



Four Wishes for Canada

Speaking Notes for Hon. Perrin Beatty

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Morning Convocation
University of Ontario Institute of Technology

General Motors Centre, 99 Athol Street East
Oshawa, ON

Please Check Against Delivery

Chancellor Taylor, President McTiernan, distinguished guests, and – most important of all – our graduates:

Thank you for this honour and for the opportunity to speak to you today. Since 2008, I've been privileged to be part of UOIT, watching the university grow and sharing our common pride in the accomplishments of our remarkable faculty and of our graduates, who are already leaving their mark on Canada and the world.

I'm very pleased to be succeeded as Chancellor by Noreen Taylor. She brings a great combination of experience and commitment to her role, which I know she will enjoy as much as I have for over seven years.

The highlight for me each year has been convocation, which let me join in celebrating our graduates' achievements and their potential to make a difference for the better. It's a wonderful vaccination against cynicism.

Some of you are the first in your families to earn a university degree. Many embody the dream that brought your families to Canada: the belief that, in this country, all citizens can achieve their full potential if they are willing to invest the time and hard work it requires.

I'll admit that I'm intimidated to be delivering this morning's address. As you know, convocation speakers are expected to offer the graduates wise counsel on how they can succeed in their careers and lives. Searching for what to tell you, I thought back to when the head of our high school history department spoke to us at length about what life had taught him over his long career. We waited breathlessly for his advice. It was, "Always put the date at the top of a letter."

What's most disturbing is that this was probably more useful than about eighty percent of the advice I've received from paid consultants over the years.

If you'll forgive me, I'll pass on the opportunity to tell you how to be a success. Instead, I'd like to speak to you for a few minutes about Canada. This year, as we prepare to celebrate our sesquicentennial, it's a particularly appropriate time to take stock.

Let's start with the society into which I graduated in 1971. Like today, it was an exciting time to be Canadian. Both Canada and the world were undergoing revolutionary change. As part of our coming of age, we had hosted the world for our centennial just four years before. And in our politics, we were led by a charismatic Prime Minister called Trudeau who had been swept into office by an electorate searching for a new type of politics. We believed he would make us more united, more modern and more just.

(It seems that in politics, as in fashion, you simply have to wait long enough for things to come back into style.)

The world outside our borders was not so hopeful. The United States had been distracted and divided by war in Asia and urban riots at home. Global security was dominated by two military blocs – one comprised of the western democracies and the other led by the Soviet Union. Still, despite fierce ideological differences, there was stability because both sides knew that whichever attacked first would itself be destroyed.

The world into which you are graduating is much more complex and, in many ways, more dangerous. World affairs are no longer controlled by two superpowers operating by agreed-upon rules. Today's threats come less from traditional militaries than from terrorism, and from failed states, a changing climate and the rise in pandemics, all of which strain governments' abilities to respond effectively. We often have a sense that our problems have become larger than our leaders.

I was in Paris last week on for a meeting of international businesses associations. As always, the city was vibrant and beautiful. It's a place where history and culture welcome you whenever you turn a corner. But it is also far from problem-free. Paris has been assaulted by terrorists twice in two years, labour unrest is growing and the national government is plumbing new depths of unpopularity. It was uncertain whether I would even be able to return home on Friday because of strikes against the rail and subway systems and threats to shut France's airports as well.

Each of us at our meeting reported on our respective economies and political landscapes. We heard about low economic growth, and about government corruption and autocracy, dangerous new nationalist movements and political uncertainty in the US and in Britain, which will vote shortly on whether to pull out of the European Union. I was struck by how much more hopeful Canada's report was than most of the others.

Forty-five years after my graduation, our basic values remain intact, but we have matured. In 1972, we often defined ourselves in terms of who we weren't, struggling to describe our uniqueness beyond not being American. Today's young Canadians express a less brittle, far more confident nationalism.

The physical face of Canada itself has also changed. Today, a majority of the residents in our largest city were born outside of Canada. You see every country's diaspora when you walk Toronto's streets. And even more important than that ethnic and cultural diversity is the fact that the Canadian multicultural experiment has succeeded to a degree unimaginable in most of the world.

None of this justifies viewing ourselves as a moral superpower whose job is to lecture other countries wrestling with problems far more severe than ours. We have frequently fallen short of our professed standards and others outperform us too often for us to be smug.

You will each have your own ideas about how Canada's future should look. They may deal with the economy or the environment or, perhaps, social justice. Here, however, are four simple wishes of mine after a lifetime in and around Canadian politics.

First, we need to understand that Canada's diversity is not a weakness, but a strength to be celebrated. We must go far beyond simple tolerance, which implies the reluctant acceptance of something – whether ethnic, linguistic, sexual, religious or political – that we profoundly dislike. The Canadian reality is that each bright thread woven into our national fabric adds to its strength and beauty.

It's often said that leaders give license to their followers to express beliefs or act in a way that they would otherwise not do. Its worst expression is political campaigns that play on people's fears and prejudices and propose building walls within or between countries. I am proud that one of the first actions of our new government was to open our doors to thousands of people fleeing war and oppression in Syria. In doing that, the Prime Minister gave us licence to give in to our best and most-Canadian instincts, just as Prime Minister Clark did when he welcomed the Vietnamese boat people in 1979 and 1980.

Canada remains a work in progress, the product of both our history and of the dreams and labour of millions of people who have left old beliefs and old ways of life behind to make this country their home. Our ability to draw people from around the globe to live here in mutual respect remains an essential part of our success. It is, at once, our gift to the world, and the world's gift to us.

The benefit that we gain by inviting others into our country is particularly evident here in the heart of Canada's automotive industry. The founders of our two great automotive parts companies, whose operations extend around the world, were both newcomers to Canada.

My second wish is for Canada to renew and deepen our engagement with the world beyond our borders. In contrast with other countries that are pulling back from global involvement, a deeper integration into world affairs would strengthen Canada's voice. It is also in keeping with our history, as reflected in the blood we shed to protect democracy in two world wars, in our contribution to peacekeeping and in our leadership in fighting apartheid in South Africa. It would build upon our involvement in organizations like the United Nations, NATO and the World Trade Organisation.

The importance of Canada's connection to the world goes far beyond the contribution we make to others. With less than one half of one percent of the world's population, we will never be a global power that can impose its will on other countries. Our success here at home requires an active and strategic engagement outside of our own borders. It depends on our being inside the room when decisions are being made and on our capacity to build alliances with others. If we retreat from the global economy or if we weary of our military, diplomatic and foreign aid commitments, we put our own vital interests at risk.

We often speak like what we do with the rest of the world is simply the product of Canadian altruism, as if it represents pure sacrifice for Canada. It would be both more honest and more productive to recognize that what we contribute to the world also promotes our interests and our ability to shape the events that affect us. Preventing pandemics or regional conflicts from spilling across national boundaries protects our security. And when Canadian aid and business investment help people move from poverty into more productive and prosperous lives, they

become both our suppliers and our customers. Similarly, as a nation that shares the global environment, we gain when Canadian technology or expertise helps others reduce pollution or conserve resources. And we benefit when our efforts to build successful democratic institutions abroad help prevent the failed states that collapse into the forced migration of millions of people.

My third wish is to finally complete the process of nation-building here at home. As we celebrate our diversity, we also need to understand that Canada is much more than the sum of its parts. Our values and interests transcend local and provincial boundaries. Yet, a century and a half after we decided to form a country, we still maintain barriers to mobility and commerce between provinces that would be illegal between countries in Europe. Despite negotiating free trade agreements with the United States and Mexico, with Europe, with Korea, Honduras, Israel, Jordan, Chile and a number of other countries, we have yet to offer it within Canada itself. We need to act like one country in more than just name.

At our best, we treat each other generously. No-one who watched the recent outpouring of support for the residents of northern Alberta can doubt that fact. It was particularly touching to read reports of Syrian refugees who, after being in Canada for only a few weeks, shared what they had received with people driven from their homes by the fire. We all feel more secure when we have each others' backs.

However, despite our capacity to act with grace and generosity, we sometimes succumb to a narrow parochialism that treats Confederation as a zero-sum game where the success of one region can only come at the expense of others. We often seem more troubled by the possibility that someone might get ahead than by the fact that some are falling behind.

Treating a healthy resources economy as a threat to our manufacturing sector or insisting that we will only allow our landlocked provinces to ship their resources to global markets if we each get a satisfactory share of the profits is a churlish and narrow view of what it means to be Canadian. The St. Lawrence Seaway would never have been built if everyone along the route had been able to exercise a veto. Nor could Sir John A. Macdonald have kept his commitment to build a railway that would tie British Columbia to the rest of Canada. It was this promise that allowed us to build a country that extended across a continent.

My fourth wish concerns the expectations we have of ourselves. **We urgently need to raise the bar for our performance as a nation, which is too often eclipsed by others.**

It is disturbing to note, for example, that jurisdictions like Switzerland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Denmark and Finland, which lack many of our natural advantages, all placed ahead of us in the World Economic Forum's 2015-2016 Global Competitiveness Index. Canada was in thirteenth place, just ahead of Qatar.

Perhaps we are the victims of our own good fortune. The almost ninety percent of us who were born in Canada since the end of World War II have known nothing but peace, prosperity and democracy. We didn't have to earn this happy condition, as previous generations did through the pain of war or the Great Depression. Instead, we were born in an orchard where we need only hold out our hand to have an apple drop into it.

It's tempting to believe that peace, prosperity and democracy are our birthright as Canadians, an entitlement we will always enjoy simply because of our citizenship. But these are not the conditions in which the majority of the world's population live today, and nor have the vast majority of human beings experienced them throughout history.

We need to understand that our freedom and prosperity are not goods that have been paid for and bequeathed to us by previous generations. Each generation must constantly re-earn them or they may be lost.

Re-earning them means investing more in the knowledge and skills of young Canadians, who must succeed in a world where competition grows more fierce by the day. It means that, as citizens, we have to become more active in the political process. And it means that we must be more strategic in our national priorities, both fixing the problems that hold us back and building on our strengths, instead of being content to do a wide range of things moderately well. Most of all, we need to develop a sense of urgency, recognizing that, even as we improve, others are doing so faster. We have to stop shooting for the bronze.

When I became UOIT's Chancellor, I ended my remarks by saying this:

Finally, as a very proud father and as a citizen, I believe universities must contribute another vital element in our national life, by inspiring a love of learning and an understanding that whether we succeed or fail will not depend upon what others do, but on our own decisions and our own actions.

That principle applies as much to nations as it does to individuals. It's in our hands to determine the kind of country we will have. Each of us as individuals must decide what Canada means to us and how we can both sustain and improve it.

As we celebrate your academic achievements and the numerous opportunities ahead, I hope you will also recognize that none of this would have been possible without the sacrifices of your families and of countless other people, many of whom have never had the opportunity to go to university themselves. How will you repay that debt?

One way is through your role as citizens. You are the next generation of Canada's leaders in science, in commerce, in culture and in politics. You both embody our best hopes for this nation and carry the burden of translating them into reality. It is the challenge of your lifetimes - and the test of who you are and what you have learned during your time here - to ensure that our country stands as an example that the human dream to live in harmony, freedom and prosperity can come true.