

A Hole in the Firmament: The Legacy of Mike Robinson

Robin V. Sears



Mike Robinson: A devoted family man, and a leader by example in politics and consulting. He died suddenly, on Canada Day, at his family's beloved summer home in Normandy.

Leadership can be dazzling and in your face: Margaret Thatcher before her decline. Sometimes razor-sharp in intellectual and emotional intensity: Barack Obama at his best. Leadership can also be obvious only when you look hard. It doesn't blot out the sun, but its gravitas is compelling when you give it attention: Lester Pearson or Angela Merkel.

Then there are the leaders who only other leaders notice because their leadership skills are so totally invested in people—in helping friends, colleagues, political allies, clients shine—that the spotlight rarely falls on them directly.

Until they are gone.

If their disappearance is sudden and shocking, then strangely, the ache their passing inflicts throws their powerful legacy into sharp relief. You realize that there truly is a hole in the firmament of your community through

which they have passed, forever.

Michael Robinson was such a leader. Almost a caricature of Canadian modesty, it was a public modesty that veiled a strong pride in his success, and a resolute conviction about "the right thing to do."

As Mike's early consulting partner, Bill Fox, has pointed out, academic research demonstrates that a large part of our values, information and knowledge flow from leaders found at every strata of society. Those leaders can spot each other a mile off.

Like Harry Near, another founding partner of his firm, Mike's personality was so effusive it disguised a deep intuition and strategic understanding of issues, policy and opportunities. But attentive clients also saw the steel behind the smile.

Mike's life was about people. They were his joy, his focus, his product,

his genius. His beloved family—to which his sincere devotion was exceedingly rare in the vain world of politics. His political family—whose many strange members rarely ruffled Mike's acceptance of humanity and its every wart; again rare in the factional environment of party politics. His friends, colleagues, students, and clients – who numbered in the hundreds, and were rarely forgotten, never rejected.

He was one of those rare leaders whose joy was the success of others, who led by example—an example that was often a rollicking laugh at the absurdities of life. He understood that truth, character and courage are always more reliably revealed during a long and loud meal with friends than in a PowerPoint presentation. So he did a lot of the former and unhappily endured the latter.

Mike took an uneasy and hesitant orator and transformed him from a businessman into a powerful political leader. It took a decade, but that was another feature of his leadership style—endless resolve and unflagging patience. Paul Martin joked at Mike's celebration of life – to which virtually the entire Ottawa political and government relations community showed up—that his earliest memories of their life on the road were of staring out the car window as Mike, gently but relentlessly, recited the long list of gaffes and flubs in the speech Paul had just delivered.

Harry Near joked that he and Mike rarely had a disagreement in all their years building Canada's largest independent public affairs consulting firm, the Earncliffe Strategy Group. Harry's role was to say no, to Mike's confident yes—to new people, new projects, new spending—and then

resisting The Badger, as Mike was always amused to be called, as he tried to wear him down.

Mike would cheerfully spend lavishly on celebratory bottles of wine for friends, or donations to favourite causes. But he also delighted in knocking a landlord's rent down by 10 percent, or nudging a party donor from three digits to four, even if it took months of badgering.

He rescued the Liberal party from the financial devastation of the Turner years, then turned around and raised more money for Martin's leadership campaign than any in Canadian history. His skill was grounded in a formidable intellect, rarely flaunted. You don't complete the *New York Times* and *Financial Times* crosswords, every day in pen, without one.

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In the short weeks since his sudden departure, friends wrestled with the

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gap he left behind, asking themselves “What would Mike have done?” at the first tough decision. Those who depended on his mostly invisible guidance—the smiling nudge at precisely the right moment, the reliable hand on the tiller, not only ache with loss but flinch slightly at doing it without him.

Leadership and its development are mysterious. Like beauty, or charisma, you know it when you see it, but it's hard to describe and harder still to create. Wesley Clark, the savvy American general who engineered an end to the Balkan conflicts, is a student of leadership. He has a marvellous line about the challenges of leadership training:

“In the US Army we estimate it takes 23 years to instill the qualities of leadership to become a three-star general, that's the average career time....and we expect every 23 year-old green lieutenant, on his first day in combat to show leadership!”

His point being that leadership can be reinforced and polished, but you also need the basics of character. Mike acquired a tough hide enduring the harsh rituals of a famous English “public” school, and then was suddenly plunked down in 1950s Calgary, from urbane London to rude cowboy country. Character-building, no doubt.

Mike was rarely polemic, let alone partisan about his convictions, yet they were deeply held. He astonished friends at his regular table at Ottawa's Métropolitain Brasserie—the political village's “cafeteria”—just before the last election. He was furious about Canada buying the F-35 fighter. Bright red in anger and indignation, he declared that the Liberals had to simply say “No, goddamit. No!”

Surprising was his rare fury and his refusal to back down despite loud teasing about being an “old-aged peacenik”. It was a rare sight of one of Mike's passions, usually carefully guarded. The waste of scarce public resources on “nonsense” was one of them.

Politics and corporate leadership are famously obsessed with winning—ensuring in a zero-sum competition, that your competitor knows he will lose any contest. At poker, Mike was typically alpha male—winning mattered.

About the more important victories, in politics and business and life, Mike was comfortable—indeed happiest—with shared success. He would sigh sadly at partisans who practised shoot-the-wounded politics. “What's the point?” he would mutter. “Don't they see how bad they look?”

By now, the hole in the firmament has begun to shrink, for those to whom Mike was at the centre of their lives. The firm had begun a transition to the post-Harry and Mike era more than five years ago and has already begun to demonstrate the success of their foresight. Harry and Mike were enormously proud of the next generation of leaders at their firm, whom they had so carefully nurtured. Painfully, the final steps in succession were taken only days before his passing.

So now the anxious question, “What would Mike do?” will become a nostalgic talisman among friends and colleagues. Perhaps eventually, it will be the touchstone that grants re-assurance that you are on the right path—that Mike is looking down with a large glass of red wine in hand, smiling. **P**

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