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A Tribute to Linda Duncan

By Douglas Roche

Edmonton-Strathcona is a rampart of democracy in Alberta whose safety the voters have wisely entrusted to Heather McPherson, who succeeds a parliamentarian who courageously held the banner high, Linda Duncan. We are here tonight to celebrate a changing of the guard — from Linda to Heather.

This changing of the guard has an importance far greater than an election victory in one constituency. In many parts of the world, democracy is trampled on and authoritarianism denies people the right to freely choose their political leaders. It is certainly not safe in many countries to work and organize for social justice. So let us not forget the precious value of freedom we have in Canada where we go to the election polls in security and peace.

We are celebrating the changing of the guard in Edmonton-Strathcona, a small area in the vastness of Canada. But in a larger sense we are celebrating the strengths of all Canada. We — here tonight — are Canada with all its history, diversity and unity. We are greater than the mere boundaries of a constituency, we rise above provincialism, we accept the challenges of the modern world.

Edmonton-Strathcona knows it belongs not just to the Whyte Avenue surroundings but to the planet, and has responsibilities to humanity and the protection of the environment that sustains all life. Who knows this better than Linda Duncan. When Governor General Julie Payette said in the Throne speech a few days ago: “Canada’s children and grandchildren will judge this generation by its action – or inaction – on the defining challenge of the time: climate change,” those words could have been written by Linda.

For eleven years, from 2008 to 2019, this energetic, undaunted champion of the environment fought to awaken the Ottawa political establishment to the need for climate action. Her last action before Parliament prorogued prior to the 2019 election was to reintroduce, for the fourth time, a Canadian Environmental Bill of Rights.

The Bill would legally safeguard the right of all Canadians to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment and require the Government of Canada to protect those rights. It would give Canadians the right to access environmental information, participate in decisions impacting their environment, and hold the government accountable through calling for investigations and judicial reviews.

Why is such a Bill needed? As Linda explained to the House of Commons: “Community voices, the voices of non-governmental organizations and indigenous voices are absolutely critical triggers for action to protect health and the environment. Federal law and policy are made all the stronger with public engagement, and public rights are absolutely critical to government accountability. That has been my direct experience over the almost 50 years that I have been an environmental lawyer and advocate.”

What a legacy Linda leaves us. In 1987, Linda was recruited by the federal Minister of Environment to establish a new enforcement unit at Environment Canada. After a year in Ottawa, she move to Whitehorse where she worked as the assistant deputy Minister for Renewable Resources in the Yukon government. She moved to Montreal after she accepted a position helping lead the enforcement department of NAFTA's Commission for Environmental Cooperation. Through projects of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, she helped establish environmental law enforcement systems in Jamaica, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. During this time, in the 1990s, she earned a Master of Laws from Dalhousie Law School.

Back in Edmonton, she worked at the Environmental Law Centre, and developed projects with the Edmonton Social Planning Council, Alberta's Clean Air Strategic Alliance, and the Canadian Council on Human Resources for the Environment Industry. Arriving in the House of Commons in 2008, she quickly became a prominent parliamentary environmentalist.

Linda's activity in Parliament was not confined to environmental issues. She held a remarkable array of other critic portfolios: indigenous affairs; western economic diversification; public works; natural resources; and international development. I can personally attest that she was a strong member of the international parliamentary network advocating the abolition of nuclear weapons.

All of this, and much more, constituted the political career of Linda Duncan. Linda had a remarkable ability to fight hard on the issues but keep personal relationships strong. In her final debate, a political opponent — a Conservative no less — said on the floor of the House of Commons: “I was sad to learn that I will not have the opportunity to work with this wonderful, passionate, sensitive and kind woman during the next Parliament.”

That remark signified the dignity and vision and hope that politics at its best conveys. Linda Duncan joins that long list of visionaries who have planted seeds that are today growing, awaiting but nourishment to bloom into beautiful flowers.