

## **Along with high office, Canada's prime ministers share a mutual disdain**

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has done something rare for a Canadian prime minister: He has been gracious to a predecessor.

This week, Mr. Harper chose former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien to be Canada's representative to the Diamond Jubilee Trust in honour of the 60-year reign of Queen Elizabeth II. The trust is intended to raise funds to support charitable activities throughout the Commonwealth. Mr. Chrétien, a big fan of the Queen, is an entirely appropriate Canadian

Mr. Harper and Mr. Chrétien, although from different parties and obviously not sharing policy preferences, have a grudging respect for each other, according to those who know both men. Each recognizes the tough guy and political survival skills in the other.

That's more, alas, than can be said for attitudes and relations among Canadian prime ministers generally. Unlike the United States and Britain, in Canada most former prime ministers not only dislike each other to the point of venom in private, they seldom honour the prime minister's office by being civil to each other in public.

On Thursday night this will mercifully, albeit temporarily, change at the Public Policy Forum's 25th anniversary dinner in Toronto. All living prime ministers were invited to attend. Mr. Harper, who apparently evinced an early interest to participate, eventually begged off. Mr. Chrétien will not be present, various reasons for which have been put forward. But the other former prime ministers – Joe Clark, John Turner, Brian Mulroney, Kim Campbell and Paul Martin – will be there.

Relations between Mr. Harper and these predecessors are either non-existent or venomous. He and Brian Mulroney, for obvious reasons, are on the outs. Mr. Mulroney cannot forgive Mr. Harper for the inquiry into the Schreiber affair and Mr. Harper's order to his party not to have any dealings with Mr. Mulroney, an unforgiveable slight for Mr. Mulroney, who led the Progressive Conservatives to two majority governments.

Mr. Harper's disdain for Mr. Clark remains intense, perhaps because he sees Mr. Clark as a political weakling, or because Mr. Clark refused to be part of the Canadian Alliance Mr. Harper once led, preferring instead to lead his own rump group in the Commons.

Mr. Harper was so lacking in grace that he refused to attend the official unveiling of Mr. Clark's portrait in the House of Commons, although Mr. Harper did find time to participate in the dedication of a portrait of Arthur Meighen, who served two brief terms as prime minister in the 1920s, that had been hanging in the building for decades.

Relations between Mr. Chrétien and Messrs. Turner and Martin are terrible, a result of the internecine wars within the Liberal Party, with Mr. Turner never having forgiven Mr. Chrétien for trying to undermine his leadership and Mr. Chrétien and Mr. Martin blaming each other for the internal rivalries that marked their time in office together.

Mr. Chrétien did display grace toward Kim Campbell, his Progressive Conservative predecessor, when he appointed her consul-general in Los Angeles, where by all accounts she did a bang-up job. And Mr. Chrétien did show up, speaking with his characteristic wit, at the unveiling of Mr. Mulroney's portrait in the House of Commons.

Relations between Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Martin are civil, as they are between Mr. Turner and Mr. Martin. Mr. Mulroney, having unseated Mr. Clark for the PC leadership, later developed a good working relationship with Mr. Clark, who served with distinction as external affairs minister for seven years.

In the United States, former presidents appear at state events together and sometimes even work together, as Bill Clinton has done in recent years with both George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush. Perhaps because the president is head of state as well as head of government, a degree of proper civic decency attends relations among former presidents.

Even in the United Kingdom, with its verbally pugilistic parliamentary politics, former prime ministers generally treat each other with public respect. They are expected to, and do, attend state functions together, if asked. Gordon Brown, while serving as Labour prime minister, even asked former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher to tea at 10 Downing Street.

It would be hard to imagine Mr. Harper inviting any of his predecessors over for a beer, or for most of them to accept an invitation from any of the other members of the select club.