OPENING REMARKS

Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson
Governor General of Canada



A leading figure in Canada's cultural life, Adrienne Clarkson has had a rich and distinguished career in broadcasting, journalism, the arts and public service. From 1982 to 1987, Clarkson served as the first Agent-General for Ontario in Paris, promoting Ontario's business and cultural interests in France, Italy and Spain. She was the President and Publisher of McClelland & Stewart from 1987 to 1988. From 1965 to 1982, Clarkson worked as host, writer and producer of several influential programs on CBC Television, including *Take Thirty, Adrienne at Large* and the *Fifth Estate*. A noted writer, she also contributed numerous articles to major newspapers and magazines in Canada and wrote three books. In 1988, she assumed responsibilities as Executive Producer, Host and Writer for the programs *Adrienne Clarkson's Summer Festival* and *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* for a period of 11 years. She also wrote and directed several films. Her work in television has garnered her dozens of TV awards in Canada and the U.S.

Since its inception, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada has contributed a great deal to the analysis and our understanding of Canada today. First Desmond Morton and now Antonia Maioni, have led the way in making it possible for us to have a disinterested, intellectually sound, constantly questioning view of ourselves. The work the McGill Institute is doing is essential to a country that prides itself on its democratic traditions. We must be able to reflect on our history, our institutions, our way of life, if we are to make speculative contributions to the future. The conference in February was completely in the spirit of this Institute.

The economist Robert Picard observed that debates on media ownership are often confused. No distinction is made between concentration in a strictly economic and legal sense and concentration in its cultural and political aspects. This is an important distinction. I am focusing here on the latter sense of media concentration – that is, its effect on the quality and the diversity of the information presented to the public. For this will have a consequent effect on democracy and the pluralism on which democracy is based. I hope that what I'm going to say helps to clarify some ideas about the public whom the media should serve and the way in which that public is changing.

From the hundreds of events that I do a year as Governor General, the thousands of people that I meet, the eighty-to-ninety villages, towns and hamlets that I visit – I've gained, I believe, a unique view of what Canadians are doing and thinking, without asking them for anything. The Canadian public knows that I don't ask anything of them – except questions. I ask them what they think – and they tell me many things. One of the things I've had confirmed for me is that Canadians are highly intelligent, aware and thirsty for knowledge, even if they don't express it.

My sense is that there is a great deal of cynicism about what kind of information we're really getting from the media and whether we should take it as pure entertainment, thereby cheapening the coinage. The line between news and editorial is becoming increasing blurred, as the Institute has recently indicated in a survey. Yet we shouldn't substitute our own distrust of the sources of information for the longing to be informed and to know more. That longing is there, because it gives us the beginnings of the ability to make sense of what life about us is like, what our society is like, and what events really signify. If that longing is not satisfied, the public grumbles or simply turns off.

Propaganda, ideology and bias are very easy to promote in any kind of information medium, if you know how. And by "information" I include not only newspapers, television, radio and the Internet, but also advertising. But people need diverse and quality sources of information in order to make sense not only of their own lives, but also of their community. As a society, therefore, we have to worry if our citizens are not dealt a full deck of information. And this is the job of the journalists and editors and broadcasters and publishers and owners.

It's been said that journalists share a vocation of unhappiness and discontent. If that's so, I think that's precisely what makes them competent, even superb, at what they do. Why on earth would you want a happy journalist?

Kierkegaard said that people hardly ever make use of the freedom they have; in place of freedom of thought, they settle for freedom of speech as compensation. Every journalist, therefore, should examine themselves and think about whether or not they actually have the freedom of thought which gives them the privilege to communicate to others freely. That is a professional struggle. It's what we mean when we expect them to aspire to the highest possible professional standards.

There is now a patchwork quilt of information out there that makes it very difficult for people to discern exactly what is really happening. I mentioned advertising as an aspect of information that is important for the public now. Remember that McLuhan told us thirty years ago that advertising creates a parallel world. But it may not be a parallel world for the majority of the population, who are struggling to piece together a patchwork quilt of information. Are we making it deliberately more difficult or less difficult for them to discern between what is really happening in the news and what has been carefully constructed to fit into part of the news and grab attention for commercial purposes?

A recent automobile ad features a little automobile object of desire gliding through a number of different situations in shots lasting one second. It ends up in a field with hundreds and hundreds of fighter airplanes going over it. What kind of message is actually being delivered by that car ad? It is designed to say that we will stop at nothing to have that new model. To us it may be an amusing juxtaposition between luxury on four wheels and the power and might of military force. But to others' minds, others not understanding either English or French very well, it could be an image of terror blandly accepted. Confusion, misunderstanding can be the order of the day, rather than factual information and the gathering of enough information to create thought.

And this is where the question of who the audience is becomes extremely important. Because all the questions that were considered on the topics of the Montreal conference could not be dealt with without considering the makeup of the audience.

By makeup of the audience I don't mean gender, race or demographic makeup. I mean that we must try to understand exactly how people in Canada have now evolved. Where does the audience come from? From what parts of the public? How do they think? Those in the media can say, "Well we can't be saying all things to all people." But it is still very healthy to try and think who is actually reading, watching, listening.

Why? Because I believe that much of the information we get – and how it is purveyed by the media – is based upon an old idea of Canada. It is based on an idea of a Canada of middle-class values, some historical memory, and a Canada seen as fully functioning in at least one of the official languages. It is a Canada where a stable democratic system is taken for granted. In other words, we basically see the audience in our own image of ourselves, more or less affluent, more or less committed to a status quo. We see the audience as people who have some education in our kinds of schooling. As people curious to know about day-to-day events, though mainly interested in the outside world when it bursts into flame, floods or loses electrical power.

Yes, that kind of "original" audience does exist. But even it is not getting all the information it needs. For instance, in an election in a foreign country, we're always told who won or lost. We are rarely given hard information as to the number of seats gained by any particular party or what those parties really stand for. As a result, our understanding of the world outside our own country is glib, frequently dismissive. And when we search for the information we need, we have to rely on foreign websites, articles in foreign publications or on programs from abroad – information that often arrives a few days, a week, or even a month later in Canadian newspapers and magazines.

But that "original" audience – as ill-served as it is – was the audience of Canada twenty years ago. The audience that we are really looking for today is different – an audience that needs attention, needs to be informed, needs to be given the absolute basics of our way of life, including our criticism of our way of life.

We have a new kind of society in Canada. We live in the year 2003 and we are a multi-racial, multi-faith immigrant population on an Aboriginal base. We have a society, a way of life, a kind of government that have served us well for the last several centuries and into which we have up to now successfully and efficiently integrated immigrants. We have many flaws in our system, but it has worked on the whole quite well. Can it even continue to do so at that level?

Our original, so-called multi-cultural society was built of immigrants from Europe, all of whom could be expected

within a relatively short time – half a generation – to achieve an economic and social status which would be on a par with other Canadians. But, as Carol Goar of the *Toronto Star* pointed out in an article reporting on a conference on immigrants in Toronto, our new immigrants are different. They come from countries where war, strife, destitution have been the norm. They come from different religious traditions. Many of them have been subjected to scenes and actions of horror and terror and have come here to escape. These are the people who need information so badly about how they can truly participate and become Canadian.

All information media must play its part in helping that process to happen. I don't mean that they project good news stories only or teach citizenship lessons subliminally. But I think that, by excellent journalism, people learn things, by osmosis. And, as everybody is watching hours and hours of TV a day, that particular medium has a special obligation to these newcomers and their children.

Even such a small thing as the weather report can have a deep effect on newcomers. I have noticed a growing tendency within the last twenty-five years of calling snow "bad weather", when in fact it is normal weather for Canada. This may seem like a tiny detail, but why should we deny our climate in this way? Why should we pass on that kind of valuation of it to people who are coming here from countries where the average temperature is 40 degrees.

The "old immigration" from Europe had trades or could farm or had strong survival skills in western culture. The people we now receive need different education, different acculturation and certainly different approaches to information. I couldn't help but think about what that ad about the little car and the dozens of fighter planes would mean to somebody who has left from a border area in Southeast Asia or from bloody civil strife in Africa. An ad shown as part of a newscast is part of the newscast. And the better the advertising is, the more likely that it will have an effect. Remember what Steven Leacock said about advertising – that it was the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it.

We've said as a country that we are going to bring over 200,000 immigrants a year to Canada. What we've done in fact is invited these people to come and take part in our society and become citizens. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to think about what we do to help them "catch up" to other citizens who've been here for decades.

I believe that all the media are absolutely critical in this respect. They play a crucial role in building the new Canada and in the acculturation of those who have come here to make Canada their home. In fact, I believe that what journalists do is as important and critical as public education is in helping our new kind of immigrants to understand and become a really functioning part of our society. And remember, public education is provincial and regional – many of those in media have national audiences. This is a responsibility; not just a greater market.

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In order to be part of this country, you have to be a fully functioning citizen. Citizenship has its responsibilities as well as its rights. As an immigrant myself, I feel very strongly about this. And as Governor General, I am firmly convinced it is the only way in which our nation can continue to live according to its beliefs, to its traditions, its history and its often hard-won democratic processes. What I believe is that, by assuming citizenship, the new citizen of Canada takes on the entire history of the country.

So as a new Canadian you can be very proud of the sacrifices Canada made in the First and Second World Wars. But you also have to acknowledge, and accept the shame and tragedy of, the residential schools or the dislocation of Japanese-Canadians sixty years ago. We cannot continue to have a country if the huge numbers of people we involve in becoming citizens slough off any responsibility for what the country has done before they got there.

Many of the immigrants whom we are now bringing to this country fully understand what it is to have a complex, often tortured history. And they have chosen to leave it and take up life in Canada. By remaking them as citizens of our country, they must learn to understand what we as a country have gone through in our evolution to now. Citizenship is not simply a buffet table of rights, privileges and perhaps some inconveniences. If a country is to have a continuous history, then it must have a history that all members of it comprehend and in which all members feel implicated.

I remember somebody once watching me singing the National Anthem in French and asking me afterwards, in a fairly polite way, how I could sing the line "Land of our ancestors ". And I replied that I really meant it. Canada is the country of my ancestors, my now adopted ancestors, the ones who struggled to create the kind of country which I was able to come to, of which I became a citizen, and of which I am now Governor General. My ancestors fought in 1837. They're the ancestors who created Confederation. All of that belongs to me and to each and everyone one of us when we are citizens of Canada.

For those of us who are immigrants, it doesn't mean that we forget where we came from, or what the food tasted like, or when the festivals are. It means only that we have a different kind of complexity in our individual circumstances as citizens. But it is this kind of complex person that your journalism must reach. They may be new arrivals now, but their impact is over generations, and you can bet that they will be actively involved in creating the Canadian society of the future.

It is they to whom you in the world of media and information must be responsible – if you truly believe in freedom of thought. They are the people who are your audience and they are the people whom you must affect. And this is where the freedom should be operating. This is where that freedom can give keys to worlds for other people. And this is where your discontent and your unhappiness could create justice for others.