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"The Massey Commission at 50: The State of the Arts"

Empire Club of Toronto

**Speaking Remarks
Peter A. Herrndorf
Director General and CEO
National Arts Centre**

Thank you very much for your kind introduction, Bill... and good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to begin by saying how much I appreciate the invitation to speak to the Empire Club of Toronto today. I think of the Empire Club as one of Canada's great institutions – one of those institutions that's essential to the intellectual and political life of the country.

And it won't surprise any of you to hear that I believe that the National Arts Centre falls into the same category – a national institution that's essential to the cultural and educational life of the country.

The National Arts Centre was created by an Act of Parliament... during the heady days of our centennial celebrations, and its mandate has always been unique.

We present the full range of the performing arts – classical music, theatre, opera, dance and variety – and we operate in both official languages. Our goal is to be Canada's pre-eminent showcase for the performing arts... but we're equally committed to providing ongoing support for artists and arts organizations in communities across Canada.

It's a bold vision... not a timid one. The kind of vision you'd want from an organization that's expected to represent the very best in the performing arts in Canada.

And after some difficulties in the 1990s, I'm happy to report that the NAC is going through one of the most exciting periods in its history. We have an exceptional artistic leadership team, led by the renowned violinist, Pinchas Zukerman... two of North America's most innovative theatre Directors, Marti Maraden and Denis Marleau... and a highly imaginative Producer of Dance Programming, Cathy Levy; we've embarked on an ambitious National Youth and Education program, which is training Canada's most talented young artists... and helping to introduce students across the country to the performing arts; and we're collaborating creatively with many of the best arts organizations in Canada – the Vancouver Playhouse; the Citadel Theatre and the Banff Centre in Alberta; the Royal Winnipeg Ballet; Soulpepper, Tarragon and the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto; Opera Lyra in Ottawa; La La La Human Steps and the Montreal Symphony in Montreal; and the Confederation Centre in Charlottetown, to mention just a few.

But as much as I'd like to spend my time this afternoon telling you about the National Arts Centre, I'm going to resist that temptation.

Instead, on this fiftieth anniversary year of the Massey-Levesque Report... a report that's often been described as the Magna Carta of Canadian cultural life, I want to talk about the remarkable impact that Canadian artists are having on the world around them.

Let me start by telling you a little about the Massey-Levesque Report... and the Canadian cultural revolution that it spawned.

The Massey-Levesque Report was a Royal Commission initiated by Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent in 1949, and the members of the Royal Commission... led by Vincent Massey... conducted the broadest investigation of the state of the arts, letters and sciences in Canada ever done. They held 114 public meetings throughout Canada... and more than twelve hundred witnesses appeared.

Their report was published in 1951, and the reverberations are still being felt. The report described a litany of problems facing the arts in Canada in the postwar period – artists couldn't earn a decent living in Canada, they argued. The country relied almost entirely on touring foreign companies for performing arts productions. And few books were being published in Canada.

They challenged conventional wisdom even more fundamentally when at the beginning of the "cold war", they questioned the purpose of elaborate national defence strategies... if, as a nation, we weren't clear about the values that we were defending.

Their prescription was also far reaching. They argued that Canadian culture played a critically important role in our nation building, and that the Federal Government had a clear obligation to nourish Canada's intellectual and cultural life. Let me quote a paragraph from the report that is typical in its directness:

"The second essential is money. If we in Canada are to have a more plentiful and better cultural fare, we must pay for it. Goodwill alone can do little for a starving plant; if the cultural life of Canada is anemic, it must be nourished, and this will cost money."

Most of that money, they suggested, should come from the three levels of government.

The Report went on to make a powerful and persuasive case for the creation of a national "arms length" funding agency for the arts... a recommendation which led almost immediately to the establishment of the Canada Council; the report argued for the creation of a National Library; it supported the launch of CBC Television... which occurred the following year; and without question, Vincent Massey and his colleagues provided the cultural framework that led to the emergence of several generations of gifted, innovative and fiercely independent Canadian artists.

Today... fifty years later... we're in an enviable position. There's more artistic talent... and more creativity... in this country than at any time in our history.

Our artists have the skill, the imagination and the commitment to create powerful and original work, and they have the drive and energy to compete with the very best in the world.

Our artists are arguably Canada's most important "export" product... and they symbolize Canada for much of the world.

When you go on your next international trip, ask the people you meet what they know about Canada. People in Europe, in Asia or in South America will probably tell you that they've never

heard of most of our politicians... our business leaders... or even our hockey players. But I suspect that they'll tell you that the individuals who really define Canada for them are almost always our artists – artists from a wide range of disciplines.

Take literature for example. For years, Alistair MacLeod's stunning short stories have been Canada's best kept secret. But since his first novel *No Great Mischief* won the International Impac Dublin Literary Award – the world's richest literary prize – he's a huge star. He joins such other internationally acclaimed Canadian writers as Margaret Atwood, who won last year's Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*; Michael Ondaatje, who became a literary cult figure after *The English Patient*; and Carol Shields, who continues to delight readers around the globe.

And just last Wednesday, the *New York Times* devoted a significant part of its arts section to exploring the narrative landscape of three wonderful Canadian writers – Richard Wright, Dennis Bock and Jane Urquhart. It was a clear sign of how much "can lit" has become an international household word.

What about theatre? Director Robert Lepage regularly stages new productions around the globe. Stratford and Shaw continue to set the standard for the classics in North America. And Cirque du Soleil has created a new theatrical art form, by completely reworking our ideas about circus. They started out performing acrobatics in communities across Quebec and Ontario. Now you can take in their multimedia shows when you go to Las Vegas, Disney World, or the Far East.

Last week, the NAC's Denis Marleau opened his new play in Paris to rave reviews in *Le Figaro*, and Louise Pitre is generating the same kind of notices in the smash Broadway hit *Mamma Mia*.

And in Music? Well... Diana Krall is the best known jazz singer in the world. Shania Twain and Terry Clark have cornered the market in country music. Sara McLachlan and Alanis Morissette have done the same in alternative rock.

And in most parts of the world, people line up for blocks to see a Robert Carsen opera, to attend a Ben Heppner performance, or to hear a Céline Dion, Leonard Cohen or Oscar Peterson concert. And Americans are just beginning to discover the blandishments of *The Barenaked Ladies*.

Take our filmmakers. For years, we've been making a splash at the Cannes Film Festival for our creativity and innovation. David Cronenberg did it with his unique brand of the cerebral and the quirky... in movies like *Crash* and *The Fly*. Atom Egoyan was the next to make an impact at Cannes with his evocative and idiosyncratic films like the *Sweet Hereafter* and *Felicia's Journey*. And this year, Inuit filmmaker, Zacharias Kunuk, won the best first film award at Cannes for *The Fast Runner*, shot with a cast of Inuit people on Baffin Island.

What about comedy? I only have to mention one name to get a debate going between the generations – Tom Green. Love him or hate him... but you have to admit that his madcap energy and creativity is having an impact on the world of comedy. How about some of the others – Jim Carrey, Martin Short, Dan Ackroyd... Lorne Michaels and his wonderful group of Canadian writers from *Saturday Night Live*. The cast of *Twenty-two Minutes* and the *Royal Canadian Air Farce*. And of course, Mike Myers. We can only guess at how many people around the world continue to regale their friends with their best Austin Powers imitations.

If we had a little more time, I'd love to talk about some of our other arts disciplines. We have great dance companies like the National Ballet and Marie Chouinard in Montreal... and despite their current financial difficulties, we have superb orchestras and composers. We're fortunate to

have both the Canadian Opera Company and Tapestry in this city, each of them bringing originality and great professionalism to the stage. We have exceptional visual artists... and a number of internationally acclaimed galleries and museums across the country.

We've also produced some of the great cultural impresarios in North America: Moses Znaimer, who's completely redefined the concept of local television over the past twenty years; Mark Starowicz of the CBC, who instinctively understood that millions of Canadians would watch hours of television about Canadian history; Garth Drabinsky, who's brought such passion and showmanship to the theatre; Robert Lantos, who makes films that matter... and make money; and David Mirvish, who proves year in, year out that Canadian commercial theatre can be both successful and adventurous.

My point in all of this is that we live in an amazing time for creativity in Canada... and all of us should be very proud of that.

The artists... and the arts organizations... that I've mentioned all have several important characteristics in common. They had the audacity to dream big dreams. They've had the courage to pursue those dreams. And they've had the tenacity to keep going until those dreams came true.

I should really end my remarks on that note of triumph. A kind of David and Goliath story... with Canada winning in the end.

But it's not an accurate picture, and I have to conclude with one significant caveat. The arts in Canada may have been a great success story over the past fifty years... but in the difficult and uncertain days ahead, we need your help more than ever.

We need a clear signal from all levels of government across the country that... even in tough times... they recognize the importance of the arts... and the benefits of a strong and vibrant Canadian culture.

Even in tough times, we need ongoing government support for our key arts organizations... and for our most promising young artists.

And even if the TSE isn't performing very well these days, we need increased levels of philanthropic support for the arts from the individuals and corporations that flourished in Canada over the past decade. We need, as well, a willingness on the part of federal tax officials to make increased charitable contributions more attractive to the donor... or, at the very least, as attractive as it is in the United States.

Despite the concerns about the economic downturn, we need your support as patrons in concert halls, theatres, galleries, museums and bookstores. The arts community, in turn, will promise to "make it worth your while."

And most of all, we need you to take a real sense of pride in the extraordinary achievements of our artists. They symbolize, in many ways, the changing character of this country – more dynamic, more adventurous, and more of a player on the international stage.

They deserve your admiration... and they deserve your enthusiastic support.

Thank you very much.

