

**A Tribute to The Honourable R. Gordon Robertson,  
P.C., C.C., LL.D., F.R.S.C., D.C.L.**

**By Thomas d'Aquino**

**MacKay United Church  
Ottawa**

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Reverend Doctor Montgomery; members of the Robertson family; Joan - Gordon's dear companion; Your Excellency; Madam Chief Justice; friends,

I am honoured – and humbled – to stand before you today, at Gordon's request, to pay tribute to him and to celebrate with you his remarkable life.

He wished this occasion to be one, not of sadness, but of celebration of a long life, well lived, a life marked by devotion to family and to country.

Gordon Robertson – a good, fair, principled, and ever so courteous man - was a modest person. But we here today know that he was a giant. Indeed, he has been described as his generation's most distinguished public servant – and what a generation that was!

Gordon was proud of his Saskatchewan roots. Born in 1917 in Davidson – a town of 300 “on the baldest prairie”, in Gordon's words, he thrived under the affection of his Norwegian-American mother and grandparents.

He met his father – of Scottish ancestry - for the first time at the age of two, when he returned home after convalescing from serious wounds suffered at the epic Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge. He was, by Gordon's account, a stern disciplinarian who demanded much of his son in his studies, in pursuit of manly sports, and in his comportment.

Gordon did not disappoint. He worked his way through drought- and depression-torn Saskatchewan, attended Regina College and the University of Saskatchewan, and in 1938 was on his way to Oxford University, a fresh young Rhodes Scholar.

In Gordon's words, “Oxford was a dream come true.” He played lacrosse and hockey for his college, Exeter, debated fine points of law at the local pubs, and admits, on one festive occasion, draining no less than three pints of beer non-stop from a silver mug!

He had a daring sense of adventure. In the summer of 1939 with the storm clouds of war forming fast over Europe, Gordon and his friends Ed Ritchie and Ross Anderson set out for the Free City of Danzig and the Polish

Corridor on the only thing they could afford – a single-cylinder motorcycle with one of them in a side-car and another slung behind somehow. Despite a crash outside Copenhagen, they returned in time to beat the Nazi onslaught.

One month later, Britain and the Empire were at war with Germany. As Gordon observed, the time for frivolity had ended.

Anticipating his return to Canada, he sat for the Department of External Affairs' examination at Canada House in London. His examiners were High Commissioner Vincent Massey, future Canadian Ambassador to the United States Hume Wrong, and a young officer called Lester Pearson. He passed, then went on to obtain his Oxford degree with a solid First.

So the stage was set for his career in the public service of Canada.

Gordon reported for duty at the East Block in June 1941. It then housed the whole Department of External Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, the Department of Finance and the Cabinet chamber. My, times have changed, have they not?

Given the close quarters, he readily rubbed shoulders with individuals who were to become legends – the likes of Norman Robertson, Jack Pickersgill, Hugh Keenleyside, Escott Reid, Arnold Heeney, and Charles Ritchie.

Shortly afterwards, in August 1943, Gordon records that he made the happiest decision of his life. He married Bea Lawson, twin sister of his friend Bill Lawson. Their children, John and Kerrie, followed.

Gordon's talents in the Department of External Affairs did not go unnoticed. In 1945, he was summoned by Prime Minister Mackenzie King and soon found himself working with King's closest confidant, Jack Pickersgill.

In his engrossing *Memoirs of a Very Civil Servant*, Gordon explains how close to impossible it was to carry out his new responsibilities – “Perfection was a bare pass in working for King”, he said.

Gordon not only beat the odds, he excelled. In the three years that followed, he had a hand in many of the key decisions made by King as he guided Canada through its post-war demobilization and reconstruction.

Of one particular achievement, Gordon took special pride – the proclamation on January 1, 1947 of the Canadian Citizenship Act. Prior to that, we were legally - first and foremost - British subjects. The first ceremony for the conferring of certificates of this new Canadian citizenship took place before the Supreme Court. Gordon describes the joy that Mackenzie King felt as he received certificate number one, and was met with rapt applause as he started his remarks for the first time with “I speak as a citizen of Canada...”

In his relationship with King, Gordon confesses to having tempted fate from time to time. He travelled with King, a strict teetotaler, with a bottle of scotch tucked in his bag so he could offer up a clandestine drink once King was safely in bed. And living on what could hardly be called a handsome salary, he had to find a way to deal with the expenses he incurred on behalf of the notorious penny-pincher. His solution was to present the crusty King with formal IOUs to sign each time this occurred.

The election of Prime Minister St Laurent in November 1948 launched a new chapter in Gordon’s life. He moved from the Prime Minister’s Office to the Privy Council Office, enthusiastically welcoming the opportunity to work under his old chief Norman Robertson.

St Laurent’s interest in constitutional reform allowed Gordon to shine as he was the only official close to the Prime Minister at the time with a background in constitutional law. Throughout the First Constitutional Conference of 1950 and the Quebec Conference of the same year, Gordon was at St Laurent’s side.

At the time, Gordon was assisted by a newly arrived junior named Pierre Elliot Trudeau. While Trudeau’s time in the Privy Council Office was brief, Gordon spoke positively of his intellect. Neither of them could guess, of course, how history would bring them together again in the decades ahead.

We can all be thankful for one of Gordon's achievements during this period – he was instrumental in saving the Library of Parliament from demolition, and in ensuring that its restoration respected its Victorian heritage – indeed he stood in the way of a proposal to get rid of the library's magnificent wood paneling because it was viewed as a fire hazard.

Gordon's verdict on St Laurent's prime-ministership was unequivocal. He records that “St Laurent administrations from 1949 to 1956 probably gave Canada the most consistently good, financially responsible, trouble-free government the country has had in its entire history, before as well as after Confederation.”

In 1953, Gordon began his ten-year northern odyssey. A re-elected St Laurent appointed him, at the age of 36, the first Deputy Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources and Commissioner of the Northwest Territories. This reflected St Laurent's determination during the Cold War to build an active presence in Canada's north.

Coming to grips with the neglected north was a daunting task – Gordon's domain comprised some 40 percent of our country's geography with a population of only 26,000. There was precious little in the way of social or economic infrastructure and the script for governance was yet to be written.

Gordon would record afterwards “For me, during these ten years, the greatest inspiration, and reward, was the sense of being able to participate in building a new part of Canada that would be different from anything we had seen before, in which ethnic differences would not divide, and in which adaptation to a new future would take place without destroying the identities and the pride of the aboriginal people.”

He would also fondly recall the role he played with James Houston in supporting the artists of Cape Dorset in their move into larger scale carving and printworks – including the celebrated Kenojuak who died only a week before he did.

Gordon's efforts in the north were supported throughout, not only by St Laurent, but by Prime Minister Diefenbaker as well.

Shortly after the election of Lester Pearson in 1963, Gordon was invited to succeed Robert Bryce as Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet – a post, he records, that he did not seek, as he was very happy working in the north where progress was finally discernible.

Despite the minority governments and turbulence of the subsequent five years, Gordon had a hand in decisions that changed the face of Canada – the creation of the Canada Assistance Plan, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, the Canada Pension Plan and medicare; the institutionalizing of federal-provincial relations as a instrument of governance; the federal response to Quebec’s Quiet Revolution; the ferociously debated adoption of the maple leaf flag; the design and launch of the Order of Canada; the splendid celebration of Canada’s centennial in 1967.

Gordon was generous in his assessment of the Pearson legacy, saying simply, “People of genius can and do make a difference. Mike Pearson was such a man.” I believe that we can say that the Pearson legacy bears the imprint of Gordon Robertson at his best.

It was in February 1968 that Gordon bumped into Pierre Trudeau at the front door of the Chateau Laurier. Trudeau invited him to walk with him to the West Block. Along the way, he asked Gordon if he would be his Secretary to the Cabinet if he were to run for the Liberal Party leadership and were to win and become Prime Minister. Gordon said yes and noted “so began an association of eleven years in which there was never a clash or an angry word.”

Gordon chaired the first major undertaking of the new Prime Minister – the Official Languages Act, which was to dramatically enhance the place of the French language, especially in Canada’s public service. Soon after, the Trudeau government was confronted with the October crisis – and the invoking of the War Measures Act as the crisis deepened with the kidnapping of James Cross and the murder of Pierre Laporte by the FLQ. Gordon’s advice to the Prime Minister throughout was seminal.

But it was Gordon’s expertise in constitutional matters that Trudeau most called upon as he pursued his central ambition – to patriate the constitution

and enshrine the Charter of Rights. The journey was tortuous and full of disappointments, and much depended on Gordon's behind-the-scenes negotiating skills. For him, it was also deeply personal. It was his abiding conviction that the unity of our country is primordial, and for this he would fight -- and fight again.

With the advent of the Clark government in May 1979, Gordon decided, after a period of reflection, that he would retire from the public service. An editorial in the Ottawa Journal spoke as well as many others of his achievements: "What is beyond dispute is the extraordinary breadth of his knowledge of the art of public administration at the highest level. His influence was far wider than any particular post he held. His discretion, his integrity, his humane wisdom, commanded respect from very different prime ministers and cabinet ministers. He gave his advice in the highest tradition of a disinterested public servant."

The work of this remarkable man, however, was not finished. He went on to become the President of the Institute for Research on Public Policy and there came to know its chairman, Robert Stanfield. Of Stanfield, he said: "During four years of working with him, I came to realize how unfortunate it was that Canadians never had the opportunity of seeing him as head of our national government. His wisdom, moderation, and good judgment would have made him a superb leader through difficult years."

As well, for ten years Gordon served as a much respected Chancellor of Carleton University, taking pleasure in offering thousands of proud graduates brief words of congratulations and encouragement.

It was in 1984 that Gordon, in concert with a few others, founded a unique institution – the Rideau Club Roundtable. Ever since – for 28 years now - it has met weekly over lunch to discuss the compelling issues of the day. At the table in its early days were Robert Bryce, Jack Pickersgill, Jean Pigott, Louis Rasminsky, Charles Ritchie, Jake Warren, Simon Reisman, Robert Stanfield, Mitchell Sharp, Jean-Luc Pepin, and others. I was astonished and delighted when I, much younger than they, was asked by Gordon to join them. I learned much about this country from these wise and vibrant minds, now gone. A number of current Roundtable members, including our Chief Justice, are among us today to share in this celebration of Gordon's life.

I would like to conclude with some remarks about my own relationship with Gordon. I had first met Gordon in 1969 in the East Block when I was a member of Prime Minister Trudeau's staff. I was mightily impressed. We kept in touch after Susan and I left for London in 1972, and it was to him I turned for comments on a paper I wrote at the time for the journal of the Institute of Public Administration titled "The Prime Minister's Office: Catalyst or Cabal?" He did not stint in his comments! And I was most appreciative.

Over the next decade, our friendship deepened and I vividly recall occasions sitting in my garden or by the fire exchanging views on the great issues of the day. During this time, I reached out often to Gordon for advice on constitutional issues as I spearheaded the work of the Business Council on National Issues on various national unity initiatives.

Our work together intensified in 1989 following Prime Minister Mulroney's courageous efforts at reaching a constitutional consensus. The unanimous approval by the provinces of the Meech Lake Accord, to amend the constitution, was looking steadily more doubtful – most particularly, in Gordon's assessment, because of Trudeau's attack on the Accord. I asked Gordon and Jake Warren, who I knew shared my grave concerns for the unity of the country, to engage with me to create what we called "Canadians for a Unifying Constitution".

We developed a statement of reasons for supporting the Accord and attracted the signatures of more than 200 prominent Canadians from all parts of Canada. We issued a booklet titled "Meech Lake: Setting the Record Straight". Our news conferences and full-page ads in the Globe and Mail and La Presse attracted much attention, but, as you know, to no avail. We were devastated. But this journey with Gordon cemented our mutual respect and friendship.

Gordon's perspective on Canada eventually lightened. In a note to me in November 2007, he wrote: "Canada is not in as precarious a condition as it was, and our own effort really did help to reduce the fury of the strain and stress of that time. If there had not been understanding, the situation today might be very different."



Friends, I have painted a picture of a man intimately engaged in the history of our country. A patriot who quietly played a significant role in shaping Canada's destiny.

To those of us who knew this man, the picture is a more personal one. It is of a loving husband, dad, and granddad. Of a generous colleague, friend and mentor. Of a good neighbour, proud of his beautiful Village of Rockcliffe Park. And of the doting master of Kipper the beagle and, to the end, of Charlie the cat who was in the habit of escorting Gordon to Joan's door when they dined together, and always returned to escort him back.

Gordon Robertson, heralded giant of your generation, Companion of the Order of Canada, treasured friend – we salute you!