

# A TRIBUTE TO



*John Tait (1945-1999)*

by Ralph Heintzman

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John Tait was a revered public servant whose name, even during his lifetime, came to symbolize the very nature of public service. That, in this unjustly short span, he should have come to embody the spirit of a whole profession was the result not just of his talents, his character, and his accomplishments, but also his very conscious devotion to that profession, a devotion which found lasting expression in one of his final and greatest achievements.

## *Montreal Roots*

John Tait was born in Montreal. This fact is important, because his place of origin and upbringing had a lasting influence on his character and outlook. John Tait was a man of roots, and his rootedness was an important element in the strength of character and values that impressed everyone who met him. The distinguished political scientist, J.R. Mallory, once observed that the Canadian public service in the last quarter of the twentieth century was at risk of becoming home to what he called "rootless" careerists. Such a thing could never have been said about John Tait. From his family he received his first and lasting lessons about fairness, loyalty and responsibility, and throughout his busy professional career he remained devoted to his extended network of family and friends, and to his place of origin, especially the landscape

of the Laurentians north of Montreal where, throughout his life, he spent some of his happiest moments.

Above all, John Tait's Montreal roots shaped his idea of Canada, especially his devotion to bilingualism, his deep conviction that Canada represented a marriage of two great languages and cultures. His own devoted marriage to Sonia Plourde was no doubt both an expression and a source of inspiration for his wider convictions about Canadian duality.

### *An Education for Public Affairs*

John Tait's lively and serious intellect was apparent from an early age and led him to undergraduate studies at Princeton University, at a time when study at an Ivy League university was much less common for young Canadians than it is today. At Princeton his focus was already on public and international affairs. From Princeton, the distinction of a Rhodes Scholarship, an honour that heralded the promise later to be so richly fulfilled, took him to Oxford University, where he enrolled in the famous "PPE" – Philosophy, Politics and Economics – familiar to many other Canadian graduates of Oxford.

It is significant that although so much of his university education occurred outside the country, this foreign experience in no way diminished his passionate Canadianism. As for so many Canadians, the experience of other countries only served to highlight the virtues and promise of his own.

Of course to be a young Canadian at the beginning of the 1970s was very heaven. It was a time full of possibility and hope, when anything seemed possible. The world seemed to lie open to imagination and creativity, perhaps especially in the public sphere, where the post-war wave of optimism about the potential for public action was reaching its crest, and had not yet started to recede, as it was to do in the 1980s and 1990s. Returning from Oxford to McGill University for his legal

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studies, John Tait, like so many talented young Canadians of his generation, headed almost immediately, upon graduation, to Ottawa, where he articulated as a law clerk in the Supreme Court of Canada.

## *A Rising Public Servant*

When he was called to the Quebec Bar in 1974, John's original intention had been to return to Montreal to practice law. But fate intervened, in the form of a friend who opened the door instead to a position in the Legislation and House Planning secretariat in the Privy Council Office. This turn of events had many long-term consequences, not just for John's career and for the institution of the public service, but for his own personal life and happiness. For it was at PCO that John met a fellow officer, Sonia Plourde, also from Montreal, who became his wife, and his life-long support.

Thus it came about that John's first and last positions in government were in the Privy Council Office, at the centre of government, where, in many ways, he belonged. His sober, reliable judgment, his broad grasp of the underlying principles of parliamentary government, allied to a pragmatic and practical outlook, made him, throughout his career, an outstanding advisor to senior officials and Ministers. These qualities were quickly recognized by his superiors in the Privy Council Office, and within a few years, still in his early thirties, John became Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet for Legislation and House Planning.

After three years in this role, John Tait moved to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs as Assistant Deputy Minister for Corporate Policy. In this new role, John showed that his broad training in public affairs and law and his own natural abilities had combined to make him an outstanding and creative public policy leader. These years also introduced John to the cause of justice for Canada's aboriginal peoples, something that remained with him for the rest of his life, part of his growing appreciation for Canadian diversity and the values of an inclusive society.

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## *The Call of the Law*

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While the years at Indian and Northern Affairs showed the breadth of his talents and public policy skills, John Tait always remained, in his heart, a lawyer as well as a public servant. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that he should move, in 1983, to the Department of Justice, as Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Law.

If the early 1970s had been a time of great promise for public service, the early 1980s were a time in which the Department of Justice seemed to be at the very centre of Canadian public affairs. After fifteen years of constitutional discussion, and in the immediate aftermath of patriation, including the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, public law was a focus of the public agenda as never before. John Tait was in his element, and was able to develop and give full expression to his deep feelings for the great framework of Canadian public and constitutional law.

At the Department of Justice, John was fortunate to work with a master of constitutional and public law, Roger Tassé, who, with Frank Iacobucci and John himself, was one of the remarkable series of outstandingly capable and humane Deputy Ministers who led the Department of Justice in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a tradition of which that department can be justly proud. In Roger Tassé, John benefited from a mentor who shared not only his expertise and passion for public law but who also possessed the qualities of wisdom, judgment and humanity for which John himself came to be known, and who, like him, was concerned to adapt the department to the modern world of public policy and analysis. Together they made, briefly, a formidable team, before Roger left the public service for private practice in 1985, and John was appointed Deputy Solicitor General, in 1986.

John's first Deputy Minister appointment was important in itself, but also as preparation. It allowed him to deepen his familiarity with the

institutions of public security and law enforcement for which the Solicitor General is responsible. And it allowed him to continue his warm and close partnership with Roger Tassé's worthy successor, Frank Iacobucci. With Frank in Justice and John as Deputy Solicitor General, the Justice sector as a whole basked for two years in leadership of an unusual calibre. These years also allowed John to apprentice in the demanding role of Deputy Minister, before taking up the position for which he was destined, as Deputy Minister of Justice, in 1988.

## *Deputy Minister of Justice*

John Tait's term as Deputy Minister of Justice was notable for many reasons. One of them was the process of reform and modernization that he led, building on the work of his two predecessors. Among other initiatives, John launched a process he called "Choices for the Future," which was intended to adapt the department and the law to modern realities such as globalization, economic and social change, and the technological revolution. Characteristically – and in a manner that heralded important work still to come – it included an effort to articulate a vision and values for the department that incorporated the best of the old and the new. Core values, he already understood, could provide both reliable guideposts and a source of inspiration to tackle new realities, ensuring an appropriate marriage of continuity and change. Among the new directions he encouraged were a strengthening of federal-provincial dialogue and cooperation on justice matters, and the establishment of multi-disciplinary teams, bringing the full range of public policy skills and social sciences to bear on policy analysis and initiatives in the justice field.

John Tait's term as Deputy Minister of Justice coincided with another intense period of constitutional discussion, and John found himself plunged again into an area of activity and concern in which he had been engaged, in one way or another, since the late 1970s. The aftermath of the Meech Lake Accord and the ensuing national debate, the public constitutional conferences, the federal-provincial negotiations that led to the Charlottetown Accord, and the national referendum that followed

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it – all these extended through most of his term at Justice and absorbed much of his professional and psychic energies.

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As Deputy Minister of Justice, John's official position alone would have made him, *ex officio*, a key player in this constitutional policy process. But his own personal qualities – his supple, fertile policy mind; his sober, prudential judgment; his wide knowledge of the law, and his careful attention to the details of legal drafting; his historical perspective and his great integrity – made him an even more valuable contributor to the constitutional policy-making process.

For John Tait, however, the fate of the constitution, and the fate of the country which was bound up with it, were never merely professional concerns. They were deeply personal, also. The break-up of the country would have had searing consequences for his family, and for his very idea of Canada. His concern to forestall such an intolerable outcome was part of the motivation that led him to seek tirelessly for creative solutions and ways out of the national dilemma. The anxiety and intensity of this constitutional labour were costly in professional but also in physical and psychic energies, and exacted a heavy toll on his own personal constitution.

While much of John Tait's time as Deputy Minister was taken up with such high matters, his growing reputation did not stem from these alone. He was also widely admired for the simple human qualities he brought to the job, and the sincerity of his concern for others. He could be tough and exacting, and occasionally even given to brief bouts of anger when standards were not met. But he was the first to regret any such outbursts. And they did not leave a mark, because his underlying decency was so palpable, as were the exacting standards he set for himself. He was a people-centred manager long before it was fashionable to think in those terms. Not only was he prepared to undergo a 360° feedback exercise but he was also happy to share the results with his subordinates, and to discuss the resulting feedback with them. His modesty, his lack of personal vanity and pretension, his ability to laugh at himself, won him the respect and affection of his employees.

If John's sincerity won the devotion of those below, he was equally if not more gifted in his relations with those above, with the Ministers whom he served. John revelled in the role of Deputy Minister largely for the opportunity it gave for this kind of service. It seemed to him that the relationship between a Minister and his Deputy captured the essence of public service; it concentrated in one relationship, and in a heightened form, as if under a microscope or spotlight, everything that made public service worthwhile. It gave opportunity to exercise, on a daily basis, all the virtues and values of public service, and to be tested by that standard: service to democracy; responsiveness to democratic will; fearless, professional advice based on careful policy analysis; speaking truth to power; a tireless search for the true public interest; a careful weighing of alternatives and competing goals; integrity in decision-making; a rigid exclusion of self-interest in favour of the public good. Judged by this standard, John Tait's conduct as Deputy Minister was exemplary. His obvious sincerity, integrity, intelligence and professionalism won the confidence of Ministers – even Ministers of departments other than his own – and opened the door to a number of productive and rewarding relationships.

As John's term as Deputy Minister of Justice lengthened, he acquired a growing stature beyond the Department, within the Deputy Minister and public service communities at large. His reliable judgment, his obvious sincerity and devotion, his reputation for integrity made him a person whose advice and counsel were regularly sought, and often influential. They also began to make him a person who, for a growing number of public servants, symbolized the best in their chosen profession. This reputation was to be decisive, and greatly enhanced, in the next and, in some ways, crowning phase of his career.

### *The Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics*

By 1994, the intensity of John's working life, combined with several persistent health problems, brought on a medical crisis which obliged

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him to relinquish the position of Deputy Minister of Justice. This could have been a severe blow, but, instead, it opened the door to one of his most important and distinctive contributions.

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As it happened, John's resignation occurred at a time when the Canadian Centre for Management Development had decided to establish a Study Team on Public Service Values and Ethics, as part of its ongoing action research program. To head such a study team it was necessary to enrol a Deputy Minister whom the public service would regard as an authentic representative of the very values the team was to study. If there were any disharmony between words and actions, between the walk and the talk, the credibility of the Study Team would be sacrificed from the start.

John Tait was the first and obvious choice, and the invitation to become chair of the Study Team was extended to him by CCMD's Principal, Ole Ingstrup. John's resignation as Deputy Minister of Justice made it possible for him to accept and to devote most of his energies to the project over the next two years. In the spring of 1995, when the Clerk of the Privy Council, Jocelyne Bourgon, decided to establish a number of Deputy Minister task forces on key issues facing the public service, there was no need to create anything new, and John's CCMD Study Team became the Deputy Minister Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Both the conduct of the Task Force's work and the character of its historic report, *A Strong Foundation*, published in December 1996, showed the clear imprint of John Tait's leadership, in numerous ways. The Task Force's inductive methodology, for example – beginning not with *a priori* assertions about public service values but rather with a patient exploration of problems and challenges facing the public service – reflected John Tait's own way of working. The Task Force called the way in which it chose to address these problems and challenges "honest dialogue," and both sides of this concept owed something to John Tait. "Dialogue" expressed his own growing convictions about the importance of inclusive consultation, of listening, and of learning.

“Honest” reflected not only John Tait’s integrity but also his courage. The Task Force tackled very delicate and controversial issues – from the quality of public service leadership, to downsizing and the public service employment contract, to the Al Mashat affair – and did so in an unusually forthright and candid way that would have been impossible without John Tait’s immense authority and determination.

The way in which *A Strong Foundation* sought to reconcile the old and the new, to reaffirm the enduring foundation of public service values while welcoming and making room for the new managerial values, this was pure John Tait, as was its emphasis on the necessary conflict between values and on the need to reconcile competing goods. The four “families” of public service values identified in the Task Force’s last chapter – democratic, professional, ethical and people values – were little more than a clothing in words of the values that had been manifested in John Tait’s own practice of public administration.

While he believed in the importance of all four “families,” John insisted on the primacy of the “democratic” values. In part, this reflected his own deep reverence for parliamentary democracy, and for the principles and conventions of responsible government, especially the conventions of ministerial accountability. The Task Force devoted an entire chapter to accountability, and this was a chapter in which John took a special interest. The passages in which the Task Force defined the concepts of accountability, responsibility, answerability and blame, bear John’s strong imprint and have been widely admired as one of the best expositions of accountability in a parliamentary system.

John’s emphasis on the democratic values also reflected his concern about some tendencies he observed in the contemporary public service. If there was anything that worried him in new public management ideas, it was the way in which, misused or misinterpreted, they might encourage public servants to focus exclusively on their managerial challenges and to overlook their primary mission to support democratic government. He wanted to remind them that their first duty was service to democracy, serving the public interest as interpreted by the duly

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constituted government, acting within the law and the constitution. Law and the constitution, guiding beacons of John's own life, ran through *A Strong Foundation* like a *leitmotif*, calling public servants back to the foundations of their profession.

Above all, *A Strong Foundation* expressed John's own unquenchable idealism about public service as a special calling. John himself was somewhat self-conscious about this idealism. In his foreword to the report, he admitted that he worried about "whether our report might be too naïve or too idealistic and might lead to another letdown." Yet he was determined to maintain his own high aspirations, and those to which he invited other public servants. "It is our values," he wrote, "that pull us forward, that command us to improve, and a richer, fuller understanding of these values can only help us to build on the finest traditions and aspirations of public service."

John need not have worried. From the moment of its publication in December 1996, the "Tait Report," as it came universally to be known, was embraced by public servants not only in the federal government, but right across Canada. Its honest confrontation of problems and dilemmas lent an authenticity and authority to its conclusions about the enduring nature of public service. As Jocelyne Bourgon was later to observe: "The Tait Report rings true to public servants everywhere, and, as a result, the four families of values it identifies in its conclusion are not clichés but, rather, living truths."

### ***Return to the Privy Council Office***

Since leaving the Department of Justice, John Tait had held the titles of Special Advisor in the Privy Council Office, as well as Senior Fellow of CCMD. Following completion of the Task Force report, he was able to take up full-time duties in the Privy Council Office as Coordinator of Security and Intelligence. This was a role that John enjoyed because it called on his previous experience in the security area as well as his legal background and policy expertise. His position in the Privy Council

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Office also made it possible for him to play a wider role as wise and trusted counsellor at the centre of government, and he was consulted on a wide variety of matters.

He also continued his official role as the Clerk's Deputy Minister champion for public service values and ethics, as well as the informal role he now acquired because of the growing renown of the "Tait Report." In his official role, he promoted the public service-wide dialogue on values advocated by the Task Force and worked on the Statement of Principles of Public Service it had recommended. In his informal role, he received innumerable invitations to meet with or speak to public servants and public service organizations right across Canada, and at various levels of government. His name was now widely connected with public service values, and public servants everywhere, eager to rediscover the foundations and nature of their profession in difficult times, hungered for his guidance and inspiration. He deeply regretted that his health did not allow him to accept more of these invitations. He often had to ask colleagues to represent him, especially for engagements requiring travel outside Ottawa. But he accepted as many as he could, conscious of the important responsibility he now carried.

With typical modesty, he worried about the iconic status his name had acquired, believing that no one person should be so closely identified with so important a cause. He sought actively to share the load, and to encourage other public service leaders to step forward.

As his health began to decline once again, this question of leadership became an increasingly urgent matter. In 1998 John was forced to curtail and then relinquish his line responsibilities within the Privy Council Office. In the early months of 1999, knowing that he must undergo surgery, John became even more concerned to ensure that ongoing leadership on public service values and ethics was assured. Typically, he was overjoyed when the Clerk appointed two Deputy Ministers to succeed him as champion. He knew that future leadership was assured, and that the torch he had lit would not be extinguished.

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## *The Private John Tait*

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For someone as passionately devoted to public service as John Tait, maintaining a healthy balance between his personal and professional lives was always a challenge. There is no doubt that the strong foundation for his own life was provided by the close and devoted relationship with his wife, Sonia Plourde. Among other things, Sonia helped to maintain his sense of humour and perspective. To spend time in their company was to be warmed by the glow of a deep and loving friendship.

While he could, a weekly game of badminton helped to maintain some of the form of the keen athlete John had been in his youth. But his most important recreation was provided by weekends and summer holidays at the family cottage. Throughout the warmer months of the year, the rhythm of life was structured, as much as possible, around weekend drives to and from the Laurentians. The relaxed conversation with Sonia was punctuated by the obligatory stop in Alfred for a taste of Canada's best French fries.

At the cottage, John slipped back into the network of family and old friends from whom he drew so much sustenance. He especially loved his extended family of young nephews and nieces, and he was often the focus of their attention. In a way that might have astonished his colleagues in Ottawa, accustomed to the intense and serious Deputy Minister, John Tait, in his family, was the centre of every game, song and youthful prank. The joy of his family nourished his passion for life, and for his profession.

### *John Tait as Mentor*

It was inevitable for someone of John's character that he should be sought out by colleagues, at various levels and stages of their careers,

for his wise advice and counsel. He gave generously of his time and made his reliable judgment and insight available to those who sought it.

Many did. Some would not have thought of taking any important decision, on a personal or policy matter, without checking with John first. Some had the good fortune to do so on an almost weekly basis. Others had to content themselves with more intermittent contact. But all who approached him came away impressed by his humanity, and reassured. Reassured about their proposed course of action, or the new one he had suggested. Reassured about themselves. Reassured about their profession, that could have such people in it.

### *John Tait's Legacy*

For those who knew him, and for many others who knew him only by reputation, John Tait's untimely death was a shock and an immense loss. It left a great void that is very difficult to fill.

But more than most, John left an enduring legacy. For those who did not know him personally, he left, of course, his immense contribution to Canada's modern public law and policy. But he also left the legacy of the Tait Report which captured the essence of what it is to be a public servant, and set the public service of Canada on a path to renewal, as the report put it, "from within: from values consciously held and daily enacted, values deeply rooted in our own system of government, values that help to create confidence in the public service about its own purpose and character, values that help us to regain our sense of public service as a high calling."

For those who were fortunate to work with him directly, John Tait left us all this, and much more. He gave us a living example of what it is to be a great public servant and a great human being. His memory is a constant inspiration, a standard and a model, but also a source of energy

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and motivation "to aim high," as he himself put it, "and if we miss the target, focus on how to do better."

The Tait Report had a great deal to say about leadership. One of its major themes was that actions speak much louder than words. In a passage entitled "Encountering the Good," for example, John's report warned that renewal of the public service could not come from codes or rules or statements alone. Much more than any of these, public service renewal must come from role models, from leadership and example. "We learn about the good," the report said, "not from abstractions but from encountering it in real life, embodied in real persons."

In John Tait, we had the inexpressible good fortune to encounter the good.

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