

A profile of Dr. Parr-Johnston

by Stephen Kimber
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When she speaks to women's groups these days, Elizabeth Parr-Johnston, the president of Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada's only college dedicated to women's education, often urges her audiences to begin to think about planning their careers more carefully. "I tell them they need to think not just about 'What do I do now?', but 'Where do I go from here?' Women," she adds, "don't usually ask what's the next job, what's the next opportunity. They're too busy digging in and doing the one that's in front of them."

Elizabeth Parr-Johnston speaks from experience.

For the first 40 years of her life, she concedes, her professional career just rumbled along, propelled more by the job choices of her then-husband and the good fortune of opportunity than by any conscious planning on her part. Not that she's complaining. "I was never dissatisfied," she is quick to note, but then adds: "Maybe if I'd spoken out..." She pauses, considers. "We were all schooled — I know that's an over-generalization, but there was a sense, I guess... well, the times were just different then."

The reality is that she followed her husband from Yale, where they were in graduate school together, to the University of Western Ontario, where he got a teaching appointment, to the University of British Columbia, where he got another teaching job, to Ottawa, where he landed a government job.

Even after they were no longer together, Parr-Johnston allows that she continued to jump to whatever seemed the next interesting opportunity without ever considering what she wanted or was best suited to do.

But then in February 1980, she suddenly found herself — a newly single mother of 40 with two kids in elementary school — at loose ends.

Her last jump had turned out to be a bungee leap without a cord.

In 1979, she'd signed on as chief of staff to Ronald Atkey, minister of employment and immigration in Joe Clark's new government. But new turned old almost instantly — "300 days," she says ruefully — as the government was defeated and Parr-Johnston was out of a job.

"After that, I thought maybe it was time to grow up and actually plan my own career for the first time ever." Being a trained economist, Parr-Johnston proceeded to put together a personal balance sheet. "What do I like to do? What skills do I bring to the table? Do I want to set up my own business? I went through the matrix and I saw that, well, I understood public policy, I understood regulated industries. Natural resource industries seemed a logical choice. So I set about finding a job."

She landed one quickly enough at Shell Canada where she served, officially, as Manager, Products Strategic Systems for Oil Products Marketing, and, unofficially, as the company's "senior-ranked woman."

She quit the company 10 years later to the day, officially because Shell was disbanding her unit and she wasn't interested in the alternative position they'd offered, and unofficially because, friends suggest, she'd smacked up against a corporate glass ceiling to further advancement.



Dr. Elizabeth Parr-Johnston
Photo: Public Relations,
Mount Saint Vincent



Parr-Johnston may be running this place sooner than you think.

Photo: Warren Watson

"I decided it was time to go on and do something else," Parr-Johnston herself explains more simply. She quit without knowing exactly what she would do next but, shortly before she resigned, she'd been approached out of the blue by an executive headhunter with yet another of those "next interesting opportunities" that had shaped so much of her career.

In 1991, she became president of Mount Saint Vincent University.

Planning had finally met serendipity.

Elizabeth Parr-Johnston, 55, the graduate of one of America's most famous women's colleges turned president of Canada's only women's college, is so perfectly matched to her position it almost seems as if she spent her life training for it.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, "in the shadow of Ebbett's Field," and raised on Long Island and in New Jersey, she is the daughter of a New York lawyer and an economist-turned-housewife mother who "made a lot of difference in my life."

She says her mother, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Wellesley College, was "probably the first woman economist" at the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank in New York. Although she gave up her career after she married, she encouraged her daughter "to study, do well, take math and be good at it. And sciences too. I knew I was different in that from a lot of the other girls in my class," Parr-Johnston says today, then adds with a laugh: "but I never worried about it. I always got to the senior prom."

Like her mother, she expected, without thinking very much about it, that she would work for a while, marry and raise children. "There was still the

expectation then that you would marry and that would be your career."

In fact, she did go to Wellesley, studied economics, even got engaged. But her academic mentor — a still prominent U.S. economics professor named Carolyn Shaw Bell, who specialized in labor economics with a focus on women — took her aside before her senior year and said: "It's nice that you're engaged, but that's not going to be enough for you. I want you to apply for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship."

Parr-Johnston won one of those prestigious fellowships, which were designed to encourage promising young men and women to pursue academic careers, and went to Yale to study international finance.

While at Yale, she married David

But even as her professional life flowered, her personal life wilted. She and her husband split up and Parr-Johnston ended up trying to "balance and juggle" a demanding career with the equally demanding job of being "a single mom with two young children. I had no personal life."

Looking for some respite, Parr-Johnston jumped at the opportunity to take part in a government-industry executive exchange with Inco, where she hoped to do less consuming policy analysis work. But shortly after she arrived, the corporate giant laid off 1,850 miners in Sudbury. The company was called before a legislature committee to explain itself. Perhaps not surprisingly, given her expertise in government, the company asked Parr-Johnston to help it prepare for the

when the Mount offered her the presidency.

"I do see a change in the fact that a lot more husbands seem willing to participate in household things they didn't used to do. My husband just pitches in when he sees there's something that needs doing without worrying about whose job it is."

Parr-Johnston's job these days is steering the Mount through the uncharted, often dangerous waters of university rationalization. "It's exhausting, it's demanding," Parr-Johnston says, "but it's terrific. I love it."

Though she recognizes that there will almost certainly be changes in the way in which the university system in Nova Scotia operates after the current rationalization process, she remains upbeat about her own institution's prospects for survival.

"The Mount is a very special university. It serves a unique role as an alternate model for a university. More than half our faculty are women, half the senior administrators, half the board of governors. That's a very different profile than you'll find anywhere else so, yes, I think there is a place for a women's university. There has to be."

She is so convinced of that, in fact, that she recently informed the Board of Governors that, when her first five-year term expires next year, "if they wish, I'd be honored to serve as president for another five years." Planning meets opportunity.

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On the author

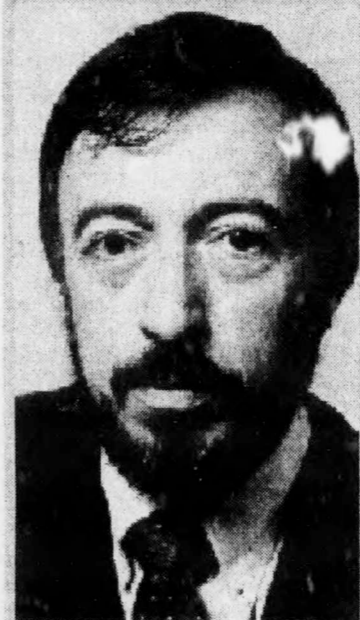


Photo courtesy of his home page

Stephen Kimber is an award-winning editor, broadcaster and professor of journalism.

His writing has appearing in almost all major national Canadian publications including *Canadian Geographic*, *Financial Post Magazine*, *Canadian Business*, *En Route*, *Cbaelaine*, *Financial Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, and the *Toronto Star* as well as *The Canadian* and *Today*.

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appearance.

She ended up resigning from government to become Inco's Director of Government Relations.

Through that job, she met Ron Atkey, a Toronto lawyer working as Inco's outside counsel. After Atkey was elected to parliament and appointed to the cabinet in 1979, he called to ask Parr-Johnston to become his chief of staff. "I wasn't a Conservative," she points out, "but I'd been in government and I understood the policy implications. I thought it would be a terrific opportunity to learn more about government."

In the end, it turned out to be a terrific opportunity to learn more about how governments sometimes don't work.

Shortly after joining Shell Canada, her personal life fell into place too. She met Archie Johnston, a Prince Edward Island-born executive with Canadian General Electric who was serving on a subcommittee of the high-powered Business Council on National Issues. The committee was preparing a paper on regional economic development so a staff member suggested he talk to someone at Shell who knew a little something about regional economic development issues.

"He asked me questions, then he asked me to lunch and eventually he began asking me to dinner." Elizabeth Parr-Johnston laughs. "And the rest, as they say, is history."

When Shell decided to transfer Parr-Johnston from Toronto to Calgary, her new husband — by now retired — happily followed her this time. Although he started his own business in Calgary, she says he was "supportive" again