

May I Ask You

[Remarks by the Honourable Horst A. Schmid (Minister, Alberta Culture)
to the Tri-Club Dinner in Winnipeg on September 14, 1978.]

May I ask you now to hear me, and in your own hearts try to understand
the reality of what I have to say?

I'll speak not of pipelines and natural gas...

Not of the fabulous tarsands of McMurray,

nor of the vast coal deposits that have become so desirable in industry again. I am not thinking of ranching,
farming, forestry, or small business -- important though all these are -- nor even of the complex
industrialization mushrooming within this province (and adding to the attendant problems of implosion and
pollution).

With the utmost respect, I speak of our home, the people who make it what it is,
our oneness now threatened, our country from the Pacific to the Atlantic,
from the U.S. border to the to the Arctic Ocean: our nation.

"I have visited in England one of those models of Gothic architecture which
the hand of genius, guided by an unerring faith, has moulded into a harmonious whole.
This cathedral is made of marble, oak, and granite.
It is the image of the nation I would like to see Canada become. For here I want
the marble to remain the marble;
the granite to remain the granite;
the oak to remain the oak; and out of all these elements,
I would build a nation great among the nations of the world."

Sir Wilfrid Laurier

Our people in the West spring from over sixty different nationalities.

They have one thing in common: their fathers came here in search of a dream, at about the time Laurier was
trying to bring into being the nation Canada would one day be,
each people retaining its own character, yet each part of a magnificent mosaic,
one people making up "...a nation great among the nations of the world..."

So they came:

the Voyageurs and the Scotsman, the Irish, the Scandinavians, and the Ukrainians in "Sifton's sheepskins";
the Hungarians, the Germans, the Italians, and the Britishers, heartsick and
tired of the hates and wars that (time and again) put out the lamps of Europe.

They came: Americans forever seeking new frontiers for their independent natures;
Japanese fleeing the teeming tenements of the Far East.

They came with nothing -- nothing but the fierce determination that
there they would prove that any man, given any chance, can do as well as others.

They came, giving of their very lifeblood to this land,
that their children could walk in it as befits common children of a common father.

Our prairie people -- most of them untrained, uneducated when they came -- did what no generation before
them ever did: . They beat "the prairie locusts" as they beat the drought... and
they turned the prairie desert into a bread basket for the world.

Miracles?

Yes.

But the real miracle was the transformation that they wrought in their own lives, the miracle that Laurier dreamed would make this nation great among the nations of the world: unity in the diversity of the West, Québec, the Maritimes, Ontario.

They learned that each man's problem was his neighbour's problem. The problem of plague was no worse than the problem of ethnic bigotry, of religious hate, so prevalent still in other countries. They fashioned their life so that in Canada -- if anywhere on Earth -- men could truly live, laugh, and labour as friends, as brothers: and brothers they become, as the children of one nationality married those of another... Theirs to be the best of all worlds.

Some witty fellow has said that a Canadian is a man whose parents were born in Scotland; who has married a nice Italian girl from Québec; heads up a Jewish wholesale business; rides downtown in a German Volkswagen, to see a play written by an Irish author and performed by English, black, American, and Scandinavian actors, then takes his family to a Ukrainian restaurant where he orders Chinese sweet and sour... all in honour of his daughter's forthcoming wedding to a Polish engineer she met while majoring in Greek Classics at the university.

"We are all Canadians.

Below the island of Montréal, the water that comes from the north from Ottawa unites with the waters that come from the western lakes, but uniting they do not mix. There they run parallel, separate, distinguishable, and yet are one stream, flowing within the same banks, the mighty St. Lawrence, and rolling on toward the sea, bearing the commerce of a nation upon its bosom: a perfect image of our nation. We may not assimilate, we may not blend, but for all that we are still the component parts of the same country."

That statement was uttered by Laurier on December 10, 1886, ninety-one years ago. Substitute Western Canada, Québec, the Territories, Ontario, and the Maritimes for Ottawa and Montréal, and I suggest that in Canada, our people are one stream, a proud and generous people, a free, united people.

Does such idealism make men soft? Unsophisticated?

If you visualize Alberta's land and its seasons, what would you see?
You would see the drilling rigs working through the long sub-zero nights.
Have you ever counted the cost of one dry well?
Have you ever counted the cost of one bad landing when
thirty-two men died in the snow-shrouded wastes in the freezing waters of the high Arctic night?
Soft men?

On the prairies, can you visualize the combines harvesting the seas of golden wheat?
A beautiful picture -- you know how those seas were created!

In our bush land, they were carved ten acres in a year by axes and human hands.
The fathers grubbed the standing trees,
the children piled the brush and burnt it.
The mothers pulled the tough, hard roots from the breaking.

Before the days of Medicare, some of those mothers ruptured themselves, pulling roots from the clearing.
They went to early graves, part of the price that has been paid
for the riches of the West today... riches we all share, riches the world shares.

But the riches we count most dear are not grain and cattle and oil.

If I hesitate now, it is because
I don't know what being a Canadian -- what living in Canada -- means to you who were born here.
But I can tell you some of the things it means to me.

In a world where crowned heads are disappearing, it means -- for one thing -- the Monarchy.
Perhaps I come by this respect and appreciation for our Queen honestly, because Bavaria (where I was born)
was traditionally a peaceful monarchy. Did you know that the name of one of our Bavarian Palatine princes
was the first to be inscribed
on the Charter, granted by Charles of England, incorporating "The Gentlemen and Company of Adventurers
Trading Into Hudson's Bay" -- today's Hudson's Bay Company?

But being quite objective about the Monarchy, which would you which would you rather have:
a dictator, who has not even tradition to restrain him -- or a Queen?...
A president -- as in the American system -- who must scabble every four years for enough votes to keep him
in office?... Or a Royal Head, above the pattern of changing politics,
whose material wants are of no concern,
whose real wealth is the affection of her people?

The monarchy is a visible reminder of our past... of the long struggle towards human betterment... a symbol
of reassurance in an age that is frightening not only to older people, but especially to our youth.

When everything is being swept away in a floodgate of change,
people just anchor their faith to something unchanging.
Maybe not without reason is some of our youth picking up the beard styles, the ruffles, and bows
of what we still refer to as "the Victorian era" -- an era identified with a Queen.

Our present Queen -- to whom the word "gracious" can most surely be applied: a model wife and mother,
every inch a lady -- gives our youth and ourselves a tradition with which they (and we) can identify... a
formality and pageantry that add richness to our lives.

So, when I think of the things Canada has given me,
it may sound strange to your ears to hear it -- but this country gave me back a Monarch.
Perhaps not until you have lived under dictators and tyrants do you understand fully what this means.

You do not have to be a Queen to receive a royal welcome in Canada: this "part of Canada"
gave me that -- in full measure and overflowing -- when I came here as a youth of nineteen.

So I came to Canada -- a boy who could speak some French and Italian, but not English (and I thought
French was the national language of the country!) -- and I would like to tell you what Canada means to me.

It means working in the gold-mining camps of Yellowknife, first as a ditchdigger, then

on a mucking machine, then as a cage-tender as men go three thousand feet into the bowels of the Pre-Cambrian Shield to search, drill, and blast hard rock for gold -- working with all kinds of men, of all classes and creeds, everyone greeting you as an equal... and no one ever uttering the epithet "D.P."

You know what Canada means to me?

Being asked to play the role of an Englishman in a Noel Coward play -- me, Horst Schmid, still with a Bavarian accent so thick you could cut it.

Canada, to me, will always mean going week after week into CKUA radio station to broadcast musical programmes to people who are sometimes homesick for their native land... Of being asked to become a director of the Edmonton Opera Association, at a time when you are an unknown.

You know what Canada means to me?

It means towns and villages where people still trust one another so much that they forget to lock their cars, let alone their doors...

Where a man you've never met hands you a beer over the garden fence -- or, better still, helps you dig the post-holes...

Where, absolutely unknown, you go campaigning in an election and people -- even the ones who tell you they're not going to vote for you -- urge you to stop and have a cup of coffee, even to come around to the back and take a dip in the swimming pool...

Where their kids offer you a share of their lemonade.

As a candidate in 1971, you may well understand that as an immigrant, I told myself that if one hundred people tell me to go back where I came from, I would withdraw my nomination. As it was, I knocked on 5,746 doors and not once did anyone even indicate this thought to me. However, one of the doors I knocked on was answered by someone with an obvious German accent... in fact, someone who I knew. When I asked him to vote for me, he told me he was a member of another party. Guess what: I told him to go back where the hell he came from.

These are no little things, ladies and gentlemen.

These are the things that make life worthwhile.

These are the things perhaps you find nowhere else on Earth anymore.

These are the things I want to guard and pass on to my children... and yours.

And they are some of the things Canada means to me.

Many thoughts past through my mind -- one being that, in Canada, we do not even stop to realize what peace really means nor the blessing it brings us.

Consider the world about us -- not just brother fighting against brother in so many lands, or the news that deluges us daily of hate and assassination, of upheaval and disaster.

And thus I could go on.

Instead, I will refer -- for the last time -- to the night I was elected.

As sons a long way from their parents will do, I phoned them. I spoke to my mother.

"Would you believe," I said, "that I was elected an MLA?"

"You mean you were appointed a sort of honorary MLA -- for the work that you've been doing -- or something?" she said.

"No -- an honest-to-goodness MLA, chosen by the people."

"Horst," said my mother, "would you believe we have elected a Turk to the Bavarian legislature?"

Since such a supposition is impossible in Bavaria, my answer was "No". In fact, I told her that if she said that, I'd think she was crazy.

"Well, Horst," she said, "that's what I think you are -- out of your mind!"

I guess she really didn't believe it till I returned to Bavaria, where never in a thousand years could I have become a cabinet minister.

During a visit there at a reception given for the province of Alberta by the Bavarian legislature, I was presented with a gold medal.

They did not know who I was, really -- a cabinet minister from Alberta -- and you should have seen their faces when I talked to them, one by one along the reception line, each in his own local dialect.

Will you believe, that at that moment I knew to the full how privileged I was...

How lucky I was to have come to this land -- and with what pride I represented Alberta and her people? As a Canadian?

Well... you and I, ladies and gentlemen, unworthy or helpless though we may feel, are the builders of our nation, our Canada.

Each one of us has a responsibility.

Each must have respect for the rights of others.

Each must see in his neighbour the dignity and worth he wants in this life for his own.

I have faith that we will think beyond the moment...

That we will build well...

That, remembering what brought your ancestors here and

their sacrifices to build the Canada we share today... we will work in the only way

that befits Canadians -- together on that keystone of true nationhood -- that we may pass on to our children a finer, richer legacy than even our own parents dreamed of.

One nation -- great among the nations of the world! Our home! Our Canada!