

Ottawa's Ultimate Insider:
THOMAS D'AQUINO



Power Couple: Thomas D'Aquino and his wife Susan Peterson. Photo courtesy of the author

By Hattie Klotz



With Governor General David Johnston (left) and Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney (right), Ottawa, 2011. Photo: Andrew Van Beek

In his memoir *Private Power, Public Purpose*, Ottawa resident Thomas D'Aquino describes a life very well lived. From presidents to princes, prime ministers to power brokers, captains of industry to creative titans, he has rubbed shoulders with them all as chief executive of the Business Council of Canada from 1981 to 2009 and as a leader in fundraising for the arts.

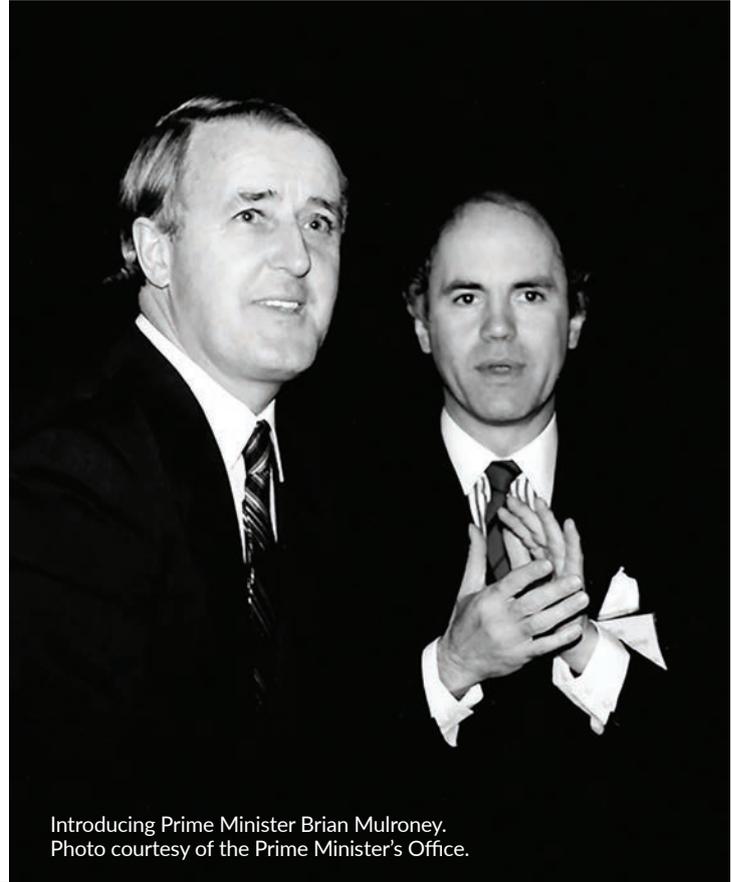
Once dubbed “Canada’s de facto prime minister”—a title that “certainly caused me sleepless nights,” Thomas says—he has been at the forefront of many of Canada’s public policy debates and political brouhahas for over 50 years. During that time, he’s received death threats and had a pile of cow manure dumped on the driveway of his Rockcliffe Park home. He’s also survived an office invasion and the burning of his effigy. It’s enough to suggest that this man’s the devil dressed in a Savile Row suit.

Tall, slim and elegant, Thomas has a patrician air, rarefied over years spent living in London and Paris, treading the corridors of power in polished custom brogues. He and his wife, retired senior finance bureaucrat Susan Peterson, are anglophiles, passionate about early music, ancient English churches, military history, gardens and brass rubbing.

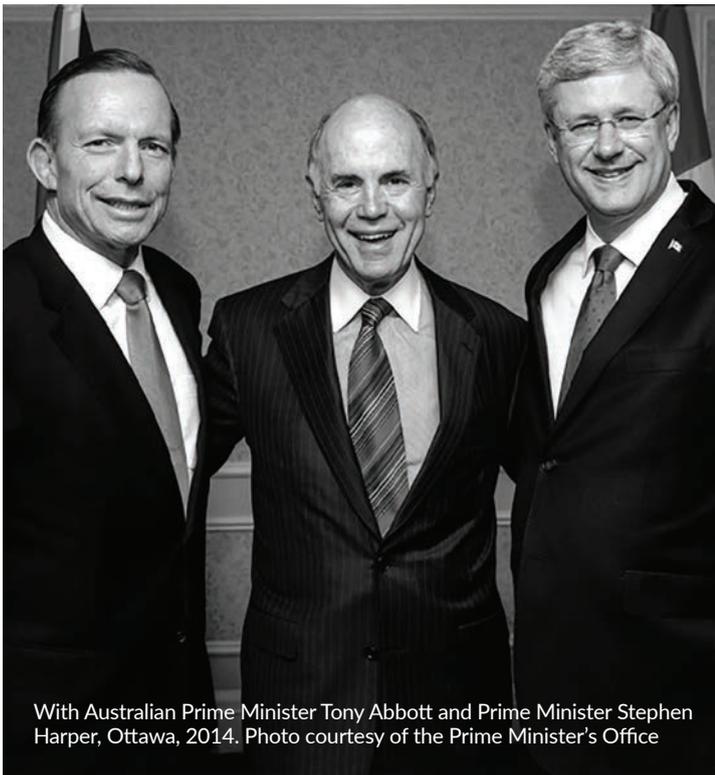
A decidedly quirky and niche pastime, brass rubbing entails reproducing, onto paper, commemorative brass plaques that often date from the 12th to 16th century and are usually found on the floor in churches. A rubbing is created by laying a sheet of paper on top of a brass, then rubbing the paper with graphite, wax or chalk.

All this to say that while Thomas's interests may tend towards the esoteric and his professional life has been lived at the highest echelons of business and politics, this is not where things began. He grew up in Nelson, B.C., the son of Italian immigrants, and spoke Italian at home. His upbringing was modest and he enjoyed playing a game of baseball and messing about in the woods as much as the next boy. But his parents instilled a work ethic early on. He played the violin and was expected to practise for hours daily in order to compete in local competitions. He was also expected to help in the garden, his father's place of joy and peace.

And when the time came for his first job, his father wanted to show him the value of hard work and the various industries that powered the economy of B.C. He arranged for his son to work in a Canadian Pacific Railway yard washing diesel engines; he arranged for him to work with the bridge and building gang on the rail lines; he arranged for him to work in the logging industry, attaching cables to felled trees; he arranged for him to work in a fish hatchery, releasing fingerlings into creeks and lakes (Thomas has a love for fly fishing to this day); and he arranged for him to work in a mine in the assay office at Toby Creek, where he lived in a mining camp.



Introducing Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Photo courtesy of the Prime Minister's Office.

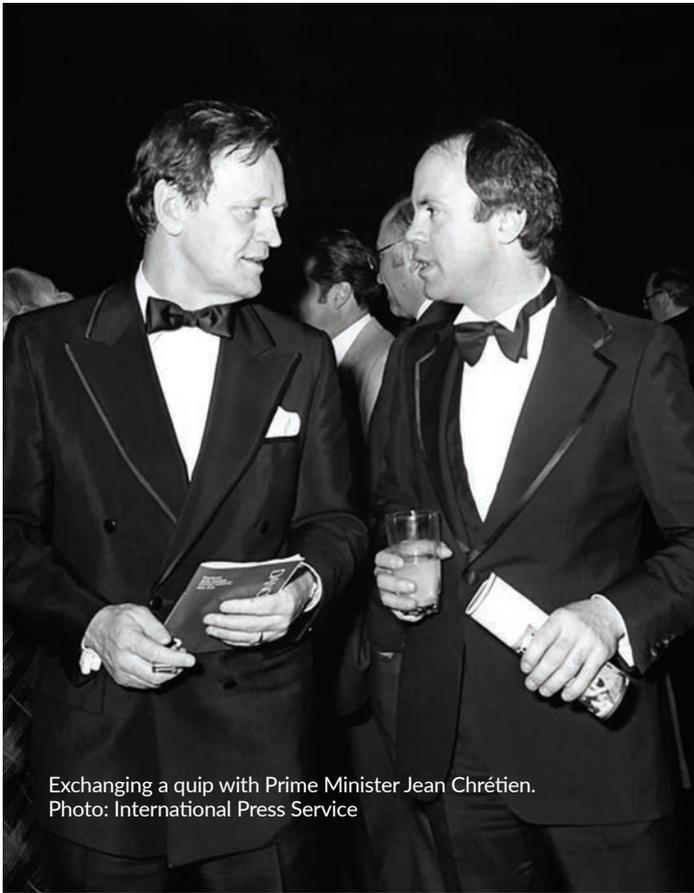


With Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Ottawa, 2014. Photo courtesy of the Prime Minister's Office

Thomas's parents had a powerful influence on his life, an impact that has helped fuel a personal mission to wield his own power and influence at the pinnacle of Canadian business for a public purpose.

A clear example of this synergy is the way he guided and grew the foundation at the National Gallery of Canada during his 18 years as chair of the board. He tapped into a well of private philanthropy and corporate support "to create a pan-Canadian family of donors that would be keen to support the gallery with gifts." It's a model that has since been emulated across the country, infusing struggling arts institutions with desperately needed funds to support their programming for public good.

As a player at the most pivotal moments in Canadian history over the last half century—from free trade, Quebec separatism, national energy policy and the global financial crisis—Thomas believes the ideas of nation building and leadership are most important. He has always wanted Canada to be the best place in the world to live, work, invest and grow. "There was a time when Canada's voice in the world was among the most respected; it was often said that we 'punched above our weight.' This is no longer the case," he writes. The potential remains, he notes, but a lack of vision and willingness to put good policy into concrete action remains a stumbling block.



Exchanging a quip with Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.
Photo: International Press Service

On leadership, he offers his perspective on the necessary qualities, integrity being the most important. Here's a man who once refused a suitcase full of cash in a Rome hotel. "The truth of the matter is that if you do not have integrity, you fail," he says.

Reluctant to be drawn into the thorny issues of current times, Thomas will only say this: "There has been a diminution of independence in the press. We have monopolies and I do not like monopolies. Much of the press that I grew up with—a paper in every town and city—has largely vanished."

On the topic of rising deficits and soaring public debt, he is more forthright: "Politicians hope for the best and rarely prepare for the worst. I feel that this a dangerous game that the government is playing. It is important not only at the federal level, but also provincial, that one should be more aware of history."

For now, Ottawa's ultimate insider is happy to continue practising his opera singing skills in the shower and dreaming of the day he will play Beethoven's Concerto in D on the main stage at the National Arts Centre—on the 19th century German violin his father bought for him more than a half century ago in Rome.

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