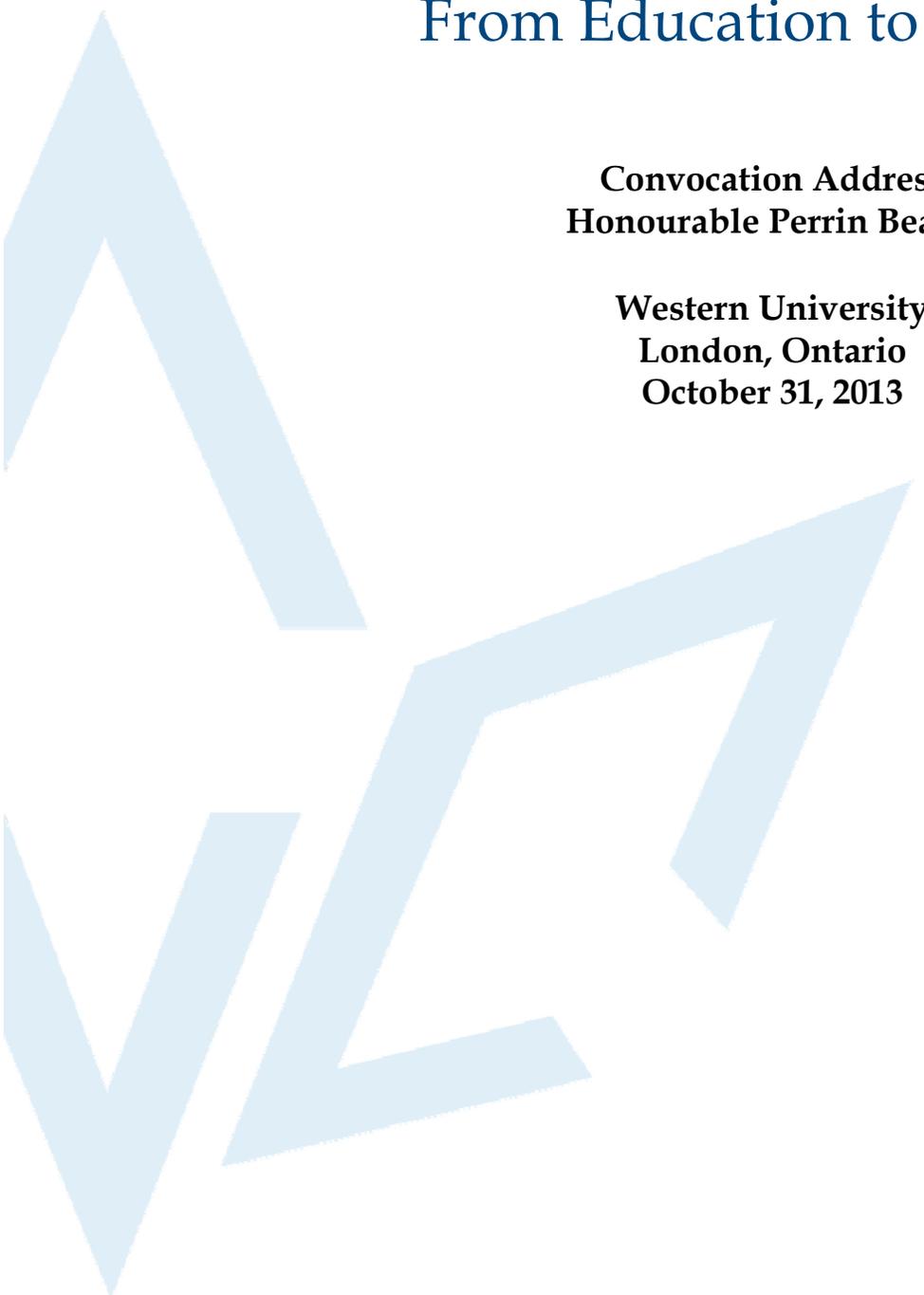




# From Education to Service

**Convocation Address  
Honourable Perrin Beatty**

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Chancellor Rotman, President Chakma, faculty and friends, fellow graduates:

Former Prime Minister Joe Clark tells what I suspect is an apocryphal story about the day his French teacher arrived and announced, "Congratulations, Mr. Clark. As of today you are officially bilingual."

"Have I really improved that much," he asked.

"No. They've lowered the standard," came the reply.

I think I know the feeling. I am very grateful for Western's kindness, which I take as a hopeful sign that my academic records have mysteriously been destroyed and that my former professors are now old enough their memories have grown faulty.

I'm tremendously proud of my association with Western. In addition to graduating from here forty-two years ago, I returned to teach a course in 1994-95, and our two sons, Christopher and Patrick, were both graduates. Julie and I will be back in a couple of weeks for a lecture in Christopher's memory at King's College.

I see an irony in my speaking to you today. As a student, I used to dread hearing ancient graduates relive their student days and try to convince us that what had happened so long ago could be relevant to us.

Yet here I am. I suppose that's what we mean by the circle of life.

Let me at least suggest a few threads that tie us together. I want to offer just three thoughts about what your education means and how it should be put to use.

The first relates to education itself.

Like most of yours, my memories of Western are happy. I believe I received a tremendous education here, much of it in the classroom.

What remains four decades later is not so much the facts I learned, but that I had an opportunity to develop my understanding of the world and my place in it. In my opinion, that is still our universities' most important contribution today: to prepare a new generation for its role in society.

When I graduated anyone with a university degree could find a job. We spent much less time worrying about how to make ourselves employable than on growing and experiencing and testing our views against each other's in those debates about almost everything that stretched long into the night and seemed so important to us. Through them, and through our professors' teaching, we developed the values that still anchor us.

The most important truth I learned was that graduation marks a new phase in your education, but not the end of it. Your best teachers -- like Peter Neary, who taught both

me and my son, Christopher -- engender a love of learning for its own sake that sustains you through the rest of your lives. I am particularly honoured that Professor Neary is part of this ceremony today.

Your education must be a life-long progression, not a canning process that starts in kindergarten and finishes when you graduate from university.

Particularly today, when technology and markets evolve at a breathtaking and accelerating pace, learning must never stop or even slow down. It can be sparked and fuelled in the classroom, but it must not be confined to it. The pervasive and unrelenting change that flows around us means that both institutions and individuals must be in a state of constant reinvention.

I returned Saturday evening from ten days in Asia. That trip reminded me of how globalisation forces us to understand not just what happens here at home, but also the economic, social and political changes taking place on the other side of the world. So much of what we have taken for granted all of our lives is being replaced by a new reality that evolves by the day.

Technology is another powerful force reshaping our world. Twenty years ago this year, as Communications minister, I committed Canada to what we referred to as an electronic highway system. Here is how I described it:

This generation has the opportunity to reshape our nation for the future, to reassert our unity of purpose, and to expand the meaning and value of our citizenship... in the same way our forebears did by linking themselves together first with footpaths, horse trails and waterways, then with telegraph, rail and telephone lines, and now with roadways, optical fibre, cables and satellite beams.....I'm talking about an electronic highway system, as varied in its capacity and uses as is our national system of roads: a network for all of us to use in seeking vital information, government services, community participation, health care, police protection, education material, entertainment, even home shopping and banking services, allowing us to strengthen our common values and national identity.

I didn't refer to the internet because in those days none of us had heard of it, even as we installed the infrastructure on which it would run. No-one had any idea of the jobs that would be created or destroyed, or how our institutions would be reshaped by this technology, or that there would not be a single human being on earth left untouched by it. Only as it evolved did we start to grasp how profoundly it would touch our lives.

Today's understanding of where technology is taking us is at least as clouded as it was twenty years ago. All we know for sure is that, as it advances, our success will depend on our willingness and ability to learn and to adapt. Otherwise, our skills and knowledge will very quickly become obsolete.

If equipping young Canadians to keep learning long after graduation is the university's key contribution, then the next most important must be to help them develop a moral compass to navigate the ethical choices ahead. That is the second observation I want to make today.

I believe this is an area where we don't do enough. We seem to be so consumed with teaching students how something can be done that we forget that to talk about when or even if it we should do it. I particularly worry when I look at our political parties, where loyalty and dedication to the cause count for more than whether the cause itself is worthy.

Educators should be very concerned about the crisis of confidence in our public institutions. They can provide a powerful antidote to cynicism and indifference.

Sadly, anyone who reads a newspaper knows that there is much to be cynical about in both the public and private sectors. The recurring theme is a troubling lack of ethics.

We can debate the specifics another time. Today, I want simply to suggest that whatever your career, your most important accountability is to yourself.

You can't delegate your responsibility for your own ethical conduct to someone else. Despite our efforts to bureaucratise morality, the issue is not whether your behaviour fits within a set of guidelines. Regulations will tell you what is permissible. Your heart will tell you what is right.

It's easy to understand why many people think the best way to get ahead is to cut corners. Indeed, sometimes the morally-impaired do succeed -- at least for a time -- but my experience in both government and business is that the cheats are soon found out.

Nor can you hide in the crowd. The very worst justification for an action is that someone told you, "Everyone does things this way."

If whatever is proposed seems morally wrong to you, it is wrong for you. Walk away.

My third thought concerns how I hope you will put your education to use.

I attended university during a period of intense activism. No social institution, whether government, the churches, or the university itself escaped the call for reform. We had long debates over issues like whether student parity on the Board of Governors would somehow help us end war and racism.

Looking back four decades later, there's no doubt that we were naive. But more far more important than our naivety was that we believed we could make a difference and that we had a responsibility to do so. No-one thought that our actions just didn't matter or that we could escape our duty to make things better.

What worries me today, when I see so much anger that government, business and even our educational system are failing us, is that growing numbers of our citizens no longer feel it is worth trying to make a difference.

As a former MP and cabinet minister -- perhaps even more so as a citizen and a father -- I am concerned about the state of our democracy. We are witnessing a deeply worrying degree of disengagement from the political system. Left unchecked, it will erode the legitimacy of our democratic institutions themselves.

Voter turnout in federal elections over the last few decades tells a powerful story. When I was first elected to Parliament in 1972, 76.7 percent of the people eligible to vote actually did so. While there have been occasional upward blips since then, the trend line has been steadily lower. In the last election, in 2011, only 61.1 percent of the eligible voters actually cast ballots.

Elections Canada's figures show that the difference between the number of Canadians registered to vote and those who cast ballots was over 9.4 million.

Put another way, the number of people who chose not to vote was greater than the total populations of our four Atlantic provinces, the three territories, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the city of Hamilton.

We need to fix the problem.

A good place to start is with our current practitioners, who could resolve to treat our democratic institutions and themselves with greater respect. If our politicians continue to act as if they believe that there is no difference between an adversary and an enemy and that everyone has his price, they should not be surprised when the public starts to share that view.

We also need a new generation to take its place rebuilding and revitalizing our society. We need you to commit yourselves to making a difference.

President Chakma, last week you and I were together in China at Nanjing University. We watched a student who was moved when a former Dean of Law here at Western, Governor General David Johnston, spoke of "A Call to Service." She asked how Chinese students could respond in their country.

Today's graduates live in the most fortunate country in the world and are our best-prepared, best-educated generation. The question is how you will employ the knowledge and the skills you acquired here.

How will you take stock fifty years from now? You have every right to use your talents to advance your own well-being. Our educational system is designed to help you do just that.

I hope you will set a higher goal for yourselves: to measure your success not by the material possessions you acquire, but by the difference you make.

We all have heroes whose examples shape our lives. Mine was my grandfather, a successful businessman who felt a duty to put back into the community. These words are carved into his grave stone:

What I spent, I had.

What I saved, I lost.

What I gave, I have.

My grandfather understood that what gives value to our lives is how we add value to the lives of others. It doesn't matter what career you choose; there are a thousand ways to contribute.

On this graduation day, all the doors in front of you remain wide open. If it seems much too soon for me to ask you how you will judge your lives four or five decades from now, all I can respond is that the years will pass far too quickly. There will never be a better time to set your course.

As you do, my plea to my fellow graduates is simply this: that you nurture the love of learning that will keep you relevant and renewed throughout your lifetimes, that you remain true to your own values, and that you commit yourselves to leaving your society better because you were part of it.