



Policy Editor L. Ian MacDonald in conversation with Governor General David Johnston at Rideau Hall. The Governor General was the head of two Canadian universities, McGill and Waterloo, for 27 years. Photo: Rideau Hall/MCpl Vincent Carbonneau.

Q&A: A Conversation With Governor General David Johnston

David Johnston spent more than two decades at the helm of first McGill University, then the University of Waterloo, before being named Governor General in 2010. Johnston has made postsecondary education, research and innovation priorities of his tenure as Canada's vice-regal representative. Policy Editor L. Ian MacDonald sat down with him at Rideau Hall to discuss those and other subjects.

Policy: Your Excellency, thank you for participating in our special issue on Canadian universities. You have been a CEO of two major Canadian universities. I wonder if you could describe that experience? It's a notoriously difficult job being president of a university.

Governor General David Johnston: I guess one is always careful using the CEO term. My personal reaction is I loved it. The cause and the company are so good. The cause of higher education is so important, I think, especially in our world today—and I found the company of people from students, staff, faculty, alumni, and so on, for the most part, exceedingly good people. While there are challenges, of course, you manage the challenges and you savour the triumphs. It was a wonderful 27-year run. I was 15 years—three five-year terms—at McGill, and then essentially two secure terms at

Waterloo, although my last term was interrupted by coming here.

Policy: McGill became number 17 in the world in the rankings on your watch and Waterloo became a global brand while you were there. Tell us how you did that.

David Johnston: Well, I would change the pronoun from you, singular, to plural, first of all and I would diminish the role of a president. Bear in mind when I came to McGill, it was an exceedingly strong institution with a remarkable history, but at a particular time when the environment was certainly a challenging and a stormy one. If I and my senior colleagues made any important contribution, it was to stabilize the institution and restore that longer-term sense that this is an institution of great quality and we'll manage through this as we managed through other challenges and did very well. In the case of Waterloo, when I went there, it was about 42 years old, it was well established as a very unconventional university and I think the challenge was to continue the unconventionality of the university into a new era and try to move from regional and national prominence to a more international prominence, and it was very much an effort of a team of people.

Policy: In Waterloo, you saw the remarkable growth of applied research—the creation of the Waterloo corridor, didn't you? It's quite impressive.

David Johnston: The characteristics of Waterloo are the determination to put knowledge into use, not always immediately practical use but the utility approach to it. The university began as an engineering faculty spun off from Waterloo Lutheran College in the expectation that it would be able to attract government operating grants when religious based organizations or secular ones didn't work. The Lutheran Senate would not give up its responsibilities, so it was an orphan from the beginning. And I decided early on that it would be a very innovative, unconventional orphan. So it began with cooperative education, which I regard as one of the truly important contributions to higher education of the 20th century. The other thing that happened in Waterloo, was

that very early on, we decided on an intellectual property policy that is creator-owned, so the university does not own the patent—the professors own it themselves. The university's function is to be removed from a proprietary interest and work to bring together partners to commercialize. Also, I should say that Waterloo County has been a very practical environment, a good ecosystem, for entrepreneurship for a very long time.

Policy: Do you have any thoughts on the difficulty of being a university president in the age of social media, with all the platforms that are out there for the people to snipe at you?

David Johnston: I guess it's more difficult because information is so rapid and it's so often undigested and sometimes that produces unusual results.

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Policy: I know that you are quite passionate about student mobility and the importance of studying abroad. You went to Harvard yourself and you played hockey and your five daughters, I understand, studied abroad. What about the importance of that?

David Johnston: Let's say a couple things I'm passionate about. Our five daughters began international exchanges at age 12 and although they came from an affluent family, they were exposed to a very wide range of society, volunteer work in the schools they attended and so on. Four things happened to my daughters as part of their *formation*, as we say in French, that were quite key from the international and other diverse experiences. One, they became more curious. Two, they became more tolerant in the best sense of that word, I'm in-

terested in why you're different and I have appreciation for that. The third thing is their judgment becomes better because they didn't carry the baggage of bigotry and they look for the other side of the story—they wanted to see more evidence on a particular problem from a different angle before they come to a conclusion. The fourth thing is most important. They become more empathetic, not sympathetic. So that was the experience of my five daughters and I think it's important that we, in Canada, develop young people who are global citizens to be proud Canadians but see the globe as their playground and function with that kind of mentality—and we have ways to go.

Only three per cent of our undergraduate students have an experience abroad whether it is to volunteer in an NGO or a work term abroad or an academic exchange. That should be 100 per cent. So we've done a number of things here at Rideau Hall in collaboration with the university and the college community to try and enhance that.

Policy: Tell us a little bit of your own experience of studying at Harvard. Did you ever beat Boston College in hockey?

David Johnston: You bet we did. We beat them in the last game I played at Harvard. It ended at three minutes to midnight. It was at the Boston Garden, in April, and the ice was lousy as it often was, because they heated it. It was the third sudden-death overtime. Had it gone on for three more minutes we would have had to stop because of the Sunday Massachusetts law which said you couldn't have a sporting event that day, we would have had to continue on the Monday. We beat them 4-3 in sudden death overtime and we won the Eastern College Athletic Conference. They were a good team. They were really good. We were nip and tuck in those days. We won the Ivy League championship, the three years that I played on the varsity team.

Policy: And how did being a foreign student change your life?

David Johnston: Well, it's interesting. I grew up in Sault Ste. Marie,

and when I sent my application to Harvard, the principal of our school, who was a very good man, would not write the letter of reference. I was a good student and I said “Sir, why won’t you?” He said, “I don’t want you to go to a second-rate American university.” I said “Well, I’m sure there are second rates and third rates but this one is first rate.” He said, “Well, I’m worried you’ll be lost and won’t come back to Canada.” I said, “I think I will but surely that’s my decision.” But he was adamant that no, it was not a good thing and so he didn’t do it. So I went to the football coach, who was also a history teacher, who said: “Oh, I’ll write your letter. You’re a big frog in a very small pond. It’s time for you to get your head knocked off by people that are faster and tougher and meaner than you.” And that was a very good experience for me. But Harvard was, I think, transforming for me. Certainly, the intellectual stimulus was great. It helped to open my mind but so many other things about it. I loved the sports. I found Boston an exciting place to stay but I have such a debt to Harvard that took me as a pretty raw rough diamond and helped to fashion it. So I’ve been involved in virtually every alumni activity you can imagine for Harvard.

Policy: You were there when a son of Harvard, John F. Kennedy, was president of the United States. It must have been a pretty exciting time in terms of transformational leadership.

David Johnston: It was. We didn’t appreciate how transformational at the time but a number of our professors went to Washington to serve with President Kennedy’s cabinet and different government positions and that brought us even closer because I was majoring in government and international relations and some of these professors left us but maintained contact with the university. It was an exciting time in the US I was involved in only one student protest. In 1962, Harvard changed our diploma from Latin to English and we thought this was most unfortunate. We wrote a letter of concern from student council to the university president to at least have an opportunity to be heard on this matter.



“There’s a balance, a harmony” between pure and applied research. Photo: Rideau Hall/MCpl Vincent Carbonneau.

Policy: Did you participate in the obligatory student sit-in of the president’s office?

David Johnston: No this was long before these were done. But this was an idea and so we sent this letter off in the morning and by early afternoon, we had an answer back saying “I would be delighted to meet with you to discuss this matter. Would you come to my garden for tea this afternoon?” So we quickly got into our suits and ties and went over. We were ushered into the garden and tea was poured. President Pusey greeted us as if we were long-lost friends and then stood up to speak. For about 15 minutes, he spoke to us in a language we didn’t understand. It was all Latin. At the end, he said: “I’m surprised. I sense none of you understand anything I have said in the past 15 minutes. This was Cicero’s speech to the Roman Senate on the importance of traditions and on the necessity of understanding them. So when all of you are able to read and to understand your degrees in Latin, then we will return them to Latin.” We got up, walked out and said “Thank you, sir, for giving us a hearing.”

Policy: Can you talk about the Governor General’s Global Research Excellence Initiative?

David Johnston: We started that in the first years here. I met the Science, Technology and Innovation Council. During the course of the meeting, we all expressed concern that while Canada punches above its weight in research—we are not as well known on the international stage as we should be. Take Nobel prizes: of the last 10 Nobel prizes won by Canadians by birth, the majority are doing their work in the United States. We have to do something about this. This was before Alice Munro and Dr. Arthur McDonald won Nobel Prizes. We learned that you don’t apply for the Nobel Prize. You have to be invited by the Nobel Committee to nominate a meritorious candidate, or be a Nobel laureate or someone from a Scandinavian country. So if you want to nominate a Canadian, best you find a Nobel laureate to make the nomination. And we felt that there is a Canadian cultural characteristic which says do not advance yourself too much, it’s a bit aggressive to do so. You don’t celebrate great triumphs as much as you should, it’s a bit showy. We certainly have to overcome that.

“ We went from 11 to 24 international prizes from 2012 to 2015, so we hope that the trajectory is increasing. And what is happening now on many university campuses is that there’s greater attention being paid to identifying and nominating people for prizes—not simply the renowned international ones but some of the more regional ones as well. ”

So we set up a coordinating committee of the granting councils and other representatives of research institutions to create an inventory of all of the leading international prizes that are used to benchmark nations’ success in this context. There are about 130 prizes

listed in the inventory which we make accessible to all universities and we offer to assist universities in strengthening their nominations for these prizes. Through our canvassing committee we help them identify meritorious candidates for these international awards and prizes. So that process is now in its third year and we like to think it's encouraged a much more ambitious approach within our universities to promote their most recognized scholars for these prizes. We went from 11 to 24 international prizes from 2012 to 2015, so we hope that the trajectory is increasing. And what is happening now on many university campuses is that there's greater attention being paid to identifying and nominating people for prizes—not simply the renowned international ones but some of the more regional ones as well. All with a view of promoting and celebrating a culture of excellence.

Policy: What's your sense of the debate between pure as opposed to applied research? You probably saw a lot of that in Waterloo.

David Johnston: Yes. It's a balance but it's more than a balance, it's a harmony. If one were to make a short-term decision, with a heavy emphasis on applied research, your basic research suffers. What happens is the intellectual talent bank on the pure side diminishes and you participate less effectively in the international fora of basic sophisticated knowledge and ultimately, applied research suffers as well. One, because you're not participating in the pools of talent. Two, because there's a connection between the two. Three weeks ago, I was in Montreal speaking at C2 Montreal, a conference that touches on innovation, and I was describing the different points on that spectrum which is back and forth and I went back to the Latin roots. Three words: Discovery, invention and innovation. For discovery, which comes from *decoveri* which means to open completely or to yield. Invention comes from *inveniri* which means to come into or to arrive at. And then the third is innovation, which tends to be more a series of acts, which comes from *innovari*, which means to alter or to refresh and it usually means to take an existing idea, maybe an invention, and gradu-

ally improving it by doing things better. All three of those distinctive activities are connected one to the other and the movement is back and forth. You can't have one without the other.

Policy: And that was my next question about the importance of the Governor General's Innovation Awards.

David Johnston: We started those because we thought there was a gap in the country and not simply in the celebration of innovation, but enhancing the culture of innovation. After an analysis, we identified about 35 nominating partners who had innovation awards of one kind or another and they became partners. The Governor General's Innovation Awards select six winners and celebrate them at an annual award ceremony. But we see the winners and the nominating partners as a collectivity, a collaboration of the winning, to communicate to Canadians how significant these six are. Tom Jenkins of Open Text and I are doing a book for 2017 on innovation in which we will try to describe some of the more significant innovation stories in Canada to continue to enhance the culture of innovation in the country.

Policy: We know that you are passionate about indigenous higher education. How do we improve outcomes given the drop-out rate in secondary reserve schools, which is 62 per cent and 25 per cent in non-reserve schools? How do we get those kids into university?

David Johnston: Well as Einstein once said: "For every complex problem, there is a simple wrong answer." And we tried some of the simple wrong answers already. You have to work carefully with the indigenous people. We have to recognize that it is a vast panoply of different cultures, of different languages, of different experiences, of different regions. Then there is an important need to meet the financial gap. We're clear that the primary and secondary schools, certainly on the reserves, are less funded than schools elsewhere in Canada for example. We have to deal with that. I also think we have to focus on teaching the teachers the best way to address that problem, to have teachers who come from indigenous environments return to their communities and teach. You identify those initia-

tives that are working best in this environment, not as top-down solutions but from the grass roots and then try to spread them across the country.

Policy: What about the importance of aboriginal role models—the Carey Prices of the world?

David Johnston: Huge. Just last Friday and Saturday night, at the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards, we celebrated Susan Aglukark, the singer, a remarkable person. One of our Governor General's Innovation Awards winners is Christi Belcourt. She does remarkable indigenous art but she puts it into social media and encourages young people to develop their own art within their own communities as a way of returning to indigenous cultures and celebrating those indigenous cultures. Then there's Douglas Cardinal, the indigenous architect who built the Canadian Museum of History, just across the river, another great role model...

Policy: Can I ask you a historical footnote question about the 1984 election leaders' debate, which you moderated? When Mr. Turner said "I had no option" and Mr. Mulroney said "You had an option, sir. You could have said 'No'." Did you have sense that something important was happening?

David Johnston: Not as much as transpired. In fact, I remember that event well because it occurred in the third half hour of a two-hour debate divided into four sections. That patronage issue had to do partly with domestic politics and partly international relations because a number of them were diplomatic posts and we actually had touched on that question twice in the previous two half hours so this was the third half hour and I was looking for a way to move the debate past that but I wasn't able to phrase my intervention properly so the discussion went on and that's what happened. I did not have an appreciation at the time of the significance of that.

Policy: It changed the entire course of the campaign.

David Johnston: It was an important factor, yes.

Policy: Thank you for doing this.

David Johnston: My pleasure. Good seeing you. **P**