

Notes for a speech
by Her Honour Hilary Weston
Lieutenant Governor of Ontario
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His Honour is a Woman

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Title: His Honour is a Woman

Thank you, Nalini, for that generous introduction. And thank you, officials and friends of the Canadian Club of Toronto, for inviting me to join your long and distinguished roster of guest speakers.

Having been tarred in certain circles as "a lady who lunches", I confess to wondering whether I was wise to be seen having a meal in public at noontime.

But, of course, I was delighted to accept your kind invitation, not least because your organization has proven time and again that women know and care as much about the issues of the day as men - and can eat at the same time!

Such stereotypes die hard. Not long ago, at a dinner here in Toronto, I was seated next to a foreign ambassador to Canada, and we began by exchanging the usual pleasantries. He ribbed me about the title of Her Honour, which appeared on my place card.

The ambassador -who has been here for several years, I should add - then turned serious and asked, "And how is the Lieutenant Governor?"

He assumed, you see, that the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario was a man and that I was the Wife Of.

He could be excused, perhaps, as a stranger to our shores, but, in fact, that mistake happens more than you might think, even though I am the second woman to hold this post.

It happened, for example, when I stopped at a Tim Horton's in Timmins for a quick bite between events - so much for the glamour of the job or, indeed, for the lady who lunches! - and a man asked about the security agents.

"It's the Lieutenant Governor," he was told.

"Oh really," he said. "Which one is he?" Like the ambassador, he was surprised to discover that His Honour is a woman.

I'm sure that many of the women in this room meet that same kind of subtle, irritating prejudice-or worse-every day.

Bright, capable, energetic women may head two of our largest automobile companies; they may be important players on Bay Street or at Queen's Park, in our universities and hospitals, on our cultural and volunteer boards; but power is still seen as a man's game - and, in very many ways, it still is.

That has got to change.

There have been significant improvements in recent decades, of course, but the "glass ceiling" remains firmly in place and the efforts to shatter it have not been without personal cost.

That's especially true for those women who have been driven into the workforce, not so much by a desire for personal fulfillment, but as by economic necessity.

But almost every working woman, I'm sure, feels torn apart by her competing and very demanding roles - as wife, mother, daughter, breadwinner, or citizen.

A few months ago, on a visit to the Women's Health Care Centre at Toronto General Hospital, a top doctor offered me a fascinating - but disturbing - explanation of why more women are dying of heart disease (as opposed to cancer) than men.

When a man gets a chest pain, she explained, he assumes he's having a heart attack due to stress or overwork, immediately rushes off to a hospital, and is told to relax, etc.

But when a woman gets a chest pain, she'll often dismiss it as a bit of indigestion, a bit of neurosis, nothing serious. She'll take a pill and go on because she can't afford to relax, SO her actual condition is not discovered until much later and, by then, it's more acute and often fatal.

Whether that's the scientific explanation or not, it has the ring of reality because it fits the experience of so many women today. And the stress upon women puts a stress upon the whole of society.

Take, for example, the family. We know that it is the basic building block of our entire civilization. It's the first and most influential training ground for kindness (or hate), for sharing (or selfishness), for peace (or violence), for learning (or ignorance),.....

..... for self-development (or self-destruction). If that foundation isn't strong, what are the prospects for our schools and community associations, for our economy and social order?

Yet we really have no idea so far what the consequences will be of so many mothers going to work by choice or necessity, of so many single-parent families, of so many divorced households, and of so many elderly people on their own or in institutions. That very doubt, indeed, fuels much of the anxiety and guilt among today's women: Will my career suffer if I prolong my maternity leave? Will my children suffer if I leave them in daycare from breakfast to supper or have them return home after school to an empty house?

Will my marriage suffer if I stay in the office till midnight or sign up for a retraining program on the weekend? Will my parents suffer if I place them in a retirement home or a chronic-care ward?

I've heard that anxiety, I've felt it, as I traveled throughout the province, from Windsor to Ottawa, from Kitchener to Kenora, during my first year as Lieutenant Governor.

It's been an uplifting and challenging experience to get to know the people of this great province of ours better and try to make the role more contemporary.

That's why I get so infuriated when people ask me, either with concern or condescension, "How could you have taken on such a dreary job? Isn't it an archaic relic left over from, the nineteenth century? Isn't it pure drudgery?"

Well, no, as a matter of fact, however exhausting and frustrating it can be, it's an incredible job as well as great honour. I mean, what's so dreary about praising, publicizing, and rewarding the significant achievements of the women of Ontario or the enormous efforts of our voluntary groups?

What's so archaic about going to bat for our jobless or marginalized young people? And where's the drudgery in being able to tour a northern mine, or being invited to visit an inner-city school, or being given a hug by a child with a disability?

Apart from the ceremonial and social duties that come with being Her Majesty's representative in Ontario, the very number of speeches, visits, and events I am asked to do clearly demonstrates the value of the office.

Recently, in fact, I've been asked to do more than I'm allowed to do. A couple of weeks ago a false rumour was posted on the Internet that I might

be able and willing to stop the government's education bill if enough people petitioned me to do so.

In a mere five days I received almost 6000 telephone calls, more than 8000 faxes and letters, and over 16,000 E-mail messages from some 30,000 Ontarians!

I had to answer them that I have neither the power to require the government to amend a piece of legislation nor the authority to dissolve the legislature in this instance, though I did make their views available to the Minister of Education as a matter of public record.

It didn't take me long to discover that there are no guidebooks, beyond the traditional protocols, on how to be a relevant, modern, and pro-active Lieutenant Governor.

I quickly discovered that the position brings unique advantages if one wishes to serve the people of Ontario and advance certain causes - the greatest of all being that it provides a chance to give voice and profile to those who lack voice or profile.

Certainly we have much to be grateful for. The economy seems to have recovered from the brutal recession; governments are on the way to balancing their books; many sectors are now being rewarded for their perseverance and adaptability.

But the recovery is far from stable or universal, and there are many of our fellow-citizens who are hurting and in dire need of help.

Unemployment appears stuck at unacceptability high numbers, particularly among our youth - which should be of special concern to all of us because so many other social problems flow from it.

Companies and public institutions can no longer guarantee anyone a job for life or a better income. (Nor is it possible to guarantee our citizens the public services and social programs they have come to expect.)

Furthermore, according to the scholars and pollsters who analyze contemporary society, the roots of our anxieties are not just economic and political. They are also social and spiritual.

They have to do with factors such as the weakening of family values, the erosion of respect, the impersonality of daily life, and the lack of community. If that's so, we have a much more difficult challenge on our hands than balancing the budget or creating jobs.

On the many occasions I'm given to talk with people from all walks of life across Ontario, I can sense this need for a more caring, more compassionate society. People have so much to say, they can hardly get enough of it out. They want to talk about their work and their families; they want to share their ideas and their problems; they seem to treat me as both a neutral listening-post and a friendly conduit to their government leaders. Much of that comes with the job, of course.

People know that the Lieutenant Governor is not a political partisan primarily interested in getting their vote. They exhibit a real warmth and a genuine sense of ownership toward their Lieutenant Governor, no matter who it is.

(And that extends, by the way, to those who aren't of British origin, for they value it as a symbol of their adopted country). Nevertheless, I'm convinced that so many people feel they can speak frankly, and on many occasions with remarkable intimacy, because I'm a woman.

I experienced that intimacy, for example, when I met recently with women cancer patients.

They came from every social and economic background - single mothers, well-to-do widows, abused women, housewives with children - yet all of them shared a belief that their cancer was the result of the stress in their lives.

If that were the end of the story, it would be a gloomy one indeed. But I met them under rather more hopeful circumstances. For they were being visited and comforted by hospice volunteers - who were mostly other women.

As many of you probably know, the hospice movement is an outreach program in which volunteers connect directly and intimately with the dying and their families, usually at home, in the last, difficult months of their lives: to assist them, to console them, to simply be with them. And almost all of the terminally ill women I encountered told me that, as a result of the hospice volunteers, they had never felt so much relief from the pain, tension, and anxiety they had been holding inside themselves.

Ironically, in other words, on the very eve of their death, they were feeling more alive than ever before, more joyful, because some other human being - a complete stranger, no less - had come to hold their hand.

That, by itself, should be a source of inspiration to us all, but there is even more. For, as I subsequently found out, the volunteers were also feeling particularly alive and joyful.

You might think that their task would be morbid and depressing; certainly the hospice movement is not one of those fashionable causes that attract powerful fundraisers and government money;.....

..... yet it's grown from eight centers in Ontario to eighty in less than a decade and it's having little trouble recruiting new volunteers in an age when many other, more established associations are experiencing declining numbers and decreasing resources.

Part of the reason lies in the episodic nature of the hospice work, which doesn't require the same degree of long-term commitment.

But I also believe that many people - and especially women - are actually looking for its intense, emotional connection to others as the "condition", so to speak, for their involvement. Why?

Because those few hours a week spent with the dying put all the stress and confusion of the rest of our lives into perspective. In other words, even a bit of time devoted to helping others helps us to restore the balance necessary for our own happiness and well-being.

In the end, therefore, all I've learned in my first year as Lieutenant-Governor is something that I suspect most of you already know: community service is not a waste of our precious time. It is our precious time.

It isn't just a chore to be undertaken for the sake of some moral obligation or social connection.

I suggest it's the way to wholeness and to joy.

And it struck me again this week, reading about the signing of the landmines treaty in Ottawa, that every single one of us, whether a princess like Diana or a concerned citizen like Jody Williams, can make an extraordinary difference, against all odds, if we would simply connect our heads to our hearts.

I certainly haven't wanted to exaggerate my own contribution in these remarks. Many of you here, women and men alike, probably do more outside the glare of pomp and circumstance with even more impact. Indeed, my basic message today is that we must continue to work together to help build a more compassionate community.

It's up to us to keep on serving others, in our own ways and as much as we can, we should do this with at least some of the intelligence, energy, creativity, and hard work that have already made our province and country one of the envies of the world.

Thank you.