

Book review

"The House is not a Home" is Erik Nielsen's confession

By J.L. GRANATSTEIN
The compulsion to confess is a very human one, as everyone who reads thrillers knows. But it is not just criminals who want to tell all. Politicians, even tight-lipped ones, apparently find it hard to keep silent forever. The proof of this axiom is Erik Nielsen's memoir, *The House is Not a Home: An Autobiography* (Macmillan: 336 pages, \$27.95).

Nielsen, a former Conservative deputy prime minister, tells us something of his early life in a household dominated by his RCMP father. Then it was the Second World War and distinguished service with the RCAF overseas, followed by the establishment of a legal practice in the north. Elected to Parliament from Yukon in a 1957 byelection, Nielsen first came to prominence during the Scandal Sessions that nearly destroyed Lester Pearson's Liberal government in the mid-1960s. Using information that he had largely dug up himself, Nielsen, day after day, rose in the House to pillory Quebec ministers for their sins. Some were real enough and involved bribery; others seemed almost imaginary. But all destroyed careers.

There was nothing wrong then or

now with exposing corruption. But Nielsen's targets invariably focussed on Quebecois, and the viciousness of his attacks, always delivered from behind his stone-hard face, created the indelible impression that Nielsen was prejudiced. Certainly, the Liberal counterattacks did nothing to dispel that assessment.

Nielsen himself maintains that his interest was solely devoted to the public good, and he puts the exposure of wrongdoing and an abhorrence of patronage at the top of his list of personal attributes, along with his loyalty to the party's leaders. Perception, however, is in the eye of the beholder, and this book ultimately does little to enhance its author's reputation.

The patronage aspect is most clear. Here, we have Nielsen devoutly proclaiming his preference for appointments based on merit alone; but we know that Nielsen helped create the Mulroney government's very effective patronage machine that still doles out rewards to the faithful. And who was ever more faithful than Nielsen? He went to his well-paid sinecure as head of the National Transportation Agency in 1987.

LOYALTY
Nielsen's loyalty to his leaders is also clear. He followed John Diefenbaker with great devotion and, although he now admits that the Chief had faults, he bitterly denounces those who helped drive him out of power. It was personal ambition that motivated them all, he says. But once Diefenbaker was gone, Nielsen gave his support to Robert Stanfield and then to Joe Clark. And after Brian Mulroney had toppled Clark, the Boy from Baie-Comeau received all of Nielsen's devotion. Until now.

The picture of Mulroney that Nielsen paints is not a wholly favorable one. We have here a weak and indecisive leader, a prime minister who is unwilling to wield his axe against friends who slip from grace. Thus, Robert Coates, the defence minister who slipped away from his handlers in the fall of 1984 to visit a sleazy porno-bar in Germany, was allowed to linger too long in office. Nielsen had to push Mulroney to get him fired, or so we are told. And the same thing happened when Sinclair Stevens fell into a conflict-of-interest situation and again when John Fraser slipped on rotten tuna. A prime minister who

can't prune his cabinet is bound to get into difficulty, and Nielsen, who prints a memorandum he wrote for Mulroney before the 1984 election, seemed to know exactly which prospective ministers were going to get into trouble.

But these revelations scarcely amount to loyalty. Why did Nielsen unburden himself now? Nielsen has refused to give interviews in connection with his book (an unheard of position for an author), so all we can do is speculate. Perhaps he really is, as he suggests, disturbed by the continuance of patronage. And perhaps pigs have started to fly. More likely, Nielsen hoped to remain a close

adviser to Mulroney after he left politics in 1987 and was disappointed that the telephone failed to ring often enough. Close relationships in politics are not long lasting, but grievances can live on even in yesterday's men. This book is obviously the product of burning resentment, and as such it negates Nielsen's greatest virtue, his loyalty to his leader.

—Prof. J.L. Granatstein, who teaches Canadian history at York University in Toronto, is one of Canada's most prolific historical writers. He has written or co-written more than 25 books, including books on the Conservative and Liberal parties.

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