



Photo: Martha Stewart

## PrimarilyKim

by Lory Hough

“Are the streets all slushy out there?” Kim Campbell asks, her eyes turned toward the big window of her fairly small office at the Center for Public Leadership, looking for signs that the mix of rain and December snow has stopped falling. The room is modest (no velvet curtains, no framed art) and messy (stacks of books on everything, including the guest chairs) and also pretty lived in for someone who just moved in a few months ago. A *New Yorker* cartoon is taped by the door with a couple seated at a table having a cocktail. “You seem familiar yet somehow strange,” the man in the cartoon says. “Are you by any chance Canadian?” Today Campbell is sitting at her desk, which is covered with folders and stacks of paper, reworking the syllabus for the gender and power course she is teaching again this semester. “I told the students last semester that they were the guinea pigs,” she says, laughing — something she does throughout the interview.

It’s “classic Kim Campbell,” she says. “I think I’m known for my sense of humor. I see the funny things in life.”

Perhaps no one teaching at the Kennedy School this semester understands the need for such a philosophical approach to living better than Campbell, who has seen her share of ups (a meteoric rise through Canadian politics) and downs (a mere 123 days in the prime minister seat, a mother who disappeared when she was 12).

“If I didn’t have a sense of humor, I’d have been in a padded cell many years ago,” she says, arching her brows, her head nodding in that you-know-what-I-mean kind of way.

Of course, there's also a serious, reflective side to this Vancouver native, which is evident when she talks about the two major issues that are important to her now: the advancement of women and the advancement of democracy. Recently, Campbell wrote to a number of organizations working with women in Afghanistan to offer the services of the school's Council of Women World Leaders — a network of current and former women heads of state and government for which Campbell serves as chair.

It's opportunities like this that make the "gum on her shoe" — a phrase she uses to describe the public's unshakable interest in her former days as Canada's first and only female prime minister — easier for this self-described "forward-thinking" person to accept.

"One of the reasons why the gum doesn't bother me so much is because there are things that I can do, there are doors that I can get into that other women can't. There's a credibility that I have because of what I've done."

That credibility, combined with years of smashing into glass ceilings and up against gendered cultural expectations — something the women in Afghanistan will face as they attempt to carve a more equitable role in their society — is what the 25 female council members hope to offer.

"We don't want to sit down and help negotiate, but to be present and to be advisors to some of the Afghan women, to validate their purposes," she says. "One thing my gender and power class teaches is that because women are not assumed to be competent, when they are high-achieving and leave their office they often fall off the radar screen, whereas men who haven't been in office for years are recycled and brought around. It's assumed that something sticks to them. With women, it's assumed it doesn't."

"The point is, I don't think it hurts to have a group of women who are sitting at a table to have a couple of old female prime ministers and presidents hanging around, reminding people that women have a right to be at the table and have something to offer," the 54-year-old says, her laugh returning.

### Childhood Threads

This interest in gender equity seeped into Campbell long before the Taliban began beating Afghan women for appearing in public without head to toe coverings. It predates her entry into politics with the Vancouver School Board ("...an excellent way to get your feet wet in public life") and her subsequent posts as minister of defense and of justice (also the first female). It started before her student days, first at the University of British Columbia in the consciousness-raising decade of the 1960s and later at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she developed an increased sense of solidarity with other women, as well as a PhD.

In fact, the interest traces back to her childhood — in ways that were both positive and painful.

On the one hand, Campbell grew up with female role models who lived by her mother Lissa's maxim: women can be anything, even if it's not a universally accepted proposition. An aunt was a doctor, and both grandmothers took pride in the part-time jobs they held while also raising families. Her mother worked outside the home most of the time and taught her "good fifty-cent words" like "misogynist."

More painful — but as influential — was the fact that her mother left the family in 1959 when Campbell was 12, hopping a ride with a friend who was delivering a boat to Europe and, like her, also trying to get away from an unhappy marriage (divorce was uncommon and difficult to get then in Canada).

"I didn't see her until 10 years later," says Campbell, who openly talks to reporters about the experience and even begins her memoir with a scene at St. Anne's Academy in Victoria, British Columbia, where the news is broken to her and her sister, Alix, by the boarding school nuns. "One of the things that scholars identify about girls who grow up without mothers is that they tend to be less lenient of standard gender role stereotypes. So my mother's influence may have been twofold: the influence she had when she was there, as well as the effect of her not being there."

Surprisingly, Campbell didn't become an angry, rebellious kid (writing in her memoir that her heart was not "irrevocably broken, just squeezed and wrung dry for the time"). Instead, she became self-reliant, an overachiever who eagerly sought approval from teachers and classmates. She changed her first name from Avril to Kim, the one her mother originally wanted to give her. She developed an admiration for Winston Churchill and wrote poems about social issues. As a teenager, she even set a lofty goal for herself: to be the first female secretary-general of the United Nations (she started on the right track, serving as student council president, where she quickly recognized her impact on people, and graduating as class valedictorian).

In many ways, the ability to move on with her life after her mother left served Campbell well as an adult, most notably when she took over the prime minister reins after the contentious Brian Mulroney resigned in 1993, only to lose the election four months later. When she talks about that down time in her life, it's clear that because of her personality — mixed with the softening effect of time — she chooses to focus on the positive, not the negative. She's a half-full, not half-empty person.

"I quite often run into people who remember things I did when I was on the Vancouver School Board that would never have made it into the press. I take real pleasure in what I was able to accomplish," she says. "That's why I don't look back on my political career with any regret. I never wasted the opportunity to make things happen. I look back and think they were very productive times. Maybe it's just adding a tile in the mosaic of progress, but that's an important thing."

When asked to name the worst piece of advice she's ever taken, Campbell turns back to the window, trying to think of an answer. Nothing pops out immediately, and when offered another question instead, she hesitates, her mind still spinning around the last one.

“It’s hard to answer that because I don’t blame people,” she finally says, after a long pause. “It’s like when people say to me, ‘What’s your worst fault or your biggest disaster?’ I have a hard time thinking about it, not because I don’t have faults or disasters, but because my whole way of looking at the world is to learn and then move on. I don’t dwell on things. It’s not the way I think to remember. I don’t carry grudges.”

### Pressing On

It is a few days before Christmas and Campbell is getting ready to fly back to Los Angeles for some quiet time with composer Hershey Felder, her common law husband of five years. The relationship is one of the ups in her life, despite the eyebrows it sometimes raises (he’s 20 years younger). She’s been called the “Madonna of Canada” and a “cougar” — comments she finds silly. The naysayers genuinely don’t seem to bother her.

“People think if they get into politics that they have to develop a thick skin, but I don’t think that’s true at all,” she says. “What you have to develop is a sense of perspective. You need to understand that in public life, you’re never going to please everyone. Being criticized and attacked goes with the territory. You just have to press on and realize that the public is usually pretty smart and can make up its own mind.

“At first, people wondered who he [Felder] was, but he’s been so successful in his own artistic endeavors that it’s very clear that this is a relationship of equals,” she says, referring to Felder’s theatre and musical career, including the recent Broadway debut of his one-man show, *George Gershwin Alone*. “When people see us together, they recognize that he’s not a ‘boy toy’ and that I’m not his mother.”

“Kim and I, from the outside, don’t look like we belong together,” Felder told the *Toronto Star* in December. “But on the inside, everything works, and that’s what makes it magic for us.”

According to Laura Liswood, creator of the Council for Women World Leaders and one of Campbell’s friends, it’s not surprising that Campbell and the Montreal-born Felder met when she was serving a four-year post as Canada’s consul-general in Los Angeles (“I had the good sense to leave the country in 1994,” she joked with the *Star*), where he was living at the time and needed to renew his passport. “She’s like a magnet for Canadians. It’s amazing,” says Liswood. “Canadians come right up to her because she carries herself in an approachable way. That’s part of her appeal.”

“I found her to be very approachable during my short time working for her,” agrees Christine Côté, a Canadian Mid-Career student who worked for Mulronev and stayed on with Campbell for a few months after the transition. “Canadians are patriotic people, particularly away from home and most certainly in the presence of one of their stars.”

Campbell doesn’t actually consider herself a star. She says she’s a teacher, a “recovering politician” and surprising to some people, an artist — another interest that threads back to her childhood. She learned to play the piano by ear even before she took lessons and

staged her first play for her Nana when she was barely three years old. By five, she was a regular on the Canadian Broadcasting Company's *Junior TV Club*, interviewing guests and moderating panel discussions. In law school, she wrote and performed in musicals like the *Best Little Courthouse in Canada*.

"People are surprised to know that I have an artistic side, but that's just because when you're in public life, people tend to pigeonhole you. Hey, Orrin Hatch writes songs," she says, amused. She and Felder are currently revising a musical they created together called *Noah's Ark*, which premiered in excerpt form at the Toronto Center for the Arts last summer and will take a few more years to fully finish. "We call it our love child."

For now, though, she's focused on another semester of teaching at the Kennedy School and traveling back and forth from her temporary, rented home in Cambridge to the home that she, Felder, and their giant, black standard poodle named Chance share in Los Angeles.

"I still haven't decided what I want to do when I grow up," she jokes. "I'm 54 now so you don't have that same sense of limitless future that you had when you were 34 or 24. But I'm in a generation where people are living much longer. My mother — oh, what day is it? I just missed her birthday, but she knows that I always miss her birthday. My mother is 78, and her doctor told her that middle age is 70. So assuming I live long and keep my marbles, I don't feel I can hang up my spurs, so to speak, just yet."