

## Convocation Address to Mount Allison University — May 26, 2008

*Remarks by Kevin G. Lynch, Clerk of the Privy Council, Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of the Public Service*

Thank you Chancellor Bragg, President and Vice Chancellor Campbell, members of the Senate and Board of Regents, members of the Faculty, members of the Graduating Class, distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen.

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to Mount Allison for this opportunity to address the graduating class — although, I confess I feel a bit like Jon Stewart did when he was asked to host the Academy Awards. Stewart said, “of course I feel honoured, but as someone who’s watched the Oscars and is a big fan, I have to tell you quite frankly, I’m a bit disappointed with the choice.”

In my case, it’s not disappointment so much as surprise — I’m very honoured to be recognized by Mount Allison University, my *alma mater*.

Today is about you, the graduates — and what graduation means. Having made the tactical error of passing all of your classes and earning enough credits to graduate, you are now leaving Mount Allison to go out into “the real world.” As humourist Dave Barry has pointed out, the first thing you’ll notice is that your professors are not going with you. That’s because they’ve learned that university is a carefree place where the most serious problem is finding a legal parking place!

But you — you the graduates — are moving on and entering a world of new challenges. Where there is no curriculum. Where everything’s an elective. And where globalization means that you will face fundamentally different problems than those of even 15 or 20 years ago.

This morning, I want to talk about that world — and the value of the liberal arts education you’ve received in navigating and shaping it.

But let me begin by addressing those of you sitting behind the graduates — the parents and family of the class of 2008 — who have done so much to make this day possible, who have been with your children through the highs and the lows, the times they thought they wouldn’t last, and the times they knew they couldn’t miss. Today, their success reflects your support and I want to congratulate all of you as well.

Now, it is the nature of these occasions, for a speaker you do not know, from a time you do not remember, to give advice you will not heed. Well relax, because today I’m not going to offer any advice; instead I just want to talk for a few minutes about the kind of education Mount Allison has given you and why it’s so important in a globalized world.

I don’t need to remind you what makes this university so special — the beauty of its campus, the richness of its programs, and the importance of its traditions. Mount Allison has proven that you don’t need a PhD program to be one of the top universities in the country and, according to the *Maclean’s* rankings, the number one undergraduate

institution.

That success, I believe, is rooted in its commitment to providing the intellectual panorama — and context — so essential for addressing today's most pressing problems.

What are those problems? What are the key challenges of a globalized world? And why is a liberal arts education so well suited to meeting them? A few thoughts.

What's remarkable about our times is not that they are changing. That's always been the case. What's remarkable is the speed, the velocity, the acceleration of change. New ideas and new players are undercutting received wisdom and doing it fast. Technological change is accelerating as never before.

Just think — when you throw away one of those birthday cards that plays a tune when you open it, you're throwing away more computing power than existed in the world at the end of the Second World War. And that power is now doubling every 18 months, and bandwidth even faster than that.

Soon we'll see computer chips with transistors smaller than a flu virus. And, not far away, chips with a billion transistors — bringing an almost unimaginable expansion in computing power and speed.

Just fifty years ago Crick and Watson discovered DNA. Today, high school students sit in biology class and split it apart.

Eight years ago, scientists sequenced the three billion letters of the human genome, uncovering, quite literally, the language of life itself — and allowing us to acquire, for the first time, some measure of control over the evolution of life on this planet.

In the midst of so much change, intense global competition is re-shaping how nations compete and how commerce functions. More than two-thirds of the global economy is already a knowledge economy, with invention and imagination creating whole new industries on the strength of an idea.

In such a torrent of change, new skills are required and the single greatest asset you can have is the ability to think. And to learn.

We live at a time when we are inundated with information. Television, radio, the Internet, cell phones and e-mail have put data, facts, statistics, and opinions at our fingertips. But access to information is not the same as wisdom. Or even understanding.

And that's why a liberal arts education is so important. A liberal arts education teaches you how to think, develops a strength of mind and an ordered intellect. Your time here at Mount Allison has equipped you with the ability to give meaning to information. To draw value from it. And add value to it. And it's where you have learned how to learn.

It has helped to make you independent thinkers, capable of forming your own opinions, attitudes and values — based not on the authority of your parents or your peers or your

professors, but on your own evaluation of argument and evidence.

That ability — to think for yourselves, and to think critically — is the single most important asset this university could have given you, and the one most critical to our times. It's certainly a skill that is recognized and sought after in the public service, where I work. In the public service, we're in the midst of a sweeping renewal, driven by the demographics of the aging baby boomer generation, which I clearly represent. What we need are young people who are thinking about the world, who have developed the capacity to analyze critically, to communicate clearly and to learn continually; and who want to make a difference to their country.

The interesting thing is that these same skills are prized in the private sector as well. A few years ago, CEOs of some of Canada's leading high tech companies took the unprecedented step of issuing a public statement in support of a liberal arts education. That statement said in part, and I quote, "a liberal arts education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations." end quote.

But there's another reason that a liberal arts education is especially important today — and that's globalization.

Now, we tend to think of globalization as being about the integration of markets, or about how technology is collapsing distance and time, or about the emergence of new institutions, like the World Trade Organization and the Financial Stability Forum. But globalization is about far more than just the free flow of goods, services, capital, and ideas.

It's also about exploring the complex interactions among individuals, groups, and nations. It's about understanding our interconnectedness. Seeing our common humanity as more important than our many differences.

And that's hard because the pace of change is not pausing for us to prepare. Instead, globalization is smashing head first into ancient cultures; creating tensions between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern.

Technology is throwing together people and cultures with fundamentally different ideas about things like the sanctity of the individual, sovereignty, due process of law, the role of women, the meaning of human rights, private property, and attitudes toward nature.

Juan Enriquez puts it succinctly in his book, *As the Future Catches You*. Enriquez writes, "technology is not kind. It does not wait. It does not say please. It slams into existing systems and often destroys them."

And what happens when it slams up against everything that roots people to their identity, their sense of self and their position in the world? Well, to put it mildly, it can be incredibly disorienting. Increasingly cut off from larger identities, many are feeling adrift, anxious, threatened.

That's the central paradox of our times. Globalization's progress has not been matched by

humanity's wisdom. Or, to use Thomas Homer-Dixon's wonderful phrase, an "ingenuity gap" has opened between the challenges we face and the answers we supply.

As Homer Dixon puts it, "the challenges (before us)... cross the spectrum of politics, economics, technology, and ecological affairs. They converge, intertwine, and often seem largely beyond our ken... Can we create ideas fast enough to solve the problems we've created?" End quote.

I think that's a profoundly important question. Can we create ideas fast enough to solve the problems we face?

The challenge for you will be to find ways to break down barriers between societies and cultures, as effectively as my generation has broken down barriers of distance. We may have connected continents, but you need to find ways to connect cultures. And that's a much taller order.

It's my belief that the answers — the ingenuity — to address these cross-cutting issues will come — can only come — from the liberal arts. Indeed, today's headlines read like a humanities syllabus — work, ethics, culture, conflict, history, and health. All of the things that the liberal arts seek to understand and illuminate.

If the big issues of the 21st century are going to be social and cultural, we need fluency across boundaries; we need disciplines that can integrate knowledge from many sources and distill wisdom from many traditions.

A liberal arts education does that. It lets you see the world "whole" — the interplay of national interests, culture, history, economics, technology, and our relationship with the earth.

John Henry Newman, the 19th century thinker and theologian, wrote a famous book called *The Idea of a University*. In it he said, "a truly great intellect...is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these on one another..." end quote.

He was writing in the 1800's but he could have been talking about the benefits of a liberal arts education in a globalized world. He could have been talking about the education you've received here at Mount Allison University.

That education has given you the ability to see connections between ideas. To see larger patterns and take the longer perspective — the very skills we'll need to navigate the challenges ahead of us. Getting there will require many more graduates like the ones we are honouring this morning. And many more universities like this one. Today, your final day at Mount Allison, you leave rightfully proud and well prepared — to provide the kind of wisdom our world needs and to offer the kind of insights your education enables. Ahead of you lie unimaginable opportunities and undreamt of possibilities. But whatever you do, wherever you go, you will always share the common bond of this common experience. This university is a part of you, as it is of me. It has been an honour sharing this important day with you. And I wish all of you, every success.