

Opinion

Clark makes passionate plea for a return to ‘co-operation across our differences’ in politics today

At a dinner in his honour last week, Joe Clark rebuked the modern Conservative Party for worsening Canada’s divisions today, and the Liberals for not ignoring ‘the unwinding world’ around us. The Alberta boy was in fighting form.

Douglas Roche



Opinion

OTTAWA—Joe Clark used the 45th anniversary of his election as Canada’s 16th prime minister on May 22 in Ottawa to politely—but unmistakably—rebuke the modern Conservative Party for worsening the divisions in the country today. He did not mention the name of the party or its leader, Pierre Poilievre, but he did not have to. The dinner crowd of 300 people assembled



Joe Clark, pictured in this file photo, celebrated his 45th anniversary of his election as Canada’s 16th prime minister on May 22 in Ottawa, and used the event to make a plea for a return to co-operation across our differences in politics today. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

in the Trillium Room in the Shaw Centre, with its sweeping vista of Ottawa’s power centres, knew exactly what he was talking about.

Clark turned what might have been just a last hurrah for the Red Tories into a passionate call for a return to “co-operation across our differences,” and a plea to “counter the negativism that characterizes public debate today.” Again and again, he returned to “the divisions arising in Canada today.” He scorned the public

debate that “concentrates on what we want rather than what the country needs.”

He invoked the names of Lester Pearson, Robert Stanfield, and Nelson Mandela as political leaders who healed the divisions of their times, and brought people together. “That spirit is not present today,” he said.

Clark, whose minority government in 1979 was defeated after only nine months in power, obviously does not want his regime to be consigned to a footnote in history. It had some remarkable achievements in bringing the Vietnamese “Boat People” to Canada, and sheltering American diplomats during the Iranian revolution. But his nine years as foreign minister in the Mulroney government, in which he pursued a dynamic and activist Canadian foreign policy known as “constructive internationalism,” allowed him to shine on the world stage.

At 39 years old, he was the youngest person ever to become Canada’s prime minister, but he has endured and is now a robust 85-year-old statesman who has never lost the dream of building Canada into an important middle power playing a key role in world affairs.

The event was held under the aegis of the Pearson Centre, a

think tank that upholds progressive, centrist, and moderate public policy combining economic success with social responsibility. It is named after Lester Pearson, Canada’s 14th prime minister, whose grandson Michael Pearson praised Clark for having the same values as his Liberal grandfather.

Clark’s criticism of politicians today did not stop with his obvious main target, the Conservatives. He did not mention the Liberal government by name when he lamented that Canada today is not living up to the “inherent Canadian capacity” to find agreements among diverse nations. It is the Liberals, however, not the Conservatives, who manage foreign policy. Clark made it clear he doesn’t think much of the present foreign policy, which, he commented adroitly, needs a lot more funding.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, a Liberal, paid his respects to Clark by attending the reception preceding the dinner. Clark didn’t mention him, either, but Trudeau’s ears must have been ringing when Clark called on Canada to pay more attention to “the unwinding world,” and use its influence to build reconciliation among nations.

Instead of giving a speech, Clark answered questions from his interviewer, his own daughter Catherine, who is a noted broadcaster. She asked her father good questions about his career and policies, drawing him out on his favourite theme that Canada is a “community of communities” that has gone askew.

We’ll hear more on these themes when Mathew Hayday, a professor of history at Guelph University, publishes his long-awaited biography of Clark. Hayday says that Clark, supported by Mulroney, developed a strong agenda marked by boldness, and a desire for activism and constructive international engagement on a multitude of fronts, including trade, human rights, arms control, the environment, and peacekeeping. Clark’s specialty was having Canada persuade major multilateral bodies to engage in coordinated actions. That sounds very Canadian, and that is the Canada Clark pointed to wistfully and energetically.

Clark’s outreach to Quebec, his defence of the provinces’ legitimate interests, his support for the United Nations and international development all are hallmarks of a very caring man. As he put it in his book, *How We Lead: Canada in a Century of Change*, he believes passionately that Canada can “make a difference” in the world by employing soft-power engagement with international partners. That’s the best of Clark that ought to be emulated in today’s chaotic world.

I asked Clark if he will write his memoirs, for surely Canada needs to hear directly from a political figure who stands in the highest ranks of the country’s foreign ministers. He gave me a non-committal reply. So I’m not sure what he is going to do. But judging from his performance at the dinner as the last of the Red Tories on the national stage, the Alberta boy is in fighting form.

Former Senator Douglas Roche’s latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

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Joe Clark at the Progressive Conservative leadership convention on June 11, 1983. *Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Alasdair Roberts*



Joe Clark at the unveiling of his official portrait as prime minister on the Hill in 2008. *The Hill Times* file photograph