

A final word on my unfortunate incident with Jean Chrétien

All knew that his motive was our newspapers' coverage of
Shawinigate and the early stirrings of the Adscam scandal

by Conrad Black



It was a pleasant surprise to receive a book last week, courtesy of John Fraser (former master of Massey College): Jean Chrétien's "My Stories, My Times." Even more pleasing was a gracious inscription on the title page, in French, from the author. Many readers would be aware that M. Chrétien and I had a parting of the ways 18 years ago over my acceptance of a peerage in the United Kingdom. It was not difficult for him to transform this, in the eyes of most Canadians who noticed, into an act of defence of Canadian national sensibilities by him and of abandonment of my native land by me in pursuit of

an enhanced level of trivial official snobbery. I was traduced and what occurred was nothing of the kind, but it isn't an important incident. Like many things that befell me in a 15-year cascade of nasty events and betrayals, it has subsided. But I would like, one more time, to make a couple of points about it.

I would like, one more time, to make a couple of points about it

First, I want to thank Jean Chrétien for his inscription; he had been a cordial acquaintance for 25 years before that, as he writes. (He even asked me once if I would like to be the governor-general, but I didn't explore the subject to find out if he was serious). I wish him a critical and commercial success for his book. I consider that our dispute ended when he was awarded the great honour of the Order of Merit by the Queen, and Bloomberg News Service called me and asked if I had any comment. I said that I assumed the recognition was of his decades of advocacy, largely in the more remote parts of Quebec, of the virtues of federalism and that I thought the honour was fairly won and wished him and Aline (his wife), every happiness. The minor controversy over my return to Canada from the United States occurred very soon after that, and I noted that when asked his opinion, Chrétien was quoted as saying "Conrad should be welcome in this country and if he comes to Shawinigan, he will receive a warm welcome," or something close to that.

I want to thank Jean Chrétien for his inscription

The whole issue between us was nonsense, but the account of it in this latest book is largely the fiction that receding memories often produce. Chrétien writes of the Nickle Resolution of the Canadian Parliament in 1919 asking for the abolition for Canadians "of noble titles emanating from London." Chrétien's assistant, Jean Pelletier, advised the

chief secretary to the Queen that Canadian law obliged him to oppose my appointment as a baron and member of the upper house of the British Parliament. In fact, as the Queen's advisers shortly ascertained, Nickle's resolution was non-binding and only asked the abolition of such titles for Canadian citizens and residents. (I was a U.K. resident.) The British government had already asked the Canadian government, as is customary, if it had any objection to my appointment, and the Canadian government responded through the chief of protocol and via the British High Commission in Ottawa that it had no objection if I became a dual citizen and did not use the title in Canada. I was advised of this by the British prime minister, Tony Blair, who could not have been more co-operative even though I would be a Conservative peer, and was sponsored by Lady Thatcher and Lord Carrington. I said that of course I would be happy with that, and Tony Blair sent over at once an application for British citizenship, for which he was the sponsor, and the home secretary, Jack Straw, was the seconder. The whole process was completed within an hour, except that Chr tien then made his intervention over the Nickle Resolution.



Queen Elizabeth, then prime minister Jean Chr tien and Conrad Black greet World War Two veterans during a ceremony unveiling the Canada Memorial in London, England, on June 3, 1994. Fred Chartrand/CP

Blair told the Queen that did not apply to me as I was being appointed as a U.K. citizen and was a resident and the peerage was a recognition of services rendered in the U.K. Chr tien did not accept this answer when the Queen's principal secretary conveyed it to Jean Pelletier. The Queen told Blair, who told me, that she found it awkward having to choose between the conflicting advice of different prime ministers of two countries of both of which she was the monarch. And I said that of course she must not be embarrassed over such a trivial matter, and asked that the matter be deferred.

The peerage was a recognition of services rendered in the

U.K.

The “very urgent” telephone call Chrétien writes that he received from me when he was on his way to a G8 meeting at Cologne, was in fact made at his request, and claims of urgency were being made by Jean Pelletier. I was not far away, at a music festival in Salzburg, Austria. My nomination procedure was not at all as Chrétien describes – the official opposition has a designated number of peers it can name any year and I was one of them, but because of the assistance our newspapers had given the Labour government of Blair in the settlement of the Northern Ireland crisis, the prime minister supported the nomination privately also. There were already 14 British-Canadian dual citizens in the House of Lords, and this method, as I just wrote, had been stipulated by the Chrétien government through the chief of protocol. Any reader may fairly judge the accuracy of Chrétien’s statement that I explained to him that I was “desperate,” and that I had sent out invitations to a huge reception I was holding for myself to celebrate my peerage. When I eventually did receive the honour, I did not have so much as a glass of champagne to celebrate it and would never in a hundred years act as he described.



Lord Black of Crossharbour takes his seat in the British House of Lords on Oct. 31, 2001. Brian Smith/Daily Telegraph

I did not wish to pass on the pleasant honour of being in the legislative chamber with the most distinguished membership and highest quality of debates in the world, but did not wish to give up my status as a Canadian citizen. My legal advice was that since this was an honour a foreign government wished to confer on me in my capacity as a citizen of that country for honours deemed to have been rendered in that country, the Canadian government had no right to prevent me from receiving it just because I was also a Canadian citizen. I asked the Canadian courts to determine that the prime minister’s

intervention in my rights as a citizen of another country was ultra vires. As judges deliberated after hearing arguments, my friend Peter Mandelson, a prominent member of the Blair government, visited Jean Chrétien and this subject came up; Peter reported that Jean said that his party had a monopoly on government, as the Reform Party and Bloc Québécois had fragmented the Progressive Conservatives, and that he would be upheld. Eventually, the Superior Court and Court of Appeal in Toronto both dutifully declared they had no jurisdiction. I had no reason to expect the Supreme Court of Canada to be any more courageous. The issue was not justiciable in Britain because the problem was entirely due to my being a Canadian citizen and was invoked by the Canadian government. It was up to me to sort it out with Canada.

The malice of the Canadian prime minister ... (was) sufficiently provoking that I temporarily renounced my Canadian citizenship

All knew, and Chrétien's biographer, Lawrence Martin, has confirmed, that his motive was our newspapers' coverage of the Shawinigate controversy and the early stirrings of the Adscam scandal. I had already, at his request, published unaltered and without comment, a vigorous self-defence Chrétien had written for us, and enforced strict rules of responsibility and fairness in these subjects (to zero resistance from National Post and Ottawa Citizen editors Ken Whyte and Neil Reynolds and their very professional journalists). It annoyed me, as a British citizen, to have a foreign leader create a class of one in the U.K. ineligible to receive an honour in that country because I was a Canadian. The malice of the Canadian prime minister and pusillanimity of the Canadian courts were sufficiently provoking that I temporarily renounced my Canadian citizenship, saying that I would apply for its return when that was appropriate, and accepted the peerage. Chrétien dismisses it as "crumbs and a wig" but there was no wig (other than the Lord Chancellor's) and membership

in that almost entirely meritorious house is not “crumbs.” I have enjoyed it and though I have been officially inactive for some years, I have returned and been generously received and look forward to resuming my full active membership. Nor is there any truth to Chrétien’s assertion that my British citizenship retarded my release from prison in the U.S. Britain has the same prisoner-transfer arrangements as Canada in those matters and I combatted the unjust sentence with successful appeals in the U.S. While waiting for justice to be done, I enjoyed assisting other prisoners to graduate from secondary school; the whole sojourn, though a travesty, was interesting.



Lord Black of Crossharbour poses for a photo with, at left, Nancy and Henry Kissinger, his wife Barbara Amiel, Margaret Thatcher and Lord Peter Carrington, on Oct. 31, 2001, the day he assumed his seat in the British House of Lords. Brian Smith I do expect to reapply as a Canadian citizen eventually – I have been mainly living here for nearly seven years, have not had so much as a parking ticket and have certainly been a substantial taxpayer. I am as I wrote above, delighted that Jean Chrétien has now also received a very high honour from the British government. I hope I shall see him again one of these days, and am sending him my history of Canada, where he is respectfully portrayed, and where this absurd incident, naturally, does not appear. My book will be cordially inscribed.

First published in the