

The Diefenbaker gambit

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To the best of John George Dryden's recollection, it was the fall of 1977, and the occasion was an event on Parliament Hill in honour of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. He said he was a nine-year-old boy on the arm of his beautiful mother, a soprano soloist named Mary Louise Dryden whose talents wielded invitations to lavish political events such as this one.

Now 42, Mr. Dryden said a particular moment has remained with him all these years later: As he tells it, his mother spotted former prime minister John George Diefenbaker across the way, shouted his name "John! John!," and then hurried toward the private grandstand where he stood.

"He leaned over the railing, I think he kissed her, looked down at me and said, You were named for me," George said in an interview in Toronto this week. "And then he looked at my mother and said something like, Why aren't you sitting up here with me? ... It was a long time ago, but I remember there was a connection between them."

Some 33 years later, George has filed a court claim alleging that he is Diefenbaker's natural son.

There are reasons to doubt the claim. At the time of any alleged liaison, Diefenbaker would have been in his early 70s, forced out as opposition leader a few months earlier; Ms. Dryden would have been a prominent Toronto socialite in her early 30s. And there is the money: George's lawsuit is seeking more than \$35-million.

Peter C. Newman, a prominent Diefenbaker historian and author of the 1963 book *Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years* and followed his career closely to the end, said he would "doubt very much" that Diefenbaker was unfaithful to his second wife, Olive.

"There are all kinds of bad things to say about him, which I did, but there was never any talk of that or rumour of that," Mr. Newman said. "I truly believe it was a good marriage. Everybody has secrets, but I certainly did not come across any of that kind of thing."

If proven true, the claim would make George the former prime minister's only biological child. If proven true, it would mean George is not, in fact, the son of Gordon Dryden, a lawyer and stalwart Liberal who served 18 years as federal party treasurer and who was a confidant to Pierre Elliott Trudeau and other prominent Liberals.

No statement of defence has been filed, and the allegations have not been proven in court. There is no proof, genetic or otherwise, that George is not

Gordon's son, and Ms. Dryden called the claim "crazy" in an interview this week. George says the paternity claim is based on alleged long-held suspicions by members of Ms. Dryden's family, and conjectures stemming from George's appearance, his name, his strained relationship with Gordon, and his mother's allegedly close friendship with Diefenbaker.

George said he hopes the court case will herald a catharsis after years of alienation, and that the proceedings will help rectify what he says are historic wrongdoings, including allegations surrounding the division of his uncle's inheritance.

"When George was born in 1968, members of the extended Dryden family secretly suspected that George was the natural child of John Diefenbaker," according to the statement of claim, which was filed last month to the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

The statement of claim adds: "Gordon and Mary Lou signed a false birth certificate to conceal this true paternity ... This has never been disclosed to George by Gordon or Mary Lou and it only became known to George in conversations with members of his extended family held in 2010. Today, George has facial features inconsistent with other close male members of the Dryden family but remarkably similar to those of John Diefenbaker in his prime of life."

George - a divorced bachelor who assists a Toronto lawyer - said he has not spoken with his mother since last May, just months before his cousin confronted him with the familial musings.

When reached by the National Post at her Toronto home, Ms. Dryden, now 76, responded to her son's allegation.

"What? That's crazy," she said. "I don't wish to talk about it anymore."

George's lawyer, Stephen Edell, said Gordon's legal counsel has "given no affirmative response" to a request for a DNA test last fall, though he said he is hopeful that a judge will compel a paternity test in the coming months.

Mr. Edell said a negative test result would not confirm that Mr. Diefenbaker is George's father, but said "in the national interest and the historical context, a lot of people are going to want to know the answer to that question."

He posited that perhaps a DNA sample could be gleaned from a living relative or from an archival item, though the "most drastic and hopefully

avoidable solution" would be exhuming Mr. Diefenbaker's body from its grave in Saskatchewan, where he was buried in 1979.

Gordon, now 84, said the allegation is "absolute rubbish," and said the issue of paternity is a "matter of tactics in this lawsuit."

The statement of claim says that at the time of Gordon's high-profile wedding on Sept. 25, 1967, Ms. Dryden was a "prominent political and church socialite and singer. She was a close personal friend and confidante of Prime Minister John George Diefenbaker and was often seen by his side at political events and as his companion on social occasions."

After decades of family tumult and litigation, George said he has been alienated from his mother and all but estranged from his father. The filing alleges that the "cumulative effect of Gordon's tireless efforts to excommunicate George from his natural role in the Dryden family" has "caused George to spiral into depression, alcohol, drug addiction and the inability to sustain a normal and loving relationship with women."

George is suing Gordon, who owns a 50% interest in a large farm outside Toronto, for \$30-million in damages. He is suing his mother for \$5-million and his brother, Barry Jr., for half of the funds and assets related to Barry Jr.'s inheritance from their uncle's estate.

He is also seeking guardianship of his mother and his autistic brother, whom he alleges are being denied adequate care by Gordon. Gordon's counsel, **Clare Burns**, said her client "denies all of the allegations and intends to vigorously defend them."

George said the idea that Diefenbaker may be his father stems from last October, when his cousin, David Matt, asked him point-blank whether he believes that Gordon is his father.

"We were sitting at his kitchen table, and that's how it all started," George recounted, adding that he was at Mr. Matt's home with his personal lawyer seeking information for the case. "He said, You know, you do look like Diefenbaker, and some family members always suspected it when Mary Lou had you. ' Then things sort of clicked in my mind, and I remembered that picture of them together in her bedroom at the Sutton house."

Mr. Matt declined to be interviewed for this story. However, George and his personal lawyer, Noel Daley, obtained a signed "will-say statement" from Mr. Matt - a statement of what he will say, should he be called to testify in court. The statement says members of Ms. Dryden's family generally accepted that George was not Gordon's son and that George's father was a very prominent individual, Mr. Edell said.

Ms. Dryden's only surviving sibling, Nancy Cain, said there was "some controversy" over George's name when he was born.

"But my dad's name was John, and Gordon's father's name was George, so I don't know," she said in a telephone interview from her home in Oshawa, Ont. "He does look a little bit like Diefenbaker, that's all I can say."

George said he believes his mother - once president of the East York Young Progressive Conservatives - met the former prime minister through her singing engagements or through her political involvement.

A 1963 Toronto newspaper article places the pair together in the East York Collegiate auditorium on April 3, when Mr. Diefenbaker delivered a 40-minute speech. The article said Ms. Dryden introduced the prime minister with a patriotic song, and then welcomed him to the stage for a campaign tune called "Into Parliament They Shall Go."

On Oct. 1, 1968, George was born at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. The day before his birth was announced in an Oct. 4 newspaper notice - "To Gordon and Mary Lou (nee Lonergan) a son, 7 lbs, 11 ozs," it read - Mr. Diefenbaker was on the floor of the House of Commons debating World Bank loans.

Mr. Diefenbaker had been widowed in 1951, and re-married two years later. He and Olive raised Carolyn, her daughter from a previous marriage who passed away last year.

"He didn't have a social life, exactly, but he was a friendly guy when he met you," said the wife of a special assistant to the former prime minister. The woman asked not to be named. "He absolutely worshipped [Olive]."

One Diefenbaker historian, Thad McIlroy, who edited The Personal Letters of a Public Man: The Family Letters of John G. Diefenbaker, said there was nothing in the massive compilation to suggest Diefenbaker stepped out on his marriage.

"Olive was the complete woman in his life ... She was all things to him," said Mr. McIlroy, who said he sifted through thousands of letters for the book. "Everyone does have an inner self, but I don't think I have ever encountered anyone with less evidence of an inner self separate from their public self than John Diefenbaker."

During the window of George's conception, Mr. Diefenbaker visited Toronto, where the Dryden family lived, on at least one recorded occasion. On Monday, Dec. 18, 1967, the former prime minister and his wife attended a Centennial event at Beth Shalom synagogue.

In January, 1968, he and Olive embarked on a 13-day Caribbean cruise. One newspaper reporter observed that the 72-year-old returned "appearing tanned and fit."

Ms. Dryden would have been in her early 30s, and on the heels of her wedding to Gordon at Toronto's Church of the Redeemer. A newspaper caption

beneath a photo of the smiling couple said
"Conservative and Liberal are united."

George said he recalls the family's living room was adorned with signed photos by Liberal figures such as Lester B. Pearson, and the phone rang with calls from Mr. Trudeau.

After high school, George worked on the sales desk for a building supply company and then later worked in the financial and real estate industries. In his early 20s, he moved into Sutton Place, a hotel on Bay Street, where he said he caroused with movie stars and befriended actors such as the late David Carradine.

George said he drank too much, and later used cocaine. He said he has been clean for 10 years, and has spent the past several months assisting Mr. Daley, even presenting legal motions before masters of the court.

"He has a rare intelligence, advocacy skills of the highest order, and is a lovely man who has been hurt and damaged and sabotaged beyond telling," said Mr. Daley, who called himself a friend and mentor of George's.

Mr. Edell, George's lawyer, said that if it turns out Gordon is not his father, "it would mean a lot for George."

"It would give him, if not closure, at least a sense of understanding and of identity," Mr. Edell said.

"For there to be another son of a prime minister - a son that was not known for 42 years - I think is significant," said George. "This too, will come to a conclusion, one way or another," he said. "I really just want the chance to take care of my mom ... I just want closure."

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