations with the United States and then gave him a second big job as Martin's replacement at the Finance Ministry. Manley, whose relations with Martin have deteriorated since Martin left cabinet, has not indicated whether he intends to run for the leadership.

Another former industry minister who may make a run for the leadership is former Newfoundland and Labrador premier Brian Tobin. The avuncular Tobin was a popular figure in the early Chrétien governments, and his humble background and populist streak seemed to match the prime minister's. He left Ottawa for the top job in his native province in 1996, but returned to federal politics and the government in 2000, clearly hoping to position himself for a shot at replacing Chrétien. Ambitious, but politically astute as well, Tobin found Martin too entrenched and warned Chrétien that no one could stop Martin from becoming prime minister without Chrétien's help. The prime minister brushed this appeal aside, and Tobin angrily resigned his seat in the House of Commons and entered the private sector in 2001. But Tobin was clearly right, and Martin continued to gain strength until he was even able to force Chrétien to announce his retirement. It is not impossible that the prime minister will turn to Tobin as a champion to challenge Martin—though whether Tobin will

judge this contest winnable at this point is another question.

Martin has steadily fortified his position within the party and with the Canadian public and has dealt fiercely with previous challengers—he used his powers as finance minister to tarnish the luster of

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potential rivals Sheila Copps, current heritage minister and MP from Hamilton, Ontario, and Lloyd Axworthy, a former foreign minister and political boss from Winnipeg, Manitoba. If Chrétien hopes to stop Martin from succeeding him, he will need to choose quickly from a field of weaker candidates and back his choice fully in order to prevail—knowing at the same time that even if he succeeds, the result will be that a relatively weak leader must lead a divided party into the next election. Such a scenario produced short-lived governments for past prime ministers like Arthur Meighan and John Turner, to name only two. While unfortunate for the career of the individual who becomes prime minister in this way, it would not represent a departure from the pattern of muskeg leadership in Canada.

I Can't, I'm Swamped

Canada's prolonged and serial leadership contests in recent years have become a preoccupation of politicians and the news media across the country. While some leadership rivals have positioned themselves in terms of image and potential marketing appeal to voters, others have sought advantage in party rules. But the striking thing about many of Canada's recent leadership debates is that they have not turned on policy differences so much as style. And where politicians have concentrated on leadership, they have been less willing to tackle difficult policy challenges. It may be that they are distracted, or it may be that they are simply risk-averse—after all, why take a position that could hurt your chances at leadership, or that a

new leader will pick you for a key post?

This can turn leaders into followers. Chrétien's tentative response to the attacks on September 11, 2001, was quickly shifted when polls showed Canadians were sympathetic to the tragedy and expected a more vigorous Canadian response. This sensitivity works to alleviate public frustration, but only to a point—where difficult issues defy a public consensus, poll-driven Canadian leaders cannot forge one.

The art of political leadership is important in forming consensus in international relations—and it is also necessary for building up political capital with important allies. President Bush demonstrated this in his address to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, bringing the international community to a fragile consensus on Iraq. But one consequence of Canada's leadership muskeg is that Canada is unlikely to join in support of the United States if the latter goes to war against Iraq—unless and until other countries have signed on to form a coalition first. The price of this would be that Canada would earn less gratitude from U.S. officials for joining a coalition last, where they might have received more by joining first. This calculation may even dissuade Canada from sending forces to Iraq at all—since Canada is incapable of making a significant military contribution, its participation in a war has no special value in advancing the national interest if it does not earn political favor with Washington.

There are some in Canada who persist in the view that foreign policy is an instrument for boosting the Canadian public's self-esteem, but even this muddled goal is unlikely to be attained by Canada's hesitancy. While there are many people in the United States who will be disappointed in Canada as an ally as a result, it is Canada that will suffer most through the loss of influence in Washington that will follow. Chrétien's shrinking influence tracks closely with the rise of Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, who has seized on the opportunity to displace Canada as the ally most respected and valued by the United States.

Canadians naturally view their national interest in good U.S. relations through the lens of economics,

rather than security, since they believe that the U.S. security guarantee to Canada is unconditional, while Canadian access to U.S. markets and investment dollars is variable. And it is on the economic front that Canadians will first notice the lost clout of their leaders. The long-running trade dispute between Canada and the United States over softwood lumber badly needs a political solution, which the flurry of ongoing NAFTA and WTO panels launched by Canada will not provide. Yet why would U.S. politicians expend political capital now to negotiate a deal with U.S. lumber interests to end the dispute? Canadian lumber interests will suffer more than their U.S. rivals if the logjam continues, and they will blame Washington—but Ottawa could do more for them if it had favors to call in from the Bush administration.

Escaping from the Leadership Muskeg

The role of leadership by the president and the prime minister in U.S.-Canada relations is similar to that of a fire department: important mainly when there are fires to put out, but not crucial every day. As a result, some will conclude that the best strategy is to wait until Canada has a new prime minister, no later than February 2004, and then begin the work of restoring Canadian influence in Washington. But this scenario holds risks for Canadians for two reasons. First, by February 2004, U.S. presidential primaries will be underway, and it will be Washington's turn to be distracted by leadership battles. This means that Canada's leadership muskeg will prevent any resort to top-level leadership in bilateral relations until as late as January 2005. Second, historically it has been in times of global crisis when Canada has gained the

most from its engagement with the United States. So if the loss of influence during this period is measured against the potential for gain, the price of Chrétien's long good-bye appears to be very high indeed.

Even worse, the Canadian leadership muskeg appears to be spreading. The pattern of long frozen periods of inactivity followed by brief moments when the decay resumes is beginning to affect Canada's relations with the United States. Citizens of both countries must hope that a new Canadian prime minister—whether Paul Martin or someone else—will lead the way out of this muskeg soon. Otherwise, the next prime minister of Canada may quickly be added to the leadership muskeg rot.

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