

Manley: business's man

John Manley's career in public service will now take another turn as he replaces Thomas d'Aquino as head of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives

By Christopher Guly

As a member of Jean Chretien's Cabinet, John Manley held virtually all of the senior posts – including deputy prime minister – except the prized one as successor to the-then prime minister. But now, he gets to be top dog in Corporate Canada.

On Jan. 1, the 59-year-old Manley will become the second president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE), succeeding Thomas d'Aquino, who has headed the organization for the past 28 years, dating back to when it was known as the Business Council on National Issues. As the CCCE boss, Manley will be the chief spokesperson for about 150 of Canada's top CEOs and entrepreneurs responsible for an estimated \$4.5-trillion in assets and \$850-billion in revenues – at a time when, as he points out, “the nexus between government and business will probably be more challenging than it has been in years.”

He certainly has considerable experience on the government side.

First elected as the Member of Parliament for Ottawa South in 1988, Manley was immediately brought into Cabinet when the Liberals took power in 1993. He spent the first seven years as industry minister until Chretien named him foreign affairs minister in 2000.

Up until then, Manley was often portrayed in the media as bland and as a bit of a geek as a result of his keen interest in technology and gadgets. But Manley's public image would soon change in the aftermath of 9/11. Eleven months into his job as foreign affairs minister, Manley delivered the government's strongest message of support for its American counterpart, forcefully telling reporters on Parliament Hill that Canada would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the U.S. in the war against terrorism.

It was a defining turning point for Manley. Chretien had named him chairman of a new Cabinet committee on public security and anti-terrorism, which found Manley working closely with senior officials in former president George W. Bush's administration.

The Ottawa-born lawyer presented Canada's case to keep the border with the U.S. open and trade flowing amid heightened security concerns, and that resulted in a "smart border" bilateral accord.

"His good will and effort translated into better relations between our countries," said Tom Ridge, who served as the first U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security and who became a good friend of Manley.

By the end of 2001, Time magazine named Manley Canadian "Newsmaker of the Year."

His star was on the rise – and so was his sense of confidence as a politician.

Manley's impromptu post-9/11 comments made him realize he could follow his instincts to "hit the right chord" with people. And ultimately, that gave him the "temerity" to run for his party's top job in 2003. But in so doing, Manley faced an uphill battle against the juggernaut behind Paul Martin's eventually successful leadership bid.

It was a bitter race, in which Martin's "thuggish and nasty" supporters divided the Liberal Party and left behind "lasting scars," recalled Manley.

After announcing that he would not seek reelection in the 2004 federal race, Manley – who succeeded Martin as finance minister – said that Martin's team told him he could not speak at the nomination meeting in the riding he had represented in the House of Commons for 15 years.

It was a further slight to one handed to Manley when Martin became prime minister in late 2003 and left him out of his cabinet. Instead, Manley was offered the top diplomatic job as ambassador to the U.S. However, with his daughter, Sarah, still in high school at the time (he and his wife Judith also have another daughter, Rebecca, and a son, David) and feeling "the chemistry" wasn't right between him and the new PM, Manley declined the opportunity and returned to practicing law.

Today, he says the possibility that he would ever again run for any elected office is remote at best.

As it turned out, it was Martin's heir as prime minister – Stephen Harper leading a Conservative government – who brought Manley back into the public spotlight two years ago and appointed him chairman of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan.

The panel's report was widely read in Washington and as far away as Germany, where parliamentary members of the Bundestag were each given copies of it translated into German. And at home, one of the key recommendations – that of extending Canada's military commitment in Afghanistan – was endorsed by Parliament with an end date of 2011, including both Conservative MPs and their Liberal colleagues, some of whom were previously opposed to the idea.

The role he played earned him status as an elder statesman, and high praise from Ridge, who believes Manley would make a “fantastic” prime minister.

But for Manley, the panel on Afghanistan gave him the chance to sink his teeth into one of his great passions. “When I'm given a complicated public-policy issue and can immerse myself in it, provide advice and then move on, it is – to my way of thinking – the ideal.”