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By Sylvia Fraser

The Belinda Stronach Defense

Betraying her party? She was sticking to her principles. The rumoured tryst with Bill Clinton? They're truly just friends. The fixation on designer clothes? The media are far more obsessed with her wardrobe than she is



I first met 39-year-old belinda stronach last august in Montreal. She was taller and thinner than I expected—five foot nine plus heels—dressed in a shiny beige leather jacket and flared white pants. The heart-shaped face looked different than in photos, with prominent bones dispelling that flat, china-doll mask that has become a media staple. The smile was wide and perfect, the brown eyes large with some dark shadows. She wore little makeup, and her honey blond hair was shoved artlessly behind her ears, as though she were a student on a break from studying—an apt comparison since she was spending the week in French immersion.

Stronach is deft at deflecting personal questions, especially those reflecting her family's wealth, estimated at \$625 million. Though she takes pride in her appearance, she insists, "I don't regard my clothes nearly as seriously as the people who report on them." She drives a Ford Escape hybrid, and since she resigned as CEO of the family corporation, Magna International, in January 2004, she no longer has dibs on the company jet. "I made a conscious decision to distance myself from Magna, so everyone would know I'm serious. When I first started campaigning, people kept asking if I ever flew commercial. What a bizarre question! Of course I do."

Stronach confesses to missing her \$9-million paycheque (with bonuses and stock options) but has been donating her \$213,000 minister's pay to provide scholarships for students. She has also been selling off her Magna holdings to avoid conflict-of-interest issues, for an estimated profit of \$20 million.

About her family's fabled 400-year-old Austrian castle: "It's an old building all right, and I think it burned down once. It's no baroque palace—there are bigger homes in York Mills!" Dennis Mills, former Liberal MP and now a Magna vice-chair, would later confirm, "One journalist called it a castle and that stuck, but in fact it used to be a monastery."

Stronach considers her childhood to have been privileged but ordinary. She and her brother, Andrew, two years younger, grew up on a horse farm and attended public schools. What kind of kid was she? "A delightful kid! No—just joking. I was shy." Is it true that her mother had to bribe her with Barbie dolls to get her to go to

school? Stronach's low-key humour is beginning to show. "Can we define that? It was kindergarten. Not Grade 9! I was terrified, hanging on to my mother. I was just a farm kid."

When pressed for any piece of hard luck that might have shaped her formative years, Stronach laughs ruefully. "My two turtles died when I was in Austria one summer with my grandparents. I think my father forgot to feed them."

What wealth buys for Stronach is independence. Though it took grit and gall to cross the Commons, she knew she wouldn't be job hunting the next day. It also provides challenge. If her immigrant father—the son of an Austrian factory worker—could parlay a Grade 8 education and a tool-and-die apprenticeship into a \$23-billion auto parts and racetrack empire, what should she be able to do with all her privilege? Wealth also buys access. When I asked Stronach for a list of people who knew her well, she named two former Ontario premiers and two former Liberal MPs (all of whom had been Magna board members), along with two ex-husbands. Globally, she probably operates at one degree of separation, thanks to her friendship with Bill Clinton. She's a member of the dean's council at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Four days before John Kennedy Jr.'s fatal plane crash, he was sitting on Stronach's patio, urging her to invest in his political magazine, *George*. In 2002, as CEO of Magna International, she was ranked number two in *Fortune* magazine's list of the world's most powerful businesswomen outside of the U.S. In April 2004, *Time* magazine named her one of the world's 100 most influential people. "They knocked me off when I went into politics," she exclaims.

Wealth is the wind in Stronach's sails, but it doesn't steer her boat. Though many Canadians wanted to "unite the right," she was the one who made the cold call in 2003. "Hello, Stephen. It's Belinda Stronach. Would you agree to a process allowing negotiations between you and Peter MacKay to begin?"

As she says, "I'm a doer."

On January 20, 2004, the Ottawa press corps converged on the Royal Canadian Legion Hall in Aurora, fuelled more by skepticism than by any sense of gravitas. After helping to graft the rump of the Conservative party, led by MacKay, onto Harper's Canadian Alliance party, neophyte Stronach was now about to challenge Harper for leadership of this strange beast. Wearing designer clothes and stilettos, embracing her height as easily as her wealth, the pretty heiress teleprompted her way through a speech about sharing "a bigger economic pie." As reporters looked into the hopeful face, bracketed by perfect blond parentheses, many saw a tall, hothouse poppy in need of trimming: Who does she think she is?

One of Stronach's friends, journalist Arlene Bynon, was in that audience. "I was half thrilled and half terrified for Belinda," she says. "I'd always felt there was a sweetness and vulnerability to her that people with money don't always have. Did she know what she was in for?"

A week later, Entwistle joined Stronach's campaign (dubbed *Blond Ambition* by the media) at Mulroney's urging. "The media interest in her was phenomenal, with autograph hunters chasing after her in airports. She had created this monster, and it was overwhelming." He himself was cautious. He wanted to check out the bimbo factor. "We spent the next 55 days Velcroed together, and publicly and privately she was always consistent. She wanted to serve her country, to give back some of her privilege. She thinks there's an unappreciated threat to Canada's standard of living and that we must mobilize to meet global competition. She would tell reporters this day in and day out, and they would shake their heads and ask, 'OK, now why are

you really running?” Stronach’s too-good-to-be-true platitudes, delivered with more caution than passion, turned her into a blank screen onto which pundits projected their theories: she was her father’s puppet, assuaging his wounded pride over his earlier defeat as a Liberal MP; she was a dilettante looking for another gold trinket to rattle on her charm bracelet. Belinda Stronach could have any lifestyle she wanted—socialite, fundraiser, international do-gooder. Why would she choose the glare of politics, with its often vicious down-and-dirty?

If Stronach had moments of self-doubt, she kept them well hidden. As Bynon, who sometimes accompanied her, later exclaimed, “Oh my God, watching Belinda debate with the other leadership candidates in Montreal, when she could barely speak French, was like seeing your friend go into the boxing ring with Mike Tyson.” Afterward, Stronach—battered but still standing—said only, “I did my best, and I’m going to do better next time.”

She won 34 per cent of the Tory vote against Harper’s 56 per cent and former Ontario cabinet minister Tony Clement’s nine per cent. She also turned a dull contest into a dramatic one. “Leadership rivalries are some of the bitterest in politics,” says Entwistle. “I think Belinda tried to make a go of it with Harper, but he broke the cardinal rule of Politics 101, which is to keep your rivals inside the tent. She was made patently unwelcome, and as for being a voice for Ontario, she might as well have been standing on Baffin Island.”

The head office of Magna International Inc., built in aurora in 1990, rises like a mountain ridge over 70 acres of lawns manicured to golf-green perfection. The long laneway to the guardhouse is bowling-alley straight. Beyond circular gardens, with hedges scrupulously boxed and trimmed in the style of Versailles, is the imposing main building, of natural stone, thrusting upward in a central peak, with long embracing arms. Its spacious marble lobby contains one anomaly: carved granite tablets like those Moses might have brought down from Mount Sinai. One is the Magna Corporation Constitution, specifying in percentage points how profits are to be shared between investors, management, employees and the community; the other is the Magna Employees’ Charter, listing benefits and urging anyone with complaints to use a hotline.

Through the glass elevator, ascending the inner atrium, you see a sizable man-made lake, distant rolling lawns with block-long horse stables and the Stronach family residences, also of stone. Nothing in this landscape is left to chance or nature. Each perfectly shaped tree, whether willow or blue spruce, occupies its own space, giving the impression that God and Frank Stronach are equal partners here.



Belinda Stronach, who, at 15, began working summers for her father in an earlier Downsview office, says her one contribution to this extravagant upgrade was fighting with engineers to make sure the windows opened. At 20, she quit her first-year business course at York University to work for Magna full time. “I thought, hey, my father’s getting on in age, and I wanted to learn from him while I had the chance.” As the older sibling, Belinda had been made to feel responsible for protecting the family assets. “Avoiding that wasn’t an option, and it was just part of my nature that I accepted the task. I wasn’t a great lover of auto

parts, bumpers and door handles, but what did fascinate me—still does—is the company culture.”

While travelling with her father, Belinda learned to think globally. “We’d go into a Russian plant, dark like something in a Dickens novel, with 150,000 workers, and sparks flying with no protection.” Back at Magna, Belinda found a second mentor—Don Walker, an attractive and amiable mechanical engineer, then VP of operations, who took her on explanatory tours of various shop floors. “I had a philosophy about never dating anyone I worked with,” she says, “but I blew that up with Don!”

Though Frank Stronach had never interfered with Belinda’s choice of high school dates, he liked to intimidate them a little to see how well they held up. “He knew I had a good head on my shoulders,” she says. “I was always assessing: ‘What does this person want out of the relationship?’ It’s just a sensitivity you grow up with because you want people to like you for yourself.” Frank was enthusiastic about Walker, as was Belinda’s mother, Elfriede, whom she describes as “an outstanding person, very kind, the family rock, who loves her garden, her dogs, the horse racing business.”

In 1988, when Frank Stronach decided to run for MP in York-Simcoe riding, Belinda threw herself into her father’s campaign. His defeat came as a shock to everyone. As Walker remembers, “Frank would always say, ‘When I’m prime minister, this is what I want to do,’ and I’d realize that in his subconscious he was already there. Belinda is a bit like that—she doesn’t recognize obstacles and, even then, she wanted to make her mark.”

Don Walker and Stronach were married in 1990 at the local Anglican church. Walker, then COO of Magna, felt living in the family compound would be too claustrophobic, so they moved into his Scarborough condo, then built their own home. Frank Jr. was born in 1991, Nikki two years later. Though Belinda’s priorities shifted to her children, she remained on the Magna board. When the couple divorced in 1997, Walker says, “It was a mutual thing. We just came to the conclusion that we had two great children but that our personalities weren’t an ideal match. I still enjoy Belinda’s company, and she and my wife, Joan, do things together.”

Their breakup inside Magna was handled just as seamlessly. After Walker had presided over the corporation’s reorganization into subsidiaries, he voluntarily resigned as CEO to take one of those smaller companies public, clearing the way for Stronach to become CEO of what was now a holding company. Board members Ed Lumley, a former federal minister of industry, and former premier Bill Davis actively supported her candidacy. “She’d been great at human resources, negotiating compensations and health plans for employees,” says Lumley “And remember, this is a vibrant young lady in a male-dominated business.” Walker agrees: “Belinda definitely knew the company culture, and she had been comfortable dealing with heads of state since she was 26.”

Stronach’s greatest handicap—that she was the boss’s daughter—proved her trump card. By common agreement, Frank Stronach is a stubborn, unpredictable visionary. Belinda was one of the few who could contain, even modify, his ricocheting enthusiasms. At the same time, her father’s policies about happy employees leading to healthy profits and community service were carved as deeply into her psyche as into Magna’s granite tablets. As Dennis Mills says, “Their powerful bond created sparks. They influenced each other.”

In her three years as CEO, from 2001 to 2004, Stronach brought stability rather than innovation during a period of record growth. She negotiated a win-win union contract—Magna’s first—with the Canadian Auto Workers. She was accepted by the industry’s boys’ club and was one of the first at Magna to recognize the

challenge of China. "I met one young builder in Beijing with a contract to develop a city block, with co-op housing and theatres and restaurants," she recalls. "I asked how many people in the block, and he said four million!"

In 2003, Stronach was still insisting she had the best job in the world. In 2004, she walked away from it all. Magna was her father's creation. It seems that inside all that perfect grooming was another equally driven Stronach with ambitions all her own.

You reach Belinda Stronach's residence by a winding drive through tidy green fields. Its postmodern peaks and wings are of stone combined with grey board and batten. The gardens are more windblown than those at Magna. There's a kids' playhouse in the Stronach style, a swimming pool overlooking the man-made lake, and tennis courts. Nikki, a competitive rider, has two horses, an exercising arena and a miniature horse as a pet.

The house's five bedrooms are built around an atrium. The rooms below flow into each other—a combined living and dining area with a table seating 10; a family room with three computer stations and an Apple that's always playing iTunes, sometimes accompanied by 13-year-old Frank on his drums; a state-of-the-art kitchen with a beamed ceiling, where Stronach sometimes cooks—beef stroganoff is her specialty. (The family tried to go vegetarian, succeeded for a year, then gave up when Nikki arrived home wearing an ecstatic smile—she had tasted baloney.) Hardwood floors, baronial fireplaces, big easy leather furniture create a pleasing unity in which children's paintings are framed as carefully as those by the Group of Seven. "I want everyone to be comfortable here—it's always full of kids," says Stronach. Two female assistants look after the household.

Stronach moved here with the children in 1986, after separating from Walker. Four years later, they were joined by Johann Olav Koss, a four-time gold-medal Olympian speed skater. The two had met in London in April 1999, when Stronach approached Koss on behalf of OATH—a Magna-sponsored group aimed at reforming the International Olympic Committee. "Belinda was a very intriguing personality, with much engagement for the Olympics," says the handsome Koss in his Norwegian-accented English. "It was like, wow!" They began meeting around the world—Australia, Athens, Los Angeles—and not on business. Koss proposed at the top of the Eiffel Tower—the phony one in Las Vegas, where you can find the world recreated in neon. They married on December 31, 1999, at the Stronachs' condo in Beaver Creek, Colorado.

As the founder of Right to Play, a sports organization for disadvantaged kids, Koss took Stronach to Ghana, where they watched 3,000 children receive vaccinations during a festival. "Here were all these mothers with babies strapped to their backs and drums beating," says Stronach. "It was a real celebration." She was no Lady Di, playing Pied Piper to the children, observed Koss. "She was more interested in talking to the mothers about their experiences."

Koss found the Stronach compound "an amazing place, though a bit overwhelming at first." He loved the children, and he and Walker liked and admired each other. The extended family was so harmonious that when Nikki had to make a family tree for school, she found it natural to include all her Norwegian cousins.

Both former husbands describe Stronach as down-to-earth, kind, fun, free of pettiness and pretension and—above all—a loving mother. In their years together, Walker says he never saw her angry or out of control. When Stronach and Koss split after three years, the reason he offered to me was the same as Walker's: two people found their dreams coalesced for a while, then veered in different directions. Both testify that the woman on public display—committed, morally driven—is the real deal: what you see is what you get.

Each fall, giant tents arise on the Magna compound for the annual Wild Wild West Hoedown, founded by Frank Stronach as a community fundraiser. This year, he arrives after 8 p.m., dressed in black—leather hat, shirt, jacket, pants—like the bad guy in the old cowboy movies, except he's wearing a sheriff's silver star and a big grin. TV cameras follow as he glad-hands through thousands of celebrants. Belinda arrives half an hour later, in boutique cowboy wear, with her own retinue. She, too, works the tent, but more discreetly, greeting many people by name. By now, Frank is off dancing with all the prettiest girls. It's his show, presided over by a full moon—more evidence he and God have an arrangement. Next morning—a Sunday—it's Belinda who is front and centre, first at 8:30 in Newmarket to launch the Terry Fox Run, then at 9:30 in Aurora, same deal, wearing a track suit and lime-heeled running shoes that look as if they could levitate. At 2:30, she drops the puck at a Junior A hockey game, suited up in skates and a jersey diplomatically divided between the rival Newmarket Hurricanes and Aurora Tigers. Afterward, it's the 100th birthday of a local resident—in the Magna Room of the Aurora Public Library.

All this has been organized by Stronach's Newmarket-Aurora constituency office. A day from now, she'll be the property of her HRSD ministry in Ottawa for a whirlwind trip to Dryden, North Bay and New Liskeard, meeting with mayors and Aboriginal leaders, presenting awards, and starring at local fundraisers as the Liberal most in demand across the country after the prime minister.

Stronach is good-humoured about fulfilling many of the offbeat requests she receives. They have included bungee jumping, singing with Rick Mercer on the CBC and riding a wild horse with photographers chasing her through cow patties. Her turndowns have included flacking for a cosmetics company and posing for a nude calendar. In cabinet, she has gained a reputation as an intelligent listener and a hard worker. She proved less successful in the House, where the free-for-all often made her cringe. "I'd look up into the faces of students in the gallery and think what a turnoff it must be."

While many Liberal ridings found themselves facing a winter election without a candidate, the Newmarket-Aurora Liberal association had already acclaimed Stronach at its September 19 meeting. It was a sweet affair attended by 50 of the faithful, clearly excited about fielding such a high-profile candidate, and strangely forgetful of the fact that she had once been their avowed enemy. Only last May, they had acclaimed Martha Hall Findlay—a bilingual lawyer and entrepreneur whom Stronach beat by 689 votes—to run against Stronach. This mini-crossover was arranged at the same time as the Big One, and by the same folk. Stronach, a world-class fence mender, says, "I'm grateful to Martha. We've become friends." Hall Findlay was present only in a graceful statement in the riding's newsletter—a timely reminder that Stronach's designer boots, no matter how pure her heart, often trample promising but shorter poppies in the race to fulfill her destiny.

Meanwhile, as election '06 approaches, perceived wisdom in the Liberal camp is that Stronach won in 2004 on the Belinda brand despite having to carry Harper on her back. Over at Tory headquarters, her former colleagues plot their revenge, led by Stephen Somerville. "This election will be a referendum on what Belinda did," the riding president has said. "People are coming from all parts of Canada to work on our campaign."

On January 23, it seems that Newmarket-Aurora will have only one candidate who counts: Belinda Stronach running for and against herself.



On the morning of May 17, 2005, a black limousine carrying Prime Minister Paul Martin stopped briefly at a side door of Ottawa's Château Laurier Hotel, and a slim blonde stepped in. She looked nervous enough that the PM asked, "Are you OK?" Together, the PM and Tory MP Belinda Stronach drove to the National Press Theatre across from Parliament Hill, then walked side by side into a packed hall of journalists. There was a gasp, as if all the air had been sucked from the room, followed by stupefied silence. "I'll never forget that sound," says Stronach. As word spread, disbelieving Canadians grabbed for their TV remotes. They saw the replays of Martin and Stronach shaking

hands against a backdrop of Canadian flags, he beaming like a Cheshire cat, she offering her Mona Lisa smile. Stronach had crossed the Commons floor, allowing the Liberals to pass their spring budget and avert a snap election.

It was a story that had played out over the past couple of years like a Harlequin Romance: two people, who obviously belonged together, started off badly; they said confrontational things to each other, then worked their way through a series of reverses to a happy ending. Former Ontario premier David Peterson was their matchmaker.

Five days before, Peterson had encountered Stronach at a \$1,000-a-plate awards dinner in Toronto. A long-time friend, he could see she was distraught. Her philosophical differences with Tory leader Stephen Harper—over her support for gay marriage and the Liberal budget vital to her Newmarket-Aurora riding—were already public. Though Stronach and Peterson exchanged few words, the subtext was clear. Giving her a big hug, Peterson offered his support. Stronach phoned him the next day. Her anxieties had crystallized around a poll indicating that the Bloc Québécois could win as many as 70 seats if Harper forced an election. As Peterson recalls, "Belinda thought national unity was too high a price to pay for one man's ambition."

Peterson called Tim Murphy, Martin's chief of staff, to explore Stronach's welcome if she crossed the floor. "I think Tim thought I was just blowing smoke." After also gaining Stronach's consent, Peterson insisted on being the only go-between. "Both sides had to trust me. This was as sensitive as a spy coming over the wall." Murphy was to speak only to the PM. Stronach could consult Mark Entwistle, an adviser during her leadership bid, now a trusted friend. That Entwistle had once been press secretary for Brian Mulroney, who'd been supportive of Stronach's bid for the Tory leadership, only demonstrated how byzantine these negotiations had already become.

During the weekend's clandestine discussions, it was Peterson who insisted Stronach receive a cabinet post. "This was no backbencher," he said. "She was a high-impact political player who deserved her chance to play." It was serendipitous that the Human Resources and Skills Development portfolio, containing all of Stronach's signature issues—education, empowerment of labour, a competitive, knowledge-based economy—was lying fallow. "It was beautiful the way the whole thing came together," said Peterson.

On Sunday night, Stronach confided in her father, auto parts tycoon Frank Stronach. She still had one unmet

request: "I wanted to look Paul Martin in the eye to make sure we had the same values."

Stronach had been sharing a suite at the Château Laurier with Tory deputy leader Peter MacKay. On Monday evening, after dinner with MacKay, she slipped away to join Peterson, Entwistle and Murphy at the PM's residence at 24 Sussex Drive, where they feasted on venison followed by chocolate semifreddo. Stronach and Entwistle thought they'd been invited only for tea, but some journalists would seize on this double dining as an act of particular treachery, like being intimate with two men on the same night.

The PM and Stronach discussed big-ticket items such as international competition. Martin also gave Stronach a highly sophisticated warts-and-all briefing about the government she would be joining. She left around 10:30, feeling honoured to be allowed to serve.

Despite the pokes and prods of a hundred microphones, Stronach has adamantly refused to reveal what later transpired between her and MacKay, soon to be the nation's most famous jilted lover. She does acknowledge that the relationship had been serious. She is also clear as to why she couldn't have warned him sooner: "I would have put him in a terrible conflict of interest." Entwistle supplies some of the shading: "Belinda had not anticipated the ferocity of Peter's reaction. He's hyper-partisan, and suddenly the public and the personal had come crashing together in an extraordinary confluence of events. She was really shaken up. There was one point on Tuesday morning when I wasn't quite sure if she was going to go through with it, but she sat herself down, and you could see her summoning up her internal strength as she reminded herself where this decision came from." Minutes later, the PM's car arrived at the Château Laurier, and together they unleashed the perfect storm. That Hurricane Belinda was not going to be tracked in the usual way was signalled that same day as Stronach left Rideau Hall, where she had been sworn in as a minister. At this seminal moment in history, one cameraman was on his knees shooting Stronach's shoes.

The howl of betrayal was understandable. Her riding president, Stephen Somerville, declared, "The stunning hypocrisy of her actions is breathtaking to behold." Alberta MLA Tony Abbott described her as "whoring herself out to the Liberals." Harper sniped, "I've never really noticed complexity to be Belinda's strong point."

While a poised and polished Stronach, in business attire, fielded questions at the nation's capital, a disconsolate MacKay, in khaki pants and orange rubber boots, brooded over his broken heart in his father's Nova Scotia potato patch. As Stronach sums it up, "I had been expecting a debate on national unity, but I spent half my time dealing with questions about my relationship with Peter."

She spent her first week as a Liberal minister well out of reach of the media. She was sleeping at Toronto's SickKids Hospital, which doesn't allow cellphones or microphones, where her 11-year-old daughter, Nikki, had had an emergency appendectomy. "I'll tell you, when your children are ill, that puts everything in perspective."