

The chief retainer at Chrétien's court

Eddie Goldenberg, *The Way It Works*.
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2006.

Review by Anthony Wilson-Smith

A good way to measure who has genuine influence around Ottawa has always been this rule: "Those who know, don't talk. Those who talk, don't know." In other words, a key requirement for playing an important role in government is the ability to not talk about it. Those who *do* boast usually aren't telling the truth, or don't last long. That's particularly true at the highest levels of unelected government service, where the best way to survive and prosper is to be seen to be making all efforts to stay out of the public eye. But that, in turn, leads to another rule: the surest way in Ottawa to attract attention is to try to avoid it. Even near-complete strangers these days will make familiar reference to such publicity-shy people as "Kevin" (Lynch, clerk of the Privy Council) or "Ian" (Brodie, the prime minister's chief of staff). And no matter what the government of the day, everyone always speaks knowingly of "Paul" (Tellier, former clerk and CEO extraordinaire) or "Derek" (Burney, former ambassador, chief of staff to Brian Mulroney, and all-round supremely connected guy).

And then there's "Eddie," as in Goldenberg, strategist, backroom negotiator and alter ego to Jean Chrétien for more than three decades — and now, the newly minted author of an exceptionally useful and insightful book on how government *really* functions at the highest levels. At one level, *The Way It Works* is unsurprisingly, unapologetically parti-

san in its depiction of Chrétien's decade in power and its unsparing vivisection of Paul Martin's plotting to replace him. Given Eddie's insider credentials, that's reason enough to read it for anyone interested in political intrigue. But it's also an indispensable primer on the acquisition, use and retention of power by one of Canada's most skilled practitioners in the art of the backroom deal.

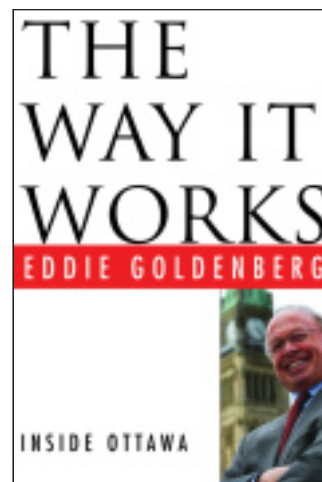
First, the evisceration of Martin. Here, Eddie brings to mind the old dinner party axiom that "if you can't say something nice about someone, come sit next to me."

Most interestingly, Eddie — who has known Martin since the two were young men — challenges previous versions of several events. One is the widespread belief that Martin — who originally wanted the Industry portfolio after the 1993 election — took Finance only after a series of emissaries from within the party pleaded with him to do so. On the contrary, Eddie writes, Chrétien "readily agreed to Paul Martin's request to be minister of industry" — and offered Finance to "a very surprised John Manley." But, he continues, Martin then called the PM back to say that "he had thought it over and had changed his mind" — so Chrétien gave him Finance. Similarly, Eddie suggests that Martin's strong support for the Meech Lake Accord was — at least initially — strictly a political ploy. In Eddie's telling, Martin "told me in no uncertain terms that...he too was against

the accord" — but was publicly supporting it because "it was not going to pass anyway" and "it was good politics in Quebec for federal Liberals to be seen to support it." Martin, it should be said, has quite a different version of events of the time. When co-author Edward Greenspon and I were conducting interviews for our 1996 book *Double Vision*, Martin and several other participants in both the cabinet selection process and Liberal debate over Meech gave accounts of the events that are at odds in a number of ways with Eddie's recollections. Either way, it's true that support or opposition of the principles underlying the Meech accord was at the root of the Martin-Chrétien divide: in the wake of their divisive 1990 leadership contest, Eddie writes: "Chrétien, white with anger, never forgot and never forgave Paul Martin for what he and his supporters did."

Still, the real surprise wasn't that two proud, headstrong, ambitious men ultimately had a falling-out — but rather that they worked so successfully for so long. Together, they ended decades of deficit budgeting at the federal level and altered the mindset that went along with it. Today, after almost a decade of federal surpluses, it's almost inconceivable to imagine a finance minister planning a budget that would intentionally plunge us back into the red.

In preserving that tenuous relationship, Eddie was Jean Chrétien's Henry Kissinger, routinely performing



shuttle diplomacy as he moved back and forth between the two superpowers of the federal government. (Unlike Kissinger, Eddie gives himself — typically — too little credit for his role.)

That quality of understatement is one of the book's many strengths: sure, Eddie ultimately had little use for Martin, but that doesn't stop him from offering praise as appropriate. No matter whose version you buy into as to the insertion of Martin into Finance, the ultimate result, Eddie writes, is that the appointment "turned out to be crucial to the long-term success of the Chrétien government."

Only once, in fact, does Eddie lapse into rhetoric that's purely partisan and demonstrably unsupported. That's when he notes, almost as an afterthought, that Brian Mulroney's time in power amounted to "10 years of national unity turmoil, with Canada at times on the edge of the abyss." In fact, the edge of the abyss came when Quebec's Yes side came within half a percentage point of winning a sovereignty referendum — with Mulroney long gone and twice removed from the prime minister's office, and Chrétien in power for two years. And the Meech Lake Accord remains, at the least, the great what-might-have-been of Canadian politics — a constitutional reform proposal signed and supported for a time by all of the country's first ministers. It's uncharacteristically churlish of Eddie to be so casually dismissive — and he also ignores Chrétien's frantic cross-country scrambling in the wake of the 1995 referendum to find new ways to entrench the principles underlying Meech. If the accord was so bad, why that effort?

But even that's a relatively small cavil, because Eddie — ever the pragmatist — gives Mulroney's Tories credit for such initiatives as tax reform and free trade. He also acknowledges some of the occasions when Chrétien was wrong — for example, his ill-considered

promise while in opposition to "scrap" the goods and services tax if he became prime minister. (To his own credit, Chrétien — who saw the manuscript before publication — let those observations stand without protest.)

In the end, the book's greatest strength is that its content lives up to its title. *The Way It Works* is, in good ways, more about the means by which decisions were made than the end result. Eddie correctly understands that as a central player in government for a decade, he's the wrong person to pontificate at length on its accomplishments. Rather, he gives readers a seat inside the room, and some close-up snapshots of some of the key participants.

Two colleagues in the PMO who

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come off especially well — and deservedly so — are Peter Donolo, Chrétien's director of communications for most of his time as prime minister, and Chaviva Hosek, director of policy. Eddie recruited both of them and says that their hires "may have been the most important long-term contribution I made to the ultimate success of the Chrétien government."

Inevitably, a book of this nature has gaps in certain areas; some welcome, some not. Although Eddie was with Chrétien through much of the Pierre Trudeau years, he doesn't dwell much on them. That's good, because the world has plenty already on the Trudeau era — especially of late. There's little about John

Turner's tenure as Liberal leader from 1984 to 1990 — largely because Eddie, alongside Chrétien, left active politics for the private sector in 1986. Similarly, you won't find much about political players from other parties; Mulroney's nine years in power get only passing reference overall, Preston Manning doesn't even get a mention, and Stephen Harper is referred to on just 12 scattered pages. Instead, Eddie stays with the people and events he knows best. On the other hand, the Quebec sponsorship scandal and Justice John Gomery's commission of inquiry get all of three pages: that's too little and too bad. Eddie contends that the program's problems with waste and blatant patronage were "sensationalized out of all proportion." Even if you agree, the controversy continues to taint the memory of Chrétien's time in office — so a longer, more spirited evocation of events would arguably have better served everyone.

The final noticeable gap is that there isn't much in the book about Eddie himself. That's no surprise: there was always a debate in the press gallery over whether Eddie's air of reserve toward most reporters was because he was cautious — which he certainly was; aloof — which he certainly never has been; or shy — which is certainly true. No matter what the view, he isn't the type to explore his feelings and emotions in public. He is, on the contrary, someone whose discretion is matched by his devotion to his cause — much like people like Kevin and Ian and Paul and Derek. In its own way, this book is a tribute to all of those ultimate insiders — and an important demonstration of their importance and value for the rest of us on the outside, looking in.

Anthony Wilson-Smith, former editor of Maclean's magazine, was co-author with Edward Greenspon of the award-winning 1996 book Double Vision: The Inside Story of the Liberals in Power (Doubleday Canada).