

## The fight of his life: John Turner and the free trade election

Paul Litt

In this riveting excerpt from *Elusive Destiny*, his new biography of John Turner, Paul Litt captures all the drama of the 1988 election, which the Liberal leader transformed into a referendum on free trade. After the fiasco of the 1984 election, Turner finally found his voice, and his issue, in his opposition to free trade. He had a lot to overcome, including a plot in his own party to oust him in mid-campaign. But in the English leaders' debate he scored heavily on Brian Mulroney: "I believe you have sold us out." Turner called it "the fight of my life." And so it was, a gallant if ultimately losing campaign.

Dans ce fascinant extrait de sa biographie de John Turner, *Elusive Destiny*, Paul Litt évoque les tensions qui ont présidées aux élections fédérales de 1988, transformées par le chef libéral en référendum sur le libre-échange. Après le fiasco du précédent scrutin de 1984, John Turner avait finalement trouvé sa voix et défini une stratégie : l'opposition au libre-échange. Mais son parcours sera semé d'embûches, le moindre n'étant pas le complot fomenté au sein même de son parti pour l'éjecter à mi-campagne. Toutefois, il aura marqué des points dans le débat des chefs en anglais par cette réplique lancée à Brian Mulroney : « Vous avez vendu notre pays au rabais. » Cette élection qu'il a vaillamment perdue a été selon ses propres termes « le combat de sa vie ».

On October 1, 1988 Mulroney called on Governor General Jeanne Sauv  and asked her to dissolve Parliament. Election day would be November 21, seven and a half weeks away. The Tories immediately rolled out more promises based on their reading of government polling data. Ed Broadbent arrogantly told the press that the campaign would confirm the death of the Liberal Party, leaving a refreshingly simple partisan landscape of Tories versus the NDP. If this pronouncement had any effect, it was to drive hesitant Liberals back to their party, just as NDP supporters, responding to Turner's position on free trade, began to contemplate the heresy of voting Liberal. Turner's opening salvo focused squarely on the trade deal. "For two months, I have been asking the Prime Minister to let the people decide; today

he finally agreed," he told reporters. "The Liberal party is ready, our people are in place, we're set to go." Thomas Walkom, one of the journalists who had been so cynical about Turner in 1984, was impressed by his sincerity, concluding, "He has found his issue."

Turner embarked on his leader's tour, which promptly went awry in a fashion that recalled the 1984 campaign. On October 5 he arrived in Montreal to unveil a daycare policy that would create 400,000 new spaces for preschoolers. This measure was already outlined in the forty-point Liberal platform. The Montreal event was intended to flesh out details and publicize it. The announcement itself went smoothly until journalists began to question Turner and his retinue about the policy's cost. Poor communications between Turner's office and Lucie

P pin, the caucus lead on the issue, had left this salient point unspecified. Turner said it would cost \$4 billion, Raymond Garneau said that it would be less, and Peter Connolly estimated \$8-10 billion. Each pronouncement was captured on camera and edited into a comedic collage for the evening news. Three days later, after the media had a field day lampooning the Liberals' confusion, Turner called a press conference to announce that the cost of the 400,000 spaces would top \$10.1 billion over seven years.

The media concluded that the Liberals, and their leader, continued to be inept. When the Liberals subsequently presented their other policy planks, they made little impression. All the painstaking policy work of the previous months seemed to have been for naught. Connolly took responsibility

for the daycare botch-up to shield Turner, then further discredited himself by swearing at a reporter in the bar of Toronto's Royal York Hotel a few days later. Soon the rumour mill was saying that he would be replaced, again reviving memories of 1984, when Turner had switched his campaign chair in midstream.

Another knife blade sank into Turner's back on October 13, when Martin Goldfarb, the Trudeau pollster

**The Conservative campaign had begun its mechanized mobile assault on the nation. A carefully orchestrated exercise modelled on recent American presidential campaigns, it focused on staging positive images of the candidate for the television news.**

he had inherited, and Tom Axworthy, the former Trudeau aide, published *Marching to a Different Drummer: An Essay on the Liberals and Conservatives in Convention*. Equating the Liberal Party with the policies of Trudeau, the book made ominous predictions of its imminent demise under misguided leadership. Turner's support for Meech Lake "repudiated his party's intrinsic heritage," Goldfarb and Axworthy wrote. Why he did so "remains a mystery." Moreover, Turner was a right winger who had abandoned the natural Liberal constituency of the poor, immigrants, women, and labour. The book's contents and its timing seemed yet another deliberate attempt to undermine Turner. Here was Goldfarb, the Liberals' pollster, publicly criticizing the party leader. A Goldfarb employee, Senator Michael Kirby, held a key position in the Liberal election campaign. In press interviews, Goldfarb and Axworthy said they had written the book a year earlier and that Turner had since redeemed himself by endorsing different policies. But why publish outdated criticisms in the middle of an election campaign? In any event, the damage was done. The incessant leadership gossip, sustained by the abortive August putsch and the April coup attempt, was reinvigorat-

ed. Turner's leadership, it seemed, was one damned mutiny after another.

Meanwhile, the Conservative campaign had begun its mechanized mobile assault on the nation. A carefully orchestrated exercise modelled on recent American presidential campaigns, it focused on staging positive images of the candidate for the television news. Tory tour coordinators with fat event-staging manuals fanned out across the land, scouting for appropri-

ate backdrops and camera angles. The crowds who came to see Mulroney, and the journalists who followed him, were kept penned behind plastic chains at a safe distance from the leader.

Turner, in contrast, had no choice but to run a go-for-broke campaign. Henry Comor had introduced him to the wireless microphone, which allowed him to walk about onstage instead of standing at a podium. That helped expend some of his nervous energy while adding a bit of show-biz razzmatazz to his appearances. Using their knowledge of their boss's strengths, his team put him in situations where they knew he performed well. But Turner was also far more comfortable than he had been in the previous campaign. He held press conferences almost daily to announce policies and answer questions. He mixed with journalists informally. He did open-line talk shows, waded into press scrums, and left himself exposed to chance encounters. This was open-field running, and he proved sure on his feet. Part of the credit for his performance was due to his belief in his mission. On free trade Turner was confident, sincere, and passionate — all qualities that played well on television.

Unfortunately, most journalists continued to report on the old John Turner. They had previously lambasted him for having no policies, but having a platform now did him little good. Television was, of course, notoriously poor at communicating the complexities of policy. Although Turner was being enthusiastically received at his campaign stops, his strong performance on the hustings was not making it onto the nightly news. The "bumbling leader" storyline still framed media reports. On October 12, for instance, he delivered a speech in Toronto. "He's limping! He's limping! Shoot that!" a television producer exclaimed as Turner tried to manage

his back pain en route to the podium. Ignoring this interjection, Turner proceeded to deliver a fiery, passionate speech against free trade to an audience of business people who favoured the deal. *CBC News* ran a clip of a point in the speech where he misspoke the word "birthright," making it sound like "birth rate."

One night, after a long day on the campaign trail in New Brunswick, journalist Graham Fraser asked Turner to elaborate on his opposition to free trade. Turner outlined his concerns about the deal and contextualized them within the history of Canada's trade policy and its struggles for national autonomy. "Was he getting frustrated trying to get his message across?" Fraser asked. Should he shift gears and look for something that might resonate more with the voters? "We're talking Canada here," Turner replied. "If people are fed up with talking Canada, then I will have fought the last hurrah. But I will be able to look myself in the mirror for the rest of my life. I mean, there hasn't been a more important issue in terms of the direction of Canada since the war." One of the problems in discussing the free-trade deal, he continued, was that the agreement was complex, and voters needed a basic knowledge of trade

policy to understand his objections to it. Yet he had only a few seconds of air time to get his message across on television. He was still trying to hone his arguments and find the right catch-phrases to convey them. "I've been accused of going at this issue too legally for the last year and a half, but I have done that deliberately to try to keep it on a rational basis," he explained. "What I will be doing now is converting it into more human, everyday terms with examples of how it will affect people."

Turner was discovering that, if he cast his free-trade message in patriotic terms, saying that it spelled the end of Canada's independence, he got a response. If such a broad caricature were required, then so be it. Why should Canadians need to know the details of trade policy? They wanted their politicians to do the analysis and present them with the choices in the simplest terms. He began to find ways to convey his message. "It's not a trade deal — it's the 'Sale of Canada Act,'" he declared. He would then elaborate:

*I will not let Brian Mulroney sell out our sovereignty. I will not let this great nation surrender its birthright. I will not let Brian Mulroney destroy a 120-year-old dream called Canada, and neither will Canadians ... I believe that on election day, November 21<sup>st</sup>, Canadians will understand that a vote for the Liberal Party is a vote for a stronger, fairer, more independent and more sovereign Canada. I believe that Canadians are not going to vote for Brian Mulroney, a man who would be governor of a 51<sup>st</sup> state. They are going to vote for John Turner, a man who wants to be Prime Minister of Canada.*

During the previous free-trade elections of 1891 and 1911, opposition had been framed in just this way. Now Canadians would address the question again. Would their answer change?

It appeared so. An Environics poll conducted during the first week of the campaign and released on October 12 showed the Tories at 42 percent, the NDP at 29 percent, and the Liberals trailing with 25 percent. As for the best leader, 40 per cent liked Mulroney, 29 per cent chose Broadbent, and only 15 per cent preferred Turner. The Liberals couldn't afford national polling, but they were tracking twelve bellwether ridings. Results in early October showed them behind in all but one, where they clung to a tenuous 1 per cent lead. If this situation prevailed, they would end up in third place with a dozen fewer seats than they currently held. The "strange death" of the Canadian Liberal Party once again seemed imminent. The Liberals' situation was depressing and still deteriorating, with a subsequent Gallup poll putting Turner's approval rating at 8 percent.

As head of the party's strategy committee, Michael Kirby received the polling data in Ottawa, analyzed it, and passed it on to Turner with his commentary on his leader's tour. The committee, which also included Senator Al Graham and André Ouellet

**Turner was discovering that, if he cast his free-trade message in patriotic terms, saying that it spelled the end of Canada's independence, he got a response. If such a broad caricature were required, then so be it.**

(the national campaign co-chairs), John Webster (the campaign director), and Michael Robinson (a lobbyist who was the party's director of finance), was rattled by this latest news. The prospect of losing again was, for all good Liberals, unthinkable. Either delusions of grandeur or a hyperactive but misguided sense of responsibility led them, with Kirby chairing, to discuss the possibility of switching leaders in mid-campaign.

Ouellet hand delivered to Stornoway a memorandum from the committee, which Turner found waiting on his return to Ottawa on Friday, October 14. It began by saying that the

poll numbers were bad, Turner's health was poor, and the campaign was not gaining momentum. Then it laid out a number of options. Without saying so specifically, it led to the obvious conclusion that Turner should quit. He was astounded. He was confident that his bad luck couldn't last and that his message would eventually break through to the Canadian public. Besides, whoever thought the Liberals could replace their leader — even with the ever-popular Jean Chrétien — and win the election was dreaming. They would look like a clutch of mercenaries led by an opportunistic assassin with blood on his hands.

The same discussion occurred among other senior Liberals. Turner's friend Richard Alway began to receive "discreet" phone calls inquiring whether Turner would step down. Ouellet buttonholed Connolly at a meeting in Ottawa on Saturday, October 15, to make the case. Kirby and Goldfarb took Doug Kirkpatrick aside to deliver the same message. Connolly didn't know whether Ouellet was speaking for himself or for the committee and thought it best not to ask.

From his perspective, Turner was doing quite well — they need only be patient and wait for Canadians to recognize it. He told Turner about the discussion. Ouellet later phoned Turner to talk about the polls but never broached the notion of a leadership change. Turner didn't help him out by saying that he knew what he was thinking. If another mutiny were in the works, he would not pre-approve it.

That Sunday evening, Al Graham flew to Quebec City, where Turner was campaigning. Turner's aides thought he had been sent to deliver the message that Turner should step down but couldn't bring himself to go through

with it. What he did say was that Chrétien should be more involved with the campaign. Everyone knew that the Chrétien forces had been dragging their

before Chrétien had been approached to see if he would step up. “He turned it down because it is not his agenda, the candidates are not his choices, the party

message visually that Mulroney was not to be trusted and that Turner had the authority to judge. On the evening of the French debate, Peter Connolly arrived at Stornoway fifteen minutes early to take Turner to the studio. He found him pacing the driveway. “Let’s go!” Turner told him. So off they went to the studios of the local CTV affiliate, CJOH, in suburban Ottawa. Turner

**Mansbridge described the Liberal strategy meeting of the week before and reported that the committee members had considered pressuring Turner to quit, sent him a memo outlining the desperate condition of the Liberal campaign, and followed up with phone calls before backing off.**

heels, realizing that a victory would put the leadership beyond his reach for years. Turner nevertheless said that if Chrétien were willing to take the party line on Meech Lake and free trade, he was welcome to campaign. No such participation was forthcoming.

Meanwhile, CBC-TV news was hot on the trail of the latest instalment in the saga of Liberal leadership intrigue. Sheldon Turcotte, the acting anchorman for *CBC News*, then introduced regular anchorman Peter Mansbridge, dressed like a journalist in a trenchcoat. Mansbridge described the Liberal strategy meeting of the week before and reported that the committee members had considered pressuring Turner to quit, sent him a memo outlining the desperate condition of the Liberal campaign, and followed up with phone calls before backing off. A shot of what was supposed to be the memo Ouellet had delivered to Stornoway flashed up on the screen. In fact, the CBC didn’t have the memo and was just showing a facsimile. When Turner, who was in Vancouver that night, learned that the story would be broadcast, he shrugged. “Well, we’ve got a speech to make,” he said simply, and soldiered off to give it.

The effect of the Mansbridge report resonated in the days that followed as other networks presented it as news, overshadowing Turner’s tour. Meanwhile, in Quebec, Liberal MPs spooked by the polls were doing exactly what Mansbridge had accused the strategy committee of doing — discussing how to overthrow their leader. The discussions ultimately fizzled, but not

has no money, and he doesn’t want to destroy himself,” a source reported.

The discouraging polls, the rumours of another coup, and the inability of the Liberals to behave honourably when presented with the possibility of being out of power combined to devastate party morale in the middle of the election campaign. Some Quebec Liberal candidates tried to distance themselves from Turner by positioning themselves as independents. Turner, for his part, found himself in mid-campaign with senior advisers he could no longer trust. Chrétien, who was quoted in newspapers as telling Liberals he wanted this election to be “a stake through Turner’s heart,” was seeing his fondest hopes realized.

By this point in the campaign, Turner had been tripped up, knocked about, and stabbed in the back to the point that he should, by rights, have staggered and pitched face-first into the turf. Yet he kept on running. Ahead, in week four of the campaign, lay the television debates, his best chance to speak directly to Canadians and, not incidentally, to make up for his “no option” debacle of 1984. The French debate was scheduled for Monday, October 24, with the English debate to follow the next day.

André Morrow, a Montreal advertising and media consultant, took the lead in preparing Turner for the French debate. He cut off caffeine and alcohol for his charge and ruthlessly limited access to him. Morrow advised Turner to be aggressive throughout the debate and to look at Mulroney with a stern and disapproving gaze. This would send the

entered the studio building hunched over as he tried to minimize the pain that shot through his back with every step. Once at the lectern, however, he stood erect and shut out the pain for the next three hours.

The debates were structured as a series of rotating one-on-one encounters between the three leaders. Turner’s French was fluent, and he seemed at ease and in command of the issues. Against Mulroney, he took the offensive, attacking him on patronage with particularly devastating effect. Mulroney, who had planned to remain unflappably prime ministerial, was riled by Turner’s accusations, went off-script, and ended up looking raffish. Turner, in contrast, appeared bemused by Mulroney’s pompous evasions. When the reviews came in the next day, he was seen as the clear winner.

Bolstered by this success, Turner was primed for the English debate the next day, Tuesday, October 25. He was so pleased with the way the French debate had gone that he asked Morrow to prepare him for the English debate as well. Morrow advised a change of tactics. He should hold off, cultivate an image of calm and reason, then unload on Mulroney toward the end. When he arrived at the studio, Turner was cheered to see anti-free-trade demonstrators outside waving placards reading “Free Canada, Trade Mulroney.”

Mulroney parried Turner’s assertion that he had not been forthcoming, responding with, “There has been a most vigorous and I think probably unprecedented exchange of views.”

“I think the issues happen to be so important for the future of Canada,”

countered Turner. "I happen to believe you've sold us out. I happen to believe that once you enter —"

"Just one second," Mulroney interjected, wagging his finger at Turner. "You do not have a monopoly on patriotism!"

"Once —"

"I resent the fact of your implication that only you are a Canadian!" Mulroney again interrupted.

"I'm saying —"

"I want to tell you that I come from a Canadian family, and I love Canada!"

"Once any —"

"And that is why I did it, to promote prosperity!"

"Once any country —"

"Don't you impugn my motives!"

"Once any country yields its economic levers —"

"Don't you impugn my motives or anyone else's!"

"Once a country yields its investments, once a country yields its energy —"

"We have not done it!"

"Once a country yields its agriculture —"

"Wrong again!"

"Once a country opens itself up to a subsidy war with the United States —"

"Wrong again!"

"— on terms of definition, then the political ability of this country to sustain the influence of the United States, to remain as an independent nation, that is lost forever, and that's the issue of this election."

Having fractured Turner's initial sally with repeated interruptions, Mulroney launched into his personal genealogy to display his credentials as a salt-of-the-earth Canadian:

*Mr. Turner, let me tell you something, sir. This country is only about 120 years old, but my own father 55 years ago went himself, as a labourer, with hundreds of other Canadians, and with their own hands in northeastern Quebec they built a little town, and*

*schools and churches and they in their own way were nation building ... I today sir, as a Canadian, believe genuinely in what I am doing. I believe it is right for Canada. I believe that in my own modest way I am nation building.*

With this last declaration, Mulroney seemed to have temporarily exhausted his lexicon of patriotic pieties. Turner got a chance to speak without being interrupted and, after declaring that his own ancestry was as Canadian as Mulroney's, blasted the prime minister with a withering outburst:

*You mentioned 120 years of history. We built a country east and west and north. We built it on an infrastructure that deliberately resisted the continental pressure of the United States. For 120 years we've done it. With one signature of a pen, you've reversed that, thrown us into the north-south influence of the United States and will reduce us ... to a colony of the United States, because when the economic levers go, the political independence is sure to follow.*

**Mansbridge described the Liberal strategy meeting of the week before and reported that the committee members had considered pressuring Turner to quit, sent him a memo outlining the desperate condition of the Liberal campaign, and followed up with phone calls before backing off.**

Drawing on his rich innate understanding of Canada, Turner had invoked myths and fears at the core of its collective psyche with a few vivid phrases. The country he was defending was one he had lived in and loved since childhood, studied in university, and criss-crossed innumerable times on the nation's business. He knew Canada. It was an independent dominion built on an east-west backbone, not just a northern annex of the United States.

Mansbridge described the Liberal strategy meeting of the week before and reported that the committee members had considered pressuring Turner to quit, sent him a memo outlining the desperate condition of the Liberal campaign, and followed up with phone calls before backing off. His passion conveyed integrity and deep conviction. "By performing well in the debate," one commentator observed, "he far exceeded expectations and caused voters to reassess their opinion of him, which they did with a vengeance." Now journalists began falling all over themselves to praise the man. The old lens was shattered. They saw a "new" John Turner, and this revelation gave them what they had always needed: a news story.

And the Liberals had more. Their ad agency, Red Leaf, reinforced Turner's debate message with a memorable television ad that aired the day before the first debate. It showed US and Canadian negotiators facing each other across a table. "Since we're talking about the free-trade deal," the slightly sinister-looking American said, "there's one line I'd like to change." The camera shifted to a map of Canada and the United States, where a hand took an eraser and rubbed out the bor-

der between the two countries. The ad effectively conveyed Turner's message, as did the frequent replays on news and public affairs shows of his broadside against Mulroney during the debate. His free-trade stance was coming across simply yet dramatically on television.

The Liberal campaign took off, with attendance at rallies soaring, donations flowing in, and volunteers flocking to join the campaign. Party workers were inspired by the prospect



CP Photo

**"I believe you have sold us out," John Turner tells Brian Mulroney during the 1988 English-language leaders' debate. It was the defining moment of the free trade election, which Turner called "the fight of my life."**

of victory. Even Jean Chrétien became more active on the hustings. A few MPs and candidates grew so cocky that they began talking about Cabinet posts and other prospects of office. The media responded by reframing its coverage of Turner. Instead of showing him limping to symbolize his political condition, they now ran pictures of him being swarmed by friendly mobs. "Do television debates cure bad backs?" asked Charles Gordon of the *Ottawa Citizen*.

Free trade shot to the top of voters' concerns. A November 7 Gallup poll showed that support for it had fallen to 26 percent from 34 percent two weeks earlier. By a two-to-one margin, Canadians told pollsters they believed Turner was genuine in his belief that the free-trade deal would be

disastrous for Canada. The same poll put the Liberals at 43 per cent popular support, with the Tories down to 31 percent and the NDP at 22 percent. There had been a 19 per cent change in voters' intentions since the previous Gallup poll — the largest one-time shift recorded by the organization in its forty-one-year history. Turner was not at all happy to see these numbers. According to the Liberals' own polling, they had no more than a 6 per cent lead. When more accurate polls subsequently became public, they would encourage the perception that momentum was shifting back to the Tories.

By the time the full impact of the debate was apparent, it was early November, and just three weeks remained in the campaign. Turner

had wrested control of the election agenda away from the Tories and made it a referendum on free trade. Allan Gregg, the Conservative pollster, later told a journalist, "It was dire, it was black...The election was en route to being lost."

Yet the well-financed Tory campaign had ample capacity to fight back. When Conservative strategists met to consider what they could do to reverse their plunge in the polls, Gregg maintained that the only way to save the situation was to attack Turner's character. Despite his recent resurrection in the eyes of voters, Gregg explained, Turner had a legacy of low approval ratings. They should revive latent suspicions about his leadership qualities. "We saw that the bridge that joined the growing fear of free trade and the growing sup-

port for the Liberal party was John Turner's credibility," he later explained. "So we had to get all the planes in the air and smash the bridge and blow it up." The plan was simple: destroy Turner's reputation.

The Tories' first step was to instruct their most credible national figures to call Turner a liar. The first of the heavy cannon to be wheeled to the parapet was Finance Minister Michael Wilson. Arrangements were made to have him speak at a luncheon in Ottawa on October 31, just five days after the debate. "John Turner in the debate Tuesday night said [Mulroney] has agreed to let the Americans have a say in the future of our social programmes such as unemployment insurance and medicare," Wilson intoned. "I say to Mr. Turner, that is a lie ... Taking this lie into our senior citizens' homes is the cruellest form of campaigning that I've seen in 10 years in politics."

The Conservatives coaxed eighty-nine-year-old Justice Emmett Hall, who had headed the royal commission that drafted national health care insurance in the 1960s, to make a statement that free trade presented no danger to medicare. Hall had, in an earlier life, been a Conservative and now returned to his roots. In Quebec they got Claude Castonguay, a prominent provincial Liberal and a key figure in the introduction of medicare in the province, to say the same. It was reasonable to conclude that he was a surrogate for Bourassa, his intervention yet another signal that the provincial Liberals had transferred their allegiance to the federal Progressive Conservatives. The Tories also put Simon Reisman on the road to repudiate the Liberals' claims about the trade deal he had negotiated. Warming to his topic, Reisman told an audience that Turner was worse than a liar — he was a traitor. Turner was used to politics taking a toll on personal relationships, but having an old friend turn on him in this way was truly hurtful.

Next the Conservatives unleashed a barrage of negative advertising. They had more television advertising room than their opponents because electoral rules allotted time in proportion to a party's representation in the House of Commons. They also had bulging campaign coffers. Businesses, many of them American owned, donated some \$10 million to the Conservative campaign. Given the capital-intensive nature of polling, advertising, public relations, and other modern electioneering techniques, that afforded them a considerable advantage over their rivals. The average viewer saw approximately twenty Tory television ads in the final week of the election, compared to ten or twelve for the Liberals and the NDP combined.

The Conservative campaign was reinforced by a huge onslaught of third-party advertising. In Canada's previous free-trade elections of 1891 and 1911, business interests had worked to keep the protection of high tariffs and were thus opposed to free trade. Now they wanted access to the vast American markets Mulroney promised them. The Business Council on National Issues, led by Thomas D'Acquino, had been lobbying for free trade for

**The Conservative campaign was reinforced by a huge onslaught of third-party advertising. In Canada's previous free-trade elections of 1891 and 1911, business interests had worked to keep the protection of high tariffs and were thus opposed to free trade. Now they wanted access to the vast American markets Mulroney promised them.**

years. Its members — the CEOs of the 150 largest corporations in Canada — had plenty of resources to throw into the Conservative campaign. In 1987 BCNI had joined with other business groups to form the Canadian Alliance for Trade and Job Opportunities, a pro-free-trade coalition that had spent millions promoting free trade. Now it launched a \$1.3 million blitz that placed multi-page ads in thirty-five newspapers

across the country, predicting severe economic consequences for Canada if it rejected the deal. Estimates of the total amount spent by the private sector on pro-free trade advertising in the last three weeks of the campaign ranged between \$4-5 million, whereas the total budget for the Pro-Canada network for the entire campaign was \$750,000 — most of which had already been spent by this point. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce wrote to its 170,000 members, urging them to campaign for free trade. Business also tried to browbeat its employees into line. The Canadian Manufacturers' Association sent letters to its three thousand members, telling executives to instruct their workforces on where their interests lay. Many CEOs complied by warning employees that their jobs depended on the deal. The *Toronto Globe and Mail* joined the chorus with a series of articles and editorials outlining the dire economic consequences of rejecting free trade. "Big business, led by American multinationals, is now trying to buy this election," Turner warned. But his voice was drowned out. Even the Alberta government got involved, sponsoring a \$500,000 advertising campaign for free trade.

On November 17, with four days left in the campaign, President Ronald Reagan, then in the last few weeks of his second term, promoted the deal in a high-profile speech. It was, he opined, a fine example of solidarity between nations, a testament to the commitment of two governments to free-market principles and economic cooperation. Turner, who was appearing on a Quebec open-line radio show that

day, described Reagan's remarks as "unprecedented interference" in Canadian domestic affairs and characterized them as "a case of a lame-duck trying to rescue a dead duck." It was a good line that didn't get the air play it might have if he had uttered it on television. Meanwhile, Margaret Thatcher told the *Washington Post* that, if the free-trade deal were revoked, it would be "very difficult for any prime minister of Canada to negotiate another international agreement with another

country." Thatcher, Turner said in French, was treating Canadians like "colons," which meant "colonials" but had connotations in French of ignorance, stupidity, and naïveté.

**The Conservatives' attack on Turner was enabled by the Liberal Party itself. Its failure to close ranks behind Turner while in opposition was fatal. The media's negative assessment of him had been reinforced regularly by the Liberals themselves, often at the most inopportune moments.**

er country." Thatcher, Turner said in French, was treating Canadians like "colons," which meant "colonials" but had connotations in French of ignorance, stupidity, and naïveté.

Turner and his advisers tried desperately to think of some way to strike back. They agreed that it would be best to find a new issue with which to throw the Tories off-balance. Those who had advised holding the party's forty-point policy platform in reserve had just such a predicament in mind. But it was too late now — all that ammunition was spent. Martin Goldfarb revived the idea of a liberalized abortion policy, but Turner wouldn't unleash such a divisive issue merely for partisan advantage. Goldfarb then suggested attacking the Tories' plan for a value-added tax, the GST. Turner again refused, because he thought it a good policy. He raised other issues but received scant media coverage. The Conservative advertising onslaught kept the focus on Turner's character.

With their superior resources, the Conservatives were able to poll, advertise, and massage the media on a scale that dwarfed their rivals' efforts. They were now enjoying a

steady point-a-day climb in voter support. Whereas polls conducted immediately after the debates said that 55 percent of people believed that Turner opposed free trade because of conviction, that percentage had now fallen to 27 percent. In terms of voters' ratings of leadership qualities, Turner was driven back to third place among the party leaders. One week before the election, fully 40 per cent of the Canadian electorate said it feared the economic consequences of rejecting the deal.

For the first time since polling began, the electorate had executed a double reverse — shifting from majority government territory for one party to the other and then back again in the course of one election campaign. Character assassination and fear-mongering worked.

The weekend before election day, Turner toured Ontario, trying to consolidate support in ridings where the race was tight. The Liberals emptied their campaign war chest to place an ad in every major Canadian daily telling readers they should vote Liberal, not NDP, to block the free-trade deal. Turner remained convinced that he was right — and that his analysis of the deal would prove prophetic.

When the first results came in from Atlantic Canada on election night, the Liberals had tripled their seats in the region from 7 to 20. In Quebec, however, the combination of free trade, Meech Lake, federal spending, and Bourassa's support for Mulroney was too much to beat. The Liberals won 12 of the 75 seats, down from 17 in 1984. The Tories swept all the remaining 63 seats, including Raymond Garneau's riding. In Ontario, where they had Premier

David Peterson's support, the Liberals netted 43 of the 99 seats, but it wasn't enough to make up for Quebec and Conservative strength in the West, where they took only 6 seats to the Tories' 48. When all the results were in, the Conservatives won the election with a reduced majority. With 170 of the 295 seats in Parliament, they had the votes needed to pass the trade deal.

Turner's Liberals more than doubled their seats to 82, and the NDP came out with 43. The Conservatives received 43 per cent of the popular vote; the Liberals, 31.9 per cent; and the NDP, 20.4 per cent, with fringe parties, including the new Reform Party out west, splitting the remainder. "I have promoted my vision of a strong, independent and sovereign Canada," Turner declared in his concession speech, "and I've done so with all my heart and all my strength and I have no regrets at all."

The Conservatives' attack on Turner was enabled by the Liberal Party itself. Its failure to close ranks behind Turner while in opposition was fatal. The media's negative assessment of him had been reinforced regularly by the Liberals themselves, often at the most inopportune moments. In the few short months leading up to the election, and even during the campaign, the damage inflicted on Turner by his own party was devastating. Inspired by a cause that he saw as central to his country's future, he came close to saving them from themselves, but he was undercut by incessant disloyalty within his party. The Liberals had behaved badly and deserved to lose. The tragedy was that their ignoble conduct had distracted voters from deciding on its merits an issue with profound implications for Canada's future.

*Excerpted from Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner, published by UBC Press (2011). By permission of the publisher.*