



The road to the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University

BY IAN MACDONALD

Ian Macdonald is president emeritus of York University and professor emeritus of Public Policy and Economics.

It was during my years in the Ontario public service (1965–1974) when I came to realize how many vexatious issues remained unresolved in the profile of Canada’s national identity: the irony of trade being less restrictive externally than among our provinces, the limited awareness of the neglect of Indigenous issues, the lack of a fulfilling partnership between our two founding languages, the growing realization that the face of Canada was becoming transformed by an expanding wave of multiculturalism, and the serious conflict between the environment and the economy. York University appeared to me to be the ideal setting to address those issues. It was still a mere institutional adolescent but already displaying remarkable academic leadership.

As a result, when I assumed the presidency of York University in 1974, among the initiatives that I hoped to encourage was the establishment of a research centre in Canadian Studies. What I did not anticipate was how rocky the road to the fulfillment of that objective would be. For understandable reasons pertaining to the longstanding boundaries of academic disciplines, several leaders in the York Senate did not share my enthusiasm. Finally, it was agreed that the Senate would approve the establishment of such a centre if I could raise the funds necessary for its foundation. At the time, I never thought that it would be such tragic circumstances that would enable us to create the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. John Robarts took his own life in October 1982. Through the clouds of my overwhelming sadness, I realized that many others would want to raise funds to honour his name, as was indeed the case. I was troubled by the need to move with what seemed like unseemly haste, and even more anxious about the call that I knew had to be made to his widow, Katherine, to seek her approval to name the Centre after her husband at such an early stage of her grieving. However, she could not have been more gracious in her response. “If you think this is something that would have pleased John, by all means go ahead.” The next step was to enlist the support of his long-time friend and campaign manager, Ernie Jackson, to raise a target sum of \$1 million, a not inconsiderable amount for a Canadian university project in those days.

Why did I deem it so important to create a university research centre in Canadian Studies at that time, at York University, and in the name of John Robarts? To answer that question, I must venture into an account of parts of my personal biography, for which I apologize. However, after 50 years, it would be difficult to find other witnesses to the story.

Following three years of graduate studies at Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship, I was welcomed back to a teaching position in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto, which I enjoyed for the next 10 years. Whereas some professors consider large first-year classes to be a chore, Professor Paul Fox and I thought of them as a challenge. When we succeeded Professors MacGregor Dawson and Vincent Bladen in teaching the introductory courses in political science and economics, respectively, we could not have been happier. I rather assumed that I might well

spend my career there. However, I had become increasingly intrigued by the issue of how public policy was made and the challenge of doing so in a highly decentralized federation like Canada.

In the summer of 1964, an announcement appeared in *The Globe and Mail* seeking applicants for the newly created position of chief economist of Ontario. Almost on a whim, I entered the civil service competition and came up the winner. What was not clear to me at the time was the fact that Premier Robarts wanted to twin the position with that of chair of an advisory committee that he proposed to create—the Ontario Advisory Committee on Confederation (OACC). The combined duties represented a huge responsibility. The purpose, as explained by the premier, quickly became apparent. He described a recent conference of first ministers where he observed several rows of young and enthusiastic advisers seated behind the premier of Québec. In contrast, when he looked behind himself, it was to see a row of empty chairs. To build the capacity for policy advice in the Ontario public service, commensurate with the province's role in Confederation, was now his objective.

In our early discussions, it did not take me long to recognize his deep-seated intellectual curiosity. Should we be encouraging economic development where the traffic counters suggested that economic growth should take place, or where public infrastructure and public policy could encourage it to happen? As I drew a deep breath, he added, "Well, think about it, and I have a few other issues that I would like to discuss the next time we meet." This was the beginning of an endless challenge and, later, my perception of the role for a research centre on Canadian Studies

Although it may be a fanciful recollection, my own interest in Canadian Studies may be deeply rooted in my own background. My parents were Scottish immigrants who had left school at age 14 and came to Canada, each on their own, at age 16 before the First World War. My father served as a stretcher bearer throughout that war and miraculously survived the carnage and bloodshed. His experience made a deep impression on me in terms of the meaning of public service and how it was the responsibility of countless individuals, not just the responsibility of the leaders of government, nor indeed the members of the academy. However, my early years were also strongly influenced by a traditional immigrant upbringing: "We do it this way, but Canadians do it that way." As a result, I was determined to discover the Canadian way and to assist others in finding that way.

I have often thought how that determination was crystallized in the Confederation of Tomorrow conference. John Robarts was highly aware of the significance of 1967 and 100 years of Confederation as a vantage point from which to view where Canada had been and, more importantly, to ponder where we could be going. A conference of first ministers could well provide that vantage point. My task, along with my colleagues, was to transform Premier Robarts's vision into a workable Ontario initiative. This was the source of my proposal for the Confederation of Tomorrow conference to ponder language issues, regional development, fiscal problems, and other vexatious public policy challenges. He asked me to explore the concept with the OACC and to report back. The committee spent all of one Friday in strenuous debate, as one would expect from a group of leading academics and others, each possessing highly individualistic views. Opinion was by no means unanimous, with some being unfavourable to such an initiative by a province. At the end of that long day, I met with the premier and presented the varying views as fairly as I could. Then he asked me what I thought. My response was simply, "I think we should go for it," to which he replied, "So do I." Clearly, there were risks for a provincial government in staging a conference on national issues of which the premier was well aware. Nor, to say the least, was the government of Canada enthusiastic. Accordingly, he asked me and some of my colleagues to visit each of the other provinces to meet with the premiers to ensure that when he announced the conference, they would undertake to be there.

The response from Premier Daniel Johnson in Québec City: "Tell your premier that, when he makes his announcement, I will be the first to promise to attend." Much later, Claude Morin (Premier Johnson's Secretary of Cabinet) reminded me of the unusually long meeting I had with his premier. That was when he told me that the premier had stepped out of a Cabinet meeting for our discussion,

keeping his ministers waiting for nearly two hours. That had nothing to do with me—I was merely the messenger. It had everything to do with the respect he had for his fellow premier from Ontario.

During the years that I was privileged to observe Premier Robarts's detailed attention to public policy, I was amazed by his capacity to listen to academic debate while under the relentless pressure of dealing with political priorities. I still have a vivid image of him on a Friday evening in a suite in the old Park Plaza Hotel in Toronto. I knew he had just finished a particularly onerous week, but he had agreed to meet with the OACC for an open-ended discussion about Confederation matters. I can picture him now seated side-by-side with Professor Alexander Brady, listening to Brady's commentary on the issues of the day. Only after a long and lively evening did he return to London, Ontario for the weekend.

The question has been posed by many commentators: How did Robarts come by that intellectual curiosity and determination to understand the complexity of Canadian society? There may be many answers to this, but my own relates to a conversation about his wartime experience in the Canadian navy. He described the lengthy chats he had with a fellow sailor in the lower bunk who came from a small town in Québec. As he contemplated their differences and similarities, what really mattered was that they were both in the same boat, factually and metaphorically. At that point in time, they were sharing a life in a special Canadian way.

When John Robarts was our York University chancellor, we renewed a number of our earlier conversations, often in intervals between convocations. He loved convocation, which he liked to describe as an event where everyone was a winner. Those conversations so often turned to a consideration of Canada—what it was and what it could be! To create a place where such conversations and inquiry could continue in a formal academic environment was the challenge for the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. ■