

The Explosion at the R.O.M.

After lunch speech to Canadian Club

20 January, 1969

When Mr. Deacon did me the honour of asking me to speak today I think he had certain misgivings. So he took me to a very enjoyable lunch and explained - very kindly - that he feared a Museum Director was not really the kind of speaker who was likely to inspire a good turnout among the captains of finance and industry who form the backbone of this club. So he felt that I should have the kind of punchy title to my talk that might attract you - all to be accompanied by a great deal of publicity! I learned of his choice of title a few days ago - "The Explosion at the R.O.M." My mind immediately turned to the activities of some of our political extremists and for a moment I feared that it might be misconstrued by some of our more ardent newshounds. I wouldn't be at all surprised to have a few calls from the press tomorrow. "Where was the explosion? Is there any damage done? Was anybody hurt?" And living in Sutton Place as I do, I think you will appreciate that I'm very sensitive to explosions. I thought of some of the lower reaches of our financial world and that too made me more nervous. Anyway I now feel something of a cross between a long-haired aesthete, a Bolshevik conspirator and a shady promoter. Its an odd feeling, I can assure you, for a dusty old Museum Director.

However, it would be less disturbing if, to a certain degree it wasn't true. I do have to put bombs under people. I do have to promote - though fortunately I have the best possible investment to sell. My job is to some degree also public relations, design, advertising, fund raising, administration, finance, education, connoisseur, scholar - even politics - in fact few jobs can have so many facets as that of a Museum Director - and therein, of course, lies its attraction. Publically at one moment one cuts the pathetic figure of a Bob Cratchitt struggling to melt the hard heart of a government Scrooge - the next that of a tycoon handling a really big business of the most vital importance to the community and to Canada as a whole. It is not easy to explain the complex nature of the explosion at Avenue and Bloor but I thought it might make some sense to try to put it in business terms. This proved a valuable exercise for myself - all of us connected with cultural affairs and the spending of public funds might well do this sometimes - and humbly I suggest that the reverse might be of value in the business field - that just as we should see if we give value for money, so the makers of our wealth should examine the ends for which that wealth is made.

As business men many of you must have experienced the problem I walked into two-and-a-half years ago. It was quite simply the familiar one of a business on the skids. The solution, or at least the approach to this problem in

the business world would, I suspect, be relatively straightforward. You would call in a whole team of consultants to take a good look at it and come up with an answer.

I imagine that they would look first at the plant and there they would find a venerable but obsolete, neglected and run-down place, untouched by major renovation for nearly 40 years and this in the midst of an unprecedented era of economic, educational expansion evident all around. They would be shocked by antiquated galleries, overcrowded work rooms, overloaded circuits, rooms that flood, general dilapidation, the absence of climate control - especially in the summer when the floors heave. Here in the heart of an evident explosion of economic prosperity was a dying epicentre. Nevertheless they would see collections and staff which are world-famous and certainly of a quality which will never again be assembled even given the most wildly generous resources.

The team would then assess the staff and here they would find a large group of loyal, dedicated, highly skilled and universally respected experts, called on by museums, scholars, government departments everywhere - but for long treated as second-class academic citizens. Their morale so low that in their despair many of them were merely waiting for a new management to appear for them to resign, to yield to the blandishments of other more progressive organisations prepared to offer them better pay, conditions and prospects.

The team would wonder what had made them stay and would soon come to the conclusion that, if the institution was to be saved at all, time was short.

Our consultants would then look at the product. Three years ago about 600,000 people a year were passing through and nearly 100,000 children were being taught in the museum - a tremendous service - with very little practical financial recognition. The collections were of extraordinary importance and it might have surprised them, as it surprises many people, to find such treasures here in Toronto, but the funds available to improve them were almost negligible - \$18,000 a year to share among 22 departments! They would, of course, look for the competitors and would find, to their surprise, that there were none. None locally, none nationally and very few internationally. They might well be perplexed - I was.

The investment side of the picture would certainly baffle the experts. The place was obviously so under-funded that it is a mystery how it ever stayed together let alone meet increasing demands. Commissions had reported on the state of affairs - even made suggestions - but absolutely nothing had been done. I don't need to expand on the subject. Despite the affection of the customers for the old place, it was patently falling apart before their eyes.

However, in the museum business there is no established consultant body to whom one can appeal for a solution and the Director must of necessity be a one-man consultant team

and provide a one-man executive solution. It is all very puzzling because it is not as if Canada enjoys so many such treasure houses of cultural and scientific wealth that it could afford to abandon its finest.

The analysis is relatively easy - if somewhat bewildering. The solutions are not so easy. They never are! First there's not much to be done about the plant except try to patch it up and then use it to the maximum, step up the efficiency, sweep away some of the cobwebs, look at the problems which had all been swept under the carpet, shudder and hope that no major disaster would happen too quickly before relief could be found. Set completion dates for gallery renovations which had been dragging on for 3-4 years - houseclean, inject a new energy, and all without money.

The problem of the staff was more difficult because they were at breaking point. For them something had to be done and what was difficult and dangerous - it had to be done very quickly. Since the lines of communication with the sources of our funds were almost non-existent, one had no guide-lines, no assurances, nothing. One had no right even to appear before the Committee which was responsible for granting funds in order to plead one's own case. Faced with complete apathy on one side and positive administrative inefficiency on the other, there seemed to me to be only one solution and that was by a major confrontation through the public media - and I shall always be enormously grateful to

these media for their appreciation of the urgency of the problem and their willingness to give it coverage, to awaken the public to the plight of a major institution. I am reminded of the Irish farmer riding his hay cart who picked up a passenger and explained to him how important it was to be kind to animals. A little while later the horse stopped and refused to move. Finally the farmer got down and gave it a terrific clout. When they were moving again the passenger said "I thought you said you had to be kind to animals." "Yes," said the farmer, "but first you have to get their attention." But, as I am sure many of you have reason to appreciate, an approach to the public media has its dangers, its pitfalls. One has got to have a cast-iron case. Everybody had to be involved quickly and, believe me, it is not easy - in fact, it was probably foolhardy - for an Englishman to come to an important position in another country and immediately launch an attack on surprised authorities. It is always a shock when a dormant volcano blows its top. I was upset to find I had to do it and I am sure that many were offended that it happened. Fortunately they were big enough people to be tolerant, to understand what I was trying to do and quickly to come to the rescue with funds. As a result the first problem of immediate collapse was averted, the budget has increased from 1.4 millions to 2.7 millions and we hope will reach a realistic level this year and next. Some of the staff who had, in fact, given me six months to

effect an improvement - stayed on. We promised to make the ROM a jewel in the crown of Ontario culture - we are keeping our promise. Come on a Sunday afternoon and battle with 8,000 visitors and you will experience the explosion yourselves.

The membership had to be stimulated. Two-and-a-half years ago it was 900 and now it is approaching 3,000. We needed an infusion of new interest and blood onto the Board and this has been achieved and I am now fortunate to have a group of public-spirited men dedicated to our progress and to whom I can appeal. In fact I have been fortunate in finding many good patriotic friends in the community for whom the institution and not petty personality considerations are paramount. We simply had to escape from the administration of the University - Excellent institution that it is, its problems were too large and complex to give real attention to the museum whose problems had driven the university to despair. I was again fortunate in having the backing of the President who resisted all attempts from any source to silence me, who let me do what I thought I needed to do, who preserved an unshakable faith in the Museum and an affection for it, who trusted my judgement. The staff had to know that somebody did care for them, to be made members of a team whose united strength would be invincible - as it now is.

The problem of investment is always difficult. The government responded sensitively and sensibly and started to take steps to improve our condition. The Metro School Board helped to contribute more for our services to children's education. The public now had to be involved in the process of revival. The results have been dramatic and have proved to me that the spirit which made this great museum is still alive. We started a Purchase Trust Fund which in 18 months has raised nearly \$150,000. Museums in the States, like Cleveland, have a fund of 70 millions, the Met. New York, 100,000 millions. Perhaps we shall never attain such affluence which enables them to attract the treasures of the world to their halls - but we do need at least 1 million quickly and I hope we shall never again see the days when we had only \$18,000 a year to share out. Col. McLaughlin gave his splendid Planetarium and then a fund of 1 million to run it effectively and in order that it should not be a further drain on the Museum's inadequate resources. Our Curators should not be forced to refuse even bargains. Curators must have the feeling that they can improve their collections, do their research, use their knowledge, enrich the public collections and leave to posterity a visible sign of their tenure of office. No responsible business would waste the know-how of one's staff. They'd be out of business. This is an area in which I feel that the community has a real and positive responsibility - and I know that we have relatively

little time in order to enrich the museum - certainly not beyond the end of this century which now beckons us thither.

Above all, we had to show that what support we are given would be well-spent, that the product, the services we offer to the public are worth the trust and investment. This is important - one must pay off. The profits, of course, cannot be measured in terms of dollars but I think that they are no less demonstrable. I am told that the Museum has become the centre of the cultural life of this surprising city - this magnetic city of wealth and hope. This year no less than 1,250,000 people will visit us - more than double in two years - more than attend hockey matches! About 400,000 children will receive instruction - far more than any other museum in the world. We have more and better exhibitions to bring the achievements of the world to this city, new, beautiful galleries. Publications are running at nearly one a week. These not only instruct our citizens but also carry our reputation across the world - no mean programme. If you are not members and don't receive our quarterly Rotunda - you are missing something. The Canada Council last year, for the first time, convinced that we were at last setting our house in order, supported us and gives indications that it is prepared to do more. I have asked the Secretary of State in Ottawa to recognise us as, in fact, the National Museum in Canada and give us a million a year for those activities which serve Canada as a whole at home and abroad. He seems sympathetic but I keep my fingers crossed. Sympathy

does not always cost very much. When he was in South America last fall and talked Canada everybody talked the R.O.M. It helped. We have expeditions around the world doing everything from collecting birds, animals and insects to digging up ancient cities and dynosaurs and all this on less than most institutions would pay for a survey. So much energy goes into scraping together pennies for this work. Canada, wealthy though it is, does little enough in the field of international cultural and scientific work that it can afford to starve an institution which in so many fields for nearly half a century, and in many instances alone, has preserved our reputation. Much of what goes on in the museum is not immediately visible but it is essential to its life.

To state all this briefly - there is a tremendous fund of gratitude among the public for what the museum has done in the past, a great sympathy for our condition and good-will for our recovery. Once started, the impetus for revival has kept up and gains momentum daily. This city which sometimes seems to stagger from one failure to another, from one indecision to another, from one lost opportunity to the next, is hungry for success and advancement and the Museum has proved its success. The ordinary people of this city have not looked in vain to its most venerable institution. We owe this to the united efforts of a great group of men and women who know their jobs and put a tremendous amount of energy into doing them unselfishly and well.

So, I've talked about the past, about the forces which have made up the explosion but the future is much more interesting and more exciting. The possibilities for this great museum are almost limitless. Above all, it must expand for it is leaking at every joint. We have the room to build a new wing into which we should put the art departments for they are suffering grievously from lack of temperature control and it would disturb any responsible person to see priceless treasures falling apart. Then the natural history departments can expand within the present building. We have the plans made for this as well as for a proper children's museum. Some of the science departments have never had galleries at all, some are hopelessly inadequate and we are missing some wonderful opportunities. We can, I assure you, give this city about which we all boast, something really to boast about - a museum which will be the envy of the Continent - and when you think that a new museum is being opened in the U.S. at the rate of one every two-and-a-half days you will appreciate that this is a real challenge - but we can and will do it. Unless you know museums you cannot appreciate the strength and value of this one. We must expand our services throughout the whole province - travelling exhibitions and lectures, technical support and advice, design services for communities anxious to start their own small museums. More and more corporations are beginning to realise

that if they want top personnel they must provide the kind of services which attract people - more than just hospitals, houses and schools - these are standard for this continent. We intend to be the spearhead of our cultural life and health. We can train the personnel of the future. We have started with two travelling museums, large centennial caravans which are being transformed. The first will show the work we do for archaeology at home and abroad and the second will demonstrate the natural life of Ontario. However, we worked out that if a caravan visits every community which wants it, it will take ten years to get round this province alone, a province larger than France - and that's a sobering thought. We could use ten such caravans. The first is finished but we have no money to run it. We are acting on faith that the money will come. We would like to open the building five nights a week. We need a new restaurant instead of the 70-seat pig-bin we now have. How can one service 1,250,000 visitors in a 70-seat slum? The signs are promising that we shall get it but really we need three restaurants - one for children, one for the passing trade, so to speak, and a first-class restaurant where one would be proud to have the finest food, to take our visitors, to enjoy the most gracious of all surroundings - perhaps a frill - but why not? What an opportunity that would be! Our galleries must be brought up to date, our staff given the research facilities they need. We would like to do more

for teenagers and for the aged. We are expected to be all things to all men and, although overcrowded, we are prepared willingly to accept the demands made upon us. I could fill another hour with our plans - their success depends upon only one thing - on financial support which the government and people like yourself are prepared to put into it. Our Minister of Education, Mr. Davies, and his Department of University Affairs have shown signs that they are willing to support something which pays off so handsomely - and, believe me, the investment is relatively small. Some companies like International Nickel have supported us and others are beginning to see the mileage they can get out of 1,250,000 visitors a year in a dynamic, absorbing organisation. They are the smart ones. The money - private, institutional and governmental - is here in Ontario and I feel confident that it will come. It must. The heart of this community is strong, its muscles are firm, its mind is quick, its vitality unbounded. I have faith that we shall get our priorities right, that what I am told is the great Canadian fault of chasing the new and untried and neglecting the proved will not apply to our future. We are exploding - constructively, in a way which can only enrich this land and everybody who has the privilege of being near enough to enjoy the ROM. But, ladies and gentlemen, in this, like in anything, you get only what you are prepared to pay for.

I have refrained from mentioning my own part in this future - but I must here say that having entrusted me with the Directorship it would be sheer folly not to use me to the full. I figure I have my most active ten years ahead of me and not to fill them, not to make me work for my keep, would be a most misplaced investment in skilled management. I doubt if any corporation would do so.

There is only so much one can do with antiquated overcrowded plant - and we have reached that point. Soon it will be pointless to try to do more and a good businessman would face up to the conclusion - expand or retrench. Retrenchment under the pressures we have is impossible even if one wanted to - and we don't!

The very day I finished writing this brief talk I received a letter which I would like to read to you. It is from Mrs. Joyce Hoskin of 438 Maple Avenue, Oakville.

"Dear Sir,

A few months ago I visited the Museum, and was extremely impressed with the Museum of Mineralogy. I thought it was extremely attractive and fascinating. I thought you were to be congratulated, but it is not in my nature to write letters of this kind.

However, I visited the Museum again this week, and spent some time in the Planetarium (I didn't see the filmshow) with my teenage son.

I was so impressed with the whole set up of the Planetarium (including the Music), not only with the set up but with the knowledge it imparts with great clarity. I am a housewife with not too much academic schooling, so have much ignorance in many spheres, and I never realised fully until that day how small the earth is in relation to the other planets. Impressing people is easy, I suppose, but I learned also.

I also re-visited the mineral exhibit and was re-enchanted with that.

So I would just like to say thank you and congratulations.

Memory becomes distorted, and if I am wrong, please forgive me, but the memories I have of the museum 7 or 8 years ago when we first visited it, are that it was just another stodgy museum - I certainly don't feel that now.

Yours truly,

Joyce Hoskin (Mrs) "

Mrs. Hoskin has stated far more simply yet more eloquently than I can, the heart of the matter - and just one letter like that, and we receive many, suddenly makes it all very well worth while.