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“Professor Thomas Symons:
An interdisciplinary Scholar, a reknown
writer, a social innovator, an historian
concerned about heritage
and a select guest speaker”

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“Professor Thomas Symons: An interdisciplinary Scholar,
a reknown writer, a social innovator, an historian
concerned about heritage and a select guest speaker”

Marc-Adélarde Tremblay
Professor Emeritus,
Laval University

Conférence prononcée à Ottawa, Conseil national de la Statistique,
le 5 mai 2005.

I am most honoured to have been asked to speak about the merits and influences of Professor Tom Symons, the Founding President and Vanier Professor Emeritus of Trent University. Upon looking at his achievements, I realized that it would be impossible to mention and comment every function he held as a University teacher, as the Chairperson, and many times as a founding President, of so many learned societies, institutions or organizations of prestige, as an invited guest speaker at so many symposia and professional annual meetings, as a frequent participant in international academic and cultural relations, as a writer in the field of Canadian Studies on intellectual and cultural issues : it would reduce the time available to other speakers. Similarly, I will not be in a position to refer to the many awards, prices, medals and other types of recognition he received, or yet, his election to prestigious intellectual organizations, all of these are in recognition of his works in the field of « education, heritage, culture, human rights and international affairs».

However, I might provide a few examples. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 1964, an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1976, and promoted to the rank of Companion in 1997, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1977 and in 2003 he was appointed as a member of the Order of Ontario. In 1992, he received the Distinguished Service to education Award of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education in Washington, D.C. From 1971 to 1991 he received

fourteen honorary doctorates, mostly from Canadian Universities. Furthermore, he has received more than 25 different scholarships for training purposes, many research grants for study trips abroad and research fellowships from the most prestigious Canadian and Foreign universities, Foundations and Learned institutions. As far as I know, it is truly an unmatched record.

I would like to spell out some features of Tom Symons's type of chairmanship. Those could be considered a prelude to the observations I will make later on about his leadership patterns on the National Statistics Council. Features which characterize his type of involvement as leader of organizations and institutions of learning can be summed up in three propositions: 1) to be at the service of a wide range of institutions and social organizations is being perceived by him as a major social responsibility; 2) his extended knowledge in history, in the arts and humanities, in the social sciences are some of the elements which constitute the fabric of his intellectual interdisciplinary culture. They become the perspective and part of the input process which regulate observations and discussions which occur among members of those organizations he leads while examining relevant topics, taking into account national and international aspects; 3) his type of leadership represents a model: It reflects a very special know-how in the art of human relations, in his skill in presenting topics being on the agenda, in conducting discussions and allowing everyone who has something to say to take the floor and in making sure that all personal contributions to be made will end at the foreseen time set earlier.

Allow me now to refer to a few circumstances and events in which Professor Symons carried important functions and which he had an impact on my career as an academic researcher. I met Professor Symons for the first time in the early seventies, when he came at Laval University as the Chairman of the Commission on Canadian Studies, to meet researchers working in such fields. The research field then was widely defined to include, in addition to historical and literary studies, those in the social sciences. I was leading at the time a team of graduate students working on the impact of technological and industrial changes on small isolated communities of the North Shore of the Saint-Lawrence River. We were at the very beginning of our field studies and had received a research Grant from the Canada Council. I remember that Professor Symons had a positive reaction to the kind of empirical work we were carrying at a period of time when Quebec was going through strong and rapid social, economic and cultural changes.

Team research in the social sciences, in those days, was just beginning and the first research grant we received had to be renewed every year. We were able to receive yearly financial support for our research project for a period of ten years which allowed for the training of about 20 graduate students during that decade. Those students wrote master degree thesis on their field experience. It is my feeling

that the publication of the Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies «*To know ourselves*» had an influence on the grants we received in the following years. The work of that Commission had a widespread impact on Canadian studies in Canada and abroad. Today, there is the existence of at least twenty Associations for Canadian Studies in foreign countries. The Report in itself had a strong influence on them reinforced by the fact that Canada, at that time, was a country admired for its culture, its economic standing, its quality of life and its growing role in international affairs.

All members of our Advisory Council know the keen interest of Professor Symons for the North and its People. At Professor Symons initiative, a result of his Northern experiences and written works in the field of Native Studies, we had discussions at our Council which led to the gathering and production of a better statistical picture and profiles of Northerners, Natives and non-Natives. It happens that this is a research field in which I work. I recognize the influence that Tom Symons had on the evolution of my involvement in Northern studies, especially since 1991 when I was appointed on the Canadian Polar Commission. The «purpose of the Commission is to promote the development and the dissemination of knowledge in respect of the polar regions». The creation of the Polar Commission occurred after Professor Symons, with an appointment from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, wrote a special Report «*The Shield of Achilles :The Report of the Canadian Polar Research Commission Study*». This Report was published in 1988 and recommended the establishment of a Canadian Polar Commission. The Commissioners were appointed in 1991. I was one of the twelve Canadian scientists who became members for a three-years term. My term of office was extended for another three years and ended in 1997. Two years later, I became a member of the Nunavik Commission which had to recommend to the Quebec Government the creation of a Government for the Inuit, living in what was called, in earlier days, «New Québec», that would have a large degree of autonomy. Such appointment confirmed and extended my active research interest for the Canadian Inuit. At times, you will agree with me, there are special historical circumstances which become structuring factors for some individuals. Professor Symons had been building them for my benefit.

I had the opportunity to be associated to some activities in which Professor Symons was equally associated, but in his case in a leading capacity. I am referring here to Commonwealth scholarships. I had been, in the seventies for few years, a member of adjudicating committees for Commonwealth scholarships when Professor Symons was the Chairman of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. In the nineties, he had been asked to chair a major Conference of the Polar Commission on Polar science and critical economic and social issues : his contribution was a key to our success. In 2003. Professor Symons became the founding Chair of the Association for Commonwealth studies which held its first annual meeting in Halifax.

The theme of the Conference was on Health and I was invited to give a paper on Nunavik Inuit health determinants. I found out that it was timely that the founding Conference was on such a topic since it is one of the basic needs of human beings and an aspiration held by most. In recent years, «to become healthy and remain healthy» has become everywhere a strong shared value. In about all Commonwealth countries, it is equally considered as a fundamental right of citizens. However, in some of them, individuals do not receive the health care services to which they are entitled. The quality of health care is also another issue of importance. The choice of such a theme for the Conference was a judicious one since it allowed for cross-cultural exchanges on experiences here and in other countries. It was a theme that was a reflection of the Chairman's experience.

Professor Symons has also been a prolific writer. His most known books are *To Know Ourselves; The Place of History*, a Royal Society of Canada's volume for which he was the editor and co-author and of the Canadian Museum of civilization's two volumes publication :*Meta Incognita, A Discourse of Discovery : the Arctic Voyages of Martin Frobisher, 1576-1578*. In addition to these, he had a wide number of monographs, articles and reports «dealing with education, public affairs, heritage conservation, human relations and international affairs» To this list we should add his written works on Natives which have been so influential. One wonders how a single individual, active as Chairman in some many organizations, sometimes as Founding Chairman or President, could find the time to write and publish so extensively works of high quality on so many complex issues facing our Canadian society?

I would like now to say a few words about chairmanship patterns built by Professor Symons as the founding Chair of the National Statistics Council in which capacity he served for the last twenty years. This is another performance which would puzzle someone who is not familiar with the huge intellectual assets of our chairman. At the start, I would like to say that I considered it a privilege to serve under his leadership for about ten years. During that period of time, he has demonstrated the breadth of his knowledge, the quality of his relationship with every member and the high esteem he had for each of them and the unusual dynamism shown in the conduct of agenda affairs. There are quite a number of facts that can be used to document such an assertion :

- a deep knowledge of the content of the complex agenda items;
- a particular care for giving the floor to all those who wish to make comments or observations on issues being examined;
- an unusual listening capacity as well as the ability to make a synthesis of the various comments being made;
- a repeated efficiency to end meetings in due time;

a «maître-d'œuvre» that has allowed for comments, observations, particular experiences of members and discussions to remain at a level where pragmatic initiatives and innovative suggestions can be put forth;

an unconditional upholder of programs and projects that have to be approved by government officials; being well known by the latter Professor Symons holds most of the time a convincing power that is of great help to Statistics Canada;

a tradition builder aimed at making the Council not only a forum for multidisciplinary exchanges among members but also a «think tank» suggesting innovative proposals so that Statistics Canada can fulfill its mandate while respecting the fundamental rights of individuals, institutions and communities;

a type of leadership where everyone find meetings enriching and the company of other members an opportunity to exchange and develop friendship.

Of course, the list is far from being exhaustive!

Au nom de tous les membres du Conseil, et en particulier des membres francophones, je vous exprime, monsieur le Président, mes plus sincères remerciements pour les connaissances nouvelles que vous nous avez permis d'acquérir mais aussi pour les services éminents que vous avez rendus à cette vénérable institution qu'est Statistique Canada dont la réputation internationale s'est élargie, tout particulièrement ces dernières années sous votre mandat avec le concours du Statisticien en chef, le Dr Fellegi. Je me permets d'ajouter que la qualité de votre direction, ajoutée à celle de notre distingué et réputé Statisticien en chef, a permis à la Grande équipe de Statistique Canada des réalisations, des accomplissements et un dépassement de soi qui témoignent de la vigueur de l'institution à laquelle nous sommes tous si profondément attachés. Cher collègue et cher ami, vous vous retirez après tant d'années d'un engagement soutenu, associé à une expertise de grande qualité. J'ai comme l'impression que les débats qui ont été tenus au Conseil ont balisé en quelque sorte le chemin à suivre et les objectifs à réaffirmer. Je vous souhaite une longue vie auprès de vos proches afin que vous puissiez mener une vie où vous jouirez d'une plus grande liberté et où vous pourrez vous adonner à des activités artistiques et littéraires que vous chérissez tant.

En terminant, j'espère que mon témoignage reflète la très haute estime et la grande affection que nous vous portons et que nous vous exprimons à l'occasion de ce souper visant à vous honorer à l'occasion de votre départ du Conseil national de la statistique. Nos souvenirs de vous en tant qu'universitaire, homme de science et en tant qu'une personne valorisant les qualités humaines de chacun seront à jamais pour nous une source d'inspiration commune.

Hôtel Westin, Ottawa
Ce 5 mai 2005

Fin du texte