



The power of words: "What would be said of a generation of North Americans that found a way to explore the stars, but allowed its lakes and forests to languish and die?" Brian Mulroney on acid rain, in an Address to a Joint Session of the US Congress, April 1988. PMO photo

Words and Occasions: The Power of Great Speech

Patrick Gossage

In the past near-century of instant mass communication, great politicians have proven the power of words to transcend division and shatter boundaries; to capture and change history. With Canada facing a defining moment in reconciling new threats to national security while protecting our civil liberties and respecting our differences, now would be the time for a great speech. It hasn't come from Stephen Harper, or anyone else.

From Winston Churchill's, "We shall fight on the beaches" to John F. Kennedy's, "Ask not..." to Ronald Reagan's, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," great speeches have proven effective in buttressing national will, inspiring generations and helping shift geopolitical reality.

Why is it that great speeches by Canadian leaders are so rare? Is it that our prime ministers have never had a Ted

Sorensen, who wrote nearly all of Kennedy's memorable speeches?

Kennedy had a moral, political and intellectual soul mate in Sorensen, the shy Nebraskan who perfectly captured the cadence and voice of the 35th president. Their relationship and the process of writing two of Kennedy's most important speeches is perfectly captured by journalist and Carleton University professor Andrew Cohen in his book *Two Days in June*. The first, a carefully crafted convocation address at the American University, set an agenda for East-West détente and arms control. The second, the very next day, was a TV address from the Oval Office on civil rights, written in the context of breaking news. Cohen's book should be required reading for the writers typing and spelling away in today's political offices.

Cohen recounts the circumstances of Kennedy's June 11, 1963, address to the nation announcing a civil rights bill the very day Governor George Wallace tried to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama with his "stand in the schoolhouse door" dare. Sorensen was severely tested as he had only a few hours to write before the telecast, forcing Kennedy to ad lib the closing.

Sorensen wrote: "If you were black instead of white would you accept the status quo?"

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Kennedy's closing ad lib was powerful: "I am asking for your help in

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making it easier for us to... provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want for ourselves.”

It's instructive to remember that great speeches take an occasion where there is a threat and appeal to our best values and instincts, our sense of fairness and justice. In Canada, they often call for unity in a bilingual, multicultural country.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney rose to the occasion in introducing the Meech Lake Accord in the House of Commons in 1987: "The agreement represents the best features of a vital federal system, one which I believe responds to Canadians in every corner of the country. It reflects a spirit of partnership—not one of endless federal-provincial struggles." Then he quoted Laurier, our first accomplished orator: "The governing motive of my life has been to harmonize the diverse elements which compose our country," words inscribed on the base of Laurier's statue in Montreal's Dominion Square.

We could stand hearing that kind of oratory now. Again, in his 1988 address to the US Congress, Mulroney made a powerful case on the issue of acid rain. "What would be said of a generation of North Americans," he asked, "that found a way to explore the stars, but allowed its lakes and forests to languish and die?" Three years later, he signed the Acid Rain Accord with the first President Bush.

Stephen Harper also rose to the occasion in his 2008 apology to native Canadians for residential schools, widely regarded as his finest moment in the House: "The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long," he declared. "The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired

the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey." What's been missing since is meaningful progress on First Nations issues, from education to women.

Harper also showed an appropriate sense of occasion after the October 22 shooting of Cpl. Nathan Cirillo at the National War Memorial and the attack on Parliament Hill. In the House, he asserted that an attack on "our institutions of government" was an attack on the country and its values. Then he laid down a marker on Canada's role in the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State with a memorable phrase: "We will not be intimidated, Canada will never be intimidated."

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But in a January 30 speech in the Toronto suburb of Richmond Hill, he heated up the rhetoric and cooled

a sense of larger purpose: “Through their deeds, these jihadists have declared war on Canada and with their words, they urge others to join their campaign of terror against Canadians... violent jihadism is not a human right. It is an act of war.”

There is no denying that many Canadians are apprehensive in the wake of the murder of two Canadians soldiers in uniform on their home soil, the horrors of massacres in Paris and the IS beheadings. Harper seized on this to use a style of wartime rhetoric that left no doubt as to the government’s intention. So, while not a great speech, it was certainly one of the more important he has given. He strongly outlined the threat and the legislative actions that would be taken to meet it. And even the most jaded pundits agree that he meant it.

But Harper’s rhetoric was overheated and it missed being a great speech because it only passingly referred to a fundamental Canadian value that almost seemed threatened by the “war” against jihadists—our respect for differences in culture and religion. The beleaguered Canadian Muslim communities needed reassurance. They didn’t get it. Indeed, they were offended by Harper’s direct reference to pro-jihadist activity taking place in mosques.

Sorensen had one rule: “If someone is offended, cut it.” Good advice.

How easy it would have been for Harper to elevate his speech by referencing Canada’s “promise” of a country where different cultures and religions live in mutual respect and support. He could have recognized their abjuration of radical jihadism and the critical role of Canada’s Muslim community in preventing the radicalization of its youth. He could also have stressed the multicultural essence of modern Canada.

In his television address to Canadians in 1970 announcing the War Measures Act in answer to a real organized threat to Quebec, Pierre Trudeau was careful to set a wider social context



“Of course my name is Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Elliott was my mother’s name.” Pierre Trudeau in the climactic speech of the first Quebec referendum at the Paul Sauvé Arena in Montreal, May 14, 1980. Robert Cooper, PMO

that was missing in Harper’s speech 45 years later: “The kidnapers claim they act as they do in order to draw attention to instances of social injustice... Every government in this country is well aware of the existence of deep and important social problems. And every government, to the limit of its resources and ability, is deeply committed to their solution. But not by kidnappings and bombings.”

There is general agreement that Trudeau’s referendum speech at the Paul Sauvé Arena in Montreal in May 1980 was certainly one of the great Canadian speeches of the post-war era. Trudeau’s speeches, his words and delivery, were important turning points in the first Quebec referendum. He represented the pride and vibrancy of the Canadian option.

I was in the Prime Minister’s Office when Trudeau disappeared to 24 Sussex for two days and wrote that speech, then memorized it. Trudeau turned René Lévesque’s comment that he was not a real Quebecer because of his mother’s name into the most powerful part of his speech: “Of course my name is Pierre Elliott Trudeau... the Elliots came to Canada more than two hundred years ago.”

His attack on Lévesque’s “contemptuous argument” was devastating. He listed PQ Quebec ministers like Pierre Marc Johnson and Louis O’Neill: “Are they Quebecers, yes or no?” He named

Inuit and native leaders: “Are they not Quebecers? They’ve been here since the stone age.” He then quoted Laurier: “My countrymen are not only those in whose veins run the blood of France... (they) are all those people whatever their race or colour who the twists and turns of fate, or their own choice, have brought among us.”

His memorable finale built on “the world is watching us... these people in Quebec... want to split it up? They want to take it away from their children? They want to break it down? NO. That’s our answer... we won’t let this country die.”

One of the failures of Canada that the world is watching, and has been for some time, is how we treat our aboriginal population. We can only imagine what a Ted Sorensen would produce if a prime minister decided to give a major speech on a new relationship with First Nations.

Sadly, unless we greatly underestimate Justin Trudeau and his advisers should he become prime minister, a great speech from our current political leadership that meets the challenging issues of our time seems unlikely. **P**

Contributing Writer Patrick Gossage is the founding chairman of Media Profile, a Toronto-based communications consulting firm. He was press secretary to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and author of the bestselling Close to the Charisma. patrick.gossage@mediaprofile.com