

Did the floor-crossing 'C student' save Canada -- even for a little while?



By [ROY MacGREGOR](#)

Tuesday, May 31, 2005 Page A2

Look, I'm fully aware I'll get lambasted for this no matter how I put it.

And slammed, not just from one side, but both.

She has, after all, somehow become the woman no one can comment on without being commented on, so let's just out with it, okay? And let the chips fall where they may:

Belinda Stronach, Mother of Confederation.

I know, I know. That should be "Person of Confederation," but it's hard to imagine Sir John A. Macdonald or George Etienne-Cartier or any of the other "Fathers" agreeing to such a politically correct correction to their legacy, so it will have to stand, no matter what the repercussions.

Think about it, though: had Belinda Stronach not crossed the floor -- no matter what her reasons, no matter what the Liberal rationale -- this sour and cranky country would be involved in an election no one wanted and no one could win.

Had she not crossed -- (your choice entirely as to whether she sold out or did the right thing) -- then that vote by Independent Member of Parliament Chuck Cadman would have meant nothing. The Liberal government would have fallen instead of survived by a single vote and the campaign would be well under way.

The Ralph Goodale budget that became the Jack Layton budget after the New Democrats held out for \$4.6-billion in support payments is now the Belinda budget, presuming it now moves through.

And that presumption is a fair guess, given that the Liberals, as expected, won the Labrador by-election and there is talk of Independent Carolyn Parrish returning to the Liberal fold -- as well as the increasing number of polls that suggest opposition support is simply not strong enough for a change in government.

Let us pretend, for the sake of argument, that Belinda Stronach -- (your choice again between personal integrity and/or political folly) -- chose to stick with the Conservative Party she somewhat created with her own personal "unite-the-right" push.

The government would have been defeated. Prime Minister Paul Martin would have immediately gone to the Governor-General and asked for the dissolution of Parliament. While there was always the slimmest chance the Governor-General could turn to Opposition Leader Stephen Harper and have him give it a go, the virtually certain bet was that she would agree to Mr. Martin's request and a general election would then be called.

Many Liberals say they actually wanted this to happen, convinced that despite the daily disgust from the Gomery inquiry, despite the dithering of Mr. Martin, despite the crass deal to hang on, they'd still do pretty well in a campaign against Mr. Harper. It might mean another minority, but perhaps a more manageable minority than one that hangs by the thread, and threat, of a single vote.

The Liberals, of course, could manage this only if the party, once again, had the blessings of seat-heavy Ontario. And such a scenario could only lead to a serious spike in Western alienation. One year after most westerners came to the conclusion that Mr. Martin lucked into power simply because weak-kneed Ontario buckled in the end, they would see Ontario again deciding matters despite Gomery, despite the deal with the socialists, despite the poor performance, so far, by an eastern prime minister who seems to lack any vision beyond the immediate reach of his smile.

Were the Liberals unable to pull this off, however, it would be equally disastrous.

A Conservative minority, thanks to a breakthrough in Ontario, would be the ideal recipe for a third referendum in Quebec and, very likely, victory, finally, for the sovereigntists. The Bloc Québécois would hold all but a handful of the 75 Quebec seats and have in hand the gift of a federal government notably out of step with Quebec values. A victory by the provincial sovereigntists and here we all go again. . . .

There will, of course, be an election one day soon. Mr. Martin has, after all, guaranteed one 30 days after the Gomery report is tabled. It may be only months, but it could also be the time necessary for (take your pick) Mr. Harper to demonstrate that he is indeed ready, or Mr. Martin to find his bearings and win back some faith. It is even possible that the Bloc could come down from the lucky bounce it has received from Gomery. All this, it might one day be argued, because a woman crossed the floor.

There is no point in adding to the cauldron already boiling with Stronach talk.

She has been called every name imaginable and defended with almost as much imagination. My own sense of her is that there's not much going on there -- Douglas Fisher, the dean of Ottawa commentators, gently described her as "a mostly empty political vessel" -- but, as former U.S. president Harry S. Truman once pointed out, "The 'C' student runs the world."

In this case, the "C" student was pretty much running the country for a few days.

Perhaps even saving it -- at least until the next mad crisis.

rmacgregor@globeandmail.ca