

John Manley

It is fitting that this gathering to honour Jim Travers is taking place in the National Conference Centre. Jim spent many hours here over the years, doing his journalistic duty.

The walls of this building, like those of Parliament, bear the imprint of the debates he covered and interpreted for his fellow citizens. It's a place that has witnessed the tumult, the failures and the successes of nation-building.

It's a place that has seen national gatherings of celebration . . . and national gatherings marking sadness and distress. The passing of Jim Travers is a matter of great national sadness and distress.

He left Joan and Ben and Patrick far too soon. He left all of us in his wider family of friends, professional associates and colleagues far too soon.

We do, and we will, miss him terribly. But his life, and how he lived it, and his contributions to the lives of others, and to the life of the country, are cause for national celebration.

So it's fitting that we are here to both mourn and celebrate Jim Travers. Our presence here is a testament to Jim's enormous talents and skills, his unquestionable professionalism, the elegance of his writing, the eloquence of his voice, the courage of his convictions, the quality of the relationships he built, and his passionate commitment to Canada.

It's also a tribute to another great quality that made him so lovable . . . his sense of humour – sometimes outrageous, often self-deprecating. Somehow he penetrated my “charismatically challenged” exterior and knew that the more outrageous the joke, the more I would laugh.

Like his proposed front-page headline for the day after his unceremonious dismissal as Editor-in-Chief: “Mother-bleeper fires star editor!” . . . although he didn't say “bleeper”.

Or when he went on Cross Country Checkup right after the 2006 Liberal leadership vote. When the exuberant host, Rex Murphy asked him what Liberals were feeling at that moment, he replied without a second's hesitation: “Buyer's remorse!”

Jim would certainly find humour, and perhaps irony, in a gathering of his family and friends at the Conference Centre to talk about him. He'd be rolling his eyes at this, just as he rolled them at some of the speeches and debates he covered here. He would have little patience for praise being directed his way, but inside, I think he might have liked it a bit as well.

I first met Jim in the early 1980s, long before I ran for public office. I was a lawyer here in Ottawa, and he had just accepted a posting to Africa on behalf of Southam News. I advised him, successfully as far as I know, on how to avoid some pitfalls in his dealings with Revenue Canada as a foreign-based correspondent.



Later in his career, he returned the favour by offering me political counsel... in print. Unfortunately, I didn't always follow his advice. But at least he never billed me for it.

Which is just one of the many reasons why journalists are generally better regarded than lawyers.

I never had the good fortune to work with Jim as a colleague, but those who did developed a tremendous respect and affection for him.

He led by example. He checked facts. He was never cavalier about "unnamed sources". You knew he would respect your confidences. The concept of 'gotcha journalism' had no place in his ethic.

He edited and re-edited, wrote and re-wrote. He was a thinker and analyst and writer with few equals. He was the master of *le mot juste*.

I knew him as a friend – a friend who was able to separate the personal from the professional. I loved having lunch or breakfast with him, especially these last few years when I have been out of public office. He could always make me laugh, and he never fed me lines about why I should go back into the political fray.

During our last breakfast, he said nothing about the illness that must have been threatening him. Instead we talked about the future, his in particular. I believed that with his mind, and his pen, that future – away from the grind of regular columns – would be bright indeed.

The critiques he offered, and the sometimes critical analyses of the words and actions of those in public life, were never mean-spirited. But he had an unfailing nose for hypocrisy. He believed that it was his good fortune to have landed a job as the *Star's* national affairs columnist – thus giving him a large audience, and putting him in touch with millions of Canadians.

He would say it was good fortune, but of course it was talent and hard work that got him there. He always took his responsibility to his readers seriously, and yet as others have said, he never took himself seriously. It doesn't get any better than that.

Last Saturday, the *Star* republished Jim's award-winning 2009 essay under the headline, "An Eloquent Plea for Democracy". It was one of his finest pieces, displaying the skills of a master wordsmith at his very best. His plea on behalf of the institutions of our democracy was heartfelt:

"If war is too serious to leave to generals, then surely democracy is too important to delegate to politicians."

These words should bruise neither generals nor politicians, both of whom at their best are seeking a better world.

But what really reflected the hope and faith he had in this country in words so elegant that I've never forgotten them were the opening lines of that piece, in which he reflected on his view of Canada in the 80's seen from abroad: "a cold but shimmering Camelot".

A Canada that he feared was under siege if not being lost. This was a glimpse inside the man, revealing his love for his country.

Jim was a powerful advocate for a Canada of vision and decency, shaped by an informed and engaged citizenry. He was a man of vision and decency and he leaves us a body of work that will be relevant for years to come.

More often than not, at the end of a conversation Jim's parting words were, "Fly Straight". Spoken by Travers as a friendly admonition, I took "Fly Straight" to have many meanings:

Be true to yourself and truthful to others.

Be fearless.

Be decent, honourable and honest.

Laugh, love, and have fun.

Don't take yourself too seriously.

Fly Straight.

OK, good friend. But it's going to be tougher without your example.