

## Did You Watch the Speech from the Throne?

On September 23, 2020, Governor General Julie Payette read the Speech from the Throne to begin the second session of the 43rd Parliament. (<https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2020/speech-from-the-throne.html>) The speech is a ritual of British parliamentary government that dates from 16th century England. What it is called and the details of the ritual vary between parliamentary democracies. In the United Kingdom it is referred to as the Queen's Speech. In Australia it is called the Governor General's Speech and in Jamaica the Governor General's Throne Speech. In the Netherlands and Norway, both of which are constitutional monarchies, such a speech is read by the monarch and takes place annually, as required by their respective constitutions.

In Quebec--let me first say that Canadian provinces have lieutenant governors whose role as representative of the Crown parallels that of the governor general at the federal level--in Quebec the traditional speech from the throne was downgraded in importance during the 1970s, becoming in 1984 the *discours d'ouverture* or opening speech. It is given by the premier of the province after a very brief speech delivered by the province's lieutenant governor.

By whatever name one refers to it and whoever reads it, a throne speech does two main things. The occasion signals the beginning of a new session of parliament. Secondly, the speech itself sets out the government's legislative agenda. Although in Canada the speech from the throne is read by the governor general, the representative of the Crown, it is written by the prime minister's advisors and can be quite partisan in tone, content and intent.

If you would like to know more about what was in the September 23, 2020 Speech from the Throne and Prime Minister Trudeau's televised speech that followed a few hours later, there is no shortage of media commentary and reactions from the opposition parties and interest groups that may be found online. And if you would like to learn about what may appear to you to be the rather arcane procedures associated with the throne speech, including persons wearing tricorne hats, one of them carrying a black rod and another a rather large and ornate mace, I've included a link in the text of this podcast that will answer every question you are likely to have, and more, about these matters. (<https://www.samaracanada.com/samara-in-the-classroom/speech-from-the-throne-informative-video>) But these are not the aspects of the throne speech that I wish to talk to you about in this podcast.

Instead, let's focus on the non-ceremonial functions of speeches from the throne. These may be divided into three categories. The first involves what might be called an affirmation of Canadian values and aspirations. They include such statements as this one from the 2013 throne speech, the last one under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper:

*As we look confidently to the future, we draw great strength from our past. Beginning with our Aboriginal peoples, Canada's story is one of risk, sacrifice, and rugged determination. From the founding of New France, to the fight for Canada in the War of 1812; from the visionary achievement of Confederation, to our victory at Vimy Ridge, Canadians have repeatedly triumphed over long odds to forge a great country, united and free.*

Here's another, this one from the 2020 throne speech:

*Canada must continue to stand up for the values that define this country, whether that's welcoming newcomers, celebrating with pride the contributions of LGBTQ2 communities, or embracing two official languages. There is work still to be done, including on the road of reconciliation, and in addressing systemic racism.*

The second function of the throne speech involves the government's statement of goals for the next session of parliament and beyond. They include, from the 2020 speech, general objectives such as, "The Government will continue its policy of putting a price on pollution, while putting that money back in the pockets of Canadians. It cannot be free to pollute", and more specific objectives and legislation such as "The Government will work with Parliament on Criminal Code amendments to explicitly penalize those who neglect seniors under their care, putting them in danger," also from the 2020 throne speech.

The third function is partisan. The speech is crafted with an eye to public opinion and the next election, whether that election is imminent or not expected to take place for a number of years. Indeed, along with the speech introducing a new federal budget, the speech from the throne provides the government of the day with the opportunity to shape the political agenda and conversation.

Drawing a line between the latter two functions, the policy and partisan functions of a throne speech, is difficult. While it would be overly cynical to argue that all the legislative and other policy promises made in a typical throne speech are included in order to win votes, the impact that these promises are expected to have on public opinion and the anticipated reactions of the opposition parties are seldom far from the minds of those who write the

speech. Indeed it is widely acknowledged that, for better or for worse, the partisan functions of the throne speech have assumed center stage in this parliamentary ritual.

This is not a recent development. Already in 1989 a former and, in his time, very prominent Liberal cabinet minister by the name of Mitchell Sharp lamented what he called the politicization of the speech from the throne. (Mitchell Sharp, "Depoliticizing the Speech from the Throne," *Parliamentary Government* 8, no. 4 (1989): 16-18) It had become, he argued, a vehicle of government propaganda. In view of what he believed to have become the preeminence of the public relations and partisan functions of the throne speech, Sharp suggested that perhaps it should be delivered by the prime minister or a member of his or her cabinet.

Purists, who hold dear the rituals of Canada's parliamentary democracy, would object vigorously to such a reform. But maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. Indeed, more Canadians might pay attention to the speech from the throne if it were to be brought into the 21st century. It may have been in recognition of this that Prime Minister Trudeau followed the September 23, 2020 Speech from the Throne with his own televised address to the Canadian people, laying out his Government's plans, in which he repeated, but more succinctly, most of what the Governor General had said a few hours earlier. (

<https://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/cpac-special/episodes/66266988/>, English text version at <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/justin-trudeaus-address-to-the-nation-the-second-wave-is-underway-full-transcript/>)

As mentioned toward the beginning of this podcast, the Quebec model of the *discours d'ouverture* involves a lengthy speech given by the province's premier, followed by a vote in the

legislature. The person who is principally responsible for the statement of goals and legislative priorities is the one who delivers it. In Sweden and Denmark, both of which are constitutional monarchies, it is the prime minister who reads what is essentially the throne speech.

In France, which is not a monarchy, the constitution does not require an annual statement of the government's agenda. Nevertheless, since 1959 it has become a tradition that the prime minister will deliver such an address, called the *déclaration de politique générale*, before the legislature at the beginning of a new government. In 2017 and again in 2018 French President Emmanuel Macron introduced the novel practice of holding a session of French parliamentarians at Versailles before the prime minister's speech to the Assemblée nationale, the French legislature. This innovation was criticized by many in France as being too much like the American president's state of the union address and has since been abandoned.

Which brings us to another model whereby the government may state its legislative goals and the opposition and media may respond. The American president's annual state of the union address is required by the United States Constitution. Since 1965 it has been televised during prime time and for many years now it has drawn a television audience of between about 30 and 42 million viewers. (<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/trump-state-of-the-union-ratings-2020-1203493614/>) Since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the practice of inviting particular guests who are mentioned in the speech and shown on camera in what are often very emotional and riveting moments, has become a standard feature of the annual state of the nation address.

So here's a question. Is it time to revamp the speech from the throne that begins each new session of Canada's parliament? What, if any changes, would you make?