TO EXCEED OURSELVES: TOWARDS A SMARTER, MORE CARING CANADA

HIS EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE DAVID JOHNSTON began his professional career as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Law at Queen's University in 1966, moving to the Law Faculty at the University of Toronto in 1968. He became dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Western Ontario in 1974. In 1979, he was named principal and vice-chancellor of McGill University, and in July 1994, he returned to the McGill Faculty of Law as a full-time professor. In June 1999, he became the fifth president of the University of Waterloo.

Mr. Johnston holds an LL.B. from Queen's University (1966), an LL.B. from the University of Cambridge (1965), and an AB from Harvard University (1963). While at Harvard, he was twice selected for the All-American hockey team and is a member of Harvard's Athletic Hall of Fame. His academic specializations include securities regulation, information technology and corporate law.

Sworn in on October 1, 2010, His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston is the 28th governor general since Confederation.

ABSTRACT

Just as Thomas Symons urged us to "know ourselves" as Canadians, my wife, Sharon, and I have concentrated our efforts on fostering a smarter, more caring Canada as we approach our nation's 150th anniversary. How are we doing in our efforts to build a better smarter, more caring communities and a better country? *To exceed ourselves.* Let that be our goal as learners and innovators, as volunteers and philanthropists, as members of healthy and strong families and smart, caring communities.

A couple of years ago, shortly after my installation as governor general, I travelled to Charlottetown to deliver the Symons Lecture on the State of Confederation. It was an honour to do so, for several reasons.

The first reason is that the lecture is named after Thomas Symons, a good friend whom I have long greatly admired and who has devoted so much of his life to the study and teaching of all things Canadian. (As this special edition of *Canadian Issues* commemorates, it was Thomas Symons who, 40 years ago, exhorted us "to know ourselves" through a greater understanding and appreciation of Canadian studies—a call to action which remains relevant to this day.)

Second, the Symons Lecture gave me a wonderful opportunity to talk about Canada and to elaborate upon my vision for this country as we approach our 150th birthday in 2017. And finally, it was of course particularly fitting to do so in Charlottetown, where the project of a united Canada was first embraced with enthusiasm.

The Charlottetown Conference of 1864 reminds us that Confederation was a shared effort—the result of many years of planning, negotiation and compromise. As the editors of *Canada's Founding Debates* point out, "Rome wasn't built in a day, and Confederation doesn't happen in a year!" Rather, it was the result of a great deal of debate and deliberation in the colonial parliaments of the day and, more fundamentally, in the homes and gathering places of ordinary people.

All were bent on answering a single overarching question: Canada, yes or no?

TOWARDS A SMARTER, MORE CARING CANADA

In the event, my lecture in Charlottetown was an elaboration of sorts on the ideas I had presented a month earlier during my installation address, entitled *A Smart and Caring Nation: A Call to Service.*

I like to think of that address as the blueprint for my mandate as governor general. Just as Thomas Symons urged us to "know ourselves" as Canadians, my wife, Sharon, and I have concentrated our efforts on fostering a smarter, more caring Canada as we approach our nation's 150th anniversary. And just as the primary question asked in the years prior to Confederation could be summed up as "Canada, yes or no?", I would suggest that the essential question we must ask ourselves today is: "A smarter, more caring Canada, yes or no?"

Or, to put it in temporal and physical terms: keener minds and kinder hearts—are these the organic transformations we envisage for the species *Canadensis* in the years ahead?

Of course, those descriptors—smart and caring, keener and kinder—can mean different things to different people, but surely the challenges faced by those who brokered the compromises and agreements of Confederation were no less. If anything, we are more aware today of what we have in common as Canadians—and indeed as human beings—than ever before in our history.

Students of Canadian history also know, however, that Confederation was no mere utopian project. The leaders of the day had very specific goals and aims. As historian Richard Gwyn writes in his recent biography of John A. Macdonald, our first prime minister understood that Confederation was above all a means to an end. That end was an independent North American nation with enough "will and nerve" to survive alongside the great powers of Britain and the United States.

We had no choice but to be an ambitious country. That's why our constitution included a pledge to start work on a trans-Canada railway within six months of Confederation, and ultimately to extend our borders all the way to the Pacific.

Today, I believe we must be equally bold in seeking new horizons—only this time, our challenge is to build a smarter, more caring nation in a rapidly changing global context.

TO EXCEED OURSELVES

All of which brings me back to our vision for 2017 and beyond. How are we doing in our efforts to build a better smarter, more caring communities and a better country? What have Sharon and I observed during the past two-and-a-half years?

While it is impossible to be comprehensive in such a short space, let me begin by stating with conviction how truly fortunate we are to call Canada home. I have always felt a deep love for this country, but never more so than now, having seen so much of it and having had the opportunity to meet so many kind-hearted, talented and energetic Canadians. Canada is in many ways the envy of the world—and with good reason.

And yet, we all know there is so much more that we can, and must, do if we are to consider ourselves a truly smart and caring nation. One of the dangers facing Canada today—and indeed any country so fortunate—is the risk of complacency. And it is a growing danger, because the pace of change is accelerating. We must continually strive to improve our learning, to extend our giving and to strengthen our communities.

With this rapidly changing global context in mind, I therefore invite all Canadians to seek new ways to exceed ourselves as we approach our 150th birthday in 2017. Let us guard against complacency, because success today rests upon our ability and willingness to continuously strive for excellence in recognizing and adjusting to new realities.

To put it another way, to succeed we must exceed ourselves.

Throughout the first half of my mandate, Sharon and I have focused our efforts on a number of key priorities that we view as essential to the Canada of which we dream: learning and innovation; volunteerism and philanthropy; and families and children. Let me focus my observations and hopes for Canada through the lens of these pillars.

LEARNING AND INNOVATION

Canada is blessed with a wealth of minerals, timber and fresh water, as well as the world's longest coastline, but our greatest resource is our ability to learn and apply our collective ingenuity. How do we best use learning and innovation to enhance our lives and strengthen our society?

One important means of creating a civic and prosperous society is to ensure a quality high school education for all Canadians. Today, there are a great many wonderful initiatives underway in Canada, focused on student success.

One of these we encountered on a memorable visit to Sherbrooke in Quebec's Eastern Townships. This community is home to a successful experiment aimed at reducing the high school dropout rate, which had reached alarming levels in recent years. Rather than focusing on their studies, many students—particularly boys—were working more and longer part-time hours. Their grades were suffering. Many eventually gave up on school altogether and dropped out in order to work full-time.

The people of Sherbrooke came together to take on this problem. Through a partnership between the business community, the school board, the city and students, a contract was drawn up to ensure that students who work part-time maintain good grades. They also cannot work more than 15 hours per week. This contract is signed by the student and the employer, based on the understanding that education is critical to individual success and to the wellbeing of the community.

In the decade that this innovative program has existed, the high school dropout rate in Sherbrooke dropped from 34 percent to 25 percent. This remarkable progress was made possible through collaboration and a willingness to look for new solutions, and by a shared belief that the success of our young people is the responsibility of the entire community, and not just the school system.

As we approach 2017, can we find ways to improve high school graduation rates for all Canadians, including people in Aboriginal communities?

At the post-secondary level, can we increase the number of Canadians who spend at least one term studying abroad, practising the diplomacy of knowledge?

And when it comes to helping students transition from school to the workforce, can we be a world leader in finding ways to apply skills-to-jobs?

Can we exceed ourselves as nation of learners and innovators?

PHILANTHROPY AND VOLUNTEERISM

One of the highlights to date in my mandate as governor general came in April 2012, when I reintroduced a very special award for volunteer and community service: the Caring Canadian Award. This award recognizes people who give their time and energy to help others, without expectation of reward or recognition. These people are a community's 'unsung' heroes. We have met so many deserving recipients over the past two-and-a-half years, but to illustrate the great compassion and generosity characteristics of these recipients I will focus on just one: 75-year-old Evelyn Florendo.

In November 1984, Evelyn, a Vancouver resident, read a news story about young offenders at the Burnaby Youth Services Custody Centre who were attempting to harm themselves. Some of them were cutting themselves, others had even attempted suicide. Wanting to do something to ease their pain and add a little joy to their lives, Evelyn contacted the director of the centre to see how she could help.

The result was a Christmas dinner for over a hundred teenagers, which she has organized and prepared for the past 28 years with help from women from the area Catholic Women's League and the local archbishop. Each Christmas, residents of the centre, who range from 12 to 19 years of age, enjoy a big meal, followed by an open house in which the teens' parents are invited, as well as guest speakers and politicians. Some of the kids at the Centre are in for serious crimes, others for lesser offences, but Mrs. Florendo only shows kindness. She hugs them and tells them that she loves them: "Many of the kids laugh or smile and respond in kind: I love you, too."

The annual Christmas dinner is a small but significant event in the calendar of these kids' lives. Those who work and volunteer at the Centre point out that this kind of compassion means a great deal. "Sometimes when kids are that age, a lot of people turn their backs on them," said another volunteer at the Centre, Roger Bissoondatt. The hope Evelyn Florendo is working to inspire in these young offenders is the hope that they can turn their lives around, and that they are precious and important individuals who can contribute to society in meaningful ways.

As governor general, it was a privilege to present Evelyn with the Caring Canadian Award—and I feel the same way about all recipients. When it comes to philanthropy and volunteerism, Canadians have much to be proud of. Every year, an estimated 12.5 million Canadians formally volunteer with an agency or organization, putting us among the world's top donors of time and talent. Canadians also show great generosity, making charitable donations of $10.6 billion in 2010.

We have done much, but we must do more. Can we widen the circle of giving in this country by integrating volunteerism into the daily lives of all Canadians, including young people, new Canadians and those who don't consider themselves to be givers?

Can we establish benchmarks to help us measure and improve our performance in volunteerism and philanthropy in comparison with other countries?

Can we exceed ourselves as a nation of volunteers and philanthropists?

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Canadians are dedicated to supporting their families, children and communities. Our country's success is built upon strong foundations of family and community, and Canadians agree the well-being of children is a priority for a smart and caring society.

One area of growing concern for Canadian families and communities is mental health. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, one in five Canadians will be personally affected by mental illness during their lifetime, whether through a family member, friend or colleague. Mental illness does not discriminate by age, income, educational level or culture, and the negative impacts on our lives and society are significant.

Over the past few years, Sharon and I have been working to try to remove the stigma that still too often surrounds mental illness, and to raise awareness about the growing body of research and treatments available. Through our efforts, we have come into contact with some remarkable individuals.

For example, late last year we met with Mike Kerrigan, who raised awareness of mental illness in rural communities by organizing a run from Strathroy, Ontario to Miramichi, New Brunswick. Mike decided to initiate the run after his 16-year old son, Jacob, was accused of being a drug addict because of his erratic behavior. He was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder and given appropriate medication to deal with his condition.

We have also seen a number of important success stories in dealing with mental illness. One is known as the Algoma Model for youth with mental health problems, developed in Sault Ste. Marie—Sharon's and my hometown. The Algoma Model is a collaborative, school- and community-based approach to addressing child and youth problem behavior and mental health issues. Through broad community partnerships, this approach aims to support young people by preventing and identifying problems before they develop, followed by targeted interventions, specialized treatment and crisis services when needed. In a wonderful example of learning and collaboration, this approach to ensuring no child or young person falls through the cracks has been adopted by a number of other Ontario communities.

A complex mixture of factors influences and causes mental illness, and we still have much to learn. The pervasiveness of this issue in Canada today makes it so important that we remove the stigma around mental illness and confront it head on as a public health matter that affects families, children and all Canadians. And because of the dramatic advances in science, particularly in our understanding of the brain in the past two decades, there is so much hope. Can we extend our caring to include those dealing with mental illness as we approach 2017?

And on another important health issue, can we renew our commitment to supporting our children's physical health and well-being through fitness and sporting activities?

Can we make ourselves a truly caring nation by making the placement of foster children in supportive and loving families a priority for all Canadians when we currently place only 10%?

Can we exceed ourselves as a nation that prioritizes the well-being of families, friends and children?

To exceed ourselves. Let that be our goal as learners and innovators, as volunteers and philanthropists, as members of healthy and strong families and smart, caring communities. To exceed ourselves as students of Canada and of the world, and indeed in each endeavour we undertake collectively and as individuals. Let excellence be our aim for Canada for 2017, not for the sake of it, but rather for reasons just as practical as were those behind Confederation in 1867—because for all that has changed since then, we once again have no choice but to be an ambitious country.

Let us exceed ourselves because we can, and because we must.