

Donald Johnston

Chair Emeritus to the McCall MacBain Foundation,
Former Secretary-General of the OECD



Honourable Donald Johnston was born in Ottawa. He attended McGill University receiving his BA and graduating as the Gold Medallist from the University's Faculty of Law in 1958. In 1958 Johnston went on a scholarship to pursue advanced studies in economics and political science in Grenoble.

In 1961, he joined the Montreal-based law firm of Stikeman Elliott, practicing business and tax law. In 1973, he was a founding partner of Johnston Heenan Blaikie, along with Roy Heenan and Peter Blaikie. From 1964 to 1977, he was a lecturer in fiscal law in the Faculty of Law of McGill University.

In 1978 he was elected to the House of Commons and joined the Cabinet of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. From 1980 to 1984, Johnston successively held senior Cabinet positions.

When Trudeau announced his retirement in 1984, Johnston ran to succeed him as Liberal leader and prime minister in that year's Liberal leadership convention. Johnston came in third in a field of seven behind John Turner and Jean Chrétien. Johnston served as Minister of Justice and Attorney General in the short-lived Turner government until its defeat in the 1984 federal election.

In opposition Johnston and Turner split over the issue of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the Meech Lake Accord: In an attempt to reconcile the divided Liberal caucus on these issues, Turner decided to support the Accord and oppose Free Trade. Johnston was opposed to the Accord and for Free Trade, and, on January 18, 1988, resigned from the Liberal caucus to sit as an "Independent Liberal" until retiring from Parliament when the 1988 general election was called.

Johnston returned to the Liberal fold in 1990, after Turner's resignation as leader, and served two terms as president of the Liberal Party of Canada from 1990 to 1994, seeing the party through its victory in the 1993 general election.

In 1994, the government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien proposed Johnston for the position of Secretary-General of the OECD. Johnston was elected to the post in November 1994 by the organization's member governments.

As the first non-European to occupy this prestigious position, Johnston began his mandate in 1996 and was elected to a second term in 2001. During his administration, the OECD represented 30 of the most advanced national economies and expanded its engagement to more than 70 non-members, with special country programs for Russia, China, Brazil and India. While the OECD is a forum for macroeconomic policy issues, it also deals with virtually all underlying structural issues including financial markets, trade and investment, taxation and corporate governance.

Under Johnston's stewardship, the OECD took the global lead in establishing the Principles of Corporate Governance (now the world standard) and revised the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the bedrock of what is now known as corporate social responsibility. The Organization also championed the correction of international harmful tax practices and the international harmonization of competition policy, while at the same time fostering sustainable development, which Johnston introduced to the OECD shortly after his arrival. He also created the Education Directorate which introduced the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA), now the leading reference for international educational comparisons.

OECD recommendations in these areas have been critical in enabling countries to structurally adapt to the challenges of globalization while maximizing its benefits to their economies.

He also commissioned and oversaw the reconstruction and renovation of the OECD's Paris headquarters. Johnston stepped down from his position at the OECD on May 31, 2006.

In 2006, Johnston rejoined Heenan Blaikie as a member of the International Business Law Group (the firm was dissolved in 2014). He focused his practice on national and international business law, working with clients to expand their businesses in an increasingly complex and competitive global environment. He is a frequent speaker around the world, addressing a broad range of issues including climate change and energy initiatives.

Awards and distinctions

In recognition of his accomplishments at the OECD, Johnston was awarded the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun, the second most prestigious Japanese decoration and the highest one that can be bestowed on a non-Japanese citizen. He received the Grand-Croix de l'Ordre de Léopold II, one of the highest honorific distinctions in Belgium, given by royal decree and generally reserved for heads of state. He was also presented with the Commander's Cross with the Star of the Order of Merit of the Republic by the President of Hungary and the Order of the White Double Cross, First Class, by the President of the Slovak Republic.

In July 2008, Johnston was appointed Officer of the Order of Canada, in recognition of his contributions to public service in Canada as well as his achievements at the OECD. He was made an Officer of the French National Order of the Legion of Honour in 2011.

He has also received several honorary doctorates from McGill University, Bishop's University, University of King's College, McMaster University and the Economics University of Bratislava, Slovakia.

He was given Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal and the Canadian Version of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012 for service to Canada.

Johnston was Chair and is currently Chair Emeritus to the McCall MacBain Foundation in Geneva. In addition, from 2006 until 2010, he was Chairman of the International Risk Governance Council (IRGC) in Geneva. From 2006 to 2009 he was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea, where he lectured on Sustainable Development.

Musical Composition

[Montreal](#) composed by Donald Johnston was performed in October 2019 in by the McGill Symphony Orchestra

Publications

- Johnston, Donald (2017). *Missing the Tide Global Governments in Retreat* (1st ed.). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN 978-0-7735-4971-5.
- Johnston, Donald (1977). *How to Survive Canada's Tax Chaos* (3rd ed.). Montreal: PaperJacks Ltd. ISBN 978-0-7701-0016-2.
- Johnston, Donald (1988). *With a Bang not a Whimper Pierre Trudeau Speaks Out* Donald Johnston Editor. Toronto: Stoddart.
- Johnston, Donald (1986). *Up The Hill* (1st ed.). Montreal: Optimum Pub Intl. ISBN 9780888901781.
- Trudeau, Pierre (1989). Donald Johnston (ed.). *Trudeau Parle* (1st ed.). Montreal: Hurtubise HMH. ISBN 978-2890458666