

September 2024 Speaker

Steve Paikin – “*John Turner- Canada’s 17th Prime Minister*”

“John Turner should be better remembered than for being Prime Minister for only 79 days,” Steve said in explaining why he wrote *John Turner: An Intimate Biography of Canada’s 17th Prime Minister*, published in 2022 by Sutherland House Books, Toronto. “Although he was flawed, he was a really great Canadian. Maybe it was unfair that he was so good-looking because expectations about him were very high. It’s better, as with Ontario Premier Bill Davis and Prime Minister Jean Chretien, when expectations are low and the person outperforms.”

Turner, a Liberal, was prime minister June 30 to September 17, 1984, and leader of the Official Opposition September 17, 1984 to February 7, 1990. He died September 19, 2020 at age 91. Steve, who spoke to us September 30, told us, “I visited his gravesite at Mount Pleasant Cemetery less than two weeks ago for the fourth anniversary of his death. He wasn’t a perfect politician; he had his share of problems, but he was a truly great Canadian who gave a lot back to the country he loved.”

Following Turner’s death former aides of his approached Paikin to write a biography. He was told he’d have access to the family and Turner’s private papers. Steve had covered Turner’s 1984 selection as Liberal party leader as well as his 1984 and 1988 losing campaigns for the prime ministership against Conservative Brian Mulroney. Also: “We would have lunch to celebrate our two-days-apart birthdays. “I had a full-time job,” Steve said, referring to his being the host of TVO’s current affairs program, *The Agenda*, “but I’m glad I agreed to do the book.”

Steve noted: “John Turner could never have become president of the United States because foreign-born people aren’t permitted to, and he was born in England. But he could become prime minister of Canada although not born here which I think shows our superiority, that we don’t care where someone comes from, we want to know what they’ll contribute.”

As Canada’s fastest runner in the 100-yard-dash Turner was slated to represent Canada in that category in the 1948 Olympics but couldn’t because he was injured in a car accident just before. He was elected to Parliament in 1962 at 33. When Lester Pearson resigned as Prime Minister and Liberal Party Leader in 1968, Turner sought to replace him but was defeated by Pierre Trudeau. Trudeau appointed him Minister of Justice and Attorney General, July 1968-January 1972. Steve praised Turner’s role in the decriminalization of abortion and homosexuality, ending government regulation of divorce, and for his oversight of the War Measures Act in the 1970 FLQ Crisis. Turner was Minister of Finance from January 1972 to September 1975. “One of Canada’s best finance ministers,” Steve said.

But Steven said Turner “for all of his qualities had two problems. He drank too much and he dropped “F” bombs at the least appropriate moments. As he got older, he lost his filter.”

Following his defeat in 1988, Turner “was unvalued and mostly unwelcomed”. The big law firm that he’d worked for didn’t want him back, but a well-reputed smaller firm accepted him. He gave talks at schools on the significance of democracy. Prime Minister Paul Martin appointed Turner a member of the Canadian delegation that monitored the runoff vote in the 2004 Ukraine presidential election. “It was a clean election. He thought it was ‘probably the best thing in my public life.’ Not being prime minister and justice minister.”

Susan Goldenberg