

Wilfred Laurier University
1997 Spring Convocation

June 7, 1997

Maureen O'Neil
Honourary Graduand

Chancellor Cleghorn , President Marsden, Graduands, families and guests;

It gives me great pleasure to be honoured by Wilfred Laurier University and to speak to you today. My role is to give you some advice as you mark this important step in your education, in your life. It brings back memories of my own convocation. To be frank, I can't remember a word of what the Honourary Graduand said. Indeed, it took some research to recall who it was... so, I am here, honoured, but without illusions.

I stepped off the convocation platform in the sunny quadrangle of Carleton University in 1964, in the middle of the Pearson years. Chaotic politics or not, those five years of our Nobel Prize winning Prime Minister's government made an indelible mark on Canada, well beyond our flag. The social security programs and commitment to equity which are the hallmarks of our civilised society were put in place.

Then our international development program was in its infancy and the agency I now head, just a gleam in the Prime Minister's eye. Canada looked outward to the world. Yet, in the 1960's, the pall of the cold war hung over us, and the threat of nuclear conflagration along with it.

There *were* lots of jobs, even for the 25% of the graduates who were young women, especially if they wanted to be nurses or teachers. But many of them had other ideas -- marriage as an occupation for example -- in spite of the tart comments of Laura Sabia, fighter for women's rights at the time. "Marriage", she said, "that takes ten minutes. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" What to do with the rest of our lives is the question for a day like this.

I have one suggestion -- embrace citizenship. Living in a democracy is demanding. It requires constant attention. It means much more than voting, which I do hope you did last week.

A world with more open borders for money and goods is a world where many wonder if there is anything to shield them from the uncertainties and bracing winds of the international market. What *is* certain is that we are working harder than ever, struggling to make sense of it all. But don't believe any of the rhetoric that says the nation state is dead. It is only nations that can, if

they wish, domesticate the raw power of that market. It is nations who define, through laws and budgets, the context within which we live our lives.

I am advocating that you embrace an engaged, socially-minded citizenship. Public institutions, like the elementary and high schools most of you attended, Medicare and, indeed, this University are at the heart of what we are as a country, what we are as people. Public purpose is more than public institutions. It is the recognition that as a society we must pull together. Ultimately we are in the same boat. We must understand that and act on that understanding if we are to avoid living behind walls. Walls to keep us from being robbed. Walls to keep the unnerving sight of poverty from our eyes. We must work together to avoid a future with a growing gulf between rich and poor. The challenge is to ensure that all people live decently, that their children have hope.

If it is hard to remember that we are in the same boat nationally, it is even more difficult internationally. We may not need convincing any more on the environment. It is only too obvious that pollution moves across borders. Distant conflicts involve us -- through our peacekeepers and through refugees who seek safe haven here. But what about just plain misery, of abuse of human rights? Their persistence is an attack on our common humanity. Our response is a moral requirement.

Social citizenship requires work: hard thinking, political organization, debate and discussion. It is exhilarating and often defeating. And where do we do that work? Political parties ought to be the answer. Political parties are the bedrock of democracy. In the recent election, we had the lowest turnout in years. Fewer than two-thirds of Canadians voted. Most of us don't work in political parties as members. I was shocked a year or so ago when a young woman I know who I thought ought to have known better said "Why do we have them, anyway. Couldn't there be some sort of ongoing polling on what we think about issues." Well, I don't think so -- not if we want to hear other people's views before we make up our own minds. Not if we want to blend our values with what serious research tells us about an issue. That's what is supposed to happen in good public policy making. We may work with voluntary groups, business associations or trade unions -- but it is through parties that many issues are melded together, so that special interests become common interests.

In addition, we must find new means of creating opportunities for public dialogue that will bring together people of different classes, races, and provinces. Not to replace parties or parliament -- but to develop the habit of dialogue. I sat in at just this sort of gathering in Austin, Texas the year before last -- a random sample of about five hundred Americans sat down together in small groups to discuss the choices that face America in economic policy, foreign policy and in the family. This extraordinary event was covered by hundreds of journalists. It was an attempt to recreate democracy as known in Athens, but with women included. It was inspiring to watch -- mainly because people from welfare mothers to Cambridge stockbrokers were actually having a

serious conversation about important public issues. The Canadian Policy Research Network has tried something similar in Canada. Canada West Foundation has experimented too.

There are ideas similar to this being tried all around the world -- from Sophia to Santiago but probably not Beijing. Even Peru's long suffering citizens have been at it. These are experiments. None is truly integrated in real politics, real policy choice. But they are vital evidence that it is too early to discount the nation state -- all over the world, people are attempting when given a chance, to set it right. Our own election last week has left us with even more significant regional cleavages. At least, that's what it appears. We need new ways of talking through that which divides us. We need new ways to prepare for a Canada of the future, in order to have a Canada of the future.

With imagination and large screen video conferencing, not to mention interpreters, there could be discussions across international borders, as well... a sort of International Cross Country Check-up with pictures. We must be creative in order to encourage the all-in-the-same-boat feeling, the respectful and sympathetic view of others. Voting is just the beginning of a citizen's responsibility.

The world that waits for you is different from my world of 1964. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones are now muzak and the Red Hot Chili Peppers have joined them. But while the Scots clone sheep, shanty towns around every third world city struggle for clean water and whole families live from garbage picking. With the multi-channel TV universe to distract and the constant chore of finding and keeping work, it would be easy to close hearts and minds to the challenges of being a citizen of the world, to the demands of social citizenship. There are many temptations to just say no.

Citizenship has always been about the dual search for representation and justice. Today you celebrate your accomplishments. Tomorrow, join the search for equity in your own country and the world. It must not be left to others. You matter. Your ideas matter. And, if you are determined, you will make a difference.