

“Recommitting to the Miracle of Canada”

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On the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the
Council of Canadians

Ottawa, ON

November 4, 2005

[1] Introduction:

Thank you, Maude, for your kind words and the Award the Council has bestowed upon me tonight.

The opportunity to say a few words on this important occasion, marking the 20th anniversary of the critically important citizens' movement we know as the Council of Canadians, is greatly appreciated. The Council continues to pursue its' cause of a stronger, united, and progressive Canada. In recognizing your past achievements, permit me to encourage you to do—even speak out—more in the future on such key issues as medicare, security of our water, our sovereignty, the arts, and the independence and diversity of our media.

Sometimes, like many of you I suppose, I wish that the public debate you often generate wasn't necessary. But, it is necessary. I increasingly find that without prodding, political engagement and genuine problem solving regarding the issues we care about, not much seems to happen.

And I particularly admire the fact that you advance public issues with evidence, often through Maude's remarkably prolific book writing. In this regard, friends, if I go on too long tonight, the good news is that it might give Maude enough time to write another book!

Congratulations, Maude, on the most recent contribution to a better Canada with today's publication of your book, *Too Close For Comfort*. I join you in your efforts to ensure that our nation's independence is assured and informed and strengthened by our Canadian values.

A few days ago, we marked the 10th anniversary of the last Quebec referendum. A few weeks ago, the Globe and Mail asked that I pen 400 words to reminisce about that decade-old event. I recalled the unmistakable gut-wrenching emotional war within me—ranging from apprehension to hope. It was a challenge to hide these feelings and thoughts as I participated on a television panel observing the ebb and flow of that night. For me, the evening ended with an indelibly etched and renewed commitment to the great social experiment known around the world as Canada. And, the urgent need to re-work that miracle.

Tonight, I want to speak about our legacy, the values that inform it, share some concerns I have about our present, and table a few ideas for a promising future.

[2] Our National Legacy

At the turn of the 20th Century, Sir Wilfred Laurier noted that the new millennium would belong to Canada. It took about 50 years for Canada to be noticed around the world for its unique commitment to fairness for its people, for its balance between the individual and the community, between nation and enterprise, and for its constructive approach to geopolitics.

After the Second World War, we picked up momentum as a nation because our federal and provincial governments worked together, governed...and led. The recent memory, at that time, of the Great Depression and the collapse of the global economic system, taught us that we have to act collectively to shape our destiny; the great mobilization for war, forced upon us the strength and the purpose to shape that destiny.

In the ensuing post-war years, our nation was transformed by demonstrated concern for families, for veterans, for the unemployed, for the elderly and the sick. We built our universities and their doors opened to everyone regardless of income. We developed systems of community colleges across our country to provide further accessibility and opportunities. We promoted our research laboratories. We created new institutions that nourished the arts and planted the seeds of the golden age of Canadian literature. We funded the CBC and embraced the television age with a uniquely Canadian ethos. And, while doing all of this, we further strengthened our national purpose and identity. We established our own citizenship act, our own national anthem, and our own flag. And we introduced social programs that most vividly affirm Canadian community values—universal hospitalization and medical care.

By the year of the Centennial, as Pierre Berton wrote, we had created “a world-class, forward-looking nation.” At the core of that nationhood stood the principles of a civil and caring society with dignity for all, equal rights, and equal opportunity. We felt we were part of a collective endeavor, that we shared a collective destiny.

After 1967, the tide of reform did not abate. We went beyond the *social* foundations of Canadian nationhood, and transformed the *political and legal* framework of our country. We affirmed the equality of our two national language communities and reformed the entire structure of government to reflect that equality. We patriated our Constitution, established the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and committed ourselves to diversity, civility, respect, and the pursuit of peace.

In essence, we reaffirmed our belief in an inter-generational and inter-regional approach as a basis of our policies. We looked after each other, regionally and

individually, to promote our right of citizenship and our national unity. Equalization was written into our new constitution. Perhaps, another way of describing this might be that we believed in our **shared destiny**, regardless of background, language, religion, or ethnicity. Shared destiny!

Let me speak a bit more about our shared destiny. We are the children of exceptional circumstances and history has shaped us in particular ways.

First of all, the land Jacques Cartier discovered almost 500 years ago was already one of the most diverse on earth. This continent held more nations on it than that of Europe today. The land into which he journeyed, spoke over fifty languages, and was a vast archipelago of cultures, religions and social systems. We did not invent national diversity during the generations since official nationhood. We joined it in progress. Our duality was shaped by this work in progress. Two rival nationalities—which spent centuries fighting each other in global empires—were now obliged to co-exist on this soil, and develop a civil society.

If we already had diversity and a somewhat grudging civility bred into the national soul, what came next would introduce empathy. The greatest human migration in history embarked across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans for more than a century. It brought us the children of the highland clearances in Scotland, of the famines of Ireland, and the teeming cities of Britain. They came from China, Japan, Eastern Europe, Germany and Iceland. They were tides of the landless and the adventurous, the dispossessed and the dreamers, with simple determination to find peace and a future for their children.

My father left Ukraine in the late 1920s in pursuit of liberty and a future in Canada. It's a story replicated a million times in Canadian history, only the dates and the names differ, but not the narrative. His timing was not the best as the prairie soil was devastated by droughts, which severely worsened the impact of the Great Depression. From farmer to labourer, he became a sectionman for the Canadian National Railways, repairing track, carting heavy ice blocks to old boxcars, clearing huge snowdrifts that blocked the tracks. When my mother and sister finally arrived in the port of Montreal, to join him, there to meet them, was Mike Romanow who used his railway pass to travel several nights and days to accompany them to their new life in Saskatoon.

The working-class west side of Saskatoon was alive with the sounds, smells, faiths and faces of many other new Canadians. They were primarily Polish, German, Métis, Jewish, Scottish, and English. Tolerance and acceptance were bred into the fibre of our lives. Caring and compassion was a necessity. The Dirty Thirties also taught us collaboration. Credit unions, co-operatives, universities, health centers, and Crown Corporations sprung up as the practical vehicles for immediate survival and for the future.

As a first generation Canadian, I was raised in the belief that the strand of a shared destiny connected us all, from neighborhood, to city, to province, to nation. Eventually, in my world, tolerance and acceptance morphed into an active respect and appreciation for cultural and religious differences. Shared destiny!

I do not invoke "shared destiny" as a poetic or a romantic phrase. It is central to our national identity and to all political and social progress in Canada. It has been at the centre of the national consensus. It has been admired around the world. When Javier

Perez de Cuellar stepped down as Secretary General of the United Nations, he came here and donated all the gifts and works of art had received during his term in office to Canada. He was asked why he chose Canada—he was, himself, a Peruvian national—and he noted that during all his travels he had come to regard Canada as the kind of civil society the nations of the world had to become if the world is to survive.

Ours is a legacy worth nurturing. Are we doing so today?

[3] The Worrying Challenges to our Legacy

While our legacy provides us with an enviable foundation as a nation, so much of it seems so fragile today. Too fragile.

Don't get me wrong. At the turn of another millennium, we still have so much for which to be grateful. Many continue to join our national community from faraway places and continue to enrich all of us. But in an age of unprecedented human, natural, and material wealth in Canada, one cannot help but note that:

- the gap between the rich and poor is growing, not diminishing;
- despite our incredible prosperity, child poverty levels remain higher than in 1989 when the House of Commons committed to ending child poverty by the year 2000;
- the security of clean air to breath and safe water to drink, is uncertain;
- the confidence in our democratic institutions is waning;
- short termism and the application of simplistic solutions to complex problems seems to have taken over the cultures of public and private places;
- rigorous accountability and governance seem more of an illusion than a reality;

- global terrorism—its root causes and the responses to it by various and traditional Canadian allies—threatens the sustenance of our core Canadian values;
- racism, sexism, and homophobia still stand as obstacles for too many Canadians when it comes having seats at the tables of decision-making;
- the ownership of our media by fewer and fewer brings with it a concomitant loss of varied and independent voices necessary for our pluralistic nation;
- we still have unfulfilled treaty obligations, unacceptable living conditions and poor life prospects for aboriginal peoples—those who were here first. This remains a blight on our progress as a nation.

What's happened to our vision of "shared destiny" to guide us in resolving these challenges?

Fueled by "silo thinking," our decision making often suffers from a hardening of the categories where economic, social, and environmental issues are dealt with separately as "one-offs" and in response to short term pressures without anywhere near enough consideration of long term implications.

In an age where connecting the dots through integrating thinking and action is crucial, our educational institutions and public and private sectors often organize instead for specialty and niches.

The word "and" in the phrase "social and economic" is now an example of the kind of unfortunate bifurcation that seems to be taking place when it comes to making policy for today and tomorrow. Worse yet, the word "and" has been replaced by "or."

Fiscal and economic objectives are increasingly being portrayed as ends rather than means to a fairer future.

At the same time, we have been taught to think of taxes as a personal cost to each of us, rather than an investment in the things that provide collective advantage to our shared destiny and all of us.

For years, environmentalists have warned us about the consequences of a neglected planet. They told us, pay now and avoid higher costs later. We called them tree huggers. Today we are living with the accuracy of their predictions with higher incidences of child asthma and the threat of fresh water wars, and the vagaries of global warming.

The result is often more of an illusion of accountability in which only measuring the easily measured has taken hold. Frequently, the easily measured isn't worth measuring.

So I admit that I am increasingly pre-occupied with things like:

- **The short-term orientation to decision-making and the consequences of simplistic solutions for complex problems.** For example, while providing large amounts of new money for Medicare is needed, ensuring that new money buys an integrated, rather than a piecemeal, approach to change is key, as is a transparent accountability system so that Canadians can track genuine progress of health care reforms.
- **The hardening of the categories at a time when we need to connect the dots.** Policy processes seem more disjointed; we need to understand, for

example, that the insecurity of our water supply will affect the poor substantially more than the rich;

- **The Federation becoming more like an association.** Thirteen “one-off” deals on Medicare”? Thirteen “one-off” deals on child care? Similarly, ad hoc fiscal arrangements for some provinces and not others, has weakened equalization and its underlying principle of interregional and intergenerational sharing; and
- **The formation of the Council of the Federation;** will this really strengthen the nation as a whole and advance the concept of “shared destiny”? Or is it a premiers’ club to push the federal government for low common denominator deals to get the quick ad hoc fix for the next provincial budgets?

[4] A Renewed Vision for Canada

My friends, Canada is a nation with “miracle potential.” It is a nation that needs to be put back on track. We must get back to that Canadian balance between the individual and community, between nation and enterprise, and base it on the concept that we really do share our destiny.

So, imagine a nation:

- where no child goes to school hungry for food, but where every child goes to school hungry to learn because of our investments in early learning and childcare;

- where every citizen has access to timely supports for illness and no one has to worry about losing their property to the costs of life saving catastrophic drugs;
- where no one who works a good, hard 40 hours per week is living in poverty;
- where the participation rates in post secondary education reflect the full mosaic of our society;
- where every citizen has proper shelter, access to clean water to drink, and fresh air to breath;
- where our First Nations peoples live in good health, enjoying the opportunities for prosperity of those who came after;
- where literacy is 100%;
- where the newly arrived, as my parents and the millions like them, are greeted with enormous respect for what they already know, able to contribute immediately to a robust economy, and where their children are supported in the schools to enable their own springboard for success in their newly adopted nation;
- where the soul of our nation is known around the world through our cultural and artistic achievements; and
- where nations united around the world, speak of our contributions to a fairer and more peaceful globe.

[5] Getting There from Here

In closing my friends, how do we get there from here?

Permit me, humbly, to offer a few examples. We need:

- **Leadership** that is informed by national purpose, a clarity of values, and a longer view of things;
- **Independent information and respect for evidence.** In this regard, I am working with a remarkable group of Canadians on developing a Canadian Index of Wellbeing that will provide regular and independently reported evidence about “how we are doing” when it comes to the things that matter to Canadians. You will be hearing more about this soon, if you haven’t already;
- A **re-calibration of fiscal federalism**; we need a modern version of the Rowell-Sirois commission and its’ recommendations need to flow from the Canada to which we aspire;
- A **renaissance in education, research, and culture** where uncommon quality and remarkable accessibility to educational and cultural opportunities are givens, not tradeoffs;
- To **acknowledge and honor our promises to the aboriginal peoples of Canada**;
- To **end the disgrace of child poverty**;
- To renew **medicare**; and
- To **restore and enrich our commitment to international peacekeeping** and independent foreign policy;

[6] Conclusion

I know this will not be easily achieved. I was a premier. I felt the pressures to succumb to political short-termism. It is not easy running a country, especially one as rich and diverse as ours. And running provinces and public and private organizations is more complex than ever.

That said, leadership is about having that big dream to build a better Canada and, as importantly, the moral purpose and will to do it. We need leaders of towns and cities and provinces, of companies—large and small, of child care centres, schools, colleges and universities, of unions and business organizations and our cultural institutions, to position their endeavors in the context of our shared destiny and a better Canada. We all need to act...with the big dream in mind, the miracle of Canada.

Sometimes, I feel that Canada is at the most critical of crossroads. There are moments when I feel we are well down a pathway that leads to more poverty, increased racism, increasing crime, and environmental degradation. I don't recognize this road as a Canadian one.

The other pathway is the one we must choose. It is a pathway built upon respect, opportunity, and fairness. It is a pathway built upon our Canadian values which have found new expression—innovative fresh ideas that create uncommon well-being for all of our citizens and the newly arrived.

This is the time to cherish our past and aggressively embrace a better future for Canada. We still are a great nation. We need and deserve an even better Canada. The world needs a better Canada. I know that the Council of Canadians will continue to pursue this noblest of goals.

Again, I thank you deeply for the honor you have bestowed on me. I humbly accept it on behalf of the millions of Mike Romanows who made this country great, and the millions since who dream no little dreams.

And as the poet Tennyson said: 'come my friends, 'tis not too late to make a newer world'!

Thank you so much.