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The following are excerpts from a speech entitled "Parliament, McGee and the Canadian Identity" delivered on March 13, 2026 at the St. Patrick's Society of Montreal annual luncheon.

Our identity as a country and as a people is deeply rooted, among other things, in how we govern ourselves.

As Supreme Court Chief Justice Richard Wagner said recently on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Court, "We are not a superpower. We are a democratic superpower."

I would add that while our neighbour to the south may be modern day Rome in size and power, we are Athens in democratic spirit and a desire to build a nation based on values and ideas that can be shared beyond our borders because maybe, just maybe, the world has something

to learn from Canada about navigating the 21st Century.

More specifically, our Canadian identity is very much tied to our Westminster parliamentary democracy, a key feature of which is the daily House of Commons Question Period.

Question Period highlights the central defining feature of our Canadian parliamentary system: that the Prime Minister and the government are accountable to Parliament. In other words, the government gets to hold power only so long as the House of Commons has not voted non confidence.

In the United States, there is no Question Period because the President does not answer to Congress, and Congress has no power over the President.

And there's another difference. In the U.S., cabinet members are not elected.

In Canada, as we know, Cabinet ministers are first and foremost elected Members of Parliament with constituents to serve and answer to. And that means they

are grounded, aware, and sensitive to what their fellow citizens are thinking.

A Prime Minister who ignores what his or her ministers are telling them about the mood of the country risks provoking resignations from Cabinet, and that, in turn, can lead to a political crisis of confidence. This very real prospect acts as a guardrail that dissuades a Prime Minister from "going rogue".

The American President's fate, on the other hand, does not depend on maintaining the confidence of Congress. Canadian Prime Ministers and governments thus are accountable in "real time" while the U.S. President only in four-year intervals.

And the American system has division baked into it. While the United States is deeply polarized for historic and cultural reasons, its competing centres of power—the President, the House, and the Senate—reinforce and aggravate that polarization, a polarization most evident during the repeated dramas of government shutdowns.

Add hyper-partisanship to this system of competing centres of power and the problems with the American model are magnified.

Of course, in Canada we are no strangers to high-octane partisanship. But for all the daily fireworks of Question Period, Parliament is one, an organic whole capable of making decisions that govern the country. The opposition parties may be merciless in their attacks on the government, but until there has been vote of non confidence, Parliament, for all intents and purposes, is a functioning unit. There is no such thing in our Westminster system as divided government.

Also, in the U.S. and Canada, the role of the Speaker is fundamentally different, and this difference, again, goes to the heart of our Westminster system.

In Canada, the Speaker's first duty is to protect Parliament's privileges, and by this, I mean Parliament's absolute right to do whatever it feels necessary to hold the government to account. This demands that the Speaker be non-partisan and impartial.

The U.S. Speaker, on the other hand, is unapologetically partisan, and if the Speaker and the President are of the same party, the Speaker works actively to advance the President's priorities. U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson has been accused of doing this even to the point of attempting

to facilitate the transfer of constitutional power from Congress to the President, namely around tariffs.

Ireland's greatest gift to Canada may have been to exile Thomas D'Arcy McGee to the United States, where he was able to size up American democracy, and after having seen it up close chose to move north to help create a new and very different national experiment.

McGee was for years an unrelenting advocate for Confederation, travelling and building relationships with those whose support was needed to make the new country a reality. He lobbied early on for an intercontinental railway to stitch east and west into an economic union independent of the United States.

Of course, McGee is most famously associated with promoting minority rights—minority education rights more specifically—which made their way into the British North America Act of 1867, and then, in 1982, into the Charter of Rights and Freedoms where they are outside the reach of the notwithstanding clause.

McGee's advocacy for minority rights opened the door to our modern-day Canadian pluralism.

And McGee was so ahead of his time that even back then, over a century before the focus on

reconciliation, he placed Indigenous Peoples at the heart of Canadian history and insisted that they were an integral part of Canada's identity.

But beyond being called the "Father of Minority Rights in Canada", McGee was also the undisputed "Poet of Confederation". According to his biographer, David A. Wilson, he was "the man whose speeches gave poetic voice to the possibilities of the future."

In his most famous speech in defence of Confederation, McGee proclaimed, "I look to the future of my adopted country with hope, though not without anxiety; I see in the not remote distance, one great nationality bound...by the blue rim of ocean—I see it quartered into many communities—each disposing of its internal affairs—but all bound together by free institutions and free commerce."

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