

Meet Geoff Regan, Canada's Speaker of the House of Commons

The veteran member of Parliament overcame a speech impediment to thrive in politics.

BY PAUL STERMAN

Not long after he was elected Canada's new Speaker of the House of Commons in December, Geoff Regan gave a public shoutout to Toastmasters. He tweeted this message to his 7,000-plus followers: "Thanks to speech therapy and fantastic Toastmasters, I gained confidence to pursue career in politics."

A one-sentence tweet—but a story much larger than that. As a youth, Regan struggled with a speech impediment, an experience that scarred his self-image. The son of a prominent politician, he benefited from speech therapy in his early 20s and later joined Toastmasters, where he was a dedicated member for nearly 10 years. In an interview, he spoke passionately about the experience.

"I became far more at ease speaking in public, not only because of prepared speeches I had to give but also because of my participation in Table Topics, in business meetings, doing speech evaluations, and serving in all the roles that members play in club meetings," says the 56-year-old politician.

Besides the tangible skills he learned—skills he says have been critical to his political success—Regan gained something else.

"The most important part of my Toastmasters experience, the number one thing I learned, is that working toward a worthwhile goal builds self-esteem," says the veteran member of Parliament, who lives in suburban Halifax in Nova Scotia. "When you set a goal, like working toward your next speech or participating in a speech contest, you learn and grow. You build self-esteem and it makes you feel good about yourself."

The man who once anguished over his speaking now savors the political life—and the opportunity to express himself. Heather Bradley, Regan's director of communications, says of her boss, "He is really a joy on the speaking front. He loves to deliver speeches, so our speechwriter is in heaven!"

Taking the Lead

Regan says one of the most valuable things he learned in Toastmasters was how to lead a meeting. He'll need every ounce of that ability in his current job. Canada's House of Commons—which along with the Senate comprises the Parliament—has 338 members. It's the Speaker's job to maintain order in the House, using parliamentary procedure—and an umpire's touch—to keep members in line during discussions and debates.



Geoff Regan, 56, is Canada's Speaker of the House of Commons. He wears the traditional Speaker's robes in the House chamber.

Photo credit: Jean-Marc Carisse

Regan's job is particularly challenging because of the nature of the House of Commons, which meets in the national capital of Ottawa. As members of the Canadian media have noted, House sessions in recent years have become increasingly divisive and unruly, punctuated by members heckling and insulting speakers.

Like a true Toastmasters alum, Regan has vowed to bring a more courteous and respectful environment to the proceedings. After being elected Speaker by his House colleagues December 3, in a secret-ballot vote, he delivered an eloquent speech.

"We must elevate the tone in the House and restore decorum. Mutual respect, despite our differences, is essential," said Regan, who gave his speech in both French and English.

"My role as your Speaker is to be fair, and I want to assure you I intend to be fair and I intend to be firm. I will not tolerate heckling. We don't need it."

Why is greater civility so important to Regan?

"I worry about the image that people have about politics and politicians," he says in the recent interview, noting that people

are tired of bickering and boorish public officials. "So I want to do whatever I can ... to combat the cynicism about politics. That's always been a priority for me."

A member of the Liberal Party, Regan is the first Speaker of the House from Atlantic Canada in nearly a century. (The coastal region encompasses the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador.) For Jim Kokocki, Toastmasters' 2015–2016 International President, Regan's success is particularly special.

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"I'm proud and excited to see Geoff Regan, a former Toastmaster and fellow Atlantic Canadian, selected as Speaker of the House in Canada's Parliament," says Kokocki, who lives in Saint John, New Brunswick.



As Speaker of the House, Regan must maintain order during discussions and debates. Photo credit: Canada House of Commons

All in the Family

For Regan, politics is a family affair. His wife, Kelly, is a cabinet member in the Nova Scotia government. (The couple have three children.) His father, Gerald, served as head of the Nova Scotia government through most of the 1970s and later was tapped as a cabinet member under Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

Geoff Regan says he was inspired by his father's work in politics. "Growing up, I saw my father working very hard and believing in what he was doing—working to help people—and I saw that as a very worthwhile activity and a noble calling."

He adds of his father, "My dad was a very good speaker, so I had big shoes to fill. But it put extra pressure on me. It was pressure I put on myself."

As a youth, he was painfully self-conscious about his speech impediment. Regan struggled to speak clearly, to get full sentences out and be understood. Part of the problem, he says, was "speaking quickly and trying to get ideas out in a big rush. Speech pathologists call it 'cluttering'—jamming the words together because you're in a hurry."

The speaking difficulties took a toll. "It made me less likely to engage in some conversations, to speak out in some situations. It affected my self-esteem, no question about it."

When he was 22, Regan went to a speech clinic to get help. He diligently practiced speaking exercises and learned to visualize, relax and slow down his speech.

A PENCHANT FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Geo Regan, Canada's Speaker of the House of Commons, isn't the only Toastmaster to flourish in the world of politics. A long list of members or former members have made their mark in that arena, whether as lawmakers, speechwriters or diplomats.

Political leaders have included Pat Roberts, a long-serving U.S. senator from Kansas; Linda Lingle, who served two terms as the governor of Hawaii; and Paramasivum Pillay Vyapoory, CL, elected earlier this year as vice president of the Republic of Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean.

Others have served on city councils, including Dan Winterburn, DTM, a member of the Jacksonville (Oregon) City Council from 2010 to 2014, and Danny Nguyen, a member of the Missouri City (Texas) City Council from 2010 to 2014. Anaheim, California, has two former members on its City Council: Tom Tait, the mayor of the city, and Lucille Kring.

Two of Toastmasters' Past International Presidents shined in the political field. John Lau, DTM, International President in 2012–2013, served as a Supreme Council member of the People's

Progressive Party of Malaysia, a component party of the Malaysian federal government.

Gary Schmidt, DTM, International President in 2009–2010, served as a top aide to two U.S. senators from his home state of Oregon, Mark Hatfield and Gordon Smith. His responsibilities included writing speeches and speaking at political events like town hall meetings.

Toastmasters have also served as high-ranking diplomats. David Y.L. Lin was Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of China (Taiwan) from 2012 to 2016. Thabo Khasipe served as an ambassador for the Kingdom of Lesotho, a country in southern Africa.

In a 2010 speech to a club in Honolulu, then-governor Lingle said, "I encourage everyone who is even thinking about running for office to join Toastmasters. It will give you a level of confidence that you wouldn't already have; it will give you a built-in support base among your fellow Toastmasters, and it will enable you to stand up and be effective in front of any audience and communicate ideas that are worthwhile."

His sister, Nancy Regan, a Canadian television personality, says her brother's struggle to overcome his impediment made him a stronger, more sensitive person. "Apart from being a really hard worker and really disciplined, he also has this uncommon sense of compassion because of what he went through," she said in a Canadian TV segment about her brother.

A New Chapter

After graduating from St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Regan earned a law degree from Dalhousie University, also in Nova Scotia. One day at a political convention in the province, he was talking with Rod Doiron, a man who knew his father. The man urged Regan to run for office.

"I said, 'I'm interested but I don't think I could because I'm not comfortable speaking in front of audiences,'" Regan recalls. "He said, 'Well, I have a solution to that: Toastmasters.'"

Regan later joined a club in Halifax. Doiron was a member of the group and mentored Regan. (That club has since been folded into a different Halifax club.) Regan embraced the Toastmasters experience, giving speeches, taking on meeting roles and earning

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his Competent Communicator award. He participated in speech contests and served as club president one year.

After practicing real estate and commercial law for a number of years, Regan entered the world of politics, spurred by the confidence Toastmasters helped him develop. He served in local positions before being elected a member of Parliament in 1993, representing the district of Halifax West. But four years later he suffered a setback when he was ousted in his bid for re-election—a period that he jokingly calls "my involuntary sabbatical."

However, Regan rebounded, winning back his seat in 2000. He has remained a Parliament member ever since. He has served as Parliamentary Secretary in the House and as Canada's Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

Lessons Learned

By the time he was elected to Parliament, Regan had left Toastmasters, but he says the lessons he learned there continued to pay dividends. He cites a long list of Toastmasters skills that are key to political success: how to craft a persuasive argument, organize your thoughts, use evocative phrasing, evaluate what other people say, and connect with your audience, whether it's one person or thousands.



Regan delivers his acceptance speech on December 3rd after being elected Speaker by his House colleagues.

Photo credit: Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press via the Associated Press

"These skills are valuable in all sorts of situations," says Regan.

Including a weekly session in the House of Commons called Question Period. The Speaker of the House spends the first 30 minutes answering questions from Parliament members. Think Table Topics—just on a much grander scale.

Regan says he truly enjoys being Speaker and relishes the challenges of his role. When he reflects on his political ascent, he does so with a certain sense of wonder.

"If you had asked me, when I was 19, 20, 21, if I thought it was likely I'd ever be elected to the House of Commons, let alone as its Speaker, I would have had grave doubts.

"Toastmasters had an enormous role in making that possible." ■

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