

THE GANG'S ALL THERE

Mulroney's Cabinet meetings are crowded but his matching of bodies with portfolios shows an understanding of people, issues and perceptions. Now, if he can only manage the mob without losing touch with Parliament and with his caucus ...

■ THERE were many sweet touches to the first Cabinet chosen by Brian Mulroney. In marveling at his cleverness, most critics touched lightly on the significance of the most obvious feature — the numbers. This is a crowd. From St. Laurent with 20 ministers, to Diefenbaker with 21, to Pearson with 28, to Trudeau with 37, to Turner with 29, we jump to Mulroney, who gives us a cast of 40.

You've heard the main argument for the gang-size from the one-time aide to Pierre Trudeau, Senator Michael Pitfield. It makes for more sensitivity within a bureaucracy to have more politicians with responsibilities, he says. Thus, the proliferation of ministers of state under Trudeau was argued as a means of keeping government close to the people. It's not an impressive argument, particularly when the track record of a few years indicates the large numbers merely throw more authority to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), which must coordinate and interweave the large congregation.

The other leading arguments in favor of numbers are that it helps keep a huge caucus happy, and the large number of minor portfolios improves the development process for politicians, letting the Prime Minister measure for those who merit more responsibility.

The obvious drawback of the numbers is that discursive talk is almost impossible. The requirement is for a hall rather than a room and a round table. Once the numbers get well over 20, good discussion becomes difficult and a highly ordered and necessarily bureaucratic process becomes essential. The people who prepare the paper and who arrange the agenda take on an inordinate importance.

Along with the large numbers too, come the immediate games: who is really important; which ministers are on which cabinet committees; what is the grouping in committees; which minister in each envelope, or general spending area, is closest to the Prime Minister? As the



first gossip to emerge about the Brian Mulroney Cabinet had it: Has Sinclair Stevens the position in Cabinet and in Cabinet committees to exert more influence on foreign affairs and relations between Canada and the U.S. than Joe Clark? You get the picture.

The hopes for those who want Ottawa to be more spare must turn toward the chore given Erik Nielsen, the Deputy Prime Minister. He is to review all departments and programs with a view to reducing spending and to killing redundancies. The veteran MP from the toughest and hardest-edged Tory I've ever encountered in 27 years around the Hill, and he neither gives a damn about public acclaim, nor does he mouth platitudes about the "best public service in the world".

Nielsen was the first neat touch I noted in the Mulroney Cabinet. A great pairing! The leader who's rich in blarney, who loves civility, who extols compromise, chose as first lieutenant a cold, straightforward, loyal, no nonsense partner. Just on the matter most fascinating to the media — that is, top level information — Nielsen is perfection as contrast. Mulroney is going to be his own "leak", dispensing tidbits in seconds-long scrums in the hallways from day to day. Nielsen has given short shrift to reporters for almost 20 years.

Other choices and placings were droll and well-considered. Manitoba is certain to be the most likely Achilles heel in a now-solid Tory west. There, the new party Confederation of Regions Western Party (COR), dedicated to Western separatism and to unilingualism, did well in the election in the rural areas. The antagonism to Mulroney's backing of Trudeau in language and constitutional attitudes is strongest in Manitoba, particularly among citizens who see themselves as Conservatives. So Mulroney gives Manitoba four Cabinet posts. B.C., with twice the number of MPs, gets only three. To gild it further, Mulroney puts a rural Manitoban, Jack Murta,

in as minister of state for multiculturalism. Clever, clever!

One victorious candidate in Quebec, Monique Vézina, is one of a few better-known women, active in the public affairs of the province. She has presence, charm, and some notoriety as one who has supported a Quebec separate from Canada. What greater tolerance and proof of a wide, forgiving ambit in a national leader than to elevate this former critic of federalism to the post of minister for external relations?

There was the question in many minds as to whom Mulroney would assign the worst portfolio of modern times – i.e., Indian and Northern Affairs. The answer came in the tiny ex-mayor of Toronto, David Crombie. What a pairing – Toronto Rosedale with the reservations and the Métis and the Inuit!

Mulroney prizes his own capacities as an interlocutor able to bring rivals together. He knows that one of the qualities which aids him at this is that he's so clearly a plain guy who's worked his way up. No wonder someone like Dennis McDermott, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, has been willing to get together with the Tory leader for

off-the-record discussions. When Bill McKnight, a Saskatchewan farmer, was made federal minister of Labor, there were lots of puzzled people. Why a wheat farmer? the answer lies in the personality of McKnight. He's almost a double for Mulroney: just one of the guys. Generally viewed by his colleagues as shrewd and diplomatic, as well as downright ambitious, McKnight will be able to get major labor leaders to talk about cooperation with government and business, the way Mulroney has promised.

Mulroney's been equally insightful in his matching of people and portfolios in the areas which matter most to those loyal to the Liberals and the New Democrats. Perfect in this regard were the assignments of Flora MacDonald to Employment and Immigration, of Marcel Masse to Communications (and so, to Culture), of Jake Epp to Health and Welfare and of Walter McLean to the manifold activities under the Secretary of State. Among the "liberally minded" and those who pursue "peace" or cultural "excellence", or who worry about the poor, there is a lot of suspicion of a government which tilts toward free enterprise

and a freeing of market forces. So Mulroney puts those who are both able and well-known for broad, "progressive" interests into the key social and cultural posts. Clever!

In piecing out something to almost interest everyone in his crowd of 40, Mulroney hasn't forgotten the constituency with which he himself has been most indelibly identified – business and industry. Ever since his arrival in Ottawa in 1979, Michael Wilson has struck me as almost too nice, boyish, and socially proper to be an effective politician. But Mulroney chose him for Finance. Obviously, Mulroney considered giving that awesome responsibility to a number of others: to a previous incumbent, John Crosbie; or to Sinclair Stevens, a most hard-working and canny ally, but a man with a faint taint of the promoter from his pre-political past; or to Robert de Cotret, the economist who headed Industry, Trade and Commerce in the brief Clark regime.

The new Prime Minister took away some loose risks by sequestering Crosbie in the busy, traditionally important ministry of Justice, but he put Stevens and de Cotret into economic portfolios in Regional Industrial Expansion and Treasury Board. The triumvirate of Wilson-Stevens-de Cotret seems to symbolize a government which intends to favor business and industry, with no further interventions into the economy and its private sector.

"Something for everybody" is the easiest phrase for the Mulroney Cabinet. But this is first measurement stuff. What will keep such an adroitly chosen but diverse gang on a positive track? The answer must come from Mulroney himself. He has to manage this mob. He'll have to reappraise it regularly; vet it for the slackers and those who veer, pick quarrels or try empire-building. We'll know within a year if he manages or merely tries to delegate his work to a bureaucratic court, as did Pierre Trudeau.

Mulroney has seemed to make choices that are better than Trudeau's, certainly more balanced and representative. Now comes the knife's edge chore for him – keeping the ministry moving and in touch with caucus and Parliament. One is tempted, eyeing the difficulties, to say: Let us pray. ■

Douglas Fisher is an Ottawa-based political commentator.

THE MAGAZINE FOR PRESIDENTS **Executive**

Enter my subscription for:

1 year \$30.00 Canada \$39.50 U.S.A. \$61.00 Foreign
2 years \$39.50 Canada \$55.00 U.S.A.
3 years \$51.00

Please enclose payment with coupon and send to: Circulation Dept., 2973 Weston Rd., P.O. Box 510, Weston, Ontario M9N 3R3.

Name _____

Title _____

Company _____

Address _____

City _____ Province _____ Postal Code _____

(Note: If providing home address, please also state your company and title.)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Province _____ Postal Code _____

For change of mailing information, please fill in above and enclose label from most recent issue.

Executive is a qualified circulation publication.
For classification purposes, please indicate:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mining, Construction | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation, |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing, | Public Utilities |
| Processing | <input type="checkbox"/> Service Industries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wholesale, Retail Trade | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please fill in): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finance, Insurance, | |
| Real Estate | |

Type of Product: _____

Estimated Sales Volume: _____

Number of Employees: _____

Thank you for your co-operation

Signature _____ Date _____

X-11-84A