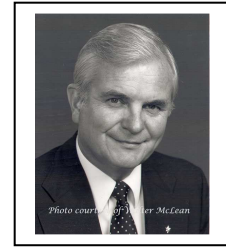


Walter McLean

Long before rock stars and celebrity politicians began shining the spotlight on the suffering in Africa, there was Walter McLean.



The former Waterloo Member of Parliament had spent seven years in Nigeria as the director of a non-profit organization in the 1960s. The Biafran War left the Presbyterian missionary horrified by the poverty and violence and committed to helping the troubled continent.

When McLean returned to Canada, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was quoted as saying, “Where’s Biafra?” when asked by reporters about the civil war.

McLean was stunned by Trudeau’s flippant remark and thought, “That’s where my friends are dying.”

So when the Waterloo pastor decided to enter federal politics it was under the banner of the Progressive Conservatives. McLean, who felt the country needed a more compassionate leader, was elected MP for Waterloo North in 1979 and re-elected in 1980, 1984 and 1988. From 1984 to 1985 he was Secretary of State for Canada, and from 1985 to 1986 he was Minister of State for Immigration before being returned to the backbenches.

McLean had originally settled in Waterloo to take the job of pastor at Knox Presbyterian Church in 1971. McLean, whose father was also a Presbyterian minister, was inspired by the call of service to his community long before he became a politician.

“I grew up in a manse where my father was a pastor – so all my life we have been dealing with people, helping people in our home. My mother and father were involved in the community,” McLean said once.

“I see life as a gift. There are more brilliant people than me but I want to use my life and the resources I have in as productive and effective a way as I can.”

McLean served as a municipal councillor in Waterloo for three years before being elected to Parliament in 1979. While many thought the humanitarian McLean might be better suited to another political party, McLean also believed in the conservative conviction that people have a responsibility to help themselves.

When McLean was appointed to cabinet under Brian Mulroney’s government in the mid-1980s, he became the first cabinet minister from the Kitchener-Waterloo area in forty-four years. His responsibilities as Secretary of State included everything from citizenship and voluntary agencies to the status of women and multiculturalism. The demands of this office were extreme; it was a time of eighteen-hour workdays and living in Ottawa apart from his wife and four sons.

His wife Barbara, however, had always maintained a strong connection to her husband's career. She said once, "We work as a team We worked together in Africa, on reports to church; I've been heavily involved in the election campaigns. Because I've had that role, I don't feel left out." Barbara McLean, who holds a teaching degree, served as a liaison officer of the World University Service of Canada, during McLean's tenure in Ottawa.

During his time in federal politics, McLean served as a special federal envoy for the United Nations and African Affairs. With this post he travelled often, giving speeches on peace, debt relief for African nations, and disarmament.

After resigning from federal politics, McLean was particularly proud of his significant role in ending nuclear weapons testing, and he remained involved in humanitarian work.

The well-known Canadian politician and former U.S. ambassador Stephen Lewis said of McLean in 1988:

"There is just no one who has won the admiration and the trust that Walter has from Africans and from other UN delegations who have come to know him. He's a big bear of a man, he's gregarious and open and lively and knowledgeable. It makes for one devil of a good combination."

Photo courtesy of Walter McLean.