

Scott Serson: A Brief Tribute to My Colleague John Tait

You may have already read the excellent Tribute prepared by Ralph Heintzman when John Tait passed. I hope those of you who have not had a previous opportunity will take the time to read it.

What I will do is highlight one period of my relationship with John and what I think it says about his character. Then I will turn briefly to *A Strong Foundation* and highlight one of the many passages that was and still is very important to me.

I warn you that I will in all likelihood get emotional as I do now whenever talking about someone who was truly important to me.

One thing John and I shared is an early introduction to the cause of justice for the First Peoples of this land and a strong, on-going commitment to that cause. We got the opportunity to work together on related law and policy in 1990. John was Deputy Minister of Justice and I was an Assistant Secretary at the Federal-Provincial Relations Office when, as Ralph Heintzman put it earlier today, we were plunged into the aftermath of the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and began working on what would eventually emerge as the Charlottetown Accord. Where Indigenous peoples were left out of the Meech Lake process, Constitutional Affairs Minister Joe Clark made sure they were full participants in the Charlottetown process and so John and I ended up working on the key Indigenous policy issue – the inherent right of self-government.

Now, as I said, I was an Assistant Secretary at the time so there were a few public service classification levels between John and me. For John that was not a barrier to dealing directly with me. As Ralph has noted, John could be tough and exacting. I, having been part of the failed Aboriginal Constitutional Process between 1985 and 1987, was quite committed to seeing the Inherent Right recognized in our Constitution. That set up a few meetings between John and me, where we discussed, and often debated quite vehemently, the recognition of the Inherent Right. In the end, the Charlottetown Accord as approved by First Ministers did contain an amendment recognizing the Inherent Right and I believe John was as pleased as I was and he was as disappointed that the Accord failed in the subsequent referendum. But when the process was over, I always worried that John felt that I had pushed him too hard on the Inherent right and that he thought less of me for it.

Fast forward to late 1998 or early 1999, I don't remember the exact timing, but I get a call from John's office to meet him. Imagine my relief, amazement, pride when, having explained that he was going to be taking some time off for health reasons, John asked me, along with Janice Cochrane, to take on the next stage of his work and lead the 'honest dialogue' on values that he and the Task Force had proposed.

The Tait Report talks about 'encountering the good'. I hope my little story illustrates what others have said over the years – those of us that were fortunate enough to

work with John Tait encountered a flesh and blood example of values-based, ethical leadership. When it came to people John was more interested in character than classification. He was not threatened by different views passionately held, and was prepared to deal with ideas on their merits. He had a huge intellect and a spirit to match.

In the Forward to *A Strong Foundation* Jocelyn Bourgon wrote "If you seek John Tait's monument, read on." There are many parts of John's monument that are important to me. But I do have a favourite passage – a passage that points to a leadership philosophy that I yearned for as an officer, that I saw reflected in John's actions and that I tried to instill wherever I worked. This is the passage:

"Wherever we find ourselves in the public service, and at whatever levels, we enjoy the deep privileges of public service — the opportunity to serve and help our country — and the obligations of leadership and initiative that go with them. We do not have to, and should not, wait for signals from others before undertaking the great tasks of public service leadership: exercising imagination, creativity and vigilance for the public good, and caring for the people entrusted to our charge."

Words I believe John lived by; words for Public Servants to live by!

Scott Serson