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Remarks Honouring the Hon. Erin O'Toole

Albany Club Honours Dinner — October 9, 2025

Members of the Albany Club, friends... good evening.

When the invitation came to speak tonight, I happened to be reading Retired U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal's recent book, *On Character*.

His point is simple and direct: character isn't something that happens to you.

It's something you build... one conviction, one disciplined choice at a time.

That frame fits Erin O'Toole better than any introduction I could write.

If you want a formula for his life, it's this: Conviction multiplied by Discipline Equals Character.

[PAUSE]

I met Erin as a classmate at the Royal Military College of Canada.

Same recruit class intake, same academic program.

He'll tell you my marks were better. I'll tell you his persuasion was legendary. His demerits at times much greater.

He could talk a professor into an essay deadline extension and a stranger into a friendship, usually in the same conversation.

But what mattered then, and matters more now, is what RMC demanded of us, our motto: *Truth, Duty, Valour*.

Not as words on a crest, but in character.

You were expected to push your mind, your fitness, your French, your leadership... every day.

You were expected to be part of something larger than yourself.

[PAUSE]

The military gave us that larger thing. Shakespeare called it a *Band of Brothers*. You may have also seen the HBO TV series. You may have listened to the Dire Straits song.

In the Navy, it's taught even more plainly: ship, shipmate, self. In that order.

Ask anyone who has worn the uniform, and they'll tell you: that ordering changes how you move through the world.

It changes what you think you owe.

You stop asking what's safest for you and start asking what's needed for the people and institutions you love.

That ethic is the ground Erin stands on.

And it was shored up by something else we shared in those early military years – family.

[PAUSE]

Erin and I were posted to Halifax at the same time, and a lot of Sunday nights we'd find ourselves in Fall River, in Rebecca's parents' kitchen.

The Grants did what East Coast families do: added a leaf to the table, poured a little more tea.....well maybe some beer or wine as well!, and made room.

Those dinners taught us that leadership and values aren't just what you do under the lights. It's what you model at home.

If you know Erin, you know that Rebecca, Jack, and Mollie are not his cheering section, they are his team.

Many of you have felt the same east coast hospitality courtesy of Rebecca.

Now, institutions love to give awards for "service to community."

With Erin, it's concrete, and it's consistent.

You saw some of it, right here, when he helped found the Rev. John Weir Foote, VC Memorial Luncheon as a ritual

of respect and connection for those who served and continue to serve.

You saw it again when he was instrumental in the birth of the True Patriot Love Foundation, an idea born in this very room.

Galas and campaigns are one thing.

Building a permanent bridge between Bay Street generosity and military families' real needs is another.

And so, you saw it on Parliament Hill with the Sam Sharpe Breakfast and the placement of Sharpe's bust in the corridor – and how that stitched mental health awareness and programming for veterans into the fabric of our national institutions.

You saw the Annual Celebration of Military Service take root on Parliament Hill.

And you saw a veterans-first culture built at Veterans Affairs, where Erin embedded respect in policy, not just in speeches.

[PAUSE]

But the measures I value most are the ones you didn't see.

You didn't see the hours Erin spent on the phone. Late at night. First thing in the morning.

Walking a veteran through a bureaucratic maze that felt impossible, and staying with them until their issue was resolved.

You didn't see the quiet push that got a modern-day veteran across the border for lifesaving treatment when every Canadian option had been exhausted.

You didn't see the last-minute calls that unlocked matching private funds for the Vimy Visitor and Education Centre when bureaucracy wanted to run out the clock and kill the initiative.

You didn't see the small, sacred gestures with our Second World War heroes, the Greatest Generation, at Holten and Groesbeek... at Wageningen (VAH-HING-EN)... moments where the only thing that mattered was gratitude, honour and respect.

You also didn't see his ongoing friendships and respect with WWII veterans like George Emmerson, Colin Brown, Don White, and General Richard Rohmer...

Or the quiet diplomacy of presenting Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan, a U.S. Marine veteran, with a Canadian War Museum print marking his grandfather's service in the Aleutians.

Or his insistence on compassionate care for Sgt. Grahame Clapp in his final hours.

You didn't see his camaraderie with the Devil's Brigade veterans, Charles Mann and Jack Callowhill as they received the US Congressional Gold Medal, or his quiet push for Alberta to modernize First Special Service Force highway signs.

[PAUSE]

You didn't see him check in, again and again, on the family of Corporal Nathan Cirillo, and the first responders who tried to save him.

You didn't see the insistence that a 102-year-old veteran from the First Special Service Force receive compassionate care, now, not tomorrow.

And you likely didn't see the mentorship of would-be RMC cadets, the nudge, the coffee, the introduction that changed a life.

[PAUSE]

Here's the point: **time is the most valuable thing we have.**

It is the only currency you cannot earn back.

And Erin spends his on people.

In a world of divided attention, he gives the rarest gift... undivided attention.

That is what conviction looks like after the cameras are gone.

[PAUSE]

I have watched Erin under extraordinary pressure.

In early 2022, when politics was at its most unforgiving, I told him something I believed then and believe now...

If your values, your principles, and your character are intact... and your family and friends are at your side... you already have what matters most.

Positions come and go.

Purpose does not.

The truth is... and forgive me for saying this in a political club... in many ways Erin is too good for politics today. The way it is too often practiced.

But he is exactly the kind of man Canada needs more of... in business, in philanthropy, in advocacy, and in the quiet networks of service that hold the country together when the headlines don't.

And if you're searching for the "why" of Erin... why the veterans' file became the place where he poured the most of himself...

I think it comes back to that question most citizens never have to face: *What would you risk for someone else?*

Erin answered that question as a young officer.

He has been answering it ever since, in smaller, humbler ways that add up to a life.

[PAUSE]

We've shared a lot over the years... studies, training, deployments, exams we barely survived, the births of children, campaigns, everything in between.

And we have shared difficult losses too.

I've seen him knock on doors until his knuckles were raw and sit with a grieving family until the house was quiet.

I've seen him bridge a gap because the gap needed bridging, not because there was something in it for him.

And I've seen him keep faith in *Truth, Duty, Valour...* When it would have been easier not to.

[PAUSE]

If someone in this room tonight is struggling to find your way, and you want a compass, borrow Erin's:

Believe in something larger than yourself.

Choose your people. Then choose them again when it's costly.

Do the work when no one is watching.

Let your values do the talking.

And when you can, do what we were taught at sea: ship, shipmate, self.

Get that order right, and the rest will follow.

[PAUSE]

Erin, you've given the country and this community your most precious resources – your time, your talent, and your good name – without keeping score.

You have turned conviction into discipline, and discipline into character, and you've made all of us better for it.

Our bond began at RMC in 1991, and it's only grown stronger year by year.

The next chapter... in business, thought leadership, philanthropy, and acts of quiet service... will only extend the reach of your work, your purpose. We are happy to have you back.

[PAUSE]

Some endings aren't endings at all.

They are a chance to keep moving forward with lighter kit, but the same steady compass.

Before I close, let me share a poem called The Spirit of RMC by Edgar Guest, written over a century ago, but still timeless:

To live as bravely as I can,
To be, No matter where, A man,
To take what comes of good or ill
And cling to faith and honour still:
To do my best and let that stand.

Erin... On behalf of your friends, your shipmates,
veterans and a grateful community... thank you.

Thank you for loving your country the way you do.

Thank you for serving the people in it.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in saluting the
truest measure of the word friend, the Hon. Erin O'Toole.