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# THE HILL TIMES

NINETEENTH YEAR, NO. 921

CANADA'S POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT NEWSWEEKLY

MONDAY, JANUARY 28, 2008 \$4.00

## Afghanistan and economy to be top issues in House of Commons

A downturn in the economy not a good time for incumbent government to go to polls, say political watchers

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

As Parliament returns this week after a highly-dramatic six-week break, political observers say Canadians can expect more of the same in the House and in the Senate as the economy and Canada's role in Afghanistan take centre stage as the top issues this winter, along with the never-ending threat of an election.

"It's going to be a lively Parliament," Nova Scotia Conservative Senator Donald Oliver told *The*

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## Some top political staffers to watch in this Parliamentary session

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty expected to take a higher profile in the House

By ABBAS RANA

The winter session of the 39th Parliament will be short and dominated by more politics than policy, say Hill insiders who are still hotly speculating on the timing of the next election.

"There'll be more politics than policy. There'll be a lot of [political and procedural] manoeuvring in the House and all kinds of justifications will be made for these manoeuvres," said one Hill insider who requested anonymity.

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Photograph courtesy of Glen Pearson, *The Hill Times*

**Enchanted:** Ontario Liberal MP Glen Pearson, rear, his wife, Jane Roy, and their children Ater, Abuk, and Achan. The couple adopted the children from war-torn Sudan where the children's mother was shot and killed in front of their eyes. p. 26.

## PM's tight control on government 'weird' strategy, say some experts

But government's communications strategy has potential to damage the government's support if seen as dictatorial or unable to cope well with criticism.

By SIMON DOYLE

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's stage-managed and "weird" communications control over his Cabinet may be a symptom of the "it's communications stupid" syndrome, in which the government

views its mistakes as communications failures as opposed to public policy failures, say political science and communications experts.

Allan Tupper, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia, told *The Hill Times* last week that there is so much emphasis on communications today that governments can often feel that they don't make policy mistakes.

"You never do anything wrong, you just miscommunicate, or you don't communicate tightly enough. You confuse unpopular public policies with poorly-communicated public policies," he

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## Parties failing to urge Milliken to enforce discipline in House: MPs

Some MPs say all parties should form a united front and ask House Speaker Peter Milliken to take a more forceful disciplinary approach in the Commons Chamber.

By SIMON DOYLE

As the House enters what's likely to be an edgy winter session and an unruly daily Question Period, MPs say decorum won't be improved until

all four parties make the unlikely move of forming a united front and urge House Speaker Peter Milliken to take a more forceful approach to discipline. At least one MP says the House Speaker could take a few pointers in style from the more forceful Deputy Speaker Bill Blaikie.

The problem of House decorum has been talked about for years, and although the issue takes a front seat for some MPs, few party leaders, whips or House leaders are urging serious action on it. But some MPs say an all-party request of Mr.

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## Mulroney-Schreiber affair 'going to be very juicy' in this winter House session

Pollster Nik Nanos predicts committee hearings to be 'very tabloid, soap-opera politics'

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

Although the present Conservative government does not necessarily have anything to do with the Mulroney-Schreiber affair, the upcoming House Ethics Committee hearings and a follow-up inquiry could have negative politi-

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## Keen demoted, not dismissed, may have been legal, says law expert

Natural Resources Department says the government had the right to remove Linda Keen under the Nuclear Safety Act

By SIMON DOYLE

The Conservative government's removal of Ms. Keen as president and CEO of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission this month may have been within legal boundaries of the Nuclear Safety Act because she was "demoted," not fired, from the commission tribunal, says Lorne Sossin, a law and public administration expert in the University of Toronto's faculty of law.

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# Legislation

## Afghanistan, economy and environment top issues in House

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Hill Times last week. "I think Afghanistan will be No. 1 and the economy No. 2. The stock market's been up and down and the governor of the Bank of Canada reduced the rate and so on, but I think that Canada's not in bad shape so the opposition parties, the three of them, will devote a lot of time to Afghanistan because it's a very divisive issue. I think it's going to make for an interesting time on the Hill."

Former deputy prime minister **John Manley**, who chaired the Independent Panel on Canada's Future in Afghanistan, released his report last Tuesday, recommending that Canada move from a combat role in Kandahar to one of development after February 2009 unless it received more help, in the form of at least 1,000 more troops from its NATO partners. While the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois want a withdrawal of all Canadian troops in Afghanistan by February 2009 when the current mission ends, the NDP want an immediate withdrawal and the Conservatives will likely put forward a motion in the House to extend the mission until at least 2011. The report urged the government to delay the vote until after the NATO leaders summit this April in order to try to negotiate more troops from NATO. It's unlikely a vote to extend the mission will pass in the House, and it's also likely it will be a confidence vote.

Nanos Research CEO **Nik Nanos** said last week that the Afghanistan issue could be "the one piece of good news" for the Conservatives this winter. He said the Conservatives have survived the minority government so far because they've been able to manage the agenda and focus on their priorities rather than letting other dictate them. Because of the many unknowns of this winter session, Mr. Nanos said Afghanistan is something the government can control. "With the Manley report out, basically, they've boxed in the Liberals because they have John Manley, former Liberal leadership contender, putting out a view on what should be done that is reasonably acceptable to the government," he said. "Strategically, it's hard for the Liberals to distance themselves from that. The one issue they'll have the best job of managing is Afghanistan and this is sort of in the absence of some kind of catastrophic occurrence in Afghanistan which would change the environment."

### All eyes on February budget: Mitchell

**David Mitchell**, vice-president of advancement at Queen's University, said MPs will be "walking on eggshells" this winter as the vote on Afghanistan could trigger an election, along with a budget expected in February. "There's not a huge expectation that this government can or will survive a confidence motion on a February budget," he told *The Hill Times* last week. "The budget is always, without question, a matter of confidence and it's an opportunity for the opposition parties to express their own lack of confidence. We know that the NDP and the Bloc have consistently indicated that they're not inclined to support this government and its priorities and the Liberal support in the House has worn a little bit thin and the expectation is that it's time for the Liberals to demonstrate



**He's on:** Government House Leader Peter Van Loan, pictured in this file photo on the Hill. Political watchers say the government will have to keep an eye on the economy before going to the polls.

their leadership as the official opposition by taking a stand against the government."

Liberal House Leader **Ralph Goodale** (Wascana, Sask.), a former finance minister, said last week that the economy will be one of the top issues in the House this winter because "the government has just made unwise choices that virtually every serious economist says are dead wrong." He said the Liberals will "vigorously pursue" the economic agenda. "The fact is the government has taken what was inherited, which was the strongest economy and the strongest fiscal position in the western world and largely frittered it away in less than two years to the point now where serious economists are raising the worry that Canada could be on the verge of a very significant economic slowdown," Mr. Goodale said.

The economic agenda will also be a top priority for the NDP, said NDP House Leader **Libby Davies** (Vancouver East, B.C.). She said the government has "failed working Canadians" and it's something they'll look to improve in the budget. "The NDP has long had that as a key priority, in terms of taking on Mr. Harper, that he's really left so many people behind with their budget, forking out a lot of money to corporations and big oil and gas companies and banks, but for the average working person, they haven't provided the help needed. So I think the economy generally will be a big issue," she said.

After ringing in the new year with the second one per cent GST cut, Prime Minister **Stephen Harper** (Calgary Southeast, Alta.) said that there probably would not be anymore tax cuts in the near future. The Conservatives also announced a \$1-billion program for the manufacturing sector in "one-industry" towns recently and said that the government would be focusing on the economy after meeting with the First Ministers on Jan. 11. In a press release, Mr. Harper said, "Our economy is strong, but at the same time, we continue to face challenges and we must, together, explore ways for all levels of government—individually and collectively—to further strengthen the economic union."

Because of the potential for an economic downturn, Mr. Mitchell said all of the political parties have an advantage to going to an

election sooner rather than later. He said with the mounting casualties in Afghanistan and a weakening economy in the United States, which is also affecting Canada, "it's risky for the government to try to live to fight another day." Mr. Mitchell said even if the Conservatives think they can't win a majority government, it would be better for them to try "to pick up some ground" out on the hustings. "They're in a better shape to do that than the opposition parties in terms of organization, funding and their volunteer base," he said. "So those maybe the factors that might allow the government to fight an election now, which is better than an election later with so many unknowns on the horizon."

Mr. Nanos said, however, that because of the "unknowns," he would be hard-pressed to see a winter election. "A downturn in the economy is never a good time for an incumbent government to call an election because it makes voters very grumpy," he said, adding, however that it would be a good time for the opposition if they can show Canadians they have the solutions. "It's not enough just to blame the other side."

Meanwhile, observers said last week that issues at the top of the agenda in the fall session such as the environment, Senate reform and justice, will take a back seat to Afghanistan and the economy. "These two issues appear in the short term, at least they have taken precedence over other issues such as the environment and social policy and healthcare, all of which are important but they don't seem to be as important political or as high profile immediately as the economy and the Canadian mission," Mr. Mitchell said.

Similarly, Sen. Oliver said there are still many bills and issues to get through in Parliament but, "they're in the background" compared to the economy and Afghanistan. "I don't think they'll be in the forefront at all, certainly not in February," he said.

### Committees to watch

Mr. Mitchell said there is not a strong "legislative agenda" this session and most of the issues, besides the budget, will be fought out politically during Question

### Week ahead in Parliament: House and Senate return

The House and Senate return to a highly politically-charged environment. After a six-week break, MPs will return to debate bills C-3, the Security Certificate and Special Advocate Bill at report stage; C-31, the Increasing Number of Judges Bill at second reading; C-8, the Railway Transportation Bill at third reading; C-9, the Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes between States and Nationals of Other States Bill at report stage; C-5, the Civil Liability and Compensation for Damage in Case of a Nuclear Incident Bill at report stage; C-27, the Identity Theft Bill at second reading; and C-7, the Aeronautics Act at third reading. Industry Minister **Jim Prentice** is also expected to introduce amendments to the Copyright Act on Monday.

Committees also get up and running this week.

On Tuesday, the Natural Resources Committee will hear from ex-Canada Nuclear Safety Commission president **Linda Keen**, who was fired recently from her post over the Chalk River nuclear facility controversy. Also appearing to discuss the issue are Auditor General **Sheila Fraser** and Health Minister **Tony Clement**. The Health Committee will be in a clause-by-clause study of Liberal MP **Navdeep Bains'** private members' Bill S-220, the National Blood Donor Week Bill. He will appear before the committee on Tuesday.

The Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics Committee, which is studying the Mulroney-Schreiber Affair, will hold an in camera meeting on Tuesday to discuss committee business, but is expected to hear from **Karlheinz Schreiber** on Thursday. Also on Thursday, the Canadian Heritage Committee will hear from **Michel Roy**, who was appointed as chair of the board of directors of Telefilm Canada.

Over in the Senate, which returns on Tuesday, the Special Committee on Aging will continue its examination of the implications of an aging society on Monday. Also on Monday, the Special Anti-terrorism Committee will study Bill S-3; the Investigative Hearing and Recognizance With Conditions Bill, while the National Security and Defence Committee studies Canada's emergency preparedness.

The Veterans Affairs Committee will continue its study on Wednesday on the "services and benefits provided to members of the Canadian Forces, veterans of war and peacekeeping missions and members of their families in recognition of their services to Canada." Also on Wednesday, the Social Affairs, Science and Technology Committee will examine the government's science and technology strategy. It will hear from the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council President **Suzanne Fortier**, Canada Foundation for Innovation President **Eliot Phillipson** and BioteCanada President **Peter Brenders**.

Meanwhile, also on Wednesday, the Banking, Trade and Commerce Committee will be in a clause-by-clause study of Bill C-10, the Foreign Investment Entities and Non-Resident Trusts Bill. The Transport and Communications Committee will continue its study on containerized freight traffic and will hear from Walmart and Canadian Tire executives.

On Thursday, Industry Minister **Jim Prentice** will appear before the Social Affairs, Science and Technology, as members continue studying the government's science and technology strategy.

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## LEGISLATION PAGE

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Period and committees.

For instance, he said the House Access to Information, Privacy, and Ethics Committee studying the Mulroney-Schreiber Affair "takes the cake" for committees to watch this session. The committee is looking at the Airbus affair and dealings between former prime minister **Brian Mulroney** and lobbyist **Karlheinz Schreiber**. A slew of witnesses, including **Norman Spector**, Mr. Mulroney's former chief of staff and former Solicitor General **Allan Rock**; former Mulroney spokesperson **Luc Lavoie** and former Mulroney chef at 24 Sussex Dr., **François Martin**; former Trudeau-era Cabinet minister who posted Mr. Schreiber's bail **Marc Lalonde**, former GCI lobbyist **Greg Alford** and former Mulroney aide **Fred Doucet**; and Mr. Schreiber's former accountant **Giorgio Pelossi** to appear by videoconference and former Mulroney-era minister **Elmer Mackay**, are scheduled to appear between now and Feb. 14. The committee will hear from Mr. Schreiber this Thursday.

In a letter to the Ethics committee last week, Mr. Mulroney's lawyer said the committee hearings have been "unfair" because the committee sought advice from Auditor General **Sheila Fraser** as to whether the committee could access Mr. Mulroney's tax returns to verify the amount of money he received from Mr. Schreiber. In addition, Mr. Mulroney's lawyer, **Guy Pratte**, said the committee unjustifiably allowed unrelated questions to be asked. Mr. Pratte said there was "a lack of appearance of impartiality and instances of actual bias already jeopardize the reliability and objectivity of the committee's ultimate report." Mulroney spokesperson **Robin Sears** told the *Globe and Mail* last week that Mr. Mulroney may not return to the committee if there is no satisfactory response to their letter.

"There are many Parliamentary, House and Senate committees, that are very active at this time, but really I think in terms of public interest and curiosity and media interest as well, the ethics committee, the ongoing investigation into the Mulroney-Schreiber affair will continue to dominate with sensational headlines that may eclipse the hard work of many other committees," Mr. Mitchell said.

Another politically explosive committee to watch this session is the House Natural Resources Committee as it dives into the controversial issues surrounding the firing of Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission's president, **Linda Keen**, and the government's handling of reopening the Chalk River, Ont., nuclear facility which produces half the world's medical isotopes. The committee met over the break and heard from Natural Resources Minister **Gary Lunn** (Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.), who defended his actions. Ms. Keen will appear before the committee this Tuesday, along with Auditor General **Sheila Fraser** and Health Minister **Tony Clement** (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.). Mr. Goodale said the Liberals will be "probing" the subject. "We seem to have a full scale war declared by Mr. Harper on all of the independent offices and watchdogs around the government. Linda Keen at the CNSC is the most recent victim. She has clearly been sacrificed to save the backside of an incompetent minister in Gary Lunn. It's Gary Lunn who should go, not Linda Keen," he said.

Mr. Nanos said the Chalk River issue will be difficult for the government to manage. "Beyond the initial response which related to making sure medical isotopes were available, this is kind of a long term story in terms of safety of the facilities, have they been maintained, what is the future of nuclear and so forth," he said. "So that is a real slow burning story that no one really knows the twists and turns it's going to take."

### National Defence, Procedure and House Affairs, Justice and Senate committees also have hot issues

Meanwhile, because Afghanistan is a hot topic, and reports last week brought the issue of detainee torture back into the

public light, the National Defence and Foreign Affairs and International Development committees will be busy. Although most see the environment taking a back seat this session, the House Environment Committee will be busy dissecting Canada's recent role at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali in December, a number of private member's bills as well as the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy's recent report calling for a carbon tax. "I think the environment will still be a big issue. The government's had a dismal record on climate change and they've embarrassed Canada internationally," Ms. Davies said.

With talk of Senate abolition and democratic reform in the fall session, it's likely the issue will resurface this winter. The government still has six bills to deal with, including: **C-6**, the Visual Identification of Voters Bill, **C-16**, the Expanded Voting Opportunities Bill, **C-19**, the Senate Tenure Bill, **C-20**, the Senate Selection Bill, **C-22**, the Democratic Representation Bill and **C-29**, the Loan Accountability Bill. Bills **C-6** and **C-22** are at the Procedure and House Affairs Committee and will likely heat up as Ontario claims it's being unfairly represented in the new formula for redistributing House seats.

One of the government's top priorities in the last session, crime and justice, will also be important in this session, as there are a number of bills still left to deal with, including ones on security certificates, non-registration of firearms, the Youth Criminal Justice Act amendments, controlled drugs and substances and identity theft. Bill **C-2**, the government's Tackling Violent Crime Bill, is currently in the Senate. "The committee that's got most of the work and the keep our streets safe legislation is the Legal Committee and a lot of those bills from the Commons will be going there for study. They will raise some serious questions," Sen. Oliver said.

Elsewhere in the Senate, Sen. Oliver said, "The Security and Defence Committee is always one to watch because of the nature of their reports and what they do. In the Transport Committee, they're finishing a study on containerization and it's important for Atlantic Canada because of the Atlantic Gateway proposals. That container report, which should be coming out in a month or two will have a major impact I think. So that's an important study to watch. Another committee that's always topical is the Environment committee. I'm not on it, so I don't know what they're studying now, but they always have interesting things going on in that committee."

### Tone, tenor and decorum

Mr. Mitchell said another issue to watch is Parliamentarians' behaviour as an indication of a coming election. "The House is going to be even more raucous than it has been because we're actually in the early stages of an election campaign right now. It simply hasn't been declared and the election writ hasn't been issued. But in fact the phony war, if I can call it that, which precedes the real war has already come," he said. "My guess is that it will become evident from the first moment that the House reconvenes."

Over in the Senate, Sen. Oliver said he expects "more of the same" in terms of decorum. "I don't think it will be better at all," he said. "The Senate is a partisan chamber. Everybody says it's a body of sober second thought—people leave their politics at home and they come in and try to work cooperatively and after all the constitution says we're to protect minorities and the regions—that doesn't happen. The opposition in the Senate takes the role that our job is to defeat the government and bring in the government that Canadians want which is a Liberal government so that kind of partisanship will be what I expect to see."

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## NEWS

# Mulroney-Schreiber probe could have negative political consequences for Conservatives, says pollster

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cal consequences for the governing party, says pollster Nik Nanos.

"It's going to be very juicy politically, and very tabloid, soap-opera politics, he said, she said, 'what kind of brown envelopes were passed to who and where and when and how thick were they?'" said Mr. Nanos, CEO of the polling firm Nanos Research. "What it does is it shows politicians who were doing things that make people very uncomfortable."

Mr. Nanos said this is significant for the Conservatives because they came to power on a campaign of ethics and integrity. Even though the public knows the current government had little to do with the former prime minister Brian Mulroney's term, the Airbus affair or German-Canadian arms dealer and lobbyist Karlheinz Schreiber, Mr. Nanos said the issue will put all politicians in a bad light, but the Conservatives even more so.

"If we do a poll and everyone says they want their politicians to be honest, politicians can't really go out saying, 'I'm honest,' or 'I'm more honest than the other candidate.' I think what's going to happen with the Schreiber inquiry is it's going to result in a

big black brush on all politicians where any politician that says they're more ethical than another politician, people just aren't going to believe," he said. "I think that's critical for this government because in the last election, the election they won, a big part of that victory was the message they sent out that they were different from the Liberals and they were going to do things differently."

The House Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics Committee is studying the dealings between Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Schreiber regarding cash payments related to the sale of Airbus planes to Air Canada in 1993 while Mr. Mulroney was still a sitting MP. Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) appointed University of Waterloo president David Johnston as an independent adviser on how to proceed with a public inquiry. When he delivered his report earlier this month, Prime Minister Harper said there would be an inquiry after the committee completed its hearings. Ethics Commissioner Mary Dawson cleared Mr. Harper, who was named in an affidavit filed in Federal Court by Mr. Schreiber's lawyers, of any conflict of interest in his handling of the Mulroney-Schreiber.

Ron Wood, former press secretary to Reform leader Preston Manning, said he believes Canadians are smarter than people

give them credit for and that the Mulroney-Schreiber affair won't have a negative effect on the Conservative Party as a brand or at election time. "That was another government, another prime minister, another time. I just don't think Canadians, (a), are paying attention and (b), are saying, 'Oh well, all politicians are bad because of this.' They either think that already or they're smart enough to make a distinction between some politicians and one or two bad apples and I'm not even saying there are any bad apples in this situation," he said.

Conservative strategist Tim Powers also told *The Hill Times* that "the current circus" will not impact the government negatively. He said the Liberal Party will do anything to attach the controversy to the Harper government when there's "no correlation" to the events that happened almost two decades ago. "The Liberals have hurt their own credibility by playing tonsil hockey with Mr. Schreiber," Mr. Powers said. "Schreiber has proven himself to be a desperate man ready to say or do anything to avoid going back to Germany to face the music. When [Liberal MP] Robert Thibault, normally a wise political hand and good fellow, is not dining with him, you have [Liberal MP] Pablo Rodriguez using Schreiber as a vehicle to go on fishing expeditions about contemporary matters. Pablo apparently can't even write his own material. Canadians see all that nonsense for what it is—self-interested opposition muckraking."

Mr. Thibault (West Nova, N.S.) told *The Hill Times* recently that the current Conservatives have "clear links with Brian Mulroney" and fear an inquiry could be negative on the party. "The people surrounding Brian Mulroney are in the upper echelons of this government and they've been trying over the last two years to rehabilitate Brian Mulroney's reputation so anything dealing with this, they fear it will hurt them," he said.

NDP MP Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, N.S.) said that because the scope of the public inquiry would focus only on the \$300,000 that Mr. Mulroney accepted from Mr. Schreiber, it would be hard for the issues to reflect badly on

the current government. He said, however, that "nothing good could come out of this inquiry for the reputation of Conservatives generally. Let's face it, this puts a stain on the Conservatives past and present, fairly or unfairly."

To compare, Mr. Nanos said that although John Gomery cleared former prime minister Paul Martin of being involved in the Liberal sponsorship scandal, it still reflected badly on the Liberals. "That had ramifications for him eventually because the poison spread beyond a few bad apples in Quebec to the Liberal Party in Quebec to their electoral fortunes," Mr. Nanos said. "I don't think you can underestimate the slow poison of the Schreiber inquiry on politicians in general."

Nova Scotia Conservative Senator Donald Oliver, who Mr. Mulroney appointed to the Upper Chamber in 1990, said that there will be a "miniscule" effect on the party but nothing lasting. "I don't think it's going to be a big issue at all. Most Canadians see the Mulroney-Schreiber matter as being a business deal between two individuals that went bad," he said last week. "Mr. Mulroney is a very distinguished Canadian statesman. This regretfully is an instant that most people understand and wish could be decided and done with. No one in any way feels that Mr. Mulroney is any way immoral, bad, wrong or has done some grievously harmful thing to the country."

Both Mr. Wood and Mr. Powers said the issue will not divide the Conservatives among Reform and PC camps as the government tries to distance itself from Mr. Mulroney. "Conservatives aren't interested in fighting among themselves anymore. We did it for long enough," Mr. Powers said. "The opposition wants to drive wedges and cause division."

Mr. Wood said bluntly, "If there are individuals who would revive old rivalries over something like this, they are stupid." He added: "This will play out. In the final analysis, nothing will come of this. Mr. Mulroney has pretty well stated his case as fully as he could. People will have made their minds up on that. Let's move on."

*The Hill Times*

*New Year's Resolutions*

- ~ Support Canada's struggling livestock producers
- ~ Implement an AgriFlex program for the next generation of agriculture policy
- ~ Create a "Grown in Canada" food label
- ~ Work for a WTO outcome that benefits all farmers
- ~ Help tobacco farmers exit with respect
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