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TO PRIORITY FCO

TELNO 753

OF 281610Z OCTOBER 88

INFO ROUTINE WASHINGTON

INFO SAVING EDMONTON, MONTREAL, VANCOUVER, TORONTO

MY TELNO 741: CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION

SUMMARY

1. ALL THREE PARTY LEADERS ACQUITTED THEMSELVES CREDITABLY IN THE TV DEBATES, WITH TURNER (LIBERAL) THE CLEAR WINNER, BUT IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN HOW MUCH OF THE LOST GROUND HE CAN RECOVER. THE LATEST POLLS SHOW GAINS FOR THE LIBERALS AT THE EXPENSE OF BOTH THE NDP AND THE CONSERVATIVES.

DETAIL

2. THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT, IN THE DEBATE IN FRENCH ON 24 OCTOBER, MULRONEY DEFENDED HIS GOVERNMENT'S RECORD EFFECTIVELY BUT THAT TURNER WON GENERAL RESPECT FOR A VIGOROUS PERFORMANCE, SHOWING NOT ONLY AN IMPROVED COMMAND OF FRENCH BUT ALSO SCORING ON FREE TRADE AGAINST MULRONEY AND ON SOCIAL POLICIES AGAINST BROADBENT. THE LATTER HELD HIS OWN, BUT HIS FRENCH IS WEAK AND AS A CONSEQUENCE HE MISSED DEBATING OPPORTUNITIES. THE RESULT WAS THAT MULRONEY KEPT HIS GROUND WHILE TURNER MANAGED TO RESTORE HIS OWN AND HIS PARTY WORKERS' MORALE: HE PROBABLY REDUCED THE RISK OF LOSING SOME MONTREAL CONSTITUENCIES TO THE NDP, BUT WHETHER HE SUCCEEDED IN LOOSENING THE CONSERVATIVES' COMMANDING GRIP ON QUEBEC PROVINCE IS MORE DOUBTFUL.

3. IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEBATE ON 25 OCTOBER (OF INTEREST TO THREE TIMES AS MANY VOTERS) MULRONEY WAS AGAIN ON THE DEFENSIVE AND MOST OF THE TIME SOUGHT TO REMAIN ALOOF AND PRIME MINISTERIAL. HE FENDED OFF ATTACKS ON HIS GOVERNMENT'S MISUSE OF PATRONAGE POWERS, ALTHOUGH TURNER SAW TO IT THAT THE AUDIENCE WERE REMINDED OF HIS ADMINISTRATION'S EARLIER DIFFICULTIES IN THIS AREA. TURNER WAS PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE IN DEBATING THE FREE TRADE ISSUE, ON WHICH BOTH HE AND MULRONEY VIED WITH EACH OTHER IN DECLARATIONS OF PATRIOTISM. IN DISPUTING TURNER'S CLAIM THAT THE CHANGES FREE TRADE WILL BRING WOULD BE IRREVERSIBLE, MULRONEY RETORTED THAT THE AGREEMENT COULD BE CANCELLED AT 6 MONTHS' NOTICE. THE LIBERALS HAVE SEIZED ON THIS AS FURTHER EVIDENCE OF MULRONEY'S INCONSISTENCY.

COMMENT

4. TURNER'S PERFORMANCE ON 25 OCTOBER HAS BEEN HAILED AS A TRIUMPH BY HIS SUPPORTERS AND HAS CERTAINLY PROVIDED A WELCOME FILLIP FOR HIS PARTY'S MORALE. BROADBENT DID LESS WELL THAN MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED AND PREDICTABLY CAME IN FOR SHARP CRITICISM OF HIS PARTY'S DEFENCE POLICY (WHICH HE HAD TRIED SO HARD TO CHANGE PRIOR TO THE ELECTION). ON SOCIAL ISSUES TOO TURNER'S PERFORMANCE WAS THE MORE CONVINCING. ALTHOUGH MULRONEY WILL NOT HAVE MADE ANY NEW CONVERTS, HE PROBABLY DID WELL ENOUGH TO MAINTAIN HIS PARTY'S LEAD. THE MAIN QUESTION THEREFORE SEEMS TO BE HOW THE ARGUMENTS BETWEEN TURNER AND BROADBENT WILL AFFECT THEIR PARTIES'S CHANCES OF COMING SECOND. TODAY'S POLLS SHOW THAT THE LIBERALS HAVE GONE SOME WAY TO RESTORING THEIR FORTUNES AT BOTH THE CONSERVATIVES' AND THE NDP'S EXPENSE.

5. TODAY'S MEDIA REPORTS OF FINANCIAL IMPROPRIETIES BY THE CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGN CO-CHAIRMAN SENATOR MICHEL COGGER IS BAD

NEWS FOR MULRONEY, IF ANY OF THE MUD CAN BE MADE TO STICK. THE LIBERALS WILL NOW SEEK TO CAPITALISE TO THE MAXIMUM ON THEIR LEADER'S SUCCESS IN THE TV DEBATES. APART FROM ONE OR TWO FLASHES OF PERSONAL ANIMOSITY BETWEEN MULRONEY AND TURNER, THESE WERE CONDUCTED AT A HIGH LEVEL AND NEUTRAL OBSERVERS HAVE COMPARED THEM FAVOURABLY AS TO BOTH TONE AND CONTENT WITH THOSE IN THE US ELECTION. NONE OF THE THREE POLITICAL LEADERS MADE A SERIOUS MISTAKE SEMI-COLON CONSEQUENTLY NONE OF THEM WAS ABLE TO SCORE A DECISIVE BLOW, ALTHOUGH MULRONEY NOW LOOKS RATHER MORE VULNERABLE ON FREE TRADE THAN HE DID AT THE OUTSET OF THE ELECTION. THE MAIN OUTCOME OF THE DEBATES WOULD SEEM TO BE THAT THE DRIFT TOWARDS A CONSERVATIVE LANDSLIDE, LIKE THAT TOWARDS A LIBERAL DEBACLE, MAY HAVE BEEN CHECKED.

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