

Book Review by:

Paul Heinbecker*

on *Getting it Done*

By: Derek Burney

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*Paul Heinbecker is Director of the Centre for Global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University and Distinguished Research Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. He recently retired after 38 years with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, most recently serving as Ambassador to the United Nations (2000- 2003). This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions above.

Derek Burney's book fills a gaping void. The precipitous collapse of the Progressive Conservatives in 1993 and the withering, even irrational, animosity the former prime minister evoked in many Canadians left few people standing who were willing and able to tell the story of the Mulroney years. Beyond the boss himself, no one is better qualified to discuss those years from the inside than Derek Burney. Former chief of staff to the prime minister, ambassador to Washington and G-7 "sherpa", Burney served at the pinnacle of Canadian diplomacy at a time when Canada had substantial influence on issues as diverse as apartheid in South Africa and American policy in the Gulf and when we racked up significant accomplishments, including agreements with the U.S. on free trade and acid rain. As history, the book is a compelling account, especially of the Mulroney era, told with wit, insight and, at times, devastating honesty and unabashed partisanship. As policy prescription, the book gives advice born of experience, albeit with some of the inevitable rear-view-mirror-driving disadvantages of memoirs that look forward as well as backward.

Caveat emptor: My career in External Affairs followed that of Derek Burney by only a couple of years. I am one of many ex-colleagues who have the greatest respect for his competence. He, like contemporaries such as Glenn Shortliffe and Don Campbell, arrived in "External" in the early 60s just as Canada was giving itself a flag of its own. He was part of a made-in-Canada generation, tough-minded, self-confident and savvy, even a little ruthless, neither to the manor nor to the manse born, contemptuous of the fake Oxford accents and Ivy League preciousness that many predecessors had cultivated. His success in navigating from public service to politics to business was as gutsy as it was extraordinary, despite how simple his book makes it seem.

Burney's account of the roller coaster-like free trade negotiations rings especially true. From the 10-10 tie in the U.S. Senate, almost lost because a senator sent the administration a message on Soviet slave labour, to the choice of the U.S. representative, a textiles negotiator unconnected to the White House, the disparity of interest on the Canadian and American sides was stark. The crunch issues were clear from the beginning, namely trade remedy and dispute settlement for Canada and investment access for the United States, but agreement was elusive because, as Burney asserts, free trade with Canada was just not a priority for Americans. The talks were salvaged by last-minute American acquiescence on dispute settlement even as Prime Minister Mulroney was preparing to tell Canadians the talks had failed. Burney personally led the final leg of this politically death-defying ride, flanked by two ministers, an exceedingly rare line-up in public service. In fact, Canada's first team of officials, Burney, Simon Reisman, Allan Gotlieb and Campbell, was as good as Canada ever iced, including in the country's diplomatic golden age.

Running the Prime Minister's office is one of the most difficult jobs in government and Burney's observations are timeless, whichever party is in charge. "Agenda and message control" were vital if not always achieved. "The major task... is to focus the Prime Minister's time and ... to ensure consistency between the message and the delivery of government action." Burney concludes that "the people who get you elected are not necessarily the best to help you govern". Prime Minister Mulroney gave Burney carte blanche to make his office effective. The Prime Minister looked after

cabinet and caucus exercising leadership skills to maintain balance, commitment and direction, his “most unheralded achievement” that saw him through scandals, plummeting polls and national unity crises.

The book rewards the reader with acute insights into national character and human nature. His sketch of Japan is exceptional, a country he portrays as “(e)asy to respect (and) hard to admire”, which, apart from its American alliance, “is very much alone in the world and has little stature of consequence in any international association other than the G-8,” a Bonsai tree, “carefully cultivated but tightly controlled . . . its growth stunted to an unnatural degree.” The Koreans, by contrast, were “rugged, in-your-face direct”, for whom “accommodation was not a strong . . . suit.” Closer to home, “the Americans are singularly powerful, – number one in many ways. They know it and act accordingly. Canadians know that they are not number one and, in that sense alone, are very unlike Americans. But Canadians also seem less certain about what or who they are, other than ‘not American.’” On people, if he could not say something nice, he usually said nothing at all, with a few intriguing exceptions, notably regarding former trade minister Pat Carney (“erratic”), U.S. trade negotiator Peter Murphy (“not much vision and even less clout”) and U.S. secretary of the treasury James Baker (“Texas crude”). Nor was he sparing of former prime minister Pierre Trudeau whose foreign policy, especially the abortive “peace mission”, he rightly saw as dilettantish.

As prime minister, Mulroney put a premium on good and civil relations with Washington and it, undoubtedly, paid dividends, including with third parties. Burney’s stress on the importance of similar engagement now is less persuasive because that Washington, regrettably, scarcely exists anymore. He argues “we can decide to either harness advantage from our proximity or seek to distance and differentiate ourselves from the United States.” In fact, we can do both. We can recognize Americans’ sense of vulnerability and protect our backdoor through their defences, preserving our economic access as a by-product of helping them. But, it is also realism and elementary self-interest, not misguided soft power, to differentiate ourselves from an American regime that is near universally loathed and feared for its aggressive use of hard power, the religiosity of its policies, its double standards and its exceptionalism. While “agreements based on the rule of law constitute the best antidote to the power imbalance” as Burney rightly argues, what are Canadians to do when their superpower neighbour becomes contemptuous of the international law that Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy and George H. W. Bush helped to create? Nor is it wise to give your neighbours the benefit of the doubt when their secretary of state misleads the UN Security Council on a matter as grave as war; when their attorney general chisels the Torture Convention; when the president is counselled to ignore the Geneva Conventions; when the administration uses the metaphor of war to lockup anyone indefinitely without charge; when they run an international Gulag archipelago of prisons (Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Diego Garcia and who knows where else) and when they “rendition” our citizens abroad to be tortured. What is required rather is, civilly but directly, speaking truth to power. That too is engagement and of a kind that current circumstances require. Few Canadians would do it better than Burney, himself.