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Speech by the Right Honourable Paul Martin

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MONTREAL – I want to thank the people of Canada. To have served you as a member of Parliament, as a Minister and as Prime Minister was more fulfilling and an honour greater than anyone could imagine.

And let me thank you, Liberals from every province and territory of our country. It was such a privilege to have served as your leader – such a privilege to have been entrusted with the leadership of a party that has played a pivotal role not only in governing our country but in helping to shape its history, define its character and chart its future.

I was first elected in 1988. Our party would know defeat in that election. It meant five long years in opposition, as Canada's debt increased and its confidence waned. By the time the 1993 campaign began, you could feel it at the doorstep, on the street, in the air - our country wanted change. Jean Chrétien provided that change and I am proud to have served in his cabinet.

I remember the excitement of winning the election, the thrill of taking office and the sinking sensation of looking at the fiscal books.

Back then, there was no debate about how much debt we should pay off. That's because the government was adding to it with chronic deficits. Back then, there was no debate about how deeply to cut taxes. That's because the government was increasing them. Back then, there was no debate about how best to invest in children, in the environment, in health care, in our universities. That's because the government simply couldn't afford it.

We came into office. And we said enough is enough.

We made the hard choices. We brought back the lost concept of prudent financial management. We put Canada's fiscal house in order – and look at the dividends it has paid. We were transported from a seemingly endless cycle of financial despair to one of lower taxes, lower interest rates, rising living standards, more and better jobs.

As the budget came into balance, as Canadians began to understand that decades of chronic deficits and rising debt were history, confidence was regained, opportunity was revived. And in many ways, our country was reborn.

Look around the world and you see what Canadians have achieved. Working together, we overcame challenges that have paralyzed other countries. We stopped having to borrow to pay our bills. We took a fundamental pillar of our social identity our national pension plan and made it secure for generations to come. We reversed the decline in basic research and made our universities and labs where the best in the world want to be. We dedicated ourselves to building a society in which newcomers feel welcome, minorities are protected and the less fortunate are cared for.

As Finance Minister, speaking on your behalf, I said that fiscal weakness is not a tenet of Liberalism, and that we must act. I said that chronic deficits threaten to overcome the social conscience of government and that we believe caring for Canadian families is a window on the kind of country we are, and the kind of country we want to be.

As your leader, I said that we give ourselves the best chance to succeed as a people when we rally behind the belief that we must leave no one behind. That has always been the touchstone of Liberalism.

For this reason, we knew that all the hard work and sacrifice that went into eliminating the deficit, paying down debt, cutting taxes - all this would be for nothing if we did not take advantage of a prosperous age to lay the groundwork for an even greater Canada.

That is the principle that guided me as Prime Minister. And I look back with pride on what we accomplished together.

We set out a foreign policy designed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. We focused our foreign aid and we stood shoulder to shoulder with the African Union. We led the way in Haiti and Darfur.

At Canada's invitation the world came to Montreal: in fact we met in this building one year ago this week – and Canada proudly led the fight to make climate change a global priority.

We signed the security and prosperity partnership with the United States and Mexico. We concluded groundbreaking trade and technology agreements with China and India. We pledged to protect within Canada not only the strengths of our unity as one country, but the flexibility to address the needs of each region.

We protected the rights of Canadians by bringing into law the Civil Marriage Act, another step in our proud history of defending and advancing equality for all the people of our great country.

We funded a 10-year agreement for better healthcare – and by focusing on wait times and patient needs and accountability, we gave Canadians the capacity to evaluate whether our public system is accessible to all, as it should be.

In everything we did we demonstrated that our government would not measure its strength by the power it accumulated, but by the partnerships it built.

We invested in our communities. We brought our major cities, Canada's signatures to the world, to the national table to ensure that they could compete with the likes of New York, London, Shanghai and Mumbai.

We brought about a just and lasting resolution to the disgraceful legacy of Aboriginal residential schools, and we came together in the Kelowna Accord with the provinces and territories and the leadership of Canada's First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis Nation to address the shame of Aboriginal poverty

We set out the agenda for a National Early Learning and Child Care Program, and within little more than a year, we signed framework agreements with all the provinces to that end. And we did it for the simplest yet most important of reasons: because education is the key to success, and the path to a quality education begins in early childhood.

Modern Liberalism was born from the belief that the institutions of society exist to ensure individual freedom and individual rights that the role of government is not to favour the advantaged but to pursue progress for the many.

Day after day, we advanced our belief that we are stronger acting together than we are alone.

Now, there are some who reject this vision. The current government rejects it. At a time when the need is real, the Conservatives have targeted some of the most vulnerable in our society. The Conservative agenda seeks only to satisfy those who agree with their cold ideology.

As Liberals we have always defended the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We believe, that we are all lessened when any one of us is denied their rights. We are a nation of minorities. When we protect minority rights, we protect the most fundamental freedoms of us all. That is why Canada is such a beacon of hope for so many around the globe.

Two months ago, the Conservatives cancelled the program that enables Canadians to defend their rights regardless of whether they have the money to do so. Well, we are the party of the Charter and under a Liberal government, your rights will never depend upon the state of your pocketbook.

I look at this Conservative government. I see its methods, I watch its manner, and let me tell you: it makes me proud to be a Liberal. Proud to be a member of a party so much more progressive than one that gives people \$4 a day and calls it a child care program, that turns its back on Aboriginal Canadians and calls it fair, that turns its back on Canada's word to the world and calls it an environmental plan.

A country is not made greater when those who have the least are forced to sacrifice the most. A country does not come together when its government fosters division. And a country does not achieve big things with small thinking.

Canada is a big country, not only in geography but in ambition. And yet at a time when Canada needs to be tackling the challenges that the future will bring, the Conservatives look not forward but backwards – revisiting old debates, dismantling programs, settling scores, tearing down rather than building up.

Let us resolve here this weekend to send a message to the Conservatives: our goals for a progressive society will not disappear, nor will our resolve to see them through; progress and fairness may be delayed but they will not be denied.

In the course of my time in politics, I have been blessed not only to have served – but to have served with so many people of great character, intelligence, loyalty and passion.

Thank you to the people of Lasalle Emard, to my riding association and all those who I have had the honour of representing for 18 years. I have always been very proud to be your Member of Parliament and I have always been proud to be a Member of Parliament from Quebec – and to promote the values of Quebec within our Confederation.

I'd like to thank our caucus and the man who rose to the challenge of opposition these last months, our Leader, Bill Graham. I want to extend my thanks to Mike Eizenga, the National Executive and the party staff for guiding us so well over the last number of years. I want to thank those who from the beginning of my political career and through it all, stood with me in the face of every challenge.

And finally, I want to thank Sheila, who thought she was marrying a practicing lawyer and who despite that slight deception on my part some 42 years ago has made each year wonderful in every way. And I want to thank my family, Paul, Jamie, David and Laurence – who will soon be out on this stage with our first grandchild Ethan, 3 months old, who if he is a true Martin will probably attempt to make a speech.

When I think back on my time as Prime Minister, I think not of the summits, the bilateral meetings, the campaigns, the speeches.

I think of the people.

I think of the countless Canadians whom I had the tremendous fortune to meet, to talk with, to share a moment, to hear their dreams.

I think of the little boy in Whitehorse at a Liberal rally, who, without a word as I approached, smiled at me and handed me a gumball.

I think of the young girl Hannah who started working to eradicate homelessness in Winnipeg at the age of six.

I think of the boy at a St. John daycare who came up to me and politely introduced himself as Batman.

I think of the Easter Seals volunteers and the children who honour the Prime Minister's Office with a visit each year.

I think of a cemetery in France during the Year of the Veteran where I listened to a group of veterans from the Second World War tell me their stories with such modesty and emotion, and with such respect for the memory of colleagues, brothers, friends for whom life ended so suddenly.

I think of those who have lost their lives defending our freedom, and of their bravery; of their families who have given so much of their own lives. And I think of meeting those families as Prime Minister, in Halifax, in Trenton, from Mayerthorpe, and of their courage.

What a country this is. A free and sovereign nation, abundant in opportunity and optimism, dedicated to generosity and to sharing in so many ways a model to the world.

We had our challenges in government. But when we look back, we must never do so without pride for all we accomplished, pride for all that was gained. There are those who say we tried to do too much. Well I would rather have tried to do too much than be guilty of caring too little. We may have lost an election, but we will never lose the faith.

You have all come to Montreal supporting different candidates. And you should be very proud of them. All are united by the same values and are motivated by the same desire to build a better Canada.

The next couple of days are going to be interesting, but one thing is for sure – when the final ballot is cast, all of us must leave here arm in arm, side by side, Liberals united not only by a determination to contest the next election with vigor and creativity but to fight hard for the Canada we believe in.

To fight hard, and to win.

I am proud to be a Liberal. Proud to follow in the footsteps of those who have come before me – men and women whose ideas and resolve made us the party of diversity, medicare, bilingualism and the Charter. The party that was at the helm during wartime and later dedicated Canada to maintaining the peace.

I am proud to defend the principles of those who have defined this party. From Blake to Mackenzie, from Laurier to King, from St. Laurent, to Pearson, from Trudeau to Turner to Chretien.

As Canadians we have every reason to tackle the future with confidence, with optimism. Our natural resources are in great demand. Our people are among the best educated. Our linguistic duality and our ethnic and cultural diversity make Canada a global microcosm, open to the world.

But we must take nothing for granted. We will only succeed if we defend our hard-won prosperity by continuing to avoid deficits; if we defend our social programs which are the key to a successful future; and if we defend our place on the world stage by speaking with an independent voice.

The world is at a crossroads and so are we. There are those who would prefer that we turn inward and leave it to others to dictate our vision of the world. But we can do better. We must do everything possible to put Canadian values in service of a more equitable globalization.

In the very first speech I heard my father give, he quoted Sir Wilfrid Laurier. They are the famous words that we all know, that are part of our heritage and guide us still more than a century later: "I am a Liberal," Laurier said, "I am one of those who think that everywhere, in human things, there are abuses to be reformed, new horizons, to be opened up and new forces to be developed."

Liberals have always been focused on new horizons, on goals that are ambitious, on dreams that are big.

Together through the decades we built the social programs that reside at the core of a compassionate society. We built the bricks and mortar of world class education and healthcare systems. In doing this, we discovered the infinite virtue of a common will and a generous heart and we built a country.

But if this party, like Canada, is to continue to succeed it will be because we pay tribute to our principles, not by standing in place, not by turning back, but by moving forward growing, leading the way.

Fiscal responsibility, compassion, generosity, the protection of our rights and freedoms: These values are our heritage. And they are our future.

In my travels as Prime Minister, it was heartening to see the respect that so many have for Canada. In developing and developed nations, we are admired. Among rich and poor, we are envied. In a world where consensus is so rare, people agree on Canada. There is a sense out there that in building a country, we got it right.

Amid the global challenges of conflict and poverty, in a time of such concern but also of great opportunity, there is a growing place for progressive nations like ours. A growing place, and a growing need.

Now is the time to further engage with the world, to build partnerships, to set an example, to lend a hand. Now is the time to lead, not to withdraw.

Now is the time for Canada.

Thank you.

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