

The Right Hon. Paul Martin
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- Thank you, President Ricketts and members of Acadia University's Faculty and Board of Governors for this honorary degree, which I am very proud to receive. And thank you for the invitation to speak to the Class of 2021, who I want to congratulate for their hard work and who probably think that after all they've been through, that I should have had to work a little harder to get my degree.

Again, to the graduates, let me thank your parents especially your mothers as it's Mother's Day. Your friends and your loved ones who supported you all the way because Canada will benefit enormously from the contributions you will make to our future.

At Acadia, you have been taught to innovate, to create and to master a storm. This is important because your generation is being asked to rise to the challenges which are of a magnitude, we haven't seen since the world wars. How you choose to face those challenges will have a lasting impact, not just on you but on the generations that will follow you.

The two overwhelming issues that you face are hardly as secret. The first is climate change. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, 2020 is on track to be one of the three warmest years ever recorded. All of which occurred after 2015 even more concerning the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases continued to rise this year despite the fact that we all spent that time tucked away in our homes because of COVID-19.

The second issue is the pandemic which has ravaged our world and our way of life. We were not prepared for COVID-19. You know this. You all made countless personal sacrifices towards our greater goal of controlling and eradicating the virus. Had the world been more prepared, your sacrifices would not have had to be so great.

Clearly the world is prepared to work together today to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19. The question is, are we prepared to work together tomorrow to prevent the next pandemic, which is unknown?

In this context, some members of the World Health Organization have set up an independent commission to explain what a new normal might be. The argument they make is valid. COVID-19 was only the latest microorganism to jump from animals to humans. It was able to do so because we created the conditions that made it a probability.

Quite clearly, we need to invest in early warning and better data systems so that future infections are identified more rapidly. A pandemic by its very nature is a global attack and so the response to the next one must be based on collaborative research, information sharing and a renewed support for multilateral bodies such as the WHO.

Here Canada must play a decisive role as nations struggle to come together to ensure the future. What does this mean? It means we must learn from history.

After the First World War, countries refused to work together. They created the League of Nations, which was the forerunner to the United Nations but then they shut it down. They refused to work together economically causing the greatest depression in modern history. And ultimately, they gave birth to World War II.

On the other hand, following the Second World War, countries joined together. They created the United Nations and the great multilateral institutions all in the recognition that it was impossible to carry on without the infrastructure supporting collective action.

The result was more positive change and the strongest global economy in recent history from which everyone has reaped the benefits. Yours and the generations to follow must not allow the world to repeat the same mistakes that were made after the First World War.

And Canada has a vital role to play here especially as the superpowers continue to disagree at arms length. For Canada to play this role, we must maintain a leadership position in the G20 and in the other multilateral institutions to which we belong. And why do I raise this at your graduation?

It's because we are a democracy and your voices, and your opinions will be of great importance to the role Canada plays.

While governments initiate change, it is people who drive it, who sustain it, who never let go regardless of the politics at play.

Whatever you do, if you're a professor, an artist, a computer scientist, a researcher, you must push for global cooperation. These are not empty words because if you find it within yourselves to harness the full breadth of what Acadia has given you, working in community, the ability to innovate, you will be at the forefront of those leading us to better outcomes.

This is the challenge that I would put to you today. And I know that you are capable of rising to it. While I was studying up for this event as any good student would do, I read Acadia's strategic plan. In it, President Ricketts articulated a perspective which I could not support more strongly. And I quote, "You are the first generation of students who will graduate into a world that is physically transforming at a rate never before seen and you would experience not only the human world is changing, but the planet itself is transforming before our eyes." End of quote.

Graduates, you came to Acadia to learn and to pursue the next great innovation. The next great dream, the next great collaboration. Let there be no mistake. You must hold on to what you have been given here. It is the anchor that will keep you rooted to what matters as we all face up to our responsibility to each other as Canadians and as citizens of the world. And on this, I would make my final request of you.

Due to the very nature of our country which is a great mosaic of diversity, Canadians have a unique opportunity to work with those who seek a global unity of action but at an important facet of doing so is to demonstrate that we can deal with the chasms within our own country especially those which arise from the treatment of the First Nations, the Métis Nation and the Inuit of this land.

For all of us, reconciliation is the crucial moral and economic issue of our time. Indigenous people are the youngest, and the fastest growing segment of our population. They have not been given the tools they need to succeed.

Even today, 40% of Indigenous children live below the poverty line. 50% of children in child welfare are Indigenous. Imagine the trust that needs to be rebuilt. Reconciliation isn't just a word. It's a very real practice that each and every one of us must actively support and indeed live. It is the road that allows young Indigenous people to pursue their ambitions in Canada's business world.

Ambitions such as were demonstrated in Nova Scotia a few months ago by the purchase of 50% of one of Canada's largest seafood companies by a coalition of Mi'kmaq Nations opening doors for the next generation of their young. This is an example of people refusing to accept a status quo that doesn't work.

And with that, I suspect the example you'd like me to follow is not to speak too long. So let me leave you with one last comment.

As you enter the world as alumni, know that Acadia has given you a gift that is priceless. It is the knowledge that you can make the difference. When you feel the urgency in you, use it to fight for a world that works. Don't settle. Don't settle when your question feels like I wasn't really answered. Don't settle when you can build bridges not barriers. Thank you.