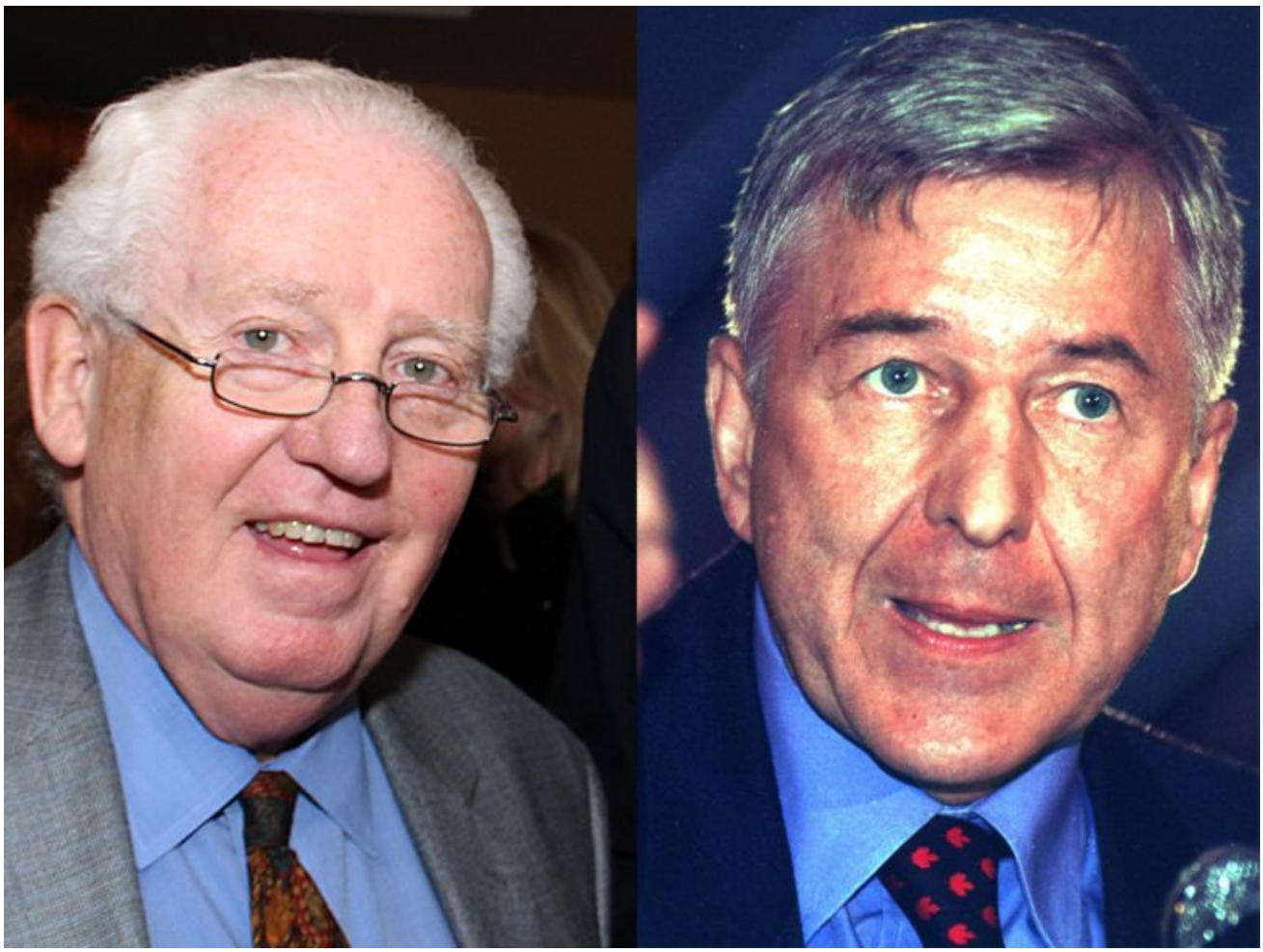
David Smith and William Johnson: Why I mourn these two great Canadians

I write now of two old friends who were prominent in the politics of this country, from different perspectives, but always with integrity and talent

by Conrad Black



It was my privilege, when I was younger, to have had many friends who were older than I, and it is my good fortune to have drawn a high card in the lottery of health. And now it is my sad honour frequently to mourn the death and eulogize the life of those good and distinguished friends who, as our grandparents used to say, “have gone on ahead.” Two such cases

have come down in the last few days, even since my comments on the widely lamented and premature death of Christie Blatchford. I write now of two old friends who were prominent in the politics of this country, from different perspectives, but always with integrity and talent, former senator David Smith and William Johnson. David Smith, who was 78, was a friend from freshman days at Carleton University (58 years ago), where we were active in the model parliament, and effected what amounted to a Liberal and Conservative coalition to keep the New Democratic Party (which in those days was brand new), out of office. The uproarious shenanigans we got up to remained with us as an amusing memory all our days. We kept in close touch as he went up the legal and political ladder. When I returned from Quebec to Toronto in 1974, he put me in touch with the man who became my lawyer in much-publicized boardroom maneuvers a few years later, another dear friend, now long dead, Igor Kaplan. (I'm now friendly with his son, whom I knew of then only as an alleged "handful.")

When David first ran for election, as an alderman, I attended a public meeting where he achieved the heroic feat of improvising a 10-minute address that was fluent, and even effected a few moments verging on passion, devoted, as far as I could discern, entirely to the need for removing stop signs from Duplex Avenue. He was soon on the executive committee, working closely with Paul Godfrey and David Crombie. He became the council president, and ran unsuccessfully for mayor against John Sewell in 1978, but helped organize Arthur Eggleton's defeat of Sewell in 1980, and was elected an MP, serving Pierre Trudeau and John Turner as minister of small business. He took positions that were relatively conservative, an old Liberal of the St. Laurent-Howe school, but maintained good relations with everyone and was a co-ordinating genius in the Liberal party from when he was an influential assistant to John Turner in the Pearson years, through to his status as an elder statesman in the Justin Trudeau years, with his influence cresting with Jean Chrétien as a campaign and

parliamentary strategist. He was a senator from 2002 to 2016.

He never exaggerated his influence, was not in the slightest self-important, or even overly partisan, but was an inexhaustible storehouse of political folklore, hilarious anecdotes and astute insights. No one had a clearer and closer view of the federal Liberal party than David did, through 50 very important years in Canada's history. He personified how to make the political system work, without rancour, corruption or even excessive cynicism, a delightful and highly efficient, much-liked man, with unsanctimonious traditional Christian views, and a very talented and attractive family, led by his wife Heather, a judge for 36 years, half of them as chief justice of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

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Bill Johnson, who has died at 88, was an altogether different breed of cat, and not so close a friend as Dave Smith, but a formidable ally in many bruising battles with the Quebec separatists, and especially the separatists who sought to curtail, torment and ultimately extirpate English in Quebec. He was perfectly bicultural (his mother was French-Canadian), highly educated: College Jean de Brebeuf, Loyola, Universities of Montreal and of California at Berkeley. He was almost ordained a Jesuit priest but demurred and became a professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, but then discovered his true vocation as a journalistic champion of Canadian biculturalism without any oppression of either official culture in Canada. He became a brilliant advocate of minority rights. It was in this role, where we both often wrote and spoke in a similar interest, that I came to know him.

His perspective was as the son of a bicultural marriage and he was equivocal in his championship of both the English and French-speaking and had a legalistic inflexibility about the

legitimacy of cultural rights as well as their reciprocal desirability – that it was an advantage to all Canadians to be intimately acquainted with two of the world's most sophisticated and civilized cultures. I agreed with that, but from the perspective of a unilingual Ontario anglophone who went to some lengths to learn French as a student at the law faculty of Quebec's Laval University, and as a co-proprietor of some of Quebec's French newspapers. We were both propagating our bonne entente views in the unreceptive ambiance of the Quebec media.

We were united, more than anything else, in our view that the French Quebec nationalists had, at Le Devoir, Radio-Canada and in the universities and politically, declared for decades that if bilingualism could be endorsed and to some degree practised, by both cultures, rather than just many French-Canadians being obliged to learn English for their economic betterment, all would be resolved. The Quebec nationalist leader in the early 1930s, Philippe Hamel, said "Conquer us with goodwill, my English-Canadian friends; you will be astounded by the easy victory which awaits you." Bill Johnson and I discovered, to our considerable irritation, that when we and many compatriots put that assurance to the test, we were often rebuffed, sometimes cordially and sometimes not, as agents of assimilation. The way of the anglo-conciliator was challenging enough, given the profusion of anglo-Canadian opinion that was exasperated by the seemingly endless demands and threats of Quebec nationalists. But the path became more Sisyphean when we were derided by those toward whom we were trying to build bridges as the vanguard of a Trojan Horse infiltration.

> *Bill Johnson was a formidable ally in many bruising battles with the Quebec separatists*

Bill faced this heat much more directly than I did. I was able to reinstate him when my associates and I bought control of

the Montreal Gazette in 1996, where he had been dropped because of what was thought to be too aggressive a defence of the rights of the English-speaking community. I did not think so and thought that was the raison d'être of the Gazette, as long as it didn't stoop to francophobia, and Bill Johnson never did. He took the leadership of the anglo-Quebec activist group Alliance Quebec in 1998, and insisted on participating in the St. Jean-Baptiste parade in Montreal that year, where he was assaulted and escorted to safety by police, but the organization started to unravel beneath him because of his rigorous insistence on absolute cultural equality. He was a braver and better soldier than I was, but I only trimmed a bit for tactical reasons, to try to win elections and referenda. It did not prevent me from admiring his stance and usually agreeing with it. He was a brilliant and a brave man, and an unfailingly courtly and courteous companion.

This brings me to the most poignant note of all; some months ago I emailed my girlfriend in our last year at the Laval law school, whom I had seen intermittently since; a lovely person in every respect. I remember her as one does from a perfect relationship at a splendid and promising time in life – we graduated in law together and I was already in the newspaper business. There was no reply but a few weeks ago, I received a most gracious note from her son saying that his mother was now in a hospice for those suffering from dementia, but in good physical health and well cared for. She can't deal with emails. Her distant memory is still quite good, and he was able to transmit my compliments. I wrote at the top of this piece that I am fortunate and thankful to be in good health and with a long actuarial life expectancy still. I believe that all life is a privilege, even in disadvantageous conditions. One of its greatest privileges is fine relationships. That they end does not diminish their value, and we draw on recollections of them as we persevere, in thinning ranks and lengthening shadows.

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