

***CANADA: FAR FROM BROKEN  
BUT DANGEROUSLY COMPLACENT***

***EXCERPTS FROM AN ADDRESS BY THOMAS D'AQUINO  
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The final chapter titled "*Reaching for Gold*" in my recent book, "*Private Power Public Purpose*", challenges Canadians to capitalize on our country's many unparalleled advantages and aspire to make Canada "*the best country in the world in which to live, work, invest and grow*". Some are no doubt skeptical that this goal can be reached. Others claim more dramatically that Canada is broken. I believe the skeptics are selling Canada short and, as for the crowd that claims that Canada is broken, I would argue they are profoundly mistaken.

This evening I will speak of Canada's strengths but devote the lion's share of my remarks to how we can make this exceptional country even stronger. My love of Canada is summed up in one short paragraph of my book. "To me, Canada is a vast and beautiful land I have travelled east and west, north and south that is home to Indigenous peoples from time immemorial and to those of all races and creeds who came later. A welcoming land to immigrants and to refugees from war-torn countries. A safe country, bounded by three oceans that in the past two centuries has been free from attack or invasion. A country hewn out of the

wilderness and bound together by bands of steel into one of the most advanced societies on earth, democratic and respectful of human rights and the rule of law. A nation with an identity forged in war and sacrifice in the defence of freedom. A country burgeoning with talent and achievement in the sciences and the arts, in entrepreneurship and business, committed to providing the best education in the world. A caring country."

That is the bedrock. At the same time, however, I have argued that for the past four decades, we have not harnessed our full potential. This was the central message of a book I co-authored in 2001 with my Business Council colleague, David Stewart-Patterson, titled "*Northern Edge: How Canadians Can Triumph in the Global Economy*". At the time, Canada faced an increasingly competitive global environment in a world dominated by the United States, the uncontested hyper-power. There was little talk of American decline at the time. The Soviet bloc had been dismantled and the China challenge was a distant prospect. Canadians had tamed inflation, embraced free trade and fiscal responsibility. We were on a roll of sorts but still lagging in our competitiveness. Back then, I argued that Canada's most serious affliction was complacency. That in far too many areas of endeavour, we satisfy ourselves with silver and bronze rather than aspiring to gold. In "*Private Power Public Purpose*", I argue that complacency remains a serious affliction -- that

we must urgently address our domestic and international shortcomings in the face of an increasingly unforgiving world marked by conflict and dangerous tensions.

The challenges ahead are daunting. I believe that meeting them requires three essentials: good public policy, strong leadership and the will to act. And always, a clear set of priorities for action. Let me share the priorities as I see them.

### **Celebrate who we are as Canadians**

Let's begin by celebrating who we are as Canadians and what we have accomplished together. Yes, there are dark chapters in our story. Our Indigenous peoples have been denied their rights and their dignity. Some of our citizens have faced discrimination and racism. But I am deeply troubled by waves of denial and cynicism I see in our public discourse, especially by those who offer the construct of a Canadian state as a failure, as little more than an affirmation of destructive colonialism.

Let's bring back to our schools the teaching of fact-based history that tells the stunningly successful Canadian story along with those dark chapters. Told with honesty, the virtues of Canada far outweigh the sins of those who came before us. As a country that welcomes so many new Canadians, it is more important than ever that they have a full and

respectful appreciation of what the tens of millions who came before them have achieved.

### **Embrace civility in public discourse**

Let's embrace civility in our public discourse once again. Let's roll back the forces of cynicism, hate and personal destruction that have made their way into our politics. Let's offer no harbour to the Trump style assault on legitimate institutions and on those who serve in public office. Let's call out those who gleefully embrace serial mendacity as the new norm. Appeals for civility in our world of today are enormously complicated, of course, by the dark forces at work on the Internet. But we should encourage all those in positions of leadership to set an example. Sometime soon, Canadians will go to the polls in a national election. Think how much better off our country would be if, instead of a barrage of personal demonization, we were showered with meaningful policy options and constructive debate.

### **Fix immigration**

What about immigration? Immigration is what made the Canada we know. It has populated our land with peoples from around the world bringing their talent, hopes and dreams to our shores. One of those was my father who came to Canada 100 years ago, fleeing from the march of fascism in the country he loved. Immigration has been a principal source

of economic growth, and the diversity it has engendered has created a mosaic that in many respects is the envy of the world. The Canadian passport remains one of the most sought after of any country. In the past, immigration unsurprisingly was an untidy affair. In modern decades, it has delivered its promise supported by a broad consensus and well-functioning rules. Now, as we see from extensive media reporting, our system is under unusual stress. There is the issue of exploding numbers of entrants into Canada exacerbating our housing problem and overloading our social services infrastructure. We must urgently restore faith in the system by sorting out the policy and the mechanics that drive it. The federal government has acknowledged the severity of the problem and has pledged to deliver solutions. We shall see.

### **Fire up the country's economic engines**

Inclusive economic growth is essential to our well-being. Our standards of living have risen spectacularly since we were largely an agricultural society a century ago. But in recent years, low levels of growth have been the norm. This has been exacerbated by a lack of competition and lacklustre investment, innovation and productivity. We are making strides in harnessing technology and the promise of artificial intelligence, but not quickly enough. In fiscal terms, we have thrown caution to the wind. Public authorities are racking up ever-higher debt and, at the federal level, calls for a fiscal anchor regrettably are being

ignored. And it is hard to believe, but after decades, our Canadian market is still hampered by inter-provincial barriers to trade. Short-sighted regulations, especially in our sluggish permitting process, stand in the way of ambitious projects. We were once a country renowned for its great construction achievements - railways, dams, pipelines and seaways. The exciting idea of great national projects seems to have faded away. Countless policy prescriptions have been advanced to tackle the malaise but time is running out. Either we respond vigorously with an all-nation effort or face decline in our standing among nations.

There is no simple answer to our predicament. But after being immersed in debates about our economy for some forty years, this I know – education, skills-training, bold investment by our businesses, advanced research, smart immigration, and a policy environment that rewards entrepreneurship are essential parts of the growth matrix.

### **Empower our national resource sector**

Canada has many strengths but perhaps none of such enduring consequence as our natural endowments. Our adept development of these assets in agriculture, forestry and fisheries and our unmatched water resources, make us a natural resource superpower among nations. But when it comes to energy, we have dropped the ball. Today, I see a country bitterly divided on how best to develop our massive energy

resources, especially with regard to fossil fuels. On the critical environmental front, the divisions are deep on how to journey successfully through the green transition. Our ability to meet zero carbon emission targets by 2050 stands significantly in doubt. Our political leaders need to take a deep breath, put short-sighted partisan considerations aside, and concentrate on delivering solutions that are good for Canadians and for the planet.

### **Get out of the ditch on healthcare**

No list of areas for improvement can exclude healthcare. At its heart, Canadians can take pride in a system that under the law offers free access to all. But the system is in trouble and the narrative here is well known to all of us: overflowing emergency rooms, shortage of beds, doctors and nurses, and an obsolete infrastructure far from adequate to meet the needs of our rapidly aging population. With one of the highest per capita expenditures on healthcare in the world, we know that financing is not at the root of the problem. We also know, as countless commissions and reports have made clear, that there are no shortages of solutions. And yet we dither as the situation deteriorates.

## **Let's excel once again at foreign policy**

Let me now turn to foreign policy. There was a time when Canada's voice in the world was one of the most respected. It was often said, "we punched above our weight". Canada's voice still counts but our soft power credentials have been enfeebled. Soft power needs to be backed up with credible military capabilities – and here we have failed.

Canada's critics, including our allies, say our words have not been matched by deeds. More generally, in trying to be all things to all people, our foreign policy lacks focus and a clear set of priorities.

Expertise and specialization - prized and celebrated in our once formidable cadre of foreign affairs officials - have diminished. The backdrop to these shortcomings is the unwillingness of our political leaders to champion foreign policy issues and priorities in national debate - hard to understand given the exceedingly dangerous state of the world.

As we pine for a more robust foreign policy, we should not ignore the importance of culture in projecting Canada's influence around the world. Our achievements in literature and the performing and visual arts are remarkable. Sadly, too few beyond our borders know this. We have an impressive story to tell this. Let's get on with it and see Canada's influence rise accordingly.



## **Let's shape a winning United States strategy**

As we assess Canada's place in the world, as ever, no relationship matters more than that with the United States. As someone who has been deeply involved in North American affairs for over four decades, I am kept awake at night by the corrosive divisions in the Great Republic and the proliferation of America-first populism. As a neighbour, ally and major trading partner, Canada benefits hugely from the association. But at the same time, we are enormously vulnerable to the vicissitudes of American politics – and to that of a possible second Trump presidency to be sure. Even if Trump fails to take the presidency, the long-standing stability that marked Canada-United States relations for more than a century is unlikely to be seen again. In response to this challenge, Canada must forge greater self-reliance and resilience -- economically, and in terms of our foreign policy and military strategy. Critical tests of this resilience will be how we respond to the upcoming presidential elections and how we prepare for the review in 2026 of the Canada-United States-Mexico Free Trade Agreement. We must employ an all-hands-on-deck effort to guarantee unimpeded access to the American market, to protect vital North American supply-chains, and ensure that Canada carries its weight in the defence and security of the continent.

At the same time, we must intensify our efforts to expand our markets beyond the United States, in Europe and particularly in Asia. This means wise and careful steps to rebuild our damaged relationships with India and China. In the case of China, an eyes-wide-open strategy in concert with our allies is essential.

### **Let's take our defence and security seriously**

Mention of the word defence brings me to arguably the most perplexing challenge facing Canada. Over the past century, Canada demonstrated again and again a remarkable ability to marshal impressive military might to counter aggression. Over the past four decades, however, our armed forces have suffered from serious neglect. Our combat readiness today to defend our land, shores and skies is far from adequate. I say this with sorrow as our men and women in uniform are among the most committed and professional I have seen anywhere in the world. But their ranks are depleted, and recruitment and retention are serious problems. One would think that with soaring threat levels made worse by naked Russian aggression in Ukraine, Chinese warnings about possible war over Taiwan, the dangerous adventurism of Iran and its proxies in the Middle East, and the bloody conflict between Israel and Hamas terrorists, that alarm bells would be ringing in Ottawa.

Our military leadership is deeply concerned and commanders have made their views known - even in public. Our political leaders do not appear to share the concern. Sadly, nor does the vast majority of the Canadian public, a reality that carries great peril. Among our allies, most importantly the Americans, Canada is seen, somewhat unfairly I admit, as a free rider. Our reluctance to make good on the promise to commit to defence spending at a floor level of 2 percent of GDP has hurt our credibility. As we wring our hands about our standing with our allies, my eyes turn to our men and women in uniform. They deserve more support, more respect. All who care about this state of affairs should be pressing hard for a well-informed national debate about our future security.

Our security does not rely on military capability alone. Our intelligence and police forces play a crucial role too and we are privileged to be part of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance. Here too Canada is found wanting as our intelligence officials and the RCMP attest. I believe it is high time for Canada to deepen the effectiveness of our intelligence services in countering foreign meddling in our internal affairs. As for the RCMP, it should be repurposed as an exclusively national police force with specialized training to deal with terrorism, cybercrime and the growing influence of internationally linked criminal gangs.

Friends, you will agree, no doubt, that what I have outlined is a terribly ambitious agenda. To some of you it may seem wishful thinking – impossible. Not in my mind. The reason is that we already have at our fingertips an impressive collection of policy analyses and sound recommendations for moving forward. In my book, I make the point that Canadians are among the best in the world at shaping ideas, at producing tomes and tomes of evidence-based research, at tabling endless studies and reports. But we score badly in implementation. Once again, the word COMPLACENCY comes to mind.

I know we can do better. Ambitious and public-spirited individuals of strong character striving for excellence can be found in the tens of thousands across Canada, in our governments, in our courts, in our armed forces, in our industries and workplaces, in our hospitals, in our universities and schools, in our arts and sports organizations, and in our communities. All are contributing in their own way toward nation-building, and the Canada we know today is a reflection of their efforts.

The primary responsibility for the attainment of national goals lies with our elected officials in Ottawa and the provinces, territories and our cities. The vast majority who serve in public office are hard-working and well-intentioned. But their efforts are often stymied by partisan conflict, opportunism, and short-term thinking dictated by short election cycles.

Their efforts are also increasingly affected by a public service that was once one of the finest in the world, and which now is sorely under-appreciated and demoralized. Making complex change happen is hard work. Nation-building on a grand scale requires focus and big ideas and ambition to match. It also requires collective effort, often over a long period of time. In the face of formidable challenges in the past, Canadian leaders have risen to the occasion with vision and courage.

In my book, I have chronicled my small part in nation-building -- sometimes successful, sometimes not, but always believing that no opportunity should go unanswered. As a young boy sitting with my Latin tutor, I was taken by two words from the writings of the Roman poet Horace: *carpe diem* (“seize the day”). Friends, I hope we can all agree – Canada is in need of a heavy dose of *carpe diem*!

*\*Notes on the speaker attached*

## **NOTES ON THE SPEAKER**

Thomas d'Aquino is an entrepreneur, philanthropist, corporate director and educator. His book "*Private Power Public Purpose - Adventures in Business, Politics and the Arts*" was published last February by Penguin Random House and within the first week of its release, The Globe and Mail listed it as the number one national best-seller in the non-fiction category.

Mr. d'Aquino is the Founding CEO of today's Business Council of Canada composed of the CEOs of the country's leading enterprises and pre-eminent entrepreneurs. He headed the organization for three decades and, when he left the Council, member companies accounted for \$850 billion in annual revenues, \$4.5 trillion in assets, and were responsible for the vast majority of Canada's private sector exports, investment, research and development, and training.

Earlier in his career, he served as a special assistant to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, as a corporate advisor in London and Paris, a professor adjunct of international business law at the University of Ottawa, and as special counsel and senior counsel to two of Canada's leading law firms. He is recognized as one of the private sector leaders in advancing the *Canada - United States Free Trade Agreement* and the *North American Free Trade Agreement*. He also is the Founding Chair of the *APEC CEO Summit* and the Chairman Emeritus of the *North American Forum*. In addition, he serves as an Honorary Professor at the Ivey Business School and Special Advisor to the Business Council of Alberta.

Mr. d'Aquino is highly engaged in support of the arts. He was a Founding Director of the National Gallery of Canada Foundation and chaired the Foundation for 18 years. He continues to serve as Chair Emeritus and he and his wife Susan are Gallery *Distinguished Patrons* - a family of over 100 leading patrons which they founded in 2005. He serves as the Co-Chair of the Jean Paul Riopelle Centenary and is a member of the Riopelle Foundation.

Mr. d'Aquino has studied at the University of British Columbia, Queen's and the University of London (London School of Economics and University College). He holds B.A., J.D., and LL.M. degrees, and an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Queen's, Wilfrid Laurier and Western Universities. He is a Member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Ottawa, and a Distinguished Lifetime Member of the Business Council of Canada.