

*At the Annual Convocation of
McGill University
on Monday, 30 May 1966
1891 students received Diplomas or Degrees.*

Honorary degrees of Doctor of Laws
were conferred upon

HER EXCELLENCY MADAME GEORGES P. VANIER

SIDNEY T. FISHER

DR. EUGENE A. FORSEY

SIR WILLIAM T. HILDRED, C.B., O.B.E.

THE HONOURABLE DUFF ROBLIN, M.L.A.



CONVOCATION ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY EUGENE ALFRED FORSEY,
M.A. '26, PH.D. '41, M.A., LL.D., D.Lit.
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH, CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS

YOUR EXCELLENCIES, Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Principal, Members of the Board of Governors and of the Senate, Fellow Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Merely to share the same platform with Her Excellency and the other distinguished honorary graduates of to-day is an honour far beyond my deserts. Finding myself in such company, I can only say, in the words of a song popular a good many years ago, "If I'm dreaming, don't wake me too soon". I need hardly add that I am deeply grateful. I should be even more grateful to be merely a silent and spellbound listener to a Convocation Address delivered by any one of my four colleagues, all of whom possess qualifications for the task which I am totally unable to discover in myself. I hope that by the time I have finished, the agreement with that remark will not be too hearty and widespread.

My first, and most pleasant, duty is, of course, to offer to the University my thanks, and those of the other honorary graduates, for the degrees you have just conferred on us. My own thanks have a special flavour, for two reasons. For one, by a series of happy coincidences, all my McGill degrees have come to me on my birthday or the day after. For another, I can't help feeling some satisfaction, not untinged with amusement, in the contrast between McGill's opinion of me now, as expressed in Dean Cohen's citation, and its opinion thirty-odd years ago, when I had it on the authority of the then Principal that I was one of the university's two leading

headaches. Perhaps I've improved; perhaps McGill has changed; perhaps I deserved the reproaches of those days as little as the kind words of these; or perhaps it is simply time "Annihilating all that's made To a green thought in a green shade".

My second, and equally pleasant duty is to offer the congratulations of the honorary graduates to the real ones, those who, unlike us, have *earned* their degrees. Here also I speak with special feeling, for my own daughter and my cousins' daughters are among them.

I have sometimes said that what this country needs most is a good supply of green baize bags, to pop down over the heads of public speakers and shut them up; and I have always added that, as one of Canada's leading chatterboxes, I should be happy to have the first bag popped over my own head. So if I had the courage of my convictions, I suppose I'd stop now. But that would throw the whole timetable into confusion; it would be a violent breach with tradition; and it would appear rude and disrespectful. Besides, there are certain things I want to say, and I am bold enough to hope that they may be sensible and useful.

You will be relieved to hear that I am not going to talk about any of the basic problems which beset our country. There is only one of them on which I feel at all qualified to speak, and it would take much too long to do justice to that; and if I tried to deal with it in short compass, many of you might find me as wrong-headed and offensive as I did a Convocation speaker last year, elsewhere, whose oration seemed to me to verge on high treason.

There is something more fundamental than anybody's particular solution to any of these problems, and that is the way we approach them, the frame of mind in which we discuss them, the method we apply in trying to find a solution. The way, the frame of mind, the method, which seems to me absolutely essential, and peculiarly the task of university people to make prevail, is summed up in one of St. Paul's injunctions to the Thessalonians: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good".

That text has two parts. I am going to preach a short lay sermon on each of them.

First, "Prove all things". In other words, test all things; take nothing on authority, whether of the old or of the young, the conservative or the radical, the theologian or the scientist, or even the journalist or television commentator. Insist on evidence. That may sound commonplace. I wish it were, but in the fields of knowledge with which I am acquainted, notably constitutional law and history, it most decidedly is not. Indeed, I sometimes say that I shall devote my declining years to compiling a book of Canadian constitutional fairy-tales, and that it will have to be looseleaf, because scarcely a day passes without some fresh addition to the collection. And, sad to say, many of the contributions come not from the ignorant but from the learned: people who are supposed

to know, and ought to know, far more about the subject than I do, but who none the less talk arrant nonsense; sometimes plain nonsense, sometimes fancy nonsense, sometimes fantastic nonsense; sometimes legal nonsense, sometimes statistical nonsense, sometimes mixed nonsense. And I am not talking about matters of opinion, but matters of fact: does the British North America Act say the Senate's maximum normal membership is 102 or 110; were the numbers of English-speaking and French-speaking people in British North America in 1867 approximately equal or were they not; did the Fathers of Confederation agree that the English and French languages should be on an absolutely equal footing in all "federal" fields or did they not? It is staggering the number of so-called "authorities" who solemnly purvey as fact statements for which there is no evidence whatever, and which often are even demonstrably contrary to the evidence. What is worse, even learned audiences often admire the Emperor's new robes, and are visibly distressed or tolerantly amused when that eccentric character Forsey points out that His Majesty is in fact stark naked.

If these people had absorbed in university, as they should have, a respect for evidence, we should be spared a great deal of bitterness, and charges of bad faith and broken promises, which often needlessly envenom the discussion of, for example, bilingualism and biculturalism. As it is, too many of the learned, and, naturally, those who look to them for light and guidance, are "tossed to and fro, carried about with every wind of doctrine," or, what is much worse, every wind of fashionable opinion; taken in by "old wives' fables", or, what is no better, young wives' fables. There is a lamentably large, and not undistinguished, company of people in Canada whose mottoes appear to be "Speak now; think later," and "Leap before you look". University people ought not to be among them; university people's peculiar task is to insist on evidence, and to make at least a decent attempt to be guided and governed by the evidence, and help others to be guided and governed by it.

The first part of my text, "Prove all things", sounds radical. So it is, and it is part of the function of university people to be radical, to go to the roots of things, to be sceptical in the proper sense, to look all round a thing and under it and over it and into it.

The second part, "Hold fast that which is good", sounds conservative. So it is, and it is part of the function of university people to be conservative. But note what it is they are to conserve: "that which is good"; and note the connection with the first part of the text: that which has been tested and *proved* to be good. I am not suggesting that graduates, old or new, should become magpies, jealously guarding collections of ancient junk, or keepers of old curiosity shops. But I am most emphatically suggesting that educated people should not be carried away by the cult of the merely new any more than of the merely old. A Senator, and a university

man too, once complained to me that none of the witnesses before the Senate Committee on Manpower and Employment had produced a single new idea for dealing with unemployment. He nearly fell off his perch when I replied that what mattered was not whether the ideas were new but whether they were sensible; for him, this was apparently a revolutionary new idea! To take another example: we hear a great deal now about the desirability of making Canada a republic; but how often has anybody here heard any argument for doing so that is more than a prose version of the ragtime song of fifty years ago: "Everybody's doing it, doing it, doing it, Everybody's doing it now"? As an argument for profound constitutional change, this is so silly that one really marvels how anyone capable of getting across the street under his own steam can pay any attention to it.

I am not arguing against new ideas. I am not arguing against constitutional change, however drastic. I am arguing that new ideas, and constitutional change, should be subject to argument; to examination, to discussion as nearly rational as we can make it; not just swallowed, holus-bolus, simply because they are the newest fashion, the very latest thing. An idea, or an institution, is not bad simply because it has existed for a long time. There probably was a reason for it in the beginning. The reason may have disappeared, or it may not. If it has, then the idea or institution should give place to better; but if the reason is still there, the idea or institution is still valid, and to jettison it is childish.

Perhaps I could have said all of this much more briefly and simply, perhaps even in five words, "Let us use our heads"; use them, that is, not simply as things to grow hair on or balance hats on, or things to count in an election or a public opinion poll, but use them for thinking. The results may not be all we could wish; the machinery is not always first class, and even when it is, it can make mistakes. But university people are surely necessarily committed to the proposition that we are likely to make rather less of a hash of things if we do use our heads than if we don't. Differences of opinion will remain, even among the most honest, the most rational and the most learned. But they are more likely to be differences about a real world, not a world of fantasy; and differences about a real world can be accommodated by compromises we all can live with, as differences about a world of fantasy, or conflicting worlds of fantasy, cannot.

I can imagine some of you going away saying, "Queerest kind of Convocation Address ever I heard". I don't mind in the least; nor do I mind how violently you may have disagreed with anything I've said. But I hope there's been some sense in it all; and if it has in any degree stirred up anyone's mind, I am well content; for I remain convinced that using our minds is, under God, the best hope we have.

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