

Brian Mulroney knew the ravages of alcohol and was there for anyone struggling – including me



Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney leaves Parliament Hill in 2012

Jim Coyle
March 1, 2024

It was a late morning in June about 10 years ago and I had just turned into the parking lot of a No-Frills supermarket in Toronto when my cellphone rang.

It was the Office of the Prime Minister asking if I would hold for a call.

I was working as a *Star* reporter at the time. My first thought was, Why would Stephen Harper be calling me? I hadn't written anything about him lately.

Then the call was patched through the PMO switchboard and I heard that voice. It was a little raspier, perhaps, than in his prime, but still a resonant baritone.

"And how are you, young Mr. Coyle?" asked former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, spoofing a line of his that I had used in an eBook I had recently written for the *Star* on my alcoholism.

By that time, Mulroney was about two decades removed from office. But he was still doing what he always had, working the phones, making those personal calls a recipient never forgets.

He had called to congratulate me on sobering up. “But most of all I want to congratulate your wife!” he said, knowing who it is in a family that bears the brunt of alcoholism.

At the time, I was just over 20 years sober. He told me that, as of the following week, it would be 34 years since he had taken a drink.

And so, we talked for 15 minutes about how it had been for me, how it had been for him, mutual acquaintances who’d sobered and people we know who’d died from the horrors of addiction.

As we chatted, I thought how astonishing it was that I – son of immigrants who never got to high school – should be trading drunk stories with a former prime minister of Canada.

But Mulroney knew that alcoholism is no respecter of rank or status, that alcoholics understand each other across any divide, and better than anyone else can.

He had been remarkably frank in his 2007 memoirs about his drinking growing out of control after his leadership loss to Joe Clark in 1976.

“I realized I would have to come to grips with the fact that I had developed what could only be described as a serious drinking problem.”

He quit drinking on June 24, 1980, St. Jean Baptiste Day in Quebec.

As his sobriety grew more solid, “it made me extremely sensitive to people with similar problems,” he wrote.

In that claim, there’s no hyperbole.

The stories were many among the problem drinkers of Ottawa – and Lord knows, there were enough of us in his day – of Mulroney calling people, friend or foe alike, with encouragement if he heard they were in trouble.

In this realm, he bore no grudges.

His former press secretary Michel Gratton, who’d embarrassed Mulroney with a couple of tell-all books after leaving the PM’s employ, nevertheless benefited from Mulroney’s support in his unsuccessful battle with the disease.

So, too, did Doug Small, a former Global TV reporter who rocked the Mulroney government in April 1989 by reporting leaked excerpts from the budget.

In his book *Power, Prime Ministers and the Press*, Robert Lewis told how, about six months after the leak, Small – who had recently quit drinking – felt shaky on a trip home from Moscow on a Mulroney tour.

Wheels were up and the drink trolleys were rolling.

“Everybody has drinks going,” Small recalled. “I thought, ‘I’m not going to get through this.’ I couldn’t see anyone who wasn’t drinking.”

Then, as Lewis chronicled, Small spotted Mulroney at the front of the plane, talking to a cabinet minister.

“I catch his eye. I walked right up to him and said, ‘I need to talk to somebody about drinking’.”

Without hesitation, Mulroney said: “You’ve come to the right place.”

The two slipped into Mulroney's private section and, until Small settled down, shared drunk stories.

As Small prepared to return to his seat, Mulroney said, "If you ever have to talk about this, you know where to come."

It was work Brian Mulroney did frequently and with no thought of publicity or political gain.

It gave him, he told me on that day on the phone, more gratification than anything else he ever did.

Jim Coyle is a former *Toronto Star* reporter and feature writer. In his 40-year career, he also wrote for The Canadian Press and the *Ottawa Citizen*.