

RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK

NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS

BY

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ON THE

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**PROVINCE HOUSE
CHARLOTTETOWN, PEI**

Thank you very much your honour for that very warm, and generous introduction, and thank you all for braving another island day to come here tonight to join in this celebration of this precious thing we call democracy.

What a fitting, and wonderful place it is that we have this meeting tonight. As you all know, this building, province house, played a critical role in the development of Canada, and is one of our most important historic monuments to that powerful concept for that country called Canada.

It's an honour to stand here today in the same place as my late grandfather, Judge Charles Gavan Duffy, who like you Madame speaker, was speaker of the legislative assembly here in the early 1920's, and we just flipped open the book out there, and there he is, and somebody even said there was a familiar resemblance, probably the lack of hair on the top.

Even more importantly, we are standing next to the building named after George Coles, who, as you've heard was one of the leaders in the campaign in PEI for responsible government.

Last month when Madame speaker asked me to lead off this celebration of 160 years of responsible government on the island, i immediately said "yes" – and then felt the grand clong that, 'urgh', oh my god what did i agree to do? And how can i make responsible government interesting?

**My anxiety was increased when i saw the announcement on the website that made some mention of "witty"... presentation on responsible government.
anyway, the um, i resorted in this case to what I've resorted to so often in the past in my life in broadcasting, and that is when you come**

into a morning of an hour long TV show, and you have practically nothing on the board, and people are saying “what are we going to do? What are we going to do? how are we going to fill the hour?” i would say well it’s time to pray to the gods of breaking news, and hope that something bad happens to somebody somewhere that we can then spend an hour talking about because right now it does look pretty barren.

So there i was thinking about responsible government, and my grandfather, and how we could make this come alive here tonight, and all of a sudden Tunisia, and Egypt, and the unrest in the middle east erupted, and i thought, aha, what better metaphor for what we went through 160 years ago than what we’re seeing on our television screens every day?

In Egypt a dictator left office relatively peacefully but now what we’re seeing tonight, and today in Libya seems to be a virtual civil war. What we are seeing is repressed people demanding what George Coles argued for us islanders 160 years ago.

In the Middle East they used Facebook, and twitter to help them organize, to help them fight for democracy, to help them topple those dictatorships. it worked in Egypt, and seems to be working elsewhere in the middle east except in Libya where we seem to have a special case where a dictator who has been entrenched for many years seems prepared to use the army against his own people.

Social media can be a very powerful tool but it’s just that, a tool. what can peaceful people do when faced by a dictator who doesn’t hesitate to turn the army against them?

When social media are used by people with passion, and aspirations, with goals, with energy, it can achieve so much, we’ve seen that. it

can be a shield against thugs, we saw that in Egypt but it cannot replace the true organizing forces for democracy; people, minds, action, ideas.

We've all heard that social media played a big part in getting barrack Obama elected president of the United States. it certainly helped him raise more money than anybody else in that political race.

But after two years of his presidency many, many Americans are frankly disappointed by their president. A majority of Americans say they disapprove of the way he's running the country, and fully 40% are even stronger saying they strongly disapprove.

But where is social media now? Americans are using it sure, but they're using it to complain, to throw digital stones at the president, and at the Democratic Party. Or, if you're a democrat, you're using it to vilify your opponents, the republicans.

But think of the amazing things the Egyptians, and the Tunisians have achieved using social media as a force for change, and i can only imagine that there must be a way that we can use it for more than what we're seeing in North America, and in the United States, in particular, today.

Not just to snipe at each other, or to set up Facebook petitions, or to insulate ourselves in an echo chamber of partisan self-congratulation. We can, and should be using the technologies that we have today to discuss, and debate policy options.

Just as, in the dawn of responsible government here, the fathers of confederation came together in person to discuss, and debate the right policies for this great nation, Canada. Technology now allows us to re-create those debates on a mass scale.

What's the future of something as vital as responsible government in a world where civic engagement is drying up?

The record is not encouraging. From the 1950s to the 1980s, years most of us in this room remember, more than 70% of Canadians – 7 in 10 -- turned out to vote in our general elections. but in the last decade, voter turnout has dropped to barely more than 60% -- 6 out of 10-- and that turnout which was 58 or 59%, Ian probably has the number at the top of his head,-- seems destined only to decline further.

Some things were big motivating power, motivators. In '84 that's the election where Brian Mulroney beat John Turner who had replaced Pierre Trudeau in the '84 election, the turnout was more than 75%. Eight years later, in '92, 72% turned out to cast a ballot when Jean Chretien came to power. Eight years after that, in 2000, Jean Chretien was still in power, but voter turnout had fallen from the 72% when he first was elected to 61%.

And eight years after that, in 2008, our last federal election, 58.8% of voters bothered to cast their ballots.

I worry that Canadians – and especially young Canadians -- are demonstrating a worrisome disengagement from politics. They vote in far fewer numbers than older generations.

I turned to my trusty assistant, Mary McQuaid, the other day, and I said "Mary, what do you think is the biggest problem facing Canada today, is it ignorance or is it apathy?" and she shrugged, and said "Mike I don't know, and frankly I don't give a damn".

She's always a good sport when i...that's the witty or half witty part of the speech.

But instead of being active in the process of government, those who have any interest in our politics seem to go online to join Facebook groups, and sign petitions. But too often, that's it. That's where it ends. No real voting in real elections, no showing up at a party rally or meeting.

Not joining a party, not going to a convention to hammer out policy where you would actually see your opponent face to face.

Earlier tonight i was on compass, and we talked about the seal hunt, and i was struck that so many of the people who are opposed to the seal hunt have never met a sealer. you know, you get a different idea of life, and of people's priorities when you actually have a chance to discuss with those with whom you are so adamantly, and intractably opposed -- what it is that causes them to do whatever it is they're doing that turns you off so much, and sometimes you discover whether it's visiting the oil sands in northern Alberta or the seal hunt, and talking to real sealers, and people who live on the margins in our society, you get a different perspective.

And that used to be the Canadian way; confrontation, conciliation, and then a good old Canadian compromise. I used to refer to them as the three Cs of political life in Canada.

But now the three Cs seem to have disappeared, and we have people who are in a constant state of conflict, and echoing or voicing that conflict in a direct way i.e. through their communications device but not actually engaging in a debate or that dialogue that produces learning, and eventually compromise.

So tonight i guess I'm urging everyone here to spread the word to those who didn't come tonight but who are interested in politics, and I'm urging you all to become born-again Canadians. To turn to your siblings, your children, your neighbours, the dead-beat brother in law, and encourage them all to get involved because the challenges that face us as a nation are as big as the challenges that faced George Coles, and his colleagues 160 years ago.

What we've got to do is find a way to deal with the issues that affect us particularly. Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand are the only four countries in the world that have the baby boom problem. If we boomers are a problem. we don't think we are, and we have the political clout to make sure that we get well treated by the political system otherwise we'll speak up in a loud voice.

After all we invented rock and roll, we knew Elvis, and the Beatles, and we are the boomers after all.

but the fact of the matter is having this huge cohort going through our population is going to mean a tremendous challenge not just for the pension system that's coming up but also for our Medicare, and our healthcare system, the nursing homes.

these are real serious problems that affect everyday individuals, and as much as we may want to tweet, and twitter, and Facebook, and opine on the internet what's going to be required to solve these problems is a generation of the kind of will that we saw that came together 160 years ago, and said "hey, we have a better idea, we are in a position to (be in) charge of our destiny".

I look around this room, and i look at the collective brain power, and i say holy cats, we should, you know, make a Canadian parliament just

out of the people in this room, and we'd have a pretty strong team to put on the ice.

But instead so many people who have something to offer are opting out because they don't like the tone of politics today.

I see Donna profit here god bless her, she's out there working for democracy, and uh. Whatever happens Donna, you will never experience anything like this other in your life, I'm sure.

You talk to people who do it the rewards are great, the sense of satisfaction, and the sense of accomplishment. the former lieutenant governor, Marian, is here who's been down that road.

But by god, the torture of the damned that you have to go through to get there, and the kind of calumnies, and vindictiveness, and so on that people who don't know any better but who feel they know, lay out are something that daunts most people, and only the very strong survive.

So i think we need a new collegiality in our public discourse. i think we need to use these new tools like Facebook, and the electronics to try to get ourselves into a position where we were 160 years ago.

Back to the future or the future by going back. to create the kind of broad based, well meaning, discussion that we have people of good will on all sides who have points of view about where we should be going in the future, who don't find themselves vilified as being some kind of terrible person because they have an idea that might be different than the conventional wisdom.

If we're going to get through this, and continue to build this great country we need all ideas, and we need frank, and honest, and open debate, and i think we need to open the discussion to as many as possible.

We've got to work together to craft the best policy, to find the most agreeable compromise, there's that c-word again, and to build solid consensus.

We must do more than expect the government to give us what we want. Instead remember that to vote we have to devote the kind of commitment that is required to give the government those policies, those ideas.

We can't just sit there, and say "make me happy" we have to say 'this is what's required, and we'll all work together to achieve it to make the largest number of people happy, and content in their lives.

We must do more than just pay our taxes, and mind our own business.

Because the legacy of responsible government is that it is—as much today as it ever was—everyone's business.

Thank you all very much for your time, and I'd be happy to take any questions you might have.