This is an unusual occasion in several ways.

First, it is well established practice that, to the extent officials make public speeches at all, they stick to "safe" subjects such as a description of a program they are administering. Controversial matters are for Ministers. Officials are also supposed to keep their personal opinions to themselves, at least in public.

In addition, there is a convention that Ministers must defend their officials in public, because we are constrained from speaking out on our own behalf.

Today, this convention will be reversed. I propose to speak on a subject that Ministers would generally feel constrained from addressing. I shall also be expressing a number of personal opinions.

The title I have chosen is, "In Praise of Politicians."

Some may find this an odd choice for a senior official. The subject is however one I know a good deal about, since politicians are the people I have worked for over the past 31 years. More important, I chose this subject because public bitchiness – I believe that is the right term – about people in politics has gone well beyond any bounds of reasonableness in recent years, to the point where the good governance of the country stands to be affected. There you have my first expression of opinion.

Politicians are important people with important responsibilities. What they do every day is too well known and too little understood. There is inadequate public comprehension of the constraints within which our politicians must function and the complexities that are the common fare of public life.

In addition, elected people in government and opposition alike are regularly maligned with regard to their lifestyles and remuneration. Saddeningly often, public and private commentary alike conveys an impression that politicians are simply free-loaders on the public purse whose primary interest is ego gratification.

Presumably there is no need for me to reassure you that I am not naive. Over the years I have become as familiar as anyone with the weaknesses of various politicians, just as various of them have become familiar with mine. I know that they themselves often do things that make the public impatient with "politics." But I have also developed a respect for the seriousness of purpose that all but a handful consistently display; an admiration for their willingness to make sacrifices in their personal lives; and a certain wonderment that they put up with some of the things they do.

To give you a sense of the effects current attitudes are having, here are a few excerpts from the press of recent months:
the former President of a provincial political party begins a newspaper article by observing that: "Conflict of interest guidelines, the public exposure of private lives, the enormous pressures on family, friends, and business, and the generally low opinion people have of politicians combine to discourage all but a handful of our most successful citizens from thinking about running for office."

a newspaper headline of last September: "Reluctant to run: Potential candidates fear price of public office."

a provincial Premier observes that: "not many people outside politics could take the endless personal criticism."

a potential leadership candidate for a national party expresses hesitation about running: his children, he explains, are embarrassed that he's an MP because of the perception that politicians are overpaid and underworked, and spend their time "yelling at each other" in the House of Commons.

I want to deal now with the "overpaid and underworked" issue.

Most Deputy Ministers in Ottawa would probably agree that, to do our jobs adequately, we usually need to work about 65-70 hours a week. In the eyes of Ministers, ours must seem an enviable lot.

To be a Minister is to hold three full-time jobs simultaneously: you are a Member of Parliament, you are responsible for a department, and you are a member of a government. To do all three really well is reserved for the super-human.

One of the things we officials do not have to attend to is constituencies. Canada has a lot of geography, and our politicians have more cause to know this than most.

Let me give you the example of a Minister I served who came from the prairies. It used to occur to me when I would go home with a full briefcase at 6:30 on a Friday night that my Minister at about the same time was on his way to the airport. Having gone through a gruelling week of Cabinet Committees, caucuses, the daily Question Period, departmental briefings, meetings with interest groups, and signing correspondence, he was about to begin a flight of 3-4 hours. Upon landing he would have a two-hour drive to his home. The next morning he would spend seeing constituents at his local office. Over the balance of the weekend there might be the official opening of a community building, someone's 60th anniversary party, a church basement speech.

And then on Sunday nights there would be the drive back to the airport to catch an east-bound flight, ending up in a rather spartan apartment in Ottawa that he shared with several other MPs.

You may say that he really didn't have to live this way, that his constituents would have understood if he had come back to the riding only every two or three months. Maybe so. But since most of the MPs I've met lead lives that differ only in detail from the pattern I've just described, I suspect they may know something that we don't.
The price paid by families is particularly high. Some MPs bring their families to Ottawa and see them when the pressures of work permit; others, especially those from rural areas, leave their families behind and see them between constituency activities on weekends. Neither arrangement is much fun. I did not research the divorce rate among MPs in preparing this speech because I don't think I want to know.

Now a few words about money. An MP gets a salary of $62,000 – not a particularly exorbitant sum for a full-time job with very substantial responsibilities. After all, a carpenter in Ontario with four years experience reportedly can make $55,000. It is frequently pointed out, disapprovingly, that MPs also get various expense allowances, including one of $19,900 which is tax free. I've always thought this was reasonable enough, since they are in fact required to meet quite a few expenses, and I don't know of anyone else who pays income tax on the proceeds of his/her expense accounts either.

It is possible that an MP has gotten rich in office during my years in Ottawa, but if so, the name escapes me. I do however recall reading recently a recollection by a retired politician that he signed a promissory note for $15,000 to finance his first campaign and was never out of debt again in the ensuing 29 years of his political career.

The risks that go with the job are substantial. The average tenure of a Canadian MP is 5-7 years. The Canadian Parliament has one of the highest rates of turnover in the Western world. In the last election, it reached 40%: 12% because of withdrawal from politics, and a sobering 28% because of electoral defeat. The figures for 1984 were even higher. How many of you would take up a line of work in which there was 1 chance in 3 or 4 that you'd be fired after four years – particularly if the decision depended not so much on your own performance as on what the public thought of your Chief Executive?

In brief, I suggest to you that much of the sniping about the expenditures and life-styles of MPs may be an amusing parlour game, but is otherwise unjustified. Canadians get good value for money from their politicians, particularly if the costs are calculated on a per-hour basis.

I think it might now be useful if I were to try to give you some sense of what it's like to work in a government environment, and the role that is played by MPs and Ministers, as well as by officials such as myself.

A newly-elected government typically comes to office with a set of aspirations which might include, say, improving the competitiveness of Canadian industry, increasing the supply of affordable housing, cleaning up the environment, and providing more assistance to Third World countries. Upon being sworn in, the government must also begin to wrestle with a number of realities. Some of these will be more or less permanent in nature, such as the constitutional division of responsibility with the provinces, regional grievances, and the linguistic duality of the country; while others will pertain to particular times, such as diminished cod stocks, an imminent transportation strike, and an adverse balance of international trade.

Plus of course the fact that there's hardly any money.

The business of government is the continuous reconciliation of national aspirations with various intractable realities of the kind I've just described. For those within government, it
is a process full of stress, frustration, and on occasion, great satisfaction when a workable solution is found for some difficult problem.

My perception is however that outside government the process is mostly viewed with a mixture of condescension and exasperation.

The public observes that politicians upon gaining office sometimes don't do what they promised they would, or even do the opposite. It finds evidence that governments are, if not irrational, then at least unpredictable, and that great wariness should be exercised in dealing with them. This state of mind was best expressed in a motto I once saw hanging on a wall in Washington, which warned that, "No one's life, liberty, or property are safe while the Legislature is in session."

Now, we all know that governments from time to time do in fact behave in the ways that people complain of. What should not be done, however, is to assume that the curious happenings we periodically witness are simply due to a lack of competence, judgement, or good character on the part of our politicians. More commonly, the explanation lies in the quite limited range of choices open to those who must make the decisions.

For example, a party that campaigned on the need to assert Canadian sovereignty through a much stronger presence in the Arctic might well find upon coming to office that the costs were far in excess of what they had imagined, and that this particular commitment could be paid for only by repudiating a number of others – quite possibly including a commitment to reduce government expenditures.

When the performance of a government begins to fall short of its promise, there are often dark mutterings, particularly in the party caucus, to the effect that Ministers have fallen into the hands of the permanent bureaucrats, whose sole interest lies in preserving the status quo. The prospect of a group of faceless officials being so persuasive as to cause public figures to throw over everything they have stood for is, from the point of view of a faceless official such as myself, rather intriguing. It calls to mind the saying that all power tends to corrupt, and absolute power is even nicer.

Alas, the reality is somewhat different. There is a difference between expressing an aspiration and making an informed choice between alternatives. And making choices is the inescapable responsibility of governments, even when all of the alternatives are unpleasant – which they usually are. Speeches full of generalizations won't do; decisions have to be made about what, exactly, shall be done to deal with a particular situation. Almost any course of action can be counted upon to cause trouble somewhere, but a government must face the reality that it cannot balance its books by expenditure cuts that will have no effect in any region, nor by imposing taxes that no one will have to pay.

And a failure to arrive at a decision also amounts to a decision.

There is also little scope in government to apply the principle, "If at first you don't succeed, destroy the evidence that you tried." The decisions and operations of governments are subjected every day to the glare of publicity. Single-interest groups will attack whatever displeases them, and opposition parties will make the most of any government errors or blunders – which indeed is what they get paid to do. Decisions taken by other components of our society are not normally subjected to this type of
treatment, and particularly not on national television every day. The private sector is private in more ways than one.

Then there is the matter of public expectations. A few years ago, in the village of Rockcliffe Park where I live, there was a contested election for seats on the village Council. No one today is quite sure how this situation came about. In any event, an all-candidates meeting took place, and was notable primarily for the fact that the contenders, each in turn, solemnly promised that if elected they would change nothing whatever, and would on the contrary leave our well-upholstered little community exactly as it was. Those who gave this undertaking most convincingly were rewarded with electoral success.

Even at the time, it was evident to most observers that this was not a wholly representative example of the Canadian political process at work. What was most noticeably missing was the multiplicity of pressures and demands for action that are the hallmark of politics at federal and provincial level.

In trying to respond to public expectations, governments cannot limit themselves to pursuing a well-defined goal commonly known in the private sector as "the bottom line;" they have no choice but to pursue multiple objectives, some of which can at times conflict with each other.

For example, governments are expected to be frugal in general, but the various constituencies and interest groups that make up the country also expect governments to come through in the particular, whether this be for the purpose of constructing a badly needed public facility, relieving the effects of a drought, promoting official languages, or rescuing some failing enterprise.

Usually demands for government action are described by their proponents as simply a matter of doing the obvious, reasonable thing. It is however a good rule of thumb that, the more money a government has, the more "reasonable" its behaviour. Unfortunately, the converse is also true, which tends to give governments a bad name in times when cash is in short supply.

Demands for inter-regional equity are often particularly difficult to cope with, the more so when they are mutually incompatible, as is quite often the case. During my time in the Department of Transport, the government of the day effected a 20% cut in Via Rail services. One of the more remarkable consequences of this decision was that the federal government was angrily accused by all five regions of discriminating against each of them – simultaneously. Those who have worked in the field of regional economic development have regularly had similar experiences. Canada is not as easy to govern as some would have you believe.

In sum, it is essential that the public recognize the degree to which governments have to make trade-offs between different objectives. One person's intolerable bureaucratic burden is another's environmental protection. If you're going to provide reasonably good government for the entire country, you've got to do a lot of different things – sometimes more, let it be admitted, than the country’s fiscal situation really allows. But when one is disposed to deplore "government profligacy," it is useful to paraphrase Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and they are not our politicians. They are us."
While much of what I have just been talking about has focused on government, which is the subject I know best, I also want to say a few words about Parliament as I have experienced it.

Parliament is of course a partisan forum, and there is no particular need for me to explain to you its functions in holding governments accountable, important though these are. What I thought you might be interested in, however, is a few words about the ability of politicians to find a consensus. It's greater than you might think.

In 1983, I spent nearly five weeks before a Parliamentary Committee conducting a clause-by-clause review of the Western Grain Transportation Act, which did away with the legendary Crow's Nest Pass rates. During these hearings, a sort of pattern developed: most mornings the Committee session would open with a series of partisan exchanges, rather like an orchestra tuning up. At some point, however, the discussion of points of substance would begin, with officials providing explanations of various complicated subjects. In a fairly short time, someone entering the room for the first time would have found it difficult to discern who was a member of which party. Much of the discussion was a serious search by all concerned for the best alternative. My recollection is that during those hearings over 70 amendments were accepted by the government. They weren't major, but the bill that finally came out was better than the one the Committee had started with.

There was nothing unique about this; on the contrary, it's the sort of thing that happens all the time, usually without attracting much notice. A fundamental responsibility of parliamentarians – whether in committee, in caucus, or on the floor of the legislature is to take measures prepared by officials under the direction of Ministers, and apply to them a scrutiny from the perspective of the public at large.

In brief, people do more in Parliament than just yell at each other.

Finally, there are several things I want to say about the relationship between Ministers and officials.

My basic point is quite simple: decisions really do rest with politicians. There is of course no shortage of presumed sophisticates who would wave this argument away and knowingly explain that the public service really runs everything. It isn't true. Even in situations where a department has a weak Minister, it is not the case that the decisions get taken by officials. Rather, what you mostly get in such a situation is bad decisions or, more commonly, no decisions at all. Without any question, the most common complaint of officials is that our Ministers' schedules never allow us enough time to get through all the various urgent matters that are pending.

When people ask me what powers of final decision I have, I never quite know how to answer. This is because virtually everything that officials and departments do is of a contingent nature: the consolidation of two Canada Employment Centres is subject to the Minister not objecting; changes to regulations require the approval of the Governor-in-Council; most contracts of significant size have to go to Treasury Board; hiring and firing are within the purview of the Public Service Commission.

In the area of policy and program design, officials spend many hours trying to work out what advice to offer our Ministers and the Cabinet. In doing so, we have the benefits of
knowledge and experience, but when we are done, it is still the Ministers who decide what advice to accept, and what to reject.

And do not assume that in such a situation the advice regularly pre-determines the outcome. Some three years of presenting cases at meetings of the Treasury Board every Thursday afternoon left me in no doubt that Ministers have minds of their own.

The decision-making role of politicians is particularly clear when it comes to major, strategic choices. Should Canada put in place an income support programme for the working poor, or not? Is regional economic development worth pursuing on a large scale? What about official bilingualism, or Canada’s future defence requirements?

On major questions of this nature, which require judgements about the needs of the country, officials are largely on the side-lines. We can offer analysis and commentary, but such decisions are primarily driven by the philosophic orientation of elected representatives and the messages registered by the voters at the last election and after. My colleagues and I can design a set of national educational standards for you, but someone else has to decide first whether this is what the country should have.

Now a few concluding observations. Like most Deputy Ministers, I have at various times over past years attended meetings of Cabinet Committees. Often the business is humdrum, but I have also sat in the corner of the room and watched Ministers of whatever party was in office agonize over some major decisions. To the sceptics, I would simply say that I have been impressed by the high level at which many of the discussions have been conducted, and by the persistent focus on the issue of how, despite fiscal, political, and other constraints, the needs of the country can be met.

You may be surprised to hear that being a senior official does not tempt one to think that government by technocrats would be a great idea. On the contrary, the experience tends to reinforce one’s democratic instincts – which is perhaps why I decided to make this speech. You soon develop a sense of your own limitations as you watch others try to discern the direction in which the public good lies. Government involves a lot of trade-offs, and there is no substitute for leaving such decisions to the judgement of people who have to get elected every few years. The public may have reservations about its politicians, but officials are not magicians either, and we know it.

So it really does matter that competent people should hold elective office.

An official is someone who has voluntarily accepted certain limitations on his/her freedom of action, in return for an opportunity to play a role in government without having to enter the political arena. Personally, I regard that as a fair exchange. In every part of the country, there are individuals and groups seeking by one means or another to participate in the decisions and operations of government. I get to do that every day, and I am paid for it. The hours are a bit long, but at least my private life is reasonably private, and I am for the most part spared public abuse.

For elected people, both the rewards and the penalties of life in the domain of public policy are greater: the rewards, because elected people actually get to make decisions, and not just to offer advice about them. They can help set the strategic course of government, rather than just advising on how something might be done.