

**REMARKS AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE  
OTTAWA DEBATING SOCIETY  
RIDEAU CLUB, OTTAWA  
JANUARY 22, 2019**

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Ladies and gentlemen, fellow debaters, good evening.

Thank you Heather Bakken for your most generous introduction and hats off to you for launching the Ottawa Debating Society.

What a brilliant idea to launch this SAociety here at the historic Rideau Club in the shadow of Canada's Parliament – our Parliament which has served as the crucible of public debate since our nation's founding. The first President of the Rideau Club was none other than Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald – an accomplished debater.

Those of us who know Parliament and who grow frustrated with the less than inspiring quality of debate at times that our representatives engage in, know that informed, constructive and respectful debate is a cornerstone of the democratic process. My admiration for the institution is what led me to write my first book titled *Parliamentary Democracy in Canada: Issues for Reform*. The quality of debate in the House of Commons was one of my principal preoccupations.

Debating has been part of my life since early days at school. At law school, I tested my skills more seriously...on one occasion during a student Supreme Moot Court having to argue a case based on the *audi alteram partem* rule (translation from Latin "let the other side be heard"). As President of the Debating Union at the University of British Columbia, I argued serious topics and many less serious such as "Be it resolved: Chastity is Outmoded", "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" and "Frailty Thy Name is Woman"...not subjects that would be acceptable on the debating podiums of today. Times do change!

During my long career in business and in the public policy domain, I had the privilege of playing an active role in the great national debates of the day:

- on deficits and debt;
- on tax reform and the GST;
- on free trade with the United States and later the NAFTA;
- on national unity and the Constitution;
- on the environment and climate change;
- on the role of capitalism in society, especially following the great financial crisis.

The debating experience was educational, exhilarating and emotionally charged at times...so much so on the emotional front where free trade was concerned that my ideological opponents burned me effigy on several occasions and once memorably dumped a truckload of cow dung on my driveway!

Along the way, I had a great deal of fun and to this day still I hugely enjoy a vigorous debate with a worthy opponent.

As you embark on this new enterprise this evening, I ask you to keep the following simple principles in mind.

- debating instead of arguing helps develop critical thinking skills
- debating is educational - preparing for debate requires research and listening to the views of your opponents can teach you a great deal
- through debating you can learn to be more articulate, coherent and thoughtful, and to think quickly on your feet
- debating can help solve problems by showing you the other side's point of view

Thinking about these principles reminds me of the words of French moralist and man of letters, Joseph Joubert, who said, "It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

The importance of reasoned debate in these challenging times cannot be stressed strongly enough. Public debate today is too often de-based by extremist rhetoric, an absence of logic and profound disrespect for the other side's point of view. And yes, "fake news" does not help.

My concluding words of advice to debaters, and to the Carleton and University of Ottawa teams here this evening, is that you respect what I call the three fundamental rules of debate: that you be personable and respectful in your delivery, that you demonstrate generosity in victory and gracefulness in defeat, and that you harness emotion and humour to full advantage.

Good luck to you all and let the fun begin!

Thomas d'Aquino  
Veteran Debater