On Leadership Styles

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Good morning everyone. As you just heard, I have been asked to share some thoughts with you on the state of our democracy, based on my experience as Government House Leader in a minority Parliament. Perhaps the right place to start is by telling you about an article that I read a few years ago that had quite an impact on me. I came across it in the Toronto Globe and Mail and it kept me thinking for days. It was about the changing skills that leaders of multinational corporations need to succeed in the New Economy and what it might mean for Canadians. The article said, and I quote:

“...the traditional [leadership] style of leading the troops over the hill to conquer is out of favour in an economy increasingly marked by mergers, joint ventures and co-operative networking. Being able to work collaboratively—delegating responsibility and appreciating diversity—is becoming the way of the New Economy...Canadian senior executives are in the enviable position of being leaders in this approach.”†

In effect, the news here is that business leaders now think that the traditional, tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners kind of leadership belongs in the past. It is part of an old paradigm that should be abandoned. By contrast, today’s corporate leader is expected to excel at teamwork, relationship building, negotiation and communications. The article goes on to say that, in the New Economy, those countries whose culture and values encourage collaboration are more likely to succeed in leadership positions. Canada, it concludes, is such a country.

There is a particular lesson that I want to draw from this because it is directly related to the points that I want to make this morning. Let me sum it up this way: In an increasingly diverse and complex world, the best way to succeed is not by trying to steamroll the competition. Working together is often a better way to get results.


† “Canadian team builders turn U.S. heads” Globe and Mail (28 August 2000), B8.
The article puts before us two competing views of leadership. One emphasizes the power to issue commands and rules, usually from a remote location. It regards involvement with others—especially competitors—as interference that only diminishes the power of the leader. The other emphasizes collaboration. In this view, far from being diminished by working with the competition, leadership can be enhanced and strengthened by it.

Over the last decade, I have been involved in many debates about leadership. Now, as the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons—in a minority Parliament—I find myself in a unique position to test some of the ideas and see where theory meets practice, where the rubber hits the road.

Here is the question I want to pose for you: What kind of leadership do we want in Parliament? The answer, it seems, depends on who you ask—or, perhaps, on how you look at democracy. Let me explain with an example based on personal experience.

As you know, our government recently tabled its Speech from the Throne, followed by the Prime Minister’s Address in Reply to it. Two opposition parties, the Conservatives and the Bloc Quebecois, proposed amendments. As a minority government, we had some hard choices to make. There were some tense moments. At one point we were poised to hold a confidence vote on the amendments. But we worked hard with the other parties. We all met, talked and, in the end, found agreement on wording that satisfied them and met the government’s objectives without compromising its core principles.

Today, there is a sense among the parties that together we were able to demonstrate that we can make this Parliament work. Nevertheless, there is an alternate view, which says that we should have pushed ahead with the confidence vote and that working together with the opposition only serves to weaken the government. As House Leader it has been my job to lead many of these negotiations. So I think I’d like to take this occasion to comment on how I see them.

Let me begin with some thoughts on democracy. In my view, the genius of democracy lies in its ability to help us live with our differences—and to do so respectfully. It is a way of making decisions on issues of the highest importance, when others around us—our family members, friends and neighbours—may disagree with our views.

Democracy does this through a two-step process: debate and decision making. First, we discuss and debate our views. Ideally, we propose options and alternatives, we provide arguments and evidence and, in the process, we all listen and learn. Then we decide.

In Parliament, of course, this happens by a vote. In a Westminster system such as our own, a political party with a majority can gain control of this second step. When it does, it effectively controls
Parliament. What questions does this pose for our two views of leadership? If you believe that leadership is defined by who controls the most votes then the answer is clear. All that really matters is whether or not I have the power to decide. If I do, you do not. If I share some of it with you, my power as a leader is diminished. Looked at this way, the logic of power is brutishly simple—as is the kind of leadership that follows from it.

Let me shift your attention back to the first stage of democracy: deliberation and debate. Suppose that I have more power than you. Suppose that I am part of a majority government that has the votes to ensure the final decision. If the debate and discussion between us is meaningful—if I really listen to you—it may change how I think. It may even change how I use the power that I have. So, while you may not have the power to decide, you can still have some influence over me. That is possible only if I am willing to listen to you and seriously consider what you say.

It is this basic belief that democracy is about listening to one another—even when the number of votes is in someone’s favour—that makes it so appealing. It allows us to accept the final decision as legitimate, even when it goes against our views. It allows us to live with our differences—and to do so respectfully.

There is nothing in democracy, however, that forces us to talk and listen to one another. It is a choice and a commitment that each party and each individual must make, if democracy is to be anything more than the quest for power. Even in countries with a long history of democracy, this does not come easily. It must be cultivated, practiced, learned and reinforced. We are all very much part of a tradition in which leadership has been practiced as a game of control. We all need to contribute, if we are going to change that.

This brings me to the subject of minority governments—one on which, I must acknowledge with some regret, I am fast becoming an expert. Canadians have decided that this Parliament will be governed by a minority. Although I might have preferred otherwise, I fully accept that judgment. But what lesson should we learn from it?

In my view, it is that Canadians want Parliament to be about more than the quest for power. They want to see that debate is meaningful and that we are listening to one another when we engage in it. They want to see more collaboration and less confrontation.

Finding myself in the situation of managing a minority government is proving very instructive here. Most of the House’s activity must be negotiated beforehand. It is not always easy. There are times when I would prefer to say to my colleagues across the table: “Take it or leave it!” rather than “What do you think?” Believe me, “What do you think?” can be a lot harder. The opposition parties often have very different
views from those of our government. As a result, even at the best of
times, governing with a minority can be a trying and messy business.
But overall there are fewer surprises, procedural shenanigans, and
games. People have to agree to make it work.
Still, let me be very clear: If anyone thinks that this means that we do
not have a bottom line, they are wrong. As a government, we have an
agenda based on a substantive policy direction. We have goals. We
fought an election campaign on them. And we will stand by them. So,
yes, I am listening to the opposition—and so is the government I
represent. But I regard that as a gain for Canadians—and I think that
they will too.
This brings me back to the question of working together with the
opposition: Should it be seen as a sign of weakness? As you may have
guessed, I disagree with that view. And here is why: It is based in a view
of leadership that I reject—one that sees Parliament as little more than a
game of power and who controls it. From this angle, our success as a
government will be judged by whether we can get our agenda through
without “blinking” or “caving in” or “backing down” or some other of a
dozen tired metaphors.
From where I stand, this is just wrong. I have metaphors too—ones that
I think do a much better job of explaining what we are trying to do, like
“finding a balance,” “looking for middle ground” or just plain “working
together.” So—from my perspective, what looks like an effort to make
room for other voices may look to others like weakness or having no
bottom line. As always, so much depends on how we choose to see
things. Maybe it is worth introducing one final metaphor here: Is the
Parliamentary glass half full or half empty?
Interestingly, some commentators have taken the opposite view from
the one I just discussed. They think that Parliament is working
remarkably well—so well, in fact, that they may wonder why we would
ever want a majority government. My answer is this: While we are
learning from this experience—and that is a good thing—the right lesson
to draw here is not that a minority government is better than a majority
government. It is rather that collaboration is better than confrontation.
Moreover, there is a cost that comes with minority governments and we
should recognize it. Let me remind you that there are deep differences
between the views of our government and those of the other parties. In a
minority situation, we must be careful about how far we tread into this
territory. That means that it is more difficult for us as a minority
government to pursue some of the goals that I believe a majority of
Canadians support.
For the moment, however, we must accept that they have a higher
priority. They have signalled the parties in Parliament that they want
them to learn to work together better. Our government accepts that
judgment. The challenge that it poses for us is to take steps that will help change the culture. Changing our views around leadership is a very important part of that.

Over the last 10 years, I have been a part of many discussions about how to make Parliament more democratic. My colleagues and I have debated procedures and rules, processes and practices of all sorts—sometimes late into the night. While I certainly would not want to say that the exercise has been unhelpful, I see now—every day—that it does not get to the heart of things.

In the first instance, democracy is not about rules and procedures. First and foremost, it is about voice. Democracy feels like it is working when people feel that their voice counts—that it is being listened to—in the political process, whether as a citizen or as parliamentarians. This brings me to the central point that I want to make today:

**Far from being a weakness, in a democracy, collaboration should be recognized as a core value. It is one that I have made part of my bottom line in politics. I encourage others to do the same.**

Indeed, I think the central message that Canadians sent in the last election is that all parties had better make it part of their bottom lines.

In summing up, let me say that I side with the new business leaders that I referred to at the beginning of this speech—those who believe that we need more collaboration and less confrontation; those who believe that the old paradigm of leadership based on the strong-man needs to change. Ordinary Canadians know this very well. They see everyday that their businesses, marriages, associations and friendships work better when they try to listen to, rather than control, one another.

If we are looking for a knockdown argument in favour of collaboration, this last point comes pretty close. So close, in fact, that I would like to draw my remarks to a close by testing it on you: Does anyone here really want to say that an effort to listen to others is a sign of weakness? And here—this is the acid test: How many of you would teach this principle to your children? With that, I thank you all for having taken the time to listen.