



Jim Coutts with Sen Joyce Fairbairn and Pierre Trudeau at the Senate speaker's dining room, on the former prime minister's 75th birthday in 1994. Back row: Speaker of the Senate Roméo Leblanc, (soon-to-be-named governor general), Tom Axworthy, Sen. Keith Davey and Dominic Leblanc. Photo, Jean-Marc Carisse

Jim Coutts, an Appreciation

FIRST IN CLASS OF POLITICAL ADVISERS

Thomas S. Axworthy

Unlike their American counterparts, political advisers and chiefs of staff to Canadian prime ministers are not widely known, but they are critical to the operation of our political system. Jim Coutts, one of the best of that political class, passed away recently. The lessons from his brilliant career are highlighted by one of his closest colleagues.

In January 1941, Wendell Willkie, the recently defeated Republican presidential candidate, visited the White House to offer his support for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policy of assistance to Great Britain. In the course of their conversation, Roosevelt advised Willkie to speak to his aide, Harry Hopkins, who was then in secret negotiations with Winston Churchill. Willkie, who was no fan of the controversial presidential assistant, asked, "Why do you keep Hopkins so close to you? You surely realize that people distrust him and resent his influence."

Roosevelt responded succinctly, in what has become a classic description of the reciprocal bond between leaders and staff: "Someday you may

well be sitting here where I am now as president of the United States," Roosevelt replied. "And when you are, you'll be looking at that door over there and knowing that practically everybody who walks through it wants something out of you. You'll learn what a lonely job this is, and you'll discover the need for somebody like Harry Hopkins, who asks for nothing except to serve you."

Great leaders are still human beings. In describing the loneliness of high office, Roosevelt was reflecting on the fact that power attracts a court, and a court has many interests, not all of them aligned with the public good or even the good of the leader. To find someone who will give you the truth, even if it hurts, who has your best

interests at heart, who is reliable and skilled, is a rare gem in the usual political minefields. One such gem was Jim Coutts, a senior adviser to both Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Political advisers are generally not well known in Canada. The anecdote about Willkie and Roosevelt, in contrast, comes from a Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Harry Hopkins by Robert Sherwood. President Kennedy's senior adviser, Ted Sorensen, wrote a memoir of his time in the White House, as did Karl Rove, the senior adviser to George W. Bush. Political advisers have long been recognized in the United States as a critical component of a president's success or failure.

Not so in Canada. J.R. Mallory, a distinguished McGill professor, wrote in 1967 that political advisers were "an unreformed part of the public service ... which have hitherto escaped the attention of scholars," and by and large the situation has not changed much in the subsequent half century.

Yet the career of Jim Coutts illustrates the critical importance of that class of men and women who, in the words of Mallory, "are political rather than bureaucratic in their functions, appointed rather than elected, and who operate in an area which strict constitutional theory does not recognize as existing."

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Born in High River, Alberta, and raised in Nanton, 80 kilometers south of Calgary, Coutts remained a proud Albertan his entire life, (it always surprised observers that three of Pierre Trudeau's

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most senior advisers, Coutts, Ivan Head and Joyce Fairbairn were from Alberta, where Liberal Party hopes go to die). Jim loved southwest Alberta—especially the Porcupine Hills: "When you grow up someplace, part of you stays there and part of the place goes with you wherever you are," he said, in describing his restoration of his grandfather's homestead east of Nanton. "Home pain," he wrote, "it is more than home-sickness—it is the profound and lasting longing in the stranger to be home. Fortunately, I have now been able to return home."

Jim attended the University of Alberta, receiving a BA and law degree there (Joe Clark was one of his classmates), and practised law in Calgary. Before his recent death, he gifted his homestead property and a significant portion of his art collection to the University of Lethbridge, which has since launched the Coutts Centre for Western Canadian Heritage.

It was in Nanton, too, that Jim began his lifelong romance with the Liberal Party. He liked to race his bicycle down the streets of his hometown, and one day in 1952, at age 14, as he was riding past a small gathering, he stopped and was invited to get off his bike and meet the leader of the Alberta Liberal Party, J. Harper Prowse. As Coutts told the story, Prowse spoke about the mission of Liberals to stand for the "little guy," and Coutts was enthralled.

This accidental meeting changed Jim's life. He never wavered in his belief that the mission of the Liberal Party was "to help the little guy." In 1984, in his book *A Canada that Works for Everyone*, his thesis continued to be "Canadians must feel our system is fair in ensuring that the new wealth that is created is shared and that it is partly used to help pay for the adjustments that so many citizens will have to make during changing times."

Coutts also discovered that the Liberal Party (at least in Alberta) was open to

talent. He was a campaign manager at age 15 for the local Liberal candidate. He became a Liberal prime minister at the University of Alberta model parliament, and president of the Young Liberal Federation. In 1962, he ran as the federal candidate in MacLeod. Judy Lamarsh, campaigning for Liberals across the county, was optimistic in reporting to Paul Martin, Sr. "If Coutts wins MacLeod," the seasoned pro reasoned, "we're going to win them all." He didn't, but in 1963, Coutts became campaign chair for Alberta in the election that produced Pearson's first minority government. He was on his way.

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Coutts loved Lester B. Pearson. His passion for politics originated in the Alberta of the 1950s, but the Pearson-



Jim Coutts and Pierre Trudeau at a private party at the Opposition Leader's South Block office on December 22, 1979. There was more than holiday spirit in the air. Coutts had just the previous week orchestrated the fall of the Conservative minority government on its budget, and persuaded Trudeau to change his mind about retiring and to lead them in the campaign that would result in a Liberal restoration. Photo, Jean-Marc Carisse

led Liberal Party was his model of what modern liberalism should be—progressive, civilized, and fun. In his initial stint in Ottawa, Coutts met everyone, and his talent for friendships grew. Long before the word “networking” took on its current meaning, Coutts’ range of contacts in business, government and the arts was astonishing. If he didn’t have the answer, he knew exactly who to call. Prime Minister Pearson, in turn, reciprocated Coutts’ affection: in 1964, when a film about Pearson’s office had a lot on Coutts, but few favourable frames on the prime minister, the PM let it go with a laugh, saying “it looks as though my grandson is running the country.”

Coutts went to the Harvard Business School after three years with Pearson, then joined the McKinsey Consulting firm in New York, finally returning to Toronto, where he started the Canada Consulting Company with five partners. I rarely heard Jim speak about his training as a lawyer, but his Harvard

One of the secrets of his success with Trudeau was that however bad the news, Coutts also had a strategy to cope. In the late 1970s, even with the economy in the doldrums and polling results plummeting, Liberal Party drums still beat out the message, “Don’t worry, Coutts has a plan.” And he always did.

training and consulting experience became a central facet of his operating style. The Harvard Business School teaches you that the right strategy and tactics can untangle any puzzle. When faced with a problem, Coutts would analyze it, find the central factor, then think through a way to overcome (or go around) the sticking point. One of the secrets of his success with Trudeau was that however bad the news, Coutts also had a strategy to cope. In the late 1970s, even with the economy in the doldrums and

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Coutts was perfect for the campaign plane – he kept his own spirits high by constantly winning at backgammon, while keeping Trudeau’s spirits high with wit, Liberal Party folklore and local information. After the success of that campaign, it surprised no one when Trudeau asked Coutts to become principal secretary in 1975.

Barely escaping electoral defeat in 1972, Pierre Trudeau brought back Keith Davey as his senior election strategist. As he had done in recommending Coutts to Mike Pearson, Davey recommended Coutts to Trudeau. In the 1974 election, Coutts was the “inside” man on the election plane while Davey ran the campaign on the ground. It was the campaign plane that cemented the Trudeau-Coutts relationship. Outsiders have a hard time understanding the dynamics of the camaraderie (or tension) that builds in the pressure cooker atmosphere of a campaign plane. You move daily from place to place with bad food, no sleep, and worries about luggage. While forgetting the names of the candidates and well-wishers who cling to the entourage, the leader still has to project an animated spirit. Coutts was perfect for the campaign plane—he kept his own spirits high by constantly winning at backgammon, while keeping Trudeau’s spirits high with wit, Liberal Party folklore and local information. After the success of that campaign, it surprised no one when Trudeau asked Coutts to become principal secretary in 1975.

Jim’s qualifications as chief of staff were many: he was unflappable in dealing with a sometimes-irascible prime minister who, in addition to the normal stresses of the office, had to face the agony of a disintegrating marriage. He always told the prime minister the truth about a situation

(the difference between a counselor and a courtier) but his advice always carried with it a conviction that the problem could be solved.

He knew that one of the jobs of an aide was to take the heat from the media and the party rather than having the inevitable anger of disappointed hopes aimed at the leader. He was curious about the world, open to new influences and people, and always fun to be with. With a twinkle in his eye, for example, he once called me into his office and said that he had decided that I should get to know Pierre Trudeau better. "You tell him the bad polls," he said, "and I'll tell him the good."

I saw a lot of Trudeau in the ensuing months. Most of all, he had a deep understanding of the political cycle. If the situation was bad, it would eventually improve. If the situation was rosy, watch out, it would inevitably decline. Roll with the punches and have a plan for every contingency: that was the Coutts *modus operandi*.

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All of these talents were on display in the fall of 1979 when Coutts orchestrated both the comeback of the Liberal Party and the restoration of Pierre Trudeau. The 1979 election had been lost in May, and Trudeau had resigned as leader in November. But on December 11, 1979, when Conservative Finance Minister John Crosbie produced an unpopular budget in a minority Parliament, Coutts saw his opportunity. First, he had to persuade the Liberal caucus to vote against the budget, which they did.

On December 13, 1979, the Clark government was defeated, 139 votes to 133. Next, the Liberal caucus and the party's national executive had to be persuaded to ask Trudeau to re-

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scind his resignation, and take the party into the election the budget defeat had precipitated. With the critical assistance of Allan MacEachen, this, too, was achieved. Then the Davey-Coutts election team had to run a successful campaign. Perhaps hardest of all, Coutts had to persuade Trudeau to stand again. Two months past his 60th birthday, Trudeau was not scheming to return, but had already begun to plan the next phase of his life after his withdrawal from politics.

On December 16, 1979, Trudeau told us he would go for a walk that night to think things over. Coutts had me prepare two speeches for the planned December 17 press conference—a short one on why Trudeau was not running, and a longer one outlining the themes of the campaign. That morning, Coutts saw Trudeau again, and it was not until I saw Trudeau pull out the three pages rather than one, that I knew Coutts had succeeded.

Thanks to Jim Coutts, Allan MacEachen and Keith Davey, Pierre Trudeau had been given the rarest gift in politics—a second chance. He made good on that chance, winning in 1980, then repatriating the constitution and establishing the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

After this virtuoso performance (think what might have happened to the Harper minority government in 2008 if Coutts had been on hand), it is one of life's ironies that Coutts subsequently failed to get elected to the House of Commons in 1981 and 1984. He retired from any formal role with the Liberal Party and devoted his life to establishing a successful business, Canada Investment Capital Ltd., and working philanthropically with Pearson College, the Nature Conservancy, and the University of Lethbridge. After he discovered he was afflicted with prostate cancer, he responded in typical Coutts fashion, reading all he could about the problem, creat-

ing a strategy of diets and treatment, and squeezing out several more good years before he finally succumbed on December 31, 2013.

Leaders get the fame, but our parties only endure because of believers who trust that they can change the direction of the country. Jim Coutts was such a believer and as such, became a legend to all those lucky enough to know him.

A few months before Jim's passing, I was speaking for a former student who was contesting an Ontario Liberal Party nomination for a nearly unwinnable provincial seat—hardly a high profile event. But to my surprise, there in the back row, where he liked to sit, was Jim Coutts, sizing up the crowd and taking the temperature of the Liberal Party. I introduced the prospective candidate to Coutts, who immediately outlined a five-point plan on how best to win the seat. Vintage Coutts! Leaders get the fame, but our parties only endure because of believers who trust that they can change the direction of the country. Jim Coutts was such a believer and as such, became a legend to all those lucky enough to know him. **P**

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