

**JOHN RALSTON SAUL
UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG
Awarding of the Honorary Doctorate of Law
University of Winnipeg
104th Convocation
October 17, 2014**

“Convocation speech”

Thank you to the University for this honour. Thank you to the graduates for welcoming me into your class.

It is also a privilege to be on once again on Treaty One land and at the heart of the Métis Nation.

Today is particularly moving for me because my father went to this University. He was a well-known hockey and football player. But unlike you and me, he didn't graduate.

In 1940 – about 75 years ago, he left this university, joined the Winnipeg Rifles, went overseas, fought in North Africa and landed on D-Day in the first wave.

Those of you who have studied history will know what I mean when I say that there is something astonishing – to have actually been there on one of the most important moments of modern history. To have been in the thick of it and to have survived.

Like many other soldiers, he never talked about it – but let me tell you about a photograph I have put in a book I'm bringing out in a few days – It is about the astonishing comeback of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada to a position of power and influence. It is called *The Comeback*. This change is the result of a long and hard struggle. You might date it from the beginning of the 20th Century – a desperate moment when the indigenous population had so shrunk and its power had been so removed, that most immigrants to this country said the Aboriginal peoples would disappear, all together.

Yet here they are – here you are, because some of you graduating today you are part of that comeback. Here they are at the very centre of the Canadian reality and growing more influential every day.

The photograph I mentioned is of a landing craft, filled with Winnipeg Rifle soldiers, being buffeted by the waves on their way to the beaches on D-Day. One of the few things my father told me was that many of them were sea-sick – vomiting – as they went to meet their destiny.

In this photograph a tall soldier - as Métis – is standing at the stern – Edmond Gagne is his name. He is still alive. You can see other landing crafts behind him. My father must have been in one of them, or on another somewhere out of this shot. The other thing I know is that in my father's landing craft there were a number of Aboriginal soldiers.

In fact, Aboriginals were the highest per capita group of volunteers from any Canadian community in WWII. They were also the highest per capita group of volunteers in WWI.

Why do I tell you this? Because the indigenous comeback has been hard earned over a long period of time in a thousand different ways. Political. In the law courts. In schools and universities. The University of Winnipeg in particular.

Tonight you will – I hope – have a party with friends and family. And you are already worrying about jobs. About life ahead.

You graduate at a difficult time. The world is in crisis. We are still deep within an economic collapse. Canada has a slight protection because of our national resources. Our oil and gas. We are lucky.

But these commodities are never the basis for long term solid jobs.

I sense that we are at the end of 40 years of neo-conservative ideology. It has failed repeatedly – to produce growth or stability or political peace.

But the outcome of this ideology is 40 years of not investing for the long term, of fearing public debt, even though public debt is what builds democracies. Public education has been constructed on public debt and taxes for two centuries in Canada.

We have preferred to indebt students – leaving them to graduate with the equivalent of a mortgage, but without a house.

And yet you are lucky because what lies ahead is a period of rebuilding and reconsolidating society.

Once again setting out to reduce the gap between the rich and poor. Once again to build the idea of social solidarity.

That can only be done through your engagement in building the public good.

The general atmosphere throughout the Western world is that self-interest must trump all. A sort of narrow view of how the world works. It is precisely this ideology which has pushed us into crisis.

We will emerge from it if you concentrate on the public good.

And here I want to leave you with one point. The single greatest issue of our time is the Aboriginal issue. This – not debt or lower taxes or trade or foreign wars – this is the single great unresolved issue in our society. It is a matter of rights. A matter of justice, of money spent on education. Of language rights. Of treaty rights. Of the Federal government fulfilling its obligations. It is a matter of the public good.

We are at a critical point. If we fail we will all be damaged.

This is the great cause of your generation whether you are Aboriginal or not. A new Canadian or a loyalist. A francophone or an Anglophone.

Aboriginals must be able to assume their full place in their own societies and in Canadian society. This can only happen if this issue rises to the top of the national agenda – to the top of your agenda. Governments must rise and fall on this issue - before all others.

Universities must build this central part of our civilization unto the very core of what they teach – in philosophy, in literature, in medicine, in history.

The University of Winnipeg is on its way to becoming a leader on this front. You must go further.

We will all suffer if there is a failure. We will all benefit if this is done.

And you will be judged by history on this outcome.

You come today to graduate. I congratulate you. Your parents are relieved.

But some generations have the privilege of being faced by a great cause.

The situation is clear. With remarkable persistence and sophistication, indigenous communities have already done a great deal, against institutionalized opposition.

Aboriginal peoples are on their way to a central role in our society. Problems remain, but the comeback cannot be stopped.

So you must choose. Are you – we – going to continue to oppose, delay, prevaricate, be part of the problem.

Or are we going to get out of the way – vote for or against people seeking office on this issue. Support the changes urgently required.

I wanted to say this to you, because this university and this city and your generation lie at the centre of this cause. It is your cause. It will shape you – your life – our society – or you will only embrace it.

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