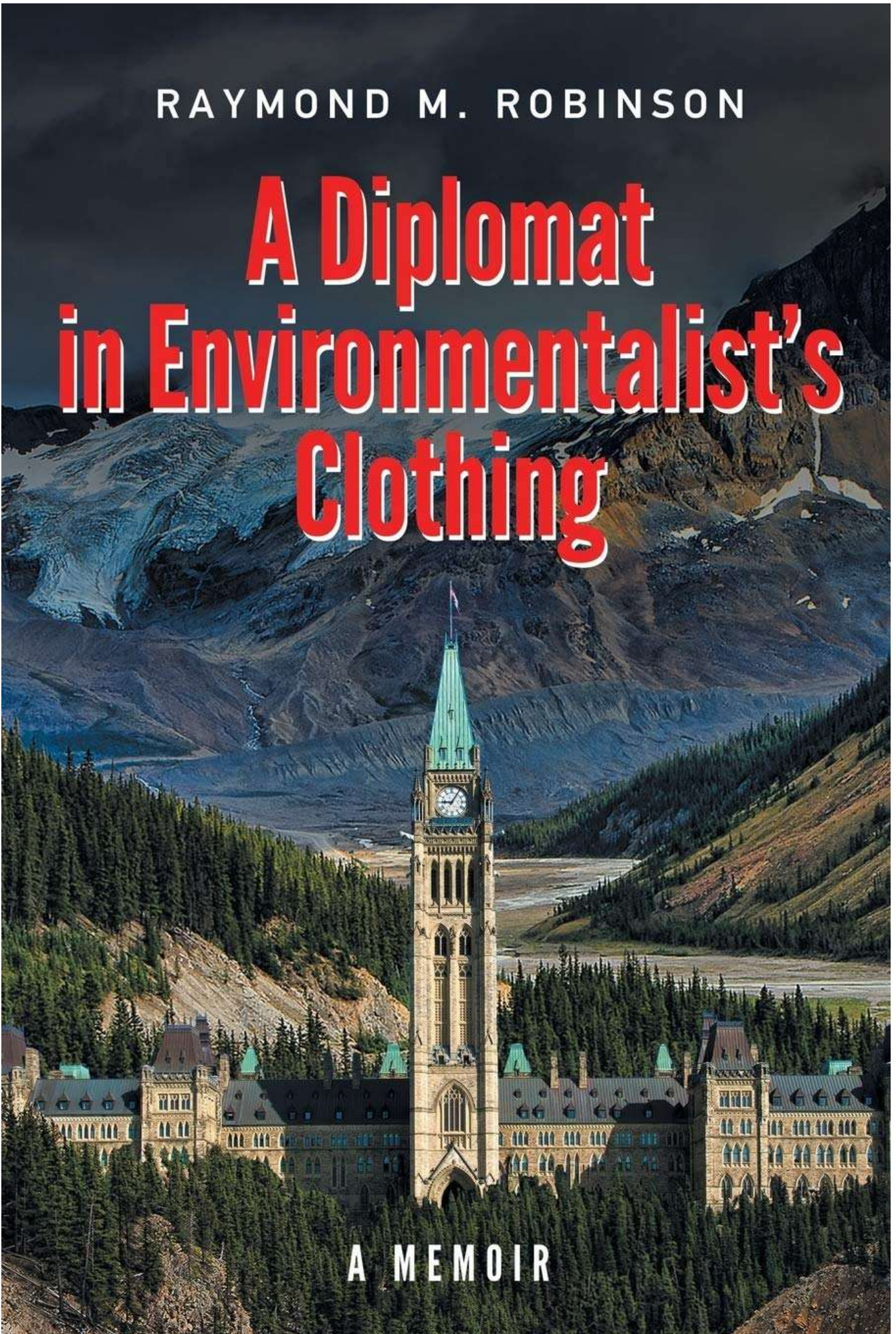


RAYMOND M. ROBINSON

A Diplomat in Environmentalist's Clothing

A MEMOIR



CHAPTER 43

PUBLIC, AND CHRISTIAN, SERVANTS

In 1971, shortly after our return from New Zealand, I became a regular attendee of a lunchtime Bible study group held at the National Energy Board, Canada's primary energy regulator. It was one of several such groups scattered throughout the federal Public Service, but I was not aware of one operating at that time in my own department, Foreign Affairs. A few years later, well after I had moved to Environment Canada, which had two Bible study groups, a few of us from different departments met in our home to consider creating some way of linking the different departmental groups.

The prime mover of this initiative was Don Page, a senior historian at Foreign Affairs, which, by that time, had its own study group. From this meeting the Public Service Christian Fellowship (PSCF) was born, to be co-chaired by Don, the real leader, and me. I was the decorative icing because of my high rank. Don was later to be appointed Vice President Academic of Trinity Western Christian University near Vancouver. He is currently Trinity's Professor Emeritus, Graduate Studies.

The plan was to arrange periodic weekend conferences with invited inspirational speakers and for Don, me, and possibly others to visit and encourage individual Bible study groups. We also hoped to increase the number of departmental groups. Don already had contacts with a comparable organization in Washington, D.C., and we hoped to arrange exchanges with our American friends. In the event, our prayers and efforts were well-rewarded. The PSCF grew to about fifty Bible study groups across the government, including one on Parliament Hill. We held several successful conferences, and contacts between the groups soon took on a life of their own. One Cabinet Minister and two other Members of Parliament were

among those who addressed us. We also had a few American speakers over the years, and some of us visited Washington.

On one such occasion, I stayed in a magnificent old mansion that had assumed the title "the Christian Embassy." It was primarily a place of outreach to Washington's sizable diplomatic community, but it also served as a kind of elegant bed and breakfast for visiting Christian speakers. I was delighted to discover that one of the other guests was Dr. James Houston, the Oxford don who founded Regent College at my old alma mater, the University of British Columbia. The College was originally created to provide graduate theological education to lay people, but in 1979 it added a program to train students to become clergy. It was truly exciting to meet a man of such depth, scholarly achievement, and Christian commitment. I also missed by one night meeting Chuck Colson, one of President Nixon's former senior advisers who had been imprisoned for his part in the Watergate affair. After his release and personal conversion, he had founded a highly successful prison ministry. Sadly, he passed away recently.

My role as a founding PSCF Co-Chairman did provide me with some opportunities to meet some very interesting people and to be in some unusual situations. One such situation was particularly upsetting to our family football fan, James. I was asked to lead the Montreal Alouettes' prayer time before their game against our son's idols, the Ottawa Roughriders. I have to admit that I was really intimidated by the size of these huge men as they crowded around me to listen to my words of exhortation and to join in my prayers. I must have been truly inspired and inspiring because Montreal went on to crush Ottawa in the game. I do not know if James has yet forgiven me.

On another occasion, I was asked to lead a three-day mission sponsored by the Chinese Baptist Church for Vietnamese "boat people," refugees who had fled Vietnam, often in small boats, following the North Vietnamese victory in their home country. This was a very challenging invitation on several levels. There was so little in common between my audience and me, and I would have to speak through an interpreter. The Bible tells us that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. I can tell you that I felt very weak indeed as I prayed about what to say and contemplated the circumstances under which I would have to deliver my remarks. In the event, God must have intervened because the words came readily; even having to stop after every sentence or two for the translation did not break the flow

as I feared it would. I was later told by the church leaders that the response had been very positive. It is, of course, entirely possible that the interpreter, one of the pastors, merely gave his own excellent series of sermons over the weekend. Afterwards, I was presented with a beautiful painted wall hanging with an Old Testament inscription in Chinese that read, "My kindness shall never depart from thee." It was a perfect match in colour with the upholstery of the sofas in our living room, where it still hangs.

The most intimidating Christian audience I ever addressed was the annual dinner of the Ottawa Evangelical Ministerium, a gathering of evangelical pastors in the Ottawa area. What could I, a layman and decorative PSCF Co-Chairman, possibly have to say to these professionals? Fortunately I had the "boat people" experience behind me, and I truly believed that God would give me the necessary words, especially since there would be no interpreter to fill in the gaps. He must have responded to my prayer because I was invited back in a subsequent year. The theme I pursued that evening was the importance of congregations protecting and supporting their pastors and their families in regular, focused prayer. I urged the pastors to recognize that need and to set up prayer groups dedicated to that purpose.

Not long ago, I was asked to put together some advice for a young Christian public servant who wanted to know how best to reflect his faith in the workplace. I thought back to the many times I had spoken to gatherings of fellow public servants about that very subject. I was never much of a teacher or preacher but was an exhorter, a spiritual cheerleader. I used to use the word "servant" a lot because it is so much a part of Jesus' teaching and, of course, coincides with the formal name of the Canadian bureaucracy: the Public Service of Canada. I am repeating below the advice I wrote for that young public servant as a way of conveying what the Public Service Christian Fellowship (PSCF) was trying to do. I ask readers, especially those who do not share my faith, to consider what is written here and ask themselves what they would think of private sector employees or public servants who acted upon this advice. The scriptural quotations that I have used are taken from the popular paraphrase *The Message*.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 – "Even though I (the apostle Paul) am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized

– whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ – but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!"

This passage makes it clear – you have to meet people on their own ground. Ardith and I received a remarkable lesson in that truth even before we became Christians. [The reader will recall the story.] I sold a large American station wagon to a funeral director in a city 500 k north of Wellington, New Zealand, where we were living. It became the first silver blue hearse in that country decked out with little curtains sewn by the funeral director's wife. The funeral director, Gordon, invited me to speak at his Rotary club and to stay in their home. He and his former ballerina wife Margaret were a delightful couple, very much in love with one another in sharp contrast to the collapsing marriage in our own home. I invited them to visit us and we spent a lot of hours in each other's company. Over several months, they attended raunchy plays with us and otherwise entered into our lifestyle without hesitation or criticism, all the while displaying this remarkable love for each other which they gradually revealed was centred on the third person in their marriage, Jesus Christ. Clearly they were following Paul's example laid out in the Scripture verses quoted. For me that means that the first rule of the Christian in the workplace must be the acceptance of those around him without condemnation of their behaviour patterns.

The second lesson that I learned from Gordon and Margaret was that those who wish to witness to others need to earn that right. Their lives must be the witness before their words can be. In the workplace that means earning the respect of one's fellow workers in terms of attitude towards the work, of personal competence and of treatment of fellow workers.

Philippians 4:6 – "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns."

As in every other aspect of life, a Christian in the workplace is called to pray about his daily tasks and for those with whom and for whom he works. I admit that I tended to follow that instruction in times of stress and not as a regular pattern. I would undoubtedly have experienced much less stress if I had been more obedient to that scriptural admonition.

Clearly, these comments apply to any workplace but those which follow are tailored more to the specific circumstances under which public servants work.

Mark 12:17 – "Jesus said, 'Give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his.'"

A public servant needs to understand what he owes to "Caesar" and what he owes to God. Clearly it is the public servant's duty to serve the Government. That means not simply to work hard at the task at hand but to apply his imagination and creativity to helping the Government function as effectively and efficiently as possible. If he is in a position of preparing advice to Government, then that advice should be well researched and reflect sincere judgement. His obligation to God in this process is to ensure so far as possible that that advice is in accord with his Christ-informed conscience. As a practical matter, that means that he tells the truth whether or not that truth is welcome. I am not, I hope, being unduly naïve. Expressing advice in a manner most likely to be acceptable is normal practice but keeping the advice honest rather than self-serving or obsequious can still be feasible within those limitations.

The obligation to "Caesar" reasserts itself once the Government has made a decision on the matter which was the subject of advice. Whether or not the public servant agrees with what Ministers have decided, it is his clear responsibility to execute as vigorously as possible the will of those elected by the people. That responsibility goes beyond responding to the government of the day. He must also carry out the letter of the legislation under which he is functioning. The potential exists, of course, for a conflict to develop between a Minister's instruction and a particular legal requirement. It is the public servant's obligation to point out that legal requirement and even seek, in serious circumstances, the advice of the Justice Department. If the Minister persists and the Deputy Minister concurs, then I believe the obligation to Caesar requires that the public servant obey. If in the event that doing so would offend his Christ-informed conscience, then a request for reassignment or resignation would have to follow. If the issue is unclear, James 1:5 has the answer. "If you don't know what to do, pray to the Father. He will help."

Mark 10: 42-45 – "Jesus got them (his disciples) together to settle things down. 'You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around,' he said, 'and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served – and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.'"

I repeatedly used the word "servants" in public addresses to underline the need for public servants to reflect Jesus' teaching as recorded in this well-known piece of Scripture. The Public Service is a hierarchy marked clearly by "rug-ranking," e.g. such perks as reserved parking spaces, large corner offices, comfortable couches and private washrooms. More importantly, there is a chain of command that reaches through the Deputy Minister to the political level. Obviously that chain of command must be respected and that was the

theme of my earlier remarks. Yet Jesus' teaching appears to turn that chain of command on its head. What we must understand, however, is that what Jesus is talking about is attitude not authority. A Christian public servant must treat those around him, especially his subordinates, with courtesy, respect and compassion. To do so not only displays the attitude of a servant but also earns the right to share his faith. Keeping an open door and caring about one's fellow workers' problems are central components of this attitude. Taking seriously, for example, performance evaluations and trying to help those who are having difficulty are marks of a caring superior who understands what a Christian servant is called to be.

The idea of being a servant goes well beyond the immediate workplace. This is where the word public comes in. Bureaucrats, to use that unattractive word, are supposed to be servants of the public but so often their behaviour suggests the opposite. For the Christian, such behaviour is completely unacceptable. Caring about those for whom one's programs are designed is an integral part of carrying out Christ's admonition to be a servant. That applies both to those who have direct interaction with the public and those who design or manage public services.

Hebrews 10:24 – "Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on ..."

The Public Service of Canada is very large and impersonal. Moreover, many of the jobs that exist within it are not very fulfilling and some are depressingly boring. Even with jobs that are intrinsically interesting, individuals can become discouraged by the apparent lack of opportunities for promotion or new challenges, especially in a contracting Public Service. Also their morale can become seriously impaired if their work is repeatedly devalued or their advice frequently ignored. With impending budget cuts, there is also fear about future employment. The Christian public servant, when faced with these conditions, has the reassurance of knowing that he is not only working for God but is loved by Him. His non-Christian workmate has no such reassurance. Reaching out in love and providing encouragement is as important in relationships with peers as it is with subordinates.

Matthew 18:20 – "And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

It is also important to reach out to fellow Christians, encouraging them to come together for prayer and Bible study ideally on a regular basis. If a Christian public servant has a private office or ready access to a meeting room, it is appropriate to make use of that facility for group prayer but not on government time. Such gatherings should take place before work begins or after it ends or during the regularly scheduled lunch break.

Clearly the primary motivation of the PSCF was sharing Christ's message of redemption and salvation. A major part of that effort was to encourage its membership to be as "Christ-like" as possible in the workplace. As a former senior executive in government, I have no hesitation in saying that our country would benefit enormously if there were many more similarly motivated public servants running what is unquestionably the largest "enterprise" in Canada.

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