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Don't be so quick to say yes

Penny Collette Contributor

Expecting a call from the prime minister, party leaders or government officials? You might want to be prepared.

John F. Kennedy famously stated in his 1961 inaugural speech, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

David Johnston, the former governor general, echoed Kennedy's philosophy, when asked by CBC's David Cochrane if he regretted taking his recent assignment as Independent Special Rapporteur on Foreign Interference. He replied, "You do what you are asked to do. When asked to serve, you do so." As we know now, Johnston suddenly resigned that position on Friday.

Both Kennedy and Johnston are right, but in this time of extreme partisanship and malevolent disinformation, interspersed with misinformation, just wanting to serve or accepting to serve is not enough.

For example, saying "yes" just because you are asked to serve, leaves questions about the ability to speak truth to power, a concept that is crucial today and something that dogged Johnston.

Instead, acceptance must come with an understanding that serving the public in 2023 requires one to be a new age warrior wearing a thick skin of invisible Teflon. It comes with insults, injuries and smears. For women, working in the public eye, it means taunts, harassment and misogynistic comments.

It all seems to be the end of a kind of public service innocence, which up until now had been the norm. The choice of a highly respected former governor general, who had been selected to serve by former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, initially seemed solid.

No one disputed Johnston's qualifications and integrity, although questions were raised about the wisdom of asking an individual who had held the constitutional non-partisan position of governor general to involve himself in a highly partisan and extremely serious national debate.

Alleged conflicts of interest were relentlessly raised by Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre. They were often of a "gotcha" nature. For example, a friendship to one person may be a social or professional acquaintance to another. But there was no one to make a final de-

termination, except of course the prime minister. Therefore, there was no appeal process for Johnston.

Events also outpaced Johnston's work schedule. The timing was tight, but as additional information came to light from media revelations, he and his team were presumably rushing to finish their report in the allotted time.

There were other serious issues. The House of Commons voted three times for a public inquiry and for Johnston's resignation. Technically, he reported to the government and not to Parliament, but in our constitutional system the government reports to Parliament. No matter how wildly partisan the matter may be, to reject the will of a majority of the elected members of the House of Commons is no small matter.

Perhaps that is why a crisis communications firm was initially hired (only to be fired shortly thereafter). But was there not a fully functioning secretariat? And why was there not a spokesperson, someone to communicate daily with the media?

Those errors have now been left in the dust, but let's not duplicate them. It's

time to take the opportunity and think ahead:

Must there be only one person to shoulder the entire investigation? Would it not be wiser to have a panel of experts? Have conflict dispute resolution models been explored? Is the timetable reasonable? Rushed deadlines will only produce half-finished business.

Is the budget sufficiently robust? An experienced, bilingual team is needed with technological and communications specialists. Finally, and sadly, if necessary, will there be resources for protection for witnesses, staff and investigators?

Someone's phone will ring soon. If a prime minister's official calls with an offer, feel free to ask questions of your own and challenge what is presented. The stakes are too high for shyness or acquiescence at this stage.

Only then can you make your own decision whether this is the way you too can best serve your country.

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