

Profile : Canada's Defense Minister Storms Top Bastion of Power : Kim Campbell leads in ruling party race. She could become North America's first female national leader.

March 02, 1993 | MARY WILLIAMS WALSH | TIMES STAFF WRITER

TORONTO — Just seven years ago, Canadian Defense Minister Kim Campbell was a political neophyte making a suicidal run for her party's leadership in British Columbia. She spent nearly \$40,000 for a last-place showing in a field of 12.

"I never thought I could win, but I wanted to show that the party had to reach out to women and young people," a chin-up Campbell explained at the time.

It was a humiliating debut, but today Campbell's "reaching out" tactic may bring her to the verge of ultimate power. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced last week that he would step down by mid-June, and polls show Campbell to be the candidate to beat in the race to succeed him as party leader.

If Campbell is indeed chosen the Progressive Conservative Party's leader this summer, and if the Progressive Conservatives go on to victory in national elections in the fall, then the 45-year-old former trial lawyer, teacher and amateur cellist not only will become Canada's 19th prime minister, she will be the first woman to head a national government in North American history.

In a country crying out for fresh faces and new political ideas, Campbell appears to hold much the same appeal that Bill Clinton did in America last year--or better yet, to hold the same appeal of a Bill and a Hillary Rodham Clinton rolled into one.

(The leader of another of Canada's three main political parties, the social-democratic New Democratic Party, is also a woman.)

Not that Campbell's ascendancy would necessarily translate into a flowering matriarchy north of the border, however.

"I don't like to get into this thing where if women ruled the world, there would be more truth, beauty and justice," Campbell has said. Though she is a progressive by the standards of her own party, and though her interest in the problems of women is doubted by few, she is, in the end, an ideological conservative--albeit one who resents it that conservatives are so rarely thought of as authentic feminists.

Since her election to Parliament in 1988, Campbell has impressed many in Ottawa who follow politics as aloof and quick-tempered, even abrasive. Despite her current popularity with the voters, she lacks powerful friends and mentors within her own party--a shortcoming that could yet undo her at the leadership convention come June.

Even Campbell's intelligence irks some, coming across as it sometimes does as bookishness, even pedantry.

"She is the only one I have ever heard quote Plato (in Parliament)," said Lynn Hunter, a member of Parliament from Canada's New Democrat Party. "I mean, give me a break." Yet Campbell has also revealed a touchingly human side, admitting that she has suffered "unspeakable loneliness" as a result of her express-elevator rise. Her two marriages both collapsed under the pressures of her busy professional life, and she is childless.

She has also occasionally demonstrated what passes for a sense of humor in a country not known for its jocularity. As a 35-year-old law student, she told a Vancouver newspaper, "What I'd really like to do is make lots and lots of money and just be a writer of comedies and sit at home with a lampshade on my head."

And in 1990, when photographer Barbara Woodley asked Campbell if she could include her in a series of portraits of prominent Canadian women, the two settled on a fanciful pose in which the new justice minister stood for Woodley's camera in a state of seeming undress, holding her court robes on a hanger before her.

Predictably, the portrait made grist for Campbell's critics, who accused her of using her bare-shouldered assets to boost her political career. One even found it in herself to pronounce Campbell the "Madonna of Canadian politics."

Retorted Campbell, "A comparison between Madonna and me is a comparison between a strapless evening gown and a gownless evening strap."

That incident aside, Campbell's tenure as a Cabinet minister has been marked by serious attempts to strike a balance between the right wing of her own party and the comparatively progressive requirements of the Canadian Charter of Rights. Her willingness to look for such compromise, and to entertain competing points of view, does much to explain her good standing among Canadians who would not otherwise think of supporting a conservative.

Though Campbell is Canada's first--and NATO's only--female defense minister, it was as justice minister that she made her place in Canadian politics. (She became defense minister only in January, in an election-year Cabinet shuffle meant to give new life to a tiring government.)

Campbell got off to an uncertain start at Justice, inheriting a painfully controversial abortion bill from her predecessor, along with the unenviable assignment of pushing it through a sharply divided Parliament. Although Campbell says she is personally pro-choice, the bill would have made abortion a crime in Canada, except in the case of a woman showing that her doctor believed a pregnancy and childbirth would jeopardize her physical, mental or emotional health.

Anti-abortionists complained that the proscription didn't go far enough; pro-choicers argued that Campbell's bill unfairly limited access. And doctors berated Campbell, saying that if her bill passed, they could be subjected to a wave of harassment suits from right-to-lifers any time they failed to arrive at an airtight justification for each abortion they performed.

The bill was ultimately defeated in the conservative-controlled Canadian Senate--a deep humiliation for Campbell.

But she managed to learn from the experience, and since then, she has won high marks for her willingness to consult with various groups on proposed legislation and to find the middle ground between polarized interests.

Some of her subsequent achievements include:

* A tightening of Canadian gun-control laws, in the face of much thumping opposition from rural conservatives. Canada now bans 60 types of military-grade weapons, limits the magazine size of various firearms, requires new gun owners to take a safety course and has increased the maximum penalty for crimes involving guns.

* A "rape-shield law" that attempts to balance an assaulted woman's right to privacy with an accused rapist's right to a fair trial. The law limits the instances in which an alleged rape victim's sexual history can be introduced in evidence and dares to set out guidelines for what constitutes consent to sexual intercourse.

* A bill, drafted but not yet passed, that would amend Canada's Human Rights Act to shore up civil-liberties protection for gays and lesbians. The bill shows, once again, Campbell's ability to home in on a compromise: It would bring same-sex couples fully into the pension and social-benefits regimes already in place for heterosexual couples, but it stops short of legally recognizing same-sex marriages.

Campbell was born Avril Phaedra Campbell but decided, at the age of 12, that she wanted to drop her birth names and go by Kim. Her mother left the family that same year, going off to work on boats in the Mediterranean and the West Indies. Her father, a prosecutor, raised Kim and her older sister.

Campbell earned a master's degree in political science from the University of British Columbia and spent two years in a doctoral-level Soviet studies program at the London School of Economics. She never finished her dissertation but learned to speak Russian and in 1972 went to study politics in the former Soviet Union. She says that experience reinforced her commitment to the principles of Western democracy.

She returned to British Columbia to practice law, teach university-level political science and history, and chair the Vancouver school board.

She moved into provincial politics but decided she couldn't work with the province's eccentric, evangelical Christian premier at the time, Bill Vander Zalm, and ran for federal office. (Vander Zalm was later driven out of office in a conflicts-of-interest scandal.)

Almost at once, she stood out because of her fluency in French--an essential public skill in language-sensitive Canada but a rarity in the ranks of western Canadian politicians. Mulroney

immediately made her Indian affairs minister. Feminists cheered in 1990 when he brought her into his inner Cabinet.

Now, as defense minister, she not only has the chance to indulge a longstanding interest in foreign affairs, but she will also have useful election-year opportunities to speak at veterans' lodges across the country and to be photographed with Canada's politically correct, blue-bereted peacekeeping troops.

"Who needs a leadership race?" she asked three days after the Cabinet shuffle, with Ottawa already thick with rumors about her prime ministerial prospects. "I'll just stage a military coup."

Biography

* Name: Kim Campbell

* Title: Defense Minister

* Age: 45

* Personal: Former trial lawyer and university teacher. Has a master's degree in political science. Elected to Parliament in 1988. Later appointed justice minister. Helped tighten Canada's gun-control laws, obtain a "rape-shield law." Defense minister since January. Amateur cellist. Intelligent. Quick-tempered but willing to compromise. Married twice, divorced.

* Quote: "I don't like to get into this thing where if women ruled the world, there would be more truth, beauty and justice."