Strongly pro
Canada's new Minister of Communications

by Connie Tadros

Following a federal cabinet shuffle June 30, Flora MacDonald (PC — Kingston and the Islands) was appointed Minister of Communications, becoming the first woman in Canadian politics to hold this portfolio and the second after former Secretary of State Judith LaMarsh to hold responsibility for culture.

Former minister of Employment & Immigration in the present government and Secretary of State for External Affairs in the Clark government, MacDonald sits on the key cabinet committees of Planning and Priorities, Regional and Economic Development, Foreign Policy and Defence, Public Service and Social Development, as well, as on the Planning and Priorities subcommittee on trade negotiations.

Born in North Sydney, Nova Scotia, MacDonald is a graduate of the Empire Business College and has attended the National Defence College. With over a decade of administrative experience with the national Progressive Conservative Party, MacDonald taught in the political science department at Queen's University. A former director of the Canadian Political Science Association and other professional associations, she was first elected to the House in 1972.

Listing speed skating among her hobbies, MacDonald is also the star of the National Film Board's 1976 hour-long documentary, directed by Peter Raymont, Flora: Scenes from a Leadership Convention, a behind-the-scenes look at her bid for the national leadership of her party.

The following interview with Cinema Canada editor Connie Tadros took place in the Communications minister's Slater Street offices in Ottawa.

I mean, he went off to the office like he had done all his life — to the cable office. I learned about this different dimension after the war.

Cinema Canada: Was be interested in politics?
Flora MacDonald: Oh, he was always fascinated by politics because everybody in Nova Scotia follows politics closely. But he wasn't a partisan in terms of organization or working in election campaigns or anything like that. He always understood the political issues and followed them. And if any political leaders found their way to Cape Breton, whether it was the leader of the Conservative Party or the old CCF or the Liberal Party, my father would insist that the whole family go to hear that individual because that was the least courtesy we could pay them since they had found their way so far east to Cape Breton.

Cinema Canada: And was this what eventually interested you in politics?
Flora MacDonald: Where I really became interested in it, some years later, was in Britain. I was working and studying and so on and that didn't leave you with much money. I was very interested in theatre and used to spend a lot of time there, but I found before long that the best theatre in town was in the British House of Commons. And I would line up and go in the evenings to hear the debates and that's where I really got bitten because it was superb — the debating skills of some of them! That was a time when Clement Attlee was there and Anthony Eden, Churchill was just fading out but Harold MacMillan was there — they were marvellous.

Cinema Canada: And that's what prompted you to take a job with the Conservative Party here?
Flora MacDonald: Oh no! That was sheer accident. I had come back after wandering around Europe and Canada, working and studying in a number of places, and I decided that I should come to Ottawa and write the Public Service exams for External Affairs. I had my appointment all set and was on my way to write them but I was early. As I happened to pass the headquarters of the Conservative Party, I went in and said jokingly, "There is another Conservative in town," and they offered me a job and I took it. And it changed my whole life!

Cinema Canada: Did you ever get to the exam?
Flora MacDonald: No, I never got to the exam. The next time I got to Exter...
Cinema Canada: Have you always been a Conservative?

Flora MacDonald: Well, we grew up in what was known as a Conservative family, but I think my father voted Liberal as often as he voted Conservative because he voted for the individual that he thought was best.

Cinema Canada: But working for the Party is one thing, and becoming a politician is quite a different thing altogether.

Flora MacDonald: One of the things that working for the party gave me was an opportunity to go into every town and village and community across this country. You get to know what the problems are, what the opportunities are and, in doing that for a number of years, you pretty soon find out what it's really all about in that area and what their concerns are. Being a woman, you pretty soon find out what it's really all about in that area and what their concerns are.
Cinema Canada: You and Mr. Masse are certainly two very different kinds of people.

Flora MacDonald: I think that our basic interests are the same but the way that we operate might be very different.

Cinema Canada: In Manpower and Immigration you did a lot of house-keeping and left it in a state where patronage would become quite difficult.

Flora MacDonald: You'd just better believe it! That was a cesspool of a department. Someone had to go in and make it into something worthwhile and I changed it into a major training department.

The problem with unemployment in the country is that many people don't have any usable skills and you've got to find ways to give it to them. One of the things that I was able to do was to say to the department: do you realize that one of the great growth sectors is in the cultural industries? Just last year in Employment and Immigration, we spent $30 million for the first time in cultural-related projects - in theatre, in dance, and that had never happened before. These are people being trained, not just in the activities themselves but in work which would provide them with experience as box office managers, production people, stage set-designers, etc. That $30 million worth of projects is a fair amount.

Cinema Canada: I bring up the question because Masse, after an initial period of budget cutting and things like that, reacted very spontaneously with his various task forces and commissions. You are going to inherit a lot of studies and opinions, but getting things done is now going to be your job.

Flora MacDonald: The two departments were in entirely different stages of development. I've come here just when there are a lot of decisions to be made and I look forward to that. I really do. I think that I have to be sure to apportion my time properly because I want to make sure that, whether cultural industries, broadcasting, or telecommunications, I don't short-change any one in becoming so enthusiastic about another aspect that it takes all my time.

In moving the Department of Employment into more of a training mode, I came to the basic question of education and of ongoing education, and lifelong learning. Telecommunications is, if anything, a greater extension of that. We haven't really come to grips in this country with how we can use our telecommunications for the benefit of not just Canadians but other countries in the world - the Third World - in a learning experience. What can they teach us, and what can we teach them via telecommunications, via satellite? We are just scratching the surface of what can be taught, what can be conveyed by satellite - to sit in on seminars that are taking place in Lusaka and see the reactions and the way people act and the kinds of questions they have would be a great experience for me. And the other way around.

So, since we are world leaders in the field of the hardware, we could go on to be world leaders in the field of software.

Cinema Canada: We've always done well in the hardware, in the technolog-...
quickly. You were very active yourself in these questions when you were with the Committee for an Independent Canada.

Flora MacDonald: Indeed I was.

Cinema Canada: And yet here you are with Free Trade on your doorstep...

Flora MacDonald: Yes, but you see one of the things that I said then and I say now is that you don’t build your place in the world by just being anti-something. You build it by being strongly pro-something. I’ve always been strongly pro-Canadian. I think that we can do things here and sometimes we sell ourselves short. We don’t think we can compete with the best. Well, telecommunications has shown that we can compete with the best. The films that are being produced right now show that we can compete with the best, and I think we are gaining a greater self-assurance as Canadians and where our place is in the world. Certainly different regions of the country and different sectors of the industry need help and that’s the same with anything that’s developing. But I don’t see it in protectionist terms. We are going to get A to C; at point B you are going to be helped to stand up but from then on to C you can run on your own. And I think that’s what we can do very well.

Cinema Canada: Time and again, and I think of John Roberts as the first blatant example, the ministers have had an idea of what needed to be done but found it impossible to get the idea past Cabinet because what the minister needed was running opposite to the various needs of Cabinet. You are popularly perceived as probably having more clout in Cabinet than several of your predecessors. Do you think that’s fair and if so, are you going to use it?

Flora MacDonald: I have worked now very closely with two Prime Ministers recently, the present prime minister and Joe Clark. I think of no stronger Canadians, no more dedicated Canadians in the sense that they are really the expression, the essence, of Canada. Yes, they have come from small communities, yes, they have gone on to larger communities, to study and work, and bring their ideas and their drive to it. They are essentially or quintessentially Canadian. They don’t need any major pressure from me to want to express that. I’m there to assist them, or to work with them and they with me. I don’t see it as being all that difficult because I know them so well...

Cinema Canada: But in some areas they might want to favour private sector initiatives for various economic reasons.

Flora MacDonald: Oh, no, no, wait a moment. This country never is, never has been and never will be a country operating in one sector to the exclusion of the other. My great predecessor in Kingston started this all off with the mix of developing the country through the private and public sectors, and there will always surely be that mix.

You know that government has to be involved. You simply know that in a country as vast and as different as Canada. And you couldn’t do without, you couldn’t leave communications or transportation solely up to the private sector. It just wouldn’t work. So we know that there will always be a mix of the public sector and the private sector. The difficulty will always be to find the right level, the right mix. And it’s the same whether it’s in broadcasting, or the cultural activities.

One of the challenges will be to see whether or not we can stimulate more private sector participation. That does not mean that the government would back out of the necessary things that it has to do. Nothing would work if that were the way.

Cinema Canada: The Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force Report. When are we going to see it?
Flora MacDonald: You and me both! I haven’t seen it.

Cinema Canada: Where is it?
Flora MacDonald: I think it’s in process of being translated.

Cinema Canada: You don’t get a copy before it’s translated?
Flora MacDonald: No, and they are not ready to present it to me. That’s fine. I’m going off on two weeks, holiday and I do not intend to take it with me. I’m going bicycling in France and it would be too heavy to carry along on my bike... So I expect when I get back...

Cinema Canada: The gossipers said that one of the things about Caplan-Sauvageau is that Masse picked exactly the people who would give him the answers he was looking for and that he would find it very easy to cope with. Perhaps your reception of this interminable report will be different.

Flora MacDonald: It’s a huge job when you think of how long it is since we’ve had a real analysis of broadcasting.

Cinema Canada: Have you any thoughts on how you would see broadcasting independently of what Caplan-Sauvageau is going to say?

Flora MacDonald: I’m still in the process of discussion with all the heads of the agencies and I don’t want to select one out on its own. I get up and go to bed with CBC Radio and it’s very good. Unfortunately I get more opportunity to be with radio than television simply because of the nature of the demands.

Cinema Canada: Will major initiatives be taken after Caplan-Sauvageau?

Flora MacDonald: In the whole field of broadcasting, obviously. We are still operating on a Broadcasting Act that is rooted in 30 years ago...

Cinema Canada: Have you any time frame for when you’d like to see those reports or legislation articulated?

Flora MacDonald: You know we are halfway through our mandate. I’d like to see it through and into a new Broadcasting Act before this Parliamentary Session ends.
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