

"THE WORLD IS NOT YOUR OYSTER"

REMARKS PREPARED FOR:

CONVOCATION OF PROFESSIONAL FACULTIES

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BY

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Mr. Chancellor, Mr. President, Honoured Guests, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Traditionally, a convocation speaker is expected to say two things to an audience of graduates upon their leaving.

The first is that I am honoured to have been asked to address you; and on that point I will not depart from tradition. As a native of northwestern Ontario, from the town of Dryden, I am indeed honoured by the distinction your alma mater has conferred upon me. And I am honoured to be numbered with men like Mr. Justice Bora Laskin, of Ft. William that used to be, and the Honourable Leo Bernier, of Sioux Lookout.

We have all gone far since our boyhoods around the Lakehead. And although this University was not yet born when we went out from here, I think I speak for all of us when I say that this, today, is a homecoming.

Now, the second traditional utterance of a convocation speaker would have me tell you that the world is your oyster, and that you should go forth and pluck out its pearl.

Well, on this point I break with tradition. The world is not your oyster. Pearls are not had for the plucking. The world you are about to enter is a complex and contentious oyster, which reserves its pearls for those who compete hardest for them.

The only criterion for success in competition is excellence. In fact, excellence is the only criterion for survival itself. And it is not enough to be excellent once, or for a while; excellence must be your continuing standard.

Those of you who have taken some biology in the course of your studies here will know that fully ninety per cent of the species that have inhabited this planet are now extinct. Yet each of those species arose and found its evolutionary niche because it was, in its time, the best fitted to survive.

But each, in its turn, was replaced by another species that had developed a competitive edge.

Those of you who have studied history will know that five hundred years ago, the armoured knight represented the pinnacle of forty centuries of military science. In his time, the knight was unstoppable; the whole structure of European society and economics centred around the creation and maintenance of heavy cavalry.

But the musket and the cannon quickly left the flower of chivalry rusting on history's junkpile.

Those of you who have studied economics know that twenty years ago, Detroit was the centre of the automotive universe. Its cars were built for power, size and speed. But the Germans and the Japanese built for economy and efficiency, and they drove Detroit into the ground.

The dinosaur, the medieval knight, the Detroit car-maker, was in his time the best at what he did. And each became, in his turn, second best. And second best is not any kind of best at all. Second best is extinction.

The medieval knight assumed he would be forever the centre of the social order. The Detroit auto manufacturer assumed people would go on buying gas-guzzlers. Those must have been comforting assumptions while they lasted, but eventually they led to some very uncomfortable encounters with reality.

From here on in, you will be making your encounters with reality, and the degree of discomfort you will undergo will depend very much on your assumptions.

If you assume that you will get by on a standard of "good enough", you will not get by.

If you assume that you can perform to a minimum — or even a moderate — standard, you will be quickly left behind.

If you assume that what has worked well for you up till now will always work just as well, you will become no less a relic of a bygone age as the Black Knight and the brontosaurus.

We are, all of us, constant candidates for the endangered species list. We all run the risk

of slipping into that comfortable niche, so easily maintained.

Nothing is more dangerous than the comfortable niche. The moment we cease to grow, that moment we begin to die. We cease to progress, and begin to mark time. We march in place, going nowhere, while others march around us — and over us —towards a future we have stopped trying to reach.

As a nation, Canada has been marking time for a generation. We have fallen under the spell of the "good enough" standard, comfortable in our resource wealth, complacent and secure in our assumption that the world will always crave our food, minerals, our wood, and our manufactured goods.

And, while we have been marking time, counting our assumptions, so many nations have marched past us that we are now the last among our competitors in productivity. We, who were once second only to the Americans, are now the last and the least.

We did not challenge enough the assumption that our markets would always be with us, always expanding, to take what we might haphazardly produce. But our competitors were glad to challenge our "good enough" complacency. Our competitors had minerals they could mine, trees they could cut and process, and they knew they only had to work a little harder.

Working that little bit harder is all it takes. There's no magic involved. We hear about the Japanese economic miracle. There was no miracle. The Japanese are not supermen, who do easily what we cannot do at all. They just work harder.

The Japanese did not come to dominate the auto industry by inventing an engine that runs on air or water or moonbeams. They took that standard car engine, and they worked on it until they could make it run better. Each year, a little improved, until it was the best on the market.

They did it with cars to Detroit; with watches to Switzerland; with cameras to the Germans. As a resource-poor nation, with only the determination of its people, Japan raised itself up by resolving to work harder and become the best it could be. The Japanese did it with their only natural resource — human ingenuity.

"Good enough" would never be good enough to the Japanese. Excellence would be their only standard.

And, when you cut through all the complexities of management style, national economic structures, and international trading arrangements, you come down to a simple truth: excellence applied to mass production will out-class the competition and command the market.

Prosperity comes from being the best at what you do. That's true for a nation, an industry, a company — or for you and me.

It does not matter so much what you do; but it matters greatly how you do it.

It matters particularly in the realm of private enterprise, because our growth and prosperity depends upon the generation of new real wealth. And the generation of wealth depends, ultimately, on excellence.

And it matters also in the realm of government and politics. We Canadians are a much governed people — I would say an overgoverned people — and we have not been governed well.

Perhaps we need to be less governed; but certainly, we need to be better governed.

The public sector cries out for an infusion of excellence. If we could throw out the well-padded false assumptions; if we could bring a spirit of excellence into the public bureaucracy — from the lowliest clerk through to the deputy minister and into the cabinet chamber — then we would no longer be marking time.

We would be back on a course for growth, moving on to regain our rightful place as one of the world's most energetic and productive peoples.

There is no law of history or evolution that commands us to keep company with knights and dinosaurs. The world's most fundamental law is growth out of change, and the only compliance with that law is through excellence.

Wherever you go from here, whether into industry or government or private practice, I ask you to take with you an understanding of that fundamental law. And I ask you to take with you a determination to be the best at what you do.

When you are tempted just to get by, resolve instead to go further than you've gone.

When you feel you have reached the peak of all your striving, look up, and you will see that the mountain keeps on getting higher. Keep climbing.

Remember that you are the inheritors of a nation that has overcome some of the most inhospitable frontiers the world could set against us. Remember, too, that the frontiers remain all around you, in every direction, and that the nearest frontier is always the one within yourself.

I challenge you to push back that frontier more each day; I challenge you to go beyond your present limits, whatever you think they may be; I challenge you to be more than you are now, and always to strive to be the best at what you do.

I challenge you to take excellence as your only standard.

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