

The Fascination of Flora

For Flora MacDonald, Cape Breton is home, Kingston, Ont., is home and, as Canada's first woman minister of External Affairs, the world is a stage

By Stephen Kimber

Flora MacDonald's overused and much-abused 1977 Dodge Monaco eases into a parking spot in front of a row of newly renovated stone buildings on Kingston, Ontario's historic waterfront. Though the clock is nudging midnight on this frazzling, frenetic and utterly routine day that has only now reached the beginning of the middle of its end, Flora MacDonald of North Sydney, N.S., still looks as crisp and composed as she did at 10 o'clock this morning when she belatedly sat for the official portrait that will soon grace Canadian embassies all over the world. The past 15 hours have been filled to the brim with diplomacy and dignitaries, with secret cables and special pleadings, with all the serious and important stuff that falls within the purview of her new job as External Affairs minister. Before this day finally dissolves into sleep at around 3 a.m., she will also have begun to make a dent in the two bulging briefcases she brought with her from Ottawa.

But now, fortified with nothing more than a takeout hamburger and a glass of milk, she is back in Kingston for an equally gruelling weekend tending to her other job as MP for Kingston and the Islands. After a Saturday morning spent listening to the complaints of pensioners fouled up by the Ottawa bureaucracy and East Indian taxi drivers who believe they have been fired because of the color of their skin, she will meet a delegation of local Chinese businessmen for lunch, tour a flower show, visit with a newly arrived family of Vietnamese refugees, and attend the Kingston Italo-Canadian Club's annual grape festival. But all of that is hours away yet. Tonight, there is still time to drop into Muldoon's, an Irish pub, to have a beer and let her constituents know she is back in town.

"You'll love Kingston," she calls over her shoulder as she leads the way into Muldoon's. "It's almost like Cape Breton." In 1966, when she needed a refuge after her firing as national Progressive Conservative party secretary, she came to Kingston, a university town of 60,000, strategically situated 100 miles southwest of Ottawa and midway between the country's two

power centres, Montreal and Toronto. She went there at the invitation of John Meisel, head of political studies at Queen's, to handle the administrative workload, but—as in Ottawa—she quickly became an almost indispensable fixture of Kingston life. She rallied local residents to the battle to save the city's dwindling heritage from the wrecker's hammer, helped found Canada's first halfway house for women prisoners,

yells a young man. "How was Paris?" calls another. Back at her table, they come to ask for autographs and to talk. A young woman passes a note to her across the beer-filled tables. "Dear Flora," it reads, "You are much younger and prettier than in the *Whig-Standard* [pictures]. Carole." "I'm going to keep that one." Flora laughs and stuffs the note in her purse. Another fellow wants her to sign his T-shirt. The shirt, he explains proudly, has already been autographed by *Playboy's* August playmate. Flora laughs. And signs. She is, if not home, then at least as close as you can come without crossing the causeway.

In Canadian politics, this is the season of the Fascination of Flora. The

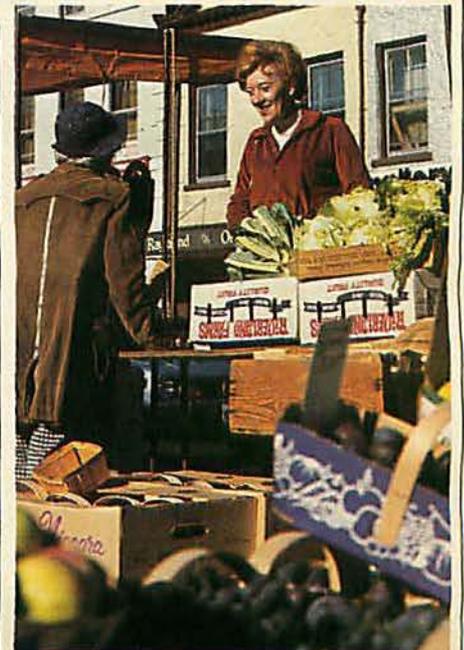


"Welcome home, Flora. How was Paris?"

lectured on politics, helped out with theatre fund-raising drives, played the part of Frontenac's mistress in a pageant commemorating Kingston's founding, and even managed to squeeze in a year as a student at Kingston's National Defence College and to serve as a founding mother of the Committee for an Independent Canada. In 1972, the people of Kingston sent her back to Ottawa as their MP.

"I just want to say that we've had our share of MPs in here and we've even had a former cabinet minister or two," Brendan McConnell, Muldoon's genial Irish owner, shouts over the din of his raucous revellers, "but we've never been able to welcome a minister of External Affairs before. Flora, come on up here and sing a song!"

As the crowd shouts and whoops and a happy drunk jumps up on stage to give her a buss on the cheek, Flora warbles "Nut-brown Maiden" in Gaelic and English. "Welcome home, Flora,"



Main-streeting never hurts

Honorable Flora, as fresh and fragile as a new spring day, smiling serenely from the cover of *Maclean's*. The smart secretary who came to Ottawa in search of a typing job at External and ended up as secretary of state for External Affairs, gracing the pages of the style section of *The New York Times*. The wily woman who is now the highest ranking female ever in Canadian politics, soon to be staring back from the cover of *Chatelaine* as Woman of the Year.

There are any number of good and trustworthy reasons for all this excitement over Flora MacDonald. In the first half-year of the government of Joe Clark, for example, while her male cabinet colleagues were busy jabbing themselves, each other, and—in many cases—the Canadian people with the wrong end of their new brooms, Flora MacDonald was sweeping so coolly and confidently into the national con-



In Kingston, everyone knows her

sciousness that it almost seemed she had been born to her role.

Indeed, when Joe Clark was trying to mould the fighting factions of his Tory caucus into a workable government after the May 22 election, he didn't even bother to ask what job Flora MacDonald wanted. He already knew. After the 1976 leadership convention, in which Flora's fanatic followers had come to Joe Clark before the third ballot to assure his victory as national leader, Flora and the new leader had discussed what she wanted in return. She had told him about thumbing through Europe in the Fifties, about the starvation she had seen while wandering through India in 1969, and about her unshakable conviction that Canada must be more than just a detached observer in the affairs of the world. What she really wanted, she allowed, was to be named External Affairs critic in his shadow cabinet. But Clark had already promised that job to Claude Wagner,



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the man he had so narrowly defeated at the convention. Though Wagner was quirky and churlish and unpredictable, Clark was convinced he still needed him to maintain the delicate fiction of party unity and, more importantly, to serve as a bridge to the voters of Quebec. *Flora could understand that? Surely, she would?* So Flora, the uncomplaining Tory soldier, settled for federal-provincial relations.

She was at the Monastère des Augustines, a Quebec convent, recharging her emotional batteries after the rigors of this spring's election campaign when Clark called to hand her the job of External Affairs minister. Their conversation lasted only a couple of minutes, but there was no need for more complex discussions. The prime minister knew what Flora would do.

She came to External, not to bury it under the weight of the bureaucracy and benign neglect that had characterized the Trudeau years, but to praise it to the heavens. She came as a woman and wasted no time shaking up External's musty old-boy network by inviting secretaries to official receptions and wondering aloud why there were so few women in positions of authority in the department. She came to show Canada's new and helpful face to the world. She went to Paris to worry over world economics, to Tokyo to take part in global energy talks, to Geneva to dress down the Vietnamese government for its treatment of the boat people, to Lusaka to search for some typically Canadian grey ground between the black and white positions of Britain and the African nations over Zimbabwe Rhodesia, and to New York to deliver a major policy speech to the world at the United Nations. But more than that, Flora MacDonald came to External to make Canadians care again about the world after a decade of navel-gazing. She came to bring to life a subject that even she concedes is not now "the first thing Canadians talk about when they get up in the morning."

All of this is the reasonable rationalization for the media's current fixation on Flora. But there is something more subtle and less obvious that is really at the heart of the Fascination of Flora. And it is simply this: If it hadn't been for a rather unsimple twist of fate in 1976, Flora MacDonald might be—no, would be—prime minister of Canada today.

Hers is the Cinderella story of modern Canadian politics. But when the pumpkin coach came it did not lead her to the prince. In February, 1976, when

she arrived at the Civic Centre in Ottawa for the PC leadership convention she had reason to believe she might even win. She was, after all, the best known candidate of her party's progressive wing. She had worked in 38 different election campaigns in 20 years and had saved more political bacon over those years than Canada Packers has pigs. The party owed her something. What's more, she carried with her the good wishes and \$10 donations of thousands of ordinary Canadians—Tories, maybe-Tories, and never-be Tories—who believed that she would make one hell of a prime minister. Surely that must count for something. She even had 350 "firm promises" of first ballot support from delegates, with more to follow when the favorite-sons and special-interest stan-



Insight's Kimber tries to keep up

dard-bearers were weeded out by the ruthlessness of the elimination process. Instead it was Flora who was turfed out. After the first ballot, she was sixth out of 11 candidates with a humiliating 214 votes. After the second ballot, she walked "with dignity and stunned serenity" to Joe Clark.

Flora MacDonald wasn't defeated by the niggly-headed neanderthals of the Tory right: They would never have voted for her anyway. She was beaten by those who called themselves her friends. They loved her as a sister and respected her as a political pro, but when they walked into the privacy of the ballot box they couldn't bring themselves to vote for her. They just couldn't believe that the Canadian people would elect a woman prime minister. But when it was over, she did not cut and run to the Liberals or the Senate like Jack Horner or Claude Wagner. Neither did she allow her private unhappiness to become the raging talk of the Ottawa cocktail circuit, like Brian Mulroney. She just went back to her former role as party stalwart. She filled up the next three years helping convince Canadians made

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uneasy by reports of Joe Clark's gaffes that there really was a government-in-waiting. By the time Clark became prime minister, there was no doubt that Flora had earned her important place in his new administration.

But what if...what if she had won the leadership? What if she had become prime minister? What kind of a leader would she have been? The incredible irony—the real reason, in fact, for the Fascination of Flora—is that although she has risen higher and against greater odds than any woman in Canadian

political history, she will never totally escape the brutal truth that she did not win the big one because she is a woman.

Flora herself does not deal in all those might-have-beens and wouldn't-it-be-nice-ifs favored by magazine writers. She is polite but firm when you broach the subject. She won't bitch about the past and she refuses to dream about some fanciful future. "I guess I still have that old Presbyterian belief in predestiny. I believe things always work out the way they should." She pauses. "Really, it's all part of my Cape Breton

heritage."

Cape Breton is the key to understanding Flora. Even her politics, a curious mixture of Scottish tight-fistedness and Cape Breton compassion, is rooted in her childhood there. Though she has been away now for nearly 30 years, she wears her Cape Breton past like a favorite dress; she shows it off to strangers in public and, in private, she takes special care to keep it fresh and new.

She was born in North Sydney in 1926 but her people have been scuffling around Cape Breton since the early 1800s when her ancestors left Scotland on the run from the brutal Highland Clearances that followed the final defeat of the Scottish clans by the English in 1746. Though the relationship has more to do with spiritual genetics than any

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What if she had won the leadership?

traceable genealogy, Flora is named for the first famous Flora MacDonald of history, who spirited Bonnie Prince Charlie—disguised as a woman—out of Scotland after the Battle of Culloden.

More directly, her world-thirstiness and the special, steady toughness that was passed over so lightly by the Tory king-makers in 1976, are products of family history. Her grandfather and great-grandfather were seagoing men of the world. Her grandmother, Eliza MacDonald, bore three of her four children at sea during a 10-year stint on the coastal trading vessels her husband commanded. When she did settle down in the North Sydney home in which Flora was born, she waited 20 more years—raising her children alone—before her husband returned from the sea.

Flora's father, Fred MacDonald, a Western Union telegrapher, was a certified eclectic who made annual forays to New York to take in big league baseball games and sample the fare at the Metropolitan Opera. He subscribed to five newspapers, haunted the local library's reference section and, at night, helped his six children—two others died in childhood—with their school lessons. He taught them to recite the famous Scottish poets, and he read aloud to them from the classics. On Saturdays, he played Pied Piper to his own brood and whatever neighbors and friends they could cajole into joining them for hymn-singing hikes. Most important, he taught Flora that she must always think for herself. She did.

The family's financial circumstances ruled out university and Flora took a job at the local Bank of Nova Scotia. Neither the job nor Cape Breton could hold her for long. She was 25



A wanderer, with world-thirstiness

when she began a working, wandering tour of Europe. In London, England, she spent her evenings soaking up the magnificent theatre of the British House of Commons and, for the first time, began to sense the excitement of political life. Back home in Nova Scotia in 1956, she threw herself into the provincial Tory campaign that brought Robert Stanfield to power for the first time. Failing to land the post-election job she really wanted—at Nova Scotia's New York Travel Office—she ended up in Ottawa, just in time to find work in the successful campaign that made John Diefenbaker prime minister.

Her job—as a secretary—was supposed to be temporary but she stayed at the Tories' national headquarters for nine years and became the heart and soul of its operation. When Tory fortunes began to collapse after the electoral debacles of 1963 and 1965 her position in the party hierarchy turned her into the connecting link among the dozens of irate Tories who wanted Diefenbaker's scalp. When Diefenbaker

ordered her fired in 1966, it galvanized the Dump-Dief movement. The firing proved to be less a humiliation than an opportunity. It moved Flora MacDonald out of the back rooms and into the floodlights. She has never looked back.

Politics is her whole life. She never married and today, aside from her family, her closest friends are also in the tight little world of Canadian politics. She cares little for possessions. All she owns, she laughs, is her car "and my overdraft at the Bank of Nova Scotia." She is forgetful about food and sleep, and her idea of a good time is an evening spent talking politics, or a weekend of more of the same back in Kingston.

Actually, Flora MacDonald would not call Kingston "home." "Home," she explained, "is still Cape Breton. When people mention home to me, that's still what I think of." But there comes a time when, like Thomas Wolfe, you can't go home again.

The good fates, the ones on which Flora relies, brought her to Kingston and Kingston brought her to Ottawa and Ottawa brought her to External Affairs. Perhaps it is still not too much to hope, given the topsy-turvy nature of Canadian politics, that those same fates will some day give the Tories a second chance. Flora MacDonald still could be one hell of a prime minister. ☒

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