Walter Gordon
1906-1997

Walter Gordon made his mark on Canadian public life through participation and leadership in three components of society: business, government and civil society. In doing so, he influenced Canada's domestic policies and its place in the world.

Born in Toronto in 1906, he attended élite Upper Canada College and Royal Military College. He entered the family business in 1927, joining Clarkson, Gordon and Co., Chartered Accountants, founded by his father. He rose to be a partner (1935-63). He was also a partner (1940-63) in Woods, Gordon and Co., Management Consultants, another family firm.

Always interested in public policy, he chaired the Royal Commission of Canada's Economic Prospects in 1955. His involvement increased when he joined the Liberal Party and was elected in Toronto-Davenport in April 1963. Lester Pearson names him Finance Minister in April 1963, a position he held until resigning in November 1965 from the Cabinet. He rejoined as President of the Privy Council in May 1967.
During the 1950s and 1960s he was considered the “voice of English Canadian nationalism” regarding ownership of the economy. He espoused advanced social programs, including medicare, and an independent, active role for Canada in world affairs. He spoke out against the United States’ war in Vietnam in a 1967 speech in Toronto, in defiance of the official Cabinet position, but it attracted public support and served to shift Canadian attitudes further toward the need to cease hostilities.

After leaving public office, Walter Gordon helped found the Committee for an Independent Canada, putting his Stamp on civil society advocacy. His attention to the non-governmental dimension of Canadian society was reinforced by the work of the Gordon Foundation, which he and his wife Elizabeth and his brother Duncan created in 1965. The Foundation’s focus over time included the environment, women’s advancement, human rights and progressive foreign and domestic policy issues.

His public voice was strengthened through his authorship of five passionately written books. He wrote about Canada’s foreign policy: “Our influence depends on our resources and our power, both moral and material, and upon our willingness to contribute aid.” “One constant aim of Canadian policy should be towards the easing of tensions everywhere, towards stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, towards disarmament”; “Support for the United Nations should remain a cornerstone of Canadian policy.”

Walter and Elizabeth Gordon had three children, Kyra, Jane and John. In 1987 this quiet Canadian passed away at the age of 81.