

## TWO VOTES: THE POWER OF THE POLLING BOOTH

Convocation address delivered by Hon. Pat Carney, P.C.  
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Mr. Chancellor, Mr. President, honoured guests and graduands. It is a privilege to be asked to address Convocation on the day Andrew Petter has been installed as Simon Fraser University's ninth President and Vice-Chancellor. I also want to thank retiring president Dr. Michael Stevenson and the Board of Governors for their part in bestowing this honour on me. It feels a bit like the first day of school; a mixture of anticipation and sheer terror!

I am often asked what I consider to be my proudest achievement in public life. During my 30 years of public service I have been given the opportunity to accomplish a great deal. But in my view, my proudest achievement is that Canadians took the time to trudge to a polling booth, in a school basement or church hall, from their home or on their way home from work, to mark an X by my name on a ballot and give me their vote for Member of Parliament. Think of the power of that vote. Everything I have achieved in public life started with that vote.

Canadians' attitude to politics today is polarized between apathy and anger. Many people feel that their vote won't change anything. One vote won't count. But they are wrong.

I won my first federal election by two votes. I remember the CBC report on election night: "...and in Vancouver Centre Conservative Pat Carney defeated former Mayor Art Phillips by... two votes?" For 30 years people have told me that they cast those two votes. They rowed in from the cottage. They finished their hospital shift and rushed to the polls five minutes before closing. They lugged a tired, tearful child from daycare to the polling booth in order to cast their vote. And they were right. They WERE the two votes! And those two votes changed Canada.

I lost that first election in a recount by a narrow margin of 95 votes. But the momentum from that election night victory elected me to the House of Commons in the next two federal elections and subsequently called me to the Senate.

My role in negotiating the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the energy accords, my efforts to strengthen BC's role in our Confederation, my private member's bills to limit bulk water exports and to preserve heritage lighthouses, and dozens of other issues all sprang from those two votes.

And yes, one vote can count. Our Conservative government proposed legislation that would limit a woman's right to an abortion, a very emotional issue. But Bill C-43 was poorly drafted to appease conflicting views in the country and I could not support it.

Prime Minister Mulroney declared a free vote on the issue. The legislation passed the House of Commons.

But when it came before the Senate, despite heavy pressure from my Conservative colleagues, I joined those Senators who voted “NAY”. The result was a tied vote. Under Senate rules, a tied vote defeats the legislation. Bill C-43 became the first government bill to be defeated in the Senate in 30 years.

If I had voted “Yea” we would have unfair and unenforceable abortion legislation in Canada today. One vote did make a difference.

I suggest Canada’s greatest national treasure is our parliamentary system of democracy. We elect some of us to govern all of us, whatever our race, creed or colour. We have one of the most accessible political systems in western democracies. Any Canadian citizen aged 18 years or older can be a candidate for federal office, unless he or she has been convicted of a criminal offense that restricts that right.

Anyone with \$1000 and 100 signatures can file nomination papers. He or she does not even have to be a member of a political party. When I first ran I took out my first Progressive Conservative membership card and my supporters raised \$200 and collected the 25 signatures necessary then.

After I won the nomination in Vancouver Centre, one of my opponents ran for another party in another riding and won the seat. He was an honorable MP who served his constituents well and no one ever mentioned his change of party affiliation!

Nor is experience necessary. The Progressive Conservative handbook for candidates posed the question: “Why do you want to run?” My answer: “Because the Tories tell me that I am an economic Joan of Arc who can help to save our country.” Another question: “What experience do you have?” My answer: “None, either in politics or being burned at the stake!”

Unlike other countries, the candidate doesn’t need to be rich. The most successful candidate in a nomination race is the person who signs up the most members. The funds for pamphlets, posters and buttons are raised by supporters. Once the election is called, there are strict limits on what candidates can spend or what supporters can contribute. If those limits are exceeded the candidate and her official agent can go to jail.

In Canada you can’t buy a person’s vote. You must ask for it. Of course sometimes that vote is not available under any circumstances. An example is the sweet-faced senior I approached while I was campaigning. When I held out my hand and asked for her vote, she answered: “My hand will wither and fall off before I shake hands with a Conservative.”

Under current rules, taxpayers subsidize the federal election costs of political parties, even the Bloc Quebecois, which is committed to breaking up Canada! Compare this with

elections in the US where candidates for office, both winners and losers, can spend millions of dollars!

Volunteers are the core of our Canadian system. They put up campaign signs and knock on doors to distribute pamphlets and to identify voters who might -or might not- support the candidate. They staff the phone banks and drive voters to the polls. They raise and record those campaign funds. They accompany the candidate on the bus stops and street corners to meet potential voters.

And they have a lot of fun. Once as we careened over Burrard Street Bridge on the back of a flat deck truck, bands playing, blue balloons bouncing, I asked a volunteer: “How did we ever get a license to do this?” She answered: “What license?” Many of those volunteers are here today.

Once you win you represent all your constituents, whether they voted for you or not. As their MP you learn the issues which trouble them. You share their joy and their pain. The heart of the riding is your constituency office which is open to all. The constituency assistant seeks aid for desperate people and holds the hand of the person under deportation order while he waits for officials to take him to the airport. My constituency assistant Marjorie Lewis is here today.

In Ottawa you are an Honorable Member, a law-maker. Our democracy is based on the rule of law. Under our system, it is the role of the government party to propose legislation, and the role of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition to oppose those laws they wish to change. That tension produces the laws that govern us, at least until the next election!

Politics is a collaborative profession. Cabinet ministers must achieve consensus on government policies, since if they can’t support them they must resign from Cabinet. That consensus, achieved despite regional, linguistic and ethnic differences, binds us together as a nation.

MPs can make a difference through committee work and private members’ bills. The NDP party has yet to form a federal government, but BC NDP MPs Dawn Black and Margaret Mitchell initiated legislation that helps protect the security of women today. NDP MP Lynn McDonald was allergic to the cigarette smoke that choked the NDP caucus room. The result is the ban on smoking in federal buildings.

Senators can make a difference by advancing issues that appear marginal to society. Two BC aboriginal women, Wendy Lockhart Lundberg and her aunt Mazie Baker, brought to Senators the astounding injustice that under existing aboriginal rights, aboriginal women do not have the protection of our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. After years of Senate hearings and committee reports, Canadian courts have ordered Parliament to correct this injustice.

And the politicians whom your votes elect contribute to society as well as politics. The indomitable Flora MacDonald, Canada's first female minister of External Affairs, now in her 80's, can be found in Afghanistan, Tibet, Africa, helping local communities. Our Conservative colleague Mary Collins, former Minister of Health, helped reform health care systems in Russia, serving as head of the World Health Office (WHO) for Russia before returning to Canada three years ago. The late NDP MP Pauline Jewett served as president of this great university. These are not patronage positions!

My critics will point out that my examples are all women. Men can and do speak for themselves. Women still tend to downplay their achievements. I am grateful to Simon Fraser University for the opportunity to share our political experiences with you today.

A final point. You leave here with more than your memories and academic credentials for which you have worked so hard. You have your right to vote, a privilege denied many others in our global community. You have your freedom to participate in our political system.

Treasure that privilege and that freedom. They are both free! And never forget how two votes changed Canada. Thank you.

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