

Donald Johnston

“You don’t have to be a socialist. What you have to do is ask, ‘How are we keeping our society in balance?’”

INTERVIEWED BY JOE CHIDLEY

I came from a rural background. A 40-acre farm, a half-dozen cows, a few pigs. It was not at all a luxurious upbringing. That background was very helpful to me, I think. People think I’m a pinstripe Westmount lawyer, but that’s where I came from. I went to a one-room schoolhouse, which was one of the best things that happened to me. You were always looking at what they were doing one or even two grades up. You just had to take a look at the blackboard.

My father had a job after the war at Boswell College, which was part of McGill at the time. So that was the shift to Montreal. And then my parents were divorced, which was unusual then.

That route was Hollywood stuff. I was 13.

I went to a big downtown high school in Montreal—2,000 students from every class of life. Three of my best friends are from that school: an Iraqi Jew, a Hungarian Jew and an Italian. We were all together, all equal.

In my day, we regarded the private schools as being for kids who really couldn’t hack it in the public school system. The best students came out of the public school system. The best teachers were in the public school system. And that has changed.

High school, I didn’t do especially well in. At McGill, I wasn’t doing especially well either. I was in arts. But I decided I wanted to go to Harvard, so I was going to get serious. I was going through the McGill law bulletin, which said that you can go to law school after two years. I thought that would be good for me. I could get a law degree in five years as opposed to an arts degree in four, and that’s a much better background for admission into Harvard Business School. So I went and applied. It happened that that year there weren’t that many applicants. So I got the call. I was about three years younger than the rest of the class.

Leonard Cohen was in the class. He didn’t last too long. He and I ended up sharing an apartment on Stanley Street. It had one bathroom and three doors. We had to put wood in the stove in the kitchen in order to have a shower. It was kind of fun.

I worked like hell. My marks were pretty good, except first year I got a bad mark in Roman law. I had to carry that burden all the way through law school. But it ended up I won the gold medal at the end of the day, even with that bloody course.

That was important for me, winning the gold medal. That changed what happened to me. I still was thinking about Harvard, but I got a call from John Turner, who was with Stikeman Elliott. They always wanted the gold medalists, so they took me out to lunch.

We developed a technique for film financing at Johnston Heenan Blaikie. I was very engaged in it, spent a lot of time in Hollywood and New York.

I’m still credited as executive producer of Oliver Stone’s first film. I think the final name—you know, these films often go through titles—I think *Seizure* was the final name, or maybe *Queen of Evil*.

In 1957, I’d won a World University Service scholarship to West Africa. I got to know Pierre Trudeau quite well on that trip. And I represented the Trudeau family—legally, I mean. I did Margaret and Pierre’s marriage contract. It’s because of that connection, which all starts with a trip to West Africa, that I got into politics.

So I ran in ’78, a byelection, and won. And went to Ottawa.

The cabinet work was interesting, but frustrating. I was somewhat out of line economically with the mainstream of the party.

We did a few good things. But we did a couple stupid things.

One of the ones that was most difficult for me was the National Energy Program. It was basically a manifestation of this extreme

Donald Johnston
Paris
Born June 26, 1936,
Ottawa
Secretary general of
the OECD

1958
Graduates from McGill law
school as gold medalist.
John Turner invites him to
join Stikeman Elliott; he
does in 1961.

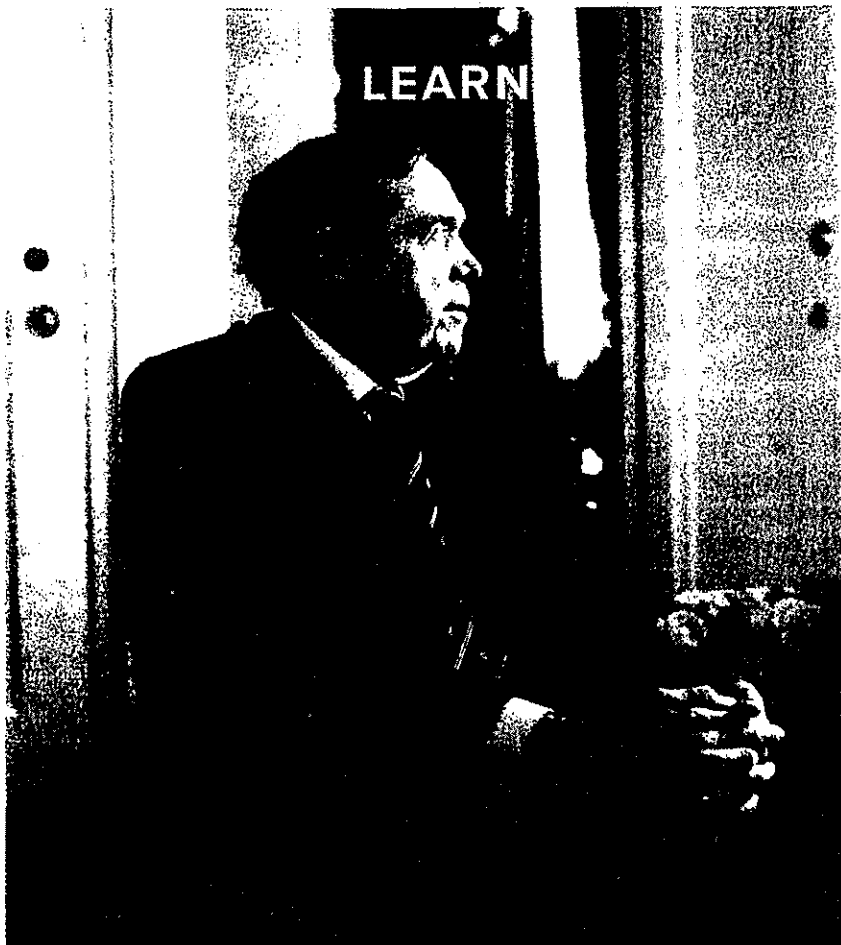
1966
Co-founds McCarthy,
Minnett, Johnston in
Montreal. In 1972, becomes
founding member of
Johnston Heenan Blaikie.

1978
Wins federal byelection in
Montreal; later cabinet
portfolios for Liberals
include Science, Regional
Development, and Justice.

1987
Breaks with Liberals, in
part over free trade. Sits
as independent. Three
years later, wins election
as Liberal party president.

1996
Elected secretary general
of the Organization for
Economic Co-operation
and Development. Term
ends in June 2006.





nationalism. The whole approach was alien to me.

By 1984, we had all the unions against us, we had the West against us with the NEP, we had Quebec against us with the Constitution. I said, "I don't know who's going to vote for us in the next election." Well, of course, we know what the result of it all was.

Then I had a falling out with the party on two issues. One was the Meech Lake Accord, which I was against. And the other was free trade, which I was for.

Meech was going to create a completely unbalanced federation, in my judgment. I'm still totally satisfied that I was right.

On free trade, I just couldn't understand the position taken by John Turner. He was a friend of mine, going way back to the 1950s—I'd known him all that time. But the Free Trade Agreement—I thought the party was crazy. So I voted for the FTA with the Conservatives.

It's very odd, how histories twist. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be here today. The Americans supported me as secretary general because I supported the free trade agreement.

Tragedies have affected my decision-making. March of '93, my brother was diagnosed with cancer, just on his 61st birthday. David. A terrible shock. He fought it through and he died on Dec. 13 of that year. Then I got a call from Jean Chrétien—this was probably a week after my brother's death. Chrétien said there's the OECD post opening up, and the Americans want a non-European.

One thing I think is, you need change in this life to keep your batteries fresh. I've done everything in sort of 10-year stints.

The OECD came out of the Marshall Plan. The idea is that you develop

“I admire people who are prepared to work in the political process”

peace and security through economic integration. You know, you don't shoot your best customer.

The organization's great strength is developing guidelines and rules for international commerce. Which are not laws, but they're enforced by peer pressure.

I put much less faith, frankly, in laws and conventions. It's behaviour that's important.

The danger in this job is you become a bit of a bumblebee—you know a little bit about a lot of things.

We now have programs with over 70 countries outside the OECD. All of this has happened because of globalization. We've had to globalize.

I've been pushing to get Russia an invitation to join the organization. Ten years ago, this was a shared goal. We did not move forward with this. I've sent letters to the ambassadors saying this is a mistake. The OECD could do something strategically important: anchor

Russia in our processes.

One of the things I'm proudest of is what we've done on statistics.

Nobody else is able to compare apples and oranges, except the OECD. We take all kinds of things into account so that the numbers can be compared with each other.

There is a great thirst for better indicators of progress on environmental, social and economic measures, rather than GDP per capita. How do you measure well-being in our society?

Among the greatest dangers to all of our societies are the weaknesses within, when the economic factors are out of balance.

I don't think politicians—certainly I as a politician—really know what is happening at every level of our society in terms of progress.

I don't think Americans do—and that's why they were shocked when they saw Katrina and the poverty in New Orleans.

They saw these things for the first time. And that shouldn't be necessary. We should have data which is reliable, credible and undisputable, so you can have a sensible political debate.

We're always looking out there internationally at all of these risks. I sometimes say to myself that maybe the greatest risks for all of us are internal—the cancers in our own society.

By and large it's been a good 10 years. I think we've accomplished a lot and I've been very pleased with the team.

If I have time, I would like to do work on political systems, because I don't think they're healthy. I don't think enough people are involved in politics, in Canada or in other countries.

No, no, I'm not retiring. I'm only 69.