

## PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

April 7, 2016

J. Robert S. Prichard

Thank you, Premier, for that generous introduction.

I feel very fortunate to receive this award tonight. It lies at the heart of my career-long interests and passions, and it comes from an organization I have greatly admired since its founding. To have the privilege of working on public policy has been a reward in itself. To be honoured for work I love to do is an unexpected bonus. Thank you for it.

The honour it represents is measured not just by the outstanding contributions of Francoise, Jack, Wayne, Peter and Taylor who are also honoured tonight, but by the stature of all those who have come before us over the past 28 years. For me, they fill the pantheon of Canadian public policy and are the people who have inspired and guided me. To join them tonight is very special indeed.

I stand here acutely aware it is the company I have kept more than my own efforts that has earned this honour. I have had the incredible good fortune to work with, and learn from, amazingly good people at the University of Toronto, Metrolinx, Torys, BMO, Torstar and elsewhere, and to live with, and learn from, Ann Wilson, my wife of over 40 years and an expert herself in progressive policy analysis. To all of them, thank you.

Fortunate as I feel to receive this honour, the greatest good fortune I have is to be a Canadian. I wasn't born here. I was brought here as a boy by my parents from the United Kingdom when they saw greater opportunity and possibilities here. It was the best possible thing that could have happened to me.

Canada has been the perfect place for me to live such a deeply fulfilling life in the realm of public policy. I can't imagine having had as good a ride anywhere else.

We have a remarkable tradition of public service which has attracted and inspired public servants of the first rank. And we have a belief that good government and good policy can make an important difference. Generation after generation, so many of the best and brightest have chosen careers of public service. And it shows. My experience in dealing with public servants has been extraordinarily positive at every level of government. I have had virtually uniformly good experiences working with them, seeking their help, debating ideas, driving change and generally trying to serve the public interest.

We are so unbelievably fortunate to have this tradition that is so robust that it can weather periods of neglect and even abuse. In my view, no country has a stronger public service and that public service has been central to making Canada the envy of the world.

In forming and reforming public policy, we also have a tradition that non-partisan and evidence-based analysis and reasoning, fueled by ideas and imagination, should play a central role. We are not always high-minded, and on occasion we veer off course, but the underlining trend line is very positive. When protecting Statistics Canada becomes a national rallying cry, our commitment to evidence and analysis is clear.

This creates an environment in which anyone with expertise and good ideas is welcome – indeed encouraged – to participate. And Canada is small enough that you don't get lost or ignored.

An early seminal moment in my career came as I headed to graduate school to study law and economics. A trusting federal public servant, Lawson Hunter, shared with me draft reports on the reform of Canada's competition law to allow me to pursue my thesis. But he also cared about my assessment of the proposed policy directions and embraced me as a colleague, albeit a very young and inexperienced one. That taught me from my earliest days as a law professor that I could make a difference and that my views would not be judged by my seniority but rather by their quality. That encouraged me to pursue issues I cared about. And it made me believe I could help shape the future. I haven't stopped trying or believing since.

My optimism was reinforced as president of the University of Toronto. Working with fellow presidents and some of the great public servants of the era led by Kevin Lynch and David Dodge, we collectively re-shaped the federal role in higher education and research. The new policy directions re-ignited Canada's universities in pursuit of global leadership, and made a profound difference to every aspect of our work. And because the policy framework was robust, it transcended partisanship and was extended by subsequent governments. This was public policy-making at its best.

In Canada, we are not on the whole burdened with undue partisanship. We are not forced to take partisan sides for life. We can have personal preferences, but be active in policy processes regardless of those preferences.

During my time at the University, I worked on three transitions in the Premier's Office: from Premier Miller to Premier Peterson; Premier Peterson to Premier Rae; and Premier Rae to Premier Harris. That I could be welcomed by these new leaders on all three transition teams for three different parties makes my

point: expertise and service mattered, and partisan affiliation didn't. Similarly, I have been honoured both federally and provincially with appointments and assignments from all sides of the aisle, invited to serve and contribute without any demand for partisan affiliation by me or my colleagues. How good it is that we regularly put ideas and expertise ahead of partisanship.

I would never argue that politics don't matter. Indeed, those with the courage to seek and serve in public office deserve to be, and must be, the ultimate arbiters on public policy even when their choices may vary from expert policy guidance. But my point is we are so fortunate to live in a political culture that carves out a large space for active, non-partisan engagement that shapes the ideas, options and policy choices that political leaders must confront. If we all occupy this space and do it well, the resulting choices will be all the better.

We have other advantages. Our federal system encourages policy experimentation and innovation with no one government having a monopoly on wisdom. Our universities are remarkably good and filled with terrific scholars working on policy issues protected by academic freedom.

In sum, I can imagine no better country in the world in which to pursue a passion for public policy. And it is worthy work. The choices we make really matter. They drive growth, productivity, fairness, inclusion, security and opportunity. Collectively, these choices have made Canada the envy of the world. And Canada's example, in part because Canadians are drawn from all corners of the earth, is widely influential and allows others to benefit when we get it right, pointing the way to a better future.

Let me close with personal advice: whether you choose to work in the public, private, academic, not-for-profit or volunteer sectors is not the important choice. There is enormous opportunity to contribute to public policy from all sectors and fortunately, we have a tradition of mobility among the sectors as my career well illustrates. The important choice is to choose to engage. To choose not to stand on the sidelines as critics, but to choose to join with others in common cause to shape public policies that will make our remarkable country even better. And it doesn't just make for a better country. It makes for a better life: richer, more purposeful and more rewarding life. I commend it to you. You will never regret it.

Thank you very much.