

The Empire Club Presents



SARADA PERI,
FORMER SENIOR SPEECHWRITER FOR
PRESIDENT OBAMA,

WITH POLITICAL STRATEGIST
DON GUY

**ON: THE CHANGING NATURE OF POLITICAL
COMMUNICATIONS**

Welcome Address, by Mr. Kent Emerson, Associate Vice
President at the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation
and President of the Empire Club of Canada

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Sarada is in town, today, visiting as a Ryerson Global
Fellow from the Ryerson Leadership Lab, an action-ori-

ented think tank aimed at addressing today's most pressing civic challenges. Thanks to Ryerson for your help in helping us organize today's event. We also have Karim Bardeesy here from Ryerson and a number of students.

HEAD TABLE

Distinguished Guest Speakers:

Mr. Don Guy, Pollster and Strategist, Pollara Strategic Insights;
Founding Member; KTG Public Affairs

Ms. Sarada Peri, Speechwriter and Communications Strategist; Former Special Assistant and Senior Speechwriter for Former President Barack Obama

Can you stand up, the students from Ryerson who are here? That would be great. This evening's topic is "The Changing Nature of Political Communications." When I think about the changing nature of political communications and the role that this speaker has had with former President Obama, I cannot stop thinking how much things have changed in the last few years and how the environment has changed since working for President Obama.

A few weeks ago, I was sitting around watching the funeral of George Bush, Sr., and all of a sudden when I saw George W. Bush, I blurted out, "Oh, my God, I miss that guy." My wife started going, "Are you crazy? Did you just say that?" I answered, "Yes, I said that. I did not even know I thought it." I think one of the things for all of us who have been watching what is going down in the U.S. is

we see that things have changed so much. The differences between Presidents Clinton and Bush, which at the time we thought were monumental differences, in retrospect, seem to be very small differences in comparison with the differences between President Obama and the current president.

Some of those changes include historic changes to global alliances, as when you have a president calling Vladimir Putin his best friend, or when you have a deliberate polarization of the general public in ways we could not have imagined. And, now, we have an increasing acceptance of nationalism and mainstream conversations about white supremacy that you would not have imagined before.

Perhaps the most alarming trend is this erosion of fact-based discussions and an increased ambiguity around what is truth. Senator Moynihan once said, “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts.” Right now, that seems to be up for debate. That has always been a problem in politics to some degree. We all know Bill Clinton had his moment about “It depends on what the definition of ‘is’, is.” Since then, in the Clinton example, it was clear public outrage. I think we are in a territory where it is not clear whether lying or misrepresenting facts causes any outrage or any real consequences. That is something that I hope the speakers will get into today. We have 4,000 false claims that the current president has made, according to the Toronto Star, in over 720 days into a presidency.

This new political environment that today’s speaker is navigating is not an easy feat. While we have not experi-

enced anything close to that in Ontario in political communications, we have had the example of Ontario Proud playing a significant role in our recent election. For all these reasons, we wanted to do this event, tonight. We are really lucky to have Sarada, and we are so glad you are here. I think this event sold out so quickly, because of just the times we are living in and how interesting it is. With that, I am going to start the introduction. To lead tonight's discussion with our feature speaker, we have Don Guy. Everyone knows what Don has been up to. Today, he has been described as a "legendary political strategist," a "brilliant strategy and a policy wizard" with a unique understanding of the nexus between communications and policy. However, if you ask Don exactly how many electoral victories he has been responsible for, he says things like, "I don't know; these things are team efforts; a lot of people deserve the credit."

Everyone knows his reputation of coming back from third place victories, second place victories to win elections all across Canada. He has recently returned to Pollara, but now is Owner and Chief Strategist. He is a founding partner of KTG Public Affairs and is a member of global research and strategy firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.

He has provided the research and strategies that have fueled some of the most successful public affairs campaigns in Canada. Don is a treasurer of the InterAction Council of Former Heads of State and Government, an international NGO think tank. Don's graduate academic training was at

the University of Toronto, where he took his MBA and doctoral studies in political and democratic behaviour.

Please, welcome to the stage, the pollster, strategist, and man of international mystery, Don Guy. Finally, tonight's feature speaker is a speechwriter and communications strategist who has helped top leaders and thinkers.

From Fortune 50 CEOs to the president of the United States, she inspires and persuades audiences.

She was Special Assistant to the president and Senior Speechwriter for President Barack Obama. Prior to joining the White House, she was a principal at West Wing Writers, where she worked with corporate, political and non-profit clients on speechwriting, speech delivery, op-eds, books, and message strategy. She was also a member of the 2012 and 2016 Democratic National Convention speechwriting teams. A recovering policy wonk, Sarada worked on Capitol Hill as Lead Education and Healthcare Policy Advisor to former Senator Mary Landrieu. She started her career as a high school English teacher in New Orleans through Teach for America. Sarada graduated from Tufts University and holds a master's degree in public policy from Harvard's Kennedy School. Please, put your hands together for Speechwriter and Communications Strategist, Sarada Peri.

Ms. Sarada Peri with Mr. Don Guy

DG: First of all, let me just say thank you, Kent, for the introduction and the fantastic opportunity to be here and spend some time chatting with Sarada, whose work I admire tremendously. There are so many familiar faces in the crowd. I think we will be well treated.

You never know. I know of at least one individual who brought hard dinner rolls to throw if he did not like what he heard. I just want to take a personal moment to say so many of you here are responsible for the successes that I have been attributed credit for. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your hard work. Another way of thinking about this event is old and busted meets young and fresh. As a result, I would imagine many of you are familiar with Sarada's work, but perhaps not some of what she is really all about, so I thought we would start with a short snap-around, a two-minute snap-around of questions that would help you get to know her a bit before we dive into the meat of the subject. Apologies to any vegans or vegetarians for the use of that metaphor.

Let us start with a tough one, Sarada. Who is your favourite president?

SP: Other than the one I worked for?

DG: Could be the one you worked for.

SP: I feel like I cannot say him, because then you will all think I am biased; although, he is in my *[list of]* top presidents. I would say my two favourite presidents are two of the favourite presidents of most Americans or many Americans: Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

DG: Excellent. What was your favourite moment working for the president that you worked for?

SP: There were so many.

Most of my day involved staring at a blank Word document in a sea of self-loathing. I think one of my favourite days—and this is a strange day to say it was a ‘favourite day’, as some of you all may know that in 2015, in Charleston, South Carolina, a white supremacist walked into a church and murdered nine Black churchgoers. It was a horrific day. It was a really tough moment in our country. On the day that the president was scheduled to give the eulogy down in Charleston, which turned out to be one of his finest speeches, that I had nothing to do with, by the way, was also the day that the Supreme Court ruled in favour of same-sex marriage equality. I did get to work on that speech.

I actually had written multiple versions, because we did not know how the court was going to rule.

I remember that morning, my boss, Cody, had been working on the Charleston eulogy all night long with

the president, and I had been working on these multiple drafts. Suddenly, the decision came down and my colleague next door to me emailed me and just said in all caps, “TOTAL VICTORY.” It was this strange day where suddenly we are in motion. The president went to the Rose Garden and delivered the victory speech that we had worked on. It was such a moment for our country. Then, he immediately got in the helicopter, went to Andrews Air Force Base, flew to Charleston and gave, I think, one of the greatest eulogies that has been given. That night, a team at the White House had planned that the whole White House would be lit up in rainbow colours in honour of the decision. It was just one of these days when I felt like somehow this president, despite everything we had been through, brought the country together. I had very little to do with that day, but I felt like, as an American, I was just proud of that day.

DG: I think many of us felt the same. Who is your least favourite president?

SP: Oh, I think you all can guess.

DG: What is your least favourite moment in this individual’s presidency? I think it is safe, I can say ‘his’ presidency, given the track record.

SP: Yes. It is hard to choose, guys. It is hard to choose, but I will say the one moment—and it is still actually

going on—that I felt like this person is “apatriotic,” as in unpatriotic, as it is not even in his mind, and he has no moral compass, was the day we learned that his administration had been separating, had been kidnapping people’s children, people who had been coming over to seek asylum at the border and putting them in cages. If you see the term ‘toddler jails’ in a newspaper in your country, you know something is deeply wrong, that we have gone astray. I think that was—as an American, as a mom, as a human being with any sense of morality—such a devastating thing to learn, and it makes you feel so helpless in your own country.

DG: Let us start at the top of the funnel in terms of the topic of the evolution of political communications and work our way down. I guess the question that I think is on many people’s minds who have either practiced the craft or have not is what the heck is going on? What is going on in the world?

SP: Hell, if I know. I think, from a political communications standpoint, the fundamentals are kind of still there. Donald Trump broke a lot of norms. He basically violated everything that people in our profession would say what not to do when they are running for president, making him disqualifying. In some ways, he was so unpresidential as to make him president.

He ran through all these norms. There are a lot of

reasons he won. What is interesting is that while doubling down on his views, showing zero empathy for anybody who is not loyal to him sort of at a personal level and really just stoking the fears of his base keeps them loyal to him. Because they keep him in power, that keeps the Republican establishment loyal to him, which has been disturbing, I think, to people who thought that the Republican Party had more integrity than that. If you look at the country, at large, he is extremely unpopular. He has the lowest approval rating of any president since polling started, basically, nationally. People do not like how he communicates.

Most people think that he has something to do with Russian collusion in our election. Most people think—and it is true—he lies constantly. Nobody thinks that this is somebody who communicates in a way that is honest, but I think that what he did do was bring to the forefront the now overused term ‘authenticity’.

He was himself. He is authentically a racist, but he is authentic. I think that did actually work for people who were sick of people like me and Don consulting the heck out of candidates. What I think you are seeing now that is really interesting is that now other people are doing that, but in ways that are honest and have integrity, and they are reaching new audiences.

If you look at the rise of many of the Democrats who won in our 2018 mid-terms—we just had mid-

terms—and the Democrats won back the House, and you see some of the people who did really well, and I will use Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Congresswoman from New York, as an example. She is a truly skilled, gifted, authentic communicator. She knows how to reach her constituents and young people all across the country using social media. She is very much herself.

I think just today, she tweeted something related to both skincare and the 70% marginal tax on wealthy people. It is really impressive. Really impressive stuff.

What she is also doing really well is opening up the process of what happens in Congress to people. She will come home from her workday and then she will do an Instagram story explaining how Congress works, which is remarkable, and I think is really appealing to people.

Yes, what Trump did was break the whole system, and he is trying to burn our country down. The flipside is I think we are seeing good people, people who are true public servants, and who take that and go in a better direction and communicate really authentically, which is actually exciting. If there is any silver lining, maybe that is it. I do not know.

DG: What would you see—I mean, AOC is a great example. Is she sort of the counter, both in terms of use of the tools, but also in approach and authenticity, to that

Trump phenomena, that communications and brand phenomena?

SP: Maybe, except—and this is maybe not answering your question—going back to your previous question, of course, we are all in our own media echo chambers, so now our new cycle, as you all know very well has been diced and sliced and bisected into a million different filters. You can listen to news that comes only from outlets whose opinion you share. Those outlets will double down on their views. People are living in those echo chambers. Fox News is doing a lot to trash her, and they are succeeding with their own base. That is still a problem. I think that what has shifted is that what we are thinking about for 2020 is whether someone like Obama, who had a message of universal values and one of hope and change and unifying the country, could win anymore. I do not know. I think that is what is scary: Whether that even resonates anymore or whether we are all—and I am sure you guys feel this here—so, so locked in our own little bubbles and so hunkered down that we cannot even get past that, and the idea of coming together is almost anathema.

DG: That begs the question. One of the things that I think has happened with the media atomization is the economics of political communications have fundamentally shifted the same way that they have with media. You question whether the economics of persuasion makes sense any-

more compared to the economics of polarization.

What is your sense of that? Is there a way out of that, or is the model permanently broken?

SP: I hope not. I still think that people do not necessarily enjoy being polarized. Yes, there is something nice about finding community in other people who hate Donald Trump, but I think there is a reason so many people gravitated to Barack Obama. I do think people still want hope more than they want fear. I take some solace in that. Where I think the changing economics of political communications is going to be interesting is that—so I do not know how it works here—I think there is probably a lot more money in politics in America, but the big dollars in politics, in political communications is in media buys, television ads. That is not really how people consume information anymore. There is going to be a really interesting struggle between digital media and TV and how you communicate authentically to the different audiences, different demographics, different ages. That, I think, could actually change the system, fundamentally. The other thing I want to say about that is if you look at the people who succeeded in 2018, they invariably were not talking about Trump. They were not doing negative attacks on the president. They really were offering an affirmative vision for the people they hoped to represent. Those are the people who won. That was kind of the strategy for the Democrats at a national level,

but also what was going on in district races. Again, maybe that means that polarization is not necessarily always a winning formula. Again, if you look at how unpopular Trump is, he has done it really well with his base.

They are going to stick with him. They are loyal to a fault. Beyond that, he has lost independence in pretty meaningful numbers.

DG: From the time you started, let us say the time you wrote your first speech and today, how has the work, the task of getting a message out changed, in your mind and the organization of delivering a message?

SP: I think all the principles of messaging that you and I tell people we work with are the same. What is the one thing you are trying to convey? What is the story that helps you tell it? How do you connect your values to your audience's values? How do you figure out what moves them, what persuades them? All those things are still the same. In some ways, though, there are more opportunities to disseminate that message and ways to maybe reach people you would not normally reach. If you think about speeches from back in the day, they were very long, because people had travelled from a long way to hear them. You were shouting because there were no microphones. Oratory was a really different thing.

All of that has evolved to fit where we are today. I think what I have found in my time at the White House—I was

there during the second term—was that they had already figured that out, and they were starting to find new ways to disseminate messages that were not in the form of traditional speeches. As the speechwriters, we loved that, because that meant that we could write fewer speeches, so that is great. If you are trying to get a bunch of young people to sign up for health care, you are not going to go and deliver a speech at the Chamber of Commerce.

You are going to do a *Between Two Ferns* video; you are going to do a BuzzFeed video; you are going to go on Snap and do a story, whatever that is. You are going to reach them where they are. I think the opportunities for that were exciting for us. All of that comes with a—there is always a dark side to all of this. That, I think, is interesting.

DG: I am glad you mentioned *Between Two Ferns* because it is actually one of my favourite communications moments from President Obama. I do want to point out, Kent, that in my rider, my contract rider, there was supposed to be ferns on either side of us. I am willing to let it pass this time.

KE: We can still do it in cactuses.

DG: You mentioned something earlier I want to come back to which is candidates who come to people like us or others in the room and say, “Teach me to be authentic.” When that happens, whether it is a CEO or a candidate for polit-

ical office or whatever the case may be, what do you tell them?

SP: I sigh deeply. Obviously, you and I both know that if someone is coming to you and asking you that question, they have not done the hard work of figuring out why they want to be in public life or be a leader. It is always turning the question back. I spend a lot of time when I work with people sort of interviewing them, just trying to figure out what makes them tick. You have to be able to answer the why. This is what I was saying earlier about this kind of overused term ‘authenticity’.

I blame Trump for this, and people seeking something, some magic sauce, but it really is about getting them to do the internal work and doing the inquiry to figure out why they want to be doing the thing that they are seeking and that is hard. You can always tell when people are not ready for it. You can always tell a politician who is not quite ready for prime time. It is not that they are not polished; it is that they have not done the internal work.

DG: I have always found it a challenge because part of my answer is you have to have the courage to be yourself. You have to have the courage to open up and be judged for good or for bad. I was speaking with somebody who was thinking about running, earlier today, who is fantastic and very authentic. Her family were saying to her, “I am not sure you should do this because of how awful the climate is right now and the kinds of attacks and lies and

unfair things that you will be subjected to.” Probably fair to say regardless of which side of the partisan aisle you are entering on. What do you say to those folks?

SP: I think you brought up an interesting point, because you said ‘she’. I think that the authenticity piece is a lot more fraught for women candidate leaders because the double standards are through the roof, as we all know.

I hear a lot of people, for example, talk about how Bernie Sanders could have beat Donald Trump. I will spare you my views on this.

DG: Please, do not.

SP: Bernie was so authentic. Why could not Hillary be more authentic? Does anybody really think, really, that a female candidate in her sixties could get up somewhere, yelling, with her hair undone, flying everywhere, talking about a revolution and anyone was going to vote her for dogcatcher? What nonsense.

Of course, a woman could not do that. It is preposterous. That double standard, I think, has hindered women candidates for so long, because there, I mean, every time I work with a woman candidate, she is wondering, “Is my voice too high? Am I wearing the right clothes? How can I sound?” All of that, I think, ends up making women candidates seem inauthentic.

It is only because they are trying to suppress their real selves, because the patriarchy has told them, “We do not want your real selves. Your real self is not a leader, and we are not going to vote for you.”

Again, what I think is exciting about this most recent crop of winners in America is, at least, they really broke some new boundaries on political communication for women. Some of these political ads, even from people who did not win, were so exciting and different. MJ Hegar, who ran for Congress in Texas, was a combat vet, and she put out some really bold ads.

She was not the only one. I think, hopefully, this is a moment where women are just done putting up with this. I do not know if that means we will ever elect a female president, but I think this was a good moment to push back on that. For so long—and I am sure there are lots of women in this room that know this—it has just been a real, huge hindrance.

DG: I think that is exactly where her family was coming from, which is that you are going to be subjected to something that others and probably your opponent, who is a man, is not going to be subjected to.

SP: Exactly. Yes, and President Obama was really clear-eyed about this. He once said about Secretary Clinton when they were running against each other in the primary, years later when he talked about it: “Like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. She had to do everything I

did, but backwards and in high heels. She had to show up four hours before a debate, because they made her do hair and makeup.” No one made him do that.

Those things pile on. I think President Obama was clear-eyed about that later on.

DG: In terms of the mix of tools that you are using today, what would you say is the most important tool or platform that you are using and recommending to your clients?

SP: What do you mean, ‘tool’ or ‘platform’?

DG: Is it Twitter? Is it Instagram? Et cetera.

SP: Oh, I see.

DG: Really, what I am trying to get at, to follow up, is what does the future look like from what you are seeing?

The U.S. is the innovator in political communications, which is why we all watch it so closely. We cannot afford most of those things that you do, but it is the innovator. I think people here, in the room, and people watching online would love to hear your sense of what is next, what is the next big platform or evolution.

SP: I do not know what the next big platform is. As a speechwriter, I am actually kind of a luddite and have been blown away myself by what is out there. I do think that people want to get closer to their candidates.

They do not want to feel like they are these distant representatives who I know nothing about. I do think we are going to see more of Instagram stories where people are cooking and talking about their day to their constituents. I do not know what that is going to mean, but those barriers are really breaking down, especially, with young people who feel like they want to know everything about the process. No more smoke-filled back rooms where things are going on. Put it all on camera. Show it to me live, in living colour.

That is going to be really interesting. I am worried about Twitter and sort of the really toxic online environment, especially, for women and candidates of colour and what all that means. At the same time, I think there are tons of opportunity there. Who knows what the future is going to be? Is it going to be that candidates are inviting you into their virtual reality room where you can imagine what it is like if they are in office? I have no idea, but I do think that the fundamentals remain the same, which is that people want authentic leaders who respect them and who are transparent. That is going to be the ballgame, whatever the platform is. I do think it is going to be insanely expensive, whatever it is, until Americans get money out of our politics. I do not know when that is going to happen.

DG: I think part of the antidote, potentially, because we are seeing some of the very same phenomena here, are the

doors. Go back to the doors. Now, running a presidential campaign, that is, obviously, not feasible, but I would imagine that a number of the candidates who had success in the House races and some of the State races must have spent some time at doors connecting with people authentically.

SP: That is the whole ballgame. It always has been. Retail politics are still the most important thing. There were reports coming out of Iowa about how Elizabeth Warren is doing really well there, just knocking on doors and having conversations with people. I am just using her as an example, but that is still the ballgame.

That is how Barack Obama won the Iowa caucuses, which catapulted him and made the whole campaign possible. It is still everything. However, everything still costs money, and it is an arms race. Every year, our presidential campaigns, in particular, get more and more expensive. Until we get rid of the kind of dark, hidden, corporate money that goes into—who knows where it is coming from? The incentives are just going to be totally misaligned. Yes, I do think, going back to the point about sort of transparency and wanting to see what you are doing, that stuff still matters, especially, in the early states. Our early primary states and caucuses—Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina—pride themselves on getting to know those candidates.

DG: Very much. I think I see a couple of people in the room who actually went down and stumped for President Obama, Senator Obama at the time, in Iowa and in New Hampshire. He was so exciting to so many people north of the border that a ton of our peers and colleagues went and did that and a lot of them consider it the most rewarding experience of their political careers because of how it was received. We have got a federal election coming up here.

SP: Yes, I heard.

DG: You may have been involved over the weekend—discussions with that.

SP: Do not screw it up.

DG: There are some people from different perspectives in the room, I want to point out. This is a multi-faith.

We have blue; we have red; we have orange; we have, I think, one or two greens. What is your advice for these folks as they lay track for an October federal election?

SP: I think you and I have kind of just talked about some of the essentials. Know who you are and why you are doing it. Tell and offer an affirmative vision. Do not just crap on the other guy. You really have to present an alternative, if you are trying to unseat someone. If you try to hold power, you need to pain a vision for why,

if we stay on this path, it is going to get better. I think back to what we did in 2012 for President Obama, and it was very much post-economic recession. The economy was getting better, but people were not feeling it yet. That whole campaign was about forward motion. We are going to keep going.

If you stick with us, you will feel it. You have to give something for people to hang on to, something to believe in. I think probably more than ever people are hungry for that, because there is a lot of fear circulating in the air, and it is not pleasant. That is not actually what excites people. Make sure your young people vote. Do not let them sit home.

Questions & Answers

DG: Are you okay if we take some questions from the audience?

SP: I am happy to do whatever you want me to do. Yes.

DG: Why don't we do that, open up for questions from the audience. Then, I do have one last question that I will save until the very end.

Q: Thank you for coming. Is Michelle going to run and clean house?

SP: I do not know her, but I have read her book. I am sure

some of you have, too. She has been crystal clear that she will never run for public office. I take her at her word. I suspect that she would find it very unpleasant, but do not we all wish.

Q: This has been a great dialogue. My one question would be about what characteristics could you see a woman having to win in the White House?

What characteristics would it be, unlike those of Hillary Clinton, that would make them be successful?

SP: This is a very hard question. I was going to say that she is a man. I hate to say this about my country, but I just do not trust us right now. I was so heartbroken the last time. You put up the most qualified person to run for president since John Quincy Adams and you vote for the buffoon. Granted, there were a lot of reasons for that in Russia and Facebook. There were a lot of reasons why it was razor-thin and our dumb electoral college. She won the popular vote by three million votes. You can tell I still have a chip on my shoulder about this whole thing, so I will stop there.

I think one good thing that is happening right now is that already what four women have declared, so, in some senses, there is a neutralizing of the issue that is going on. You are also seeing when the press covers these women candidates in the way they historically

have, which is rife with double standards and in a really sexist manner, people are really calling them out on it. There is a truly sort of robust kind of feminist-leaning media that has the vocabulary to call them out in a way that I think people were almost afraid to do with Hillary, because we did not want to make the election about gender, necessarily. She did, but not as much and certainly in 2008.

That, I think, is helpful. I think, again, just woman or man, somebody who is ready to present themselves as their best self and is transparent and honest and has a vision that people want to be a part of, has the power to build a movement because, again, that is what Obama did really successfully. I think we are hungry for that again.

What is really interesting right now—I am sure you have been hearing this a lot—is that, in terms of Democrats, everybody is getting up in a tizzy about who is sort of most electable. Everybody is saying whoever can win. Whoever that person is, let us put that person up. There is a lot of debate about who that person could be, man, woman, whatever. I think we are just getting into our own heads a little bit, and this is how we snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, which we do well. I am a little concerned that we are overthinking it right now, and we have to let this primary process play out. It is going to be a bloody, many-person primary,

and I think we just need to calm down a little bit as Democrats. We are kind of freaking out.

Q: Good evening. Thank you very much for your comments, tonight. I am fascinated as a political writer with your comments about truth. Can you comment a little bit about how that intersects with the importance of the First Amendment in the United States, because if we are going to be successful in having intelligent, thoughtful, political dialogue with the citizenry, the unlimited right of political actors to say anything they want about any subject and demean anybody that they feel like demeaning seems to require some kind of redress, does it not?

I think that is a struggle in the United States perhaps more than it is here in Canada. I would appreciate your view.

SP: That is a really interesting question. I think this is kind of a centuries-long struggle for us. It has just always been the case. If you go back to John Quincy Adams, he said that the election of 1800 was the dirtiest election in his lifetime. It was the third election America had—really partisan news. At that point, newspapers were openly partisan—not Fox parading as fair and balanced—and all kinds of slime was thrown and lies.

People were suing for slander. This has always been a problem. It is acute, pronounced and exponentially

bigger now, but that tension between First Amendment rights and being able to lie about people and disseminate those lies is just ongoing. The one school of thought is you just drown out the lies. Another school of thought is the people who believe those lies live in a bubble; we are never going to get them anyway; we are never going to persuade them, otherwise. I think what is really interesting now is a new regulatory challenge, and some of what they have uncovered is that it was through Facebook that these Russian intermediaries were fueling false stories about Hillary trying to gin up tension, racial tension between people pretty successfully, and they were targeting the States where that Trump was able to flip.

That is, I think the regulation of technology and how those platforms are allowed to basically self-police right now is going to be a really interesting challenge. I do not know what the solution is going to be. I think people really disagree about this stuff, but it is so dangerous for our democracy to allow what happened last time to continue. I do not have an answer for this. I think it is just going to be this ongoing tension, but I think these platforms are introducing a whole new strain that people before this were not thinking about. Now, we actually have to grapple with it. Other countries, frankly, just have laws that govern it differently. I think you guys do, too.

They can shut it down. We just do not have that. It is tricky.

Q: Just following up on the gentleman's question, what impact do you think that independent expenditures or third-party campaigns have had on the democratic process in the U.S.? You mentioned Citizens United as being the case that allowed a lot of these to take place. Do you think there is going to be some sort of regulatory changes that will limit these types of campaigns?

SP: This is really tricky. The Citizens United was a Supreme Court decision that basically allowed for these unlimited expenditures and for people to hide who they are when they make these donations. It opened the flood for this dark money to infiltrate political campaigns. You will watch these ads, some crazy anti-Hillary ad or something and at the bottom, it is some cryptic name like "Americans for Justice and Cats."

You have no idea who is paying for this. It is all legal. The challenge here is that was a Supreme Court decision. The recourse for that is tricky. Either the Supreme Court needs to overturn its own decision which seems unlikely given the makeup of the Court, or Congress needs to do something about it.

Mitch McConnell, the august leader of the Republicans who also has zero moral compass has no inter-

est. He just wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post criticizing campaign finance reform. Campaign finance reform is pretty popular in America. This guy is really off the rails on this stuff, but it benefits the Republican Party. Yes, I think that not only has it harmed the actual process and outcomes of elections and, given extremely wealthy people outsize power in the process, but it has made people cynical. It has just made people cynical about the process, and that is so dangerous for democracy. It was something President Obama cared a lot about, and then we just never got anything done in Congress because Republicans do not want—well, some Republicans, the leader of the Republicans—campaign finance reform. I do not know. I do think there is an appetite for it. Congressional Democrats who are now in power are introducing legislation right now to combat a whole range of these really undemocratic practices that have taken hold in our system, including money and campaign finance. This stuff is popular with voters, especially young people. It will be interesting to see going forward whether we get some traction on that. At some point, how much money can flood the system? It is insane.

Q: I have two questions. One is a baby question. I am interested to know when you were writing a speech for the president, how involved was President Obama? We have read his books. We know he

could write. Did he say, “Let us go over the themes and work on the words later?” Or was it, “Here is a speech for you?”

SP: That is a good question. It really depended on the speech. He is an irritatingly good writer, so he could—it is annoying. He is one of those people who could run the world and write really good speeches if he had time. He did not have time, hence the speechwriting staff. It really depended on the speech. We might say to ourselves, “Is this an education policy speech that is similar to ones he has given before and that we can work off of and we know the policy? And he is pretty comfortable with the language and so this will not be something that we need to waste his time talking to him about; he will just edit it. He will heavily edit the draft, but he does not need to talk to us ahead of time to get words on paper.” Or we might ask, “Is it a speech about something controversial, new, something he is really passionate about?” In which case, he might want—then you might get up-front guidance, or he might take a stab. My boss, Cody, who worked on the bigger speeches, the set pieces that were higher profile, would often go back and forth with him where maybe the president would write in long hand on his yellow legal pad a couple of pages, and they would kind of go back and forth. It really depended. I am sure that if he had the time, he would happily write the welcome for

the Girl Scouts who were coming to the White House, but that was not the nature of it. Our job was to create scaffolding, give him the best possible scaffolding based on how we understood how he thought, and then let him do his work to make it his. Our goal was just to make his job easier.

Q: The other question actually has to do with everything you have talked about in terms of the media and the tools. There was an alarming movie about Brexit that HBO just launched. And the people that funded the research that helped the leave campaign are the same people that funded the research for Trump's efforts, are the same people that were at the Koch brothers' retreat this weekend with millionaires and billionaires across the country.

It is an unknown, but do you think it is possible that a Congress engaged in this will be able to combat these forces of money and information and insidiousness in our lives?

SP: Possibly. I do not know. If they really wanted to engage, again, the problem is that Republicans run one half of Congress. I also think that the problem is bigger than America. If you think about the forces behind all this, it is forces that want to weaken our western democratic alliances and that want to change the nature of the liberal world order, post-World War Two.

These are fundamental world shifts they are trying to make, and they are using our political processes to do that. The problem is bigger than Facebook bots.

I think it is actually going to take a global effort on the part of countries like ours that share democratic values to really start to combat that. My fear is that, internally, historically, this would not have been hard for an American president to call out for an adversary for hacking our election. That would have been a no-brainer. Now, we have a president who seems to be in a literal pocket of Russia but also his party is just sitting there. They just decided not to pass sanctions against an oligarch who has been hugely problematic in breaking laws left and right. This is where we are. I am afraid that the Republicans' obsession with power is really contributing to undemocratic trends, not just in our country, but everywhere. Brexit—this is going to affect everybody. I think it is bigger than our Congress. I have no idea how we get out of this. I hope all of our elections will go well, and we will get some leaders who actually care. It is scary. Scary times.

Q: Putting backing aside for a moment, looking at the political polarization that we are seeing across the landscape in the UK and around the world and Europe as well and the U.S., in the last eight years with the Obama administration, did you not see the signs? Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that

the people voted him in, or at least that is what we are led to believe. Where did you miss the signs?

SP: I do not think I, personally, missed the signs, because I thought Trump was going to win. I did. I am horrified that I thought that, but I very much felt like he was going to win. It was actually Brexit that really made me think that he was going to win. I just think that there was a—I can only speak about America semi-intelligently, and even there I am far from an expert—but I think that there was this feeling, generally, that there was this sort of naïve post-racial notion that just electing a black president meant we were all set and there were going to be no more problems. I think that if you worked in the administration, if you worked in politics, you saw that there was actually a huge backlash that was kind of building and gaining power that was scary and that Republicans were intentionally stoking. Just the candidacy of Donald Trump, just the candidacy was alarming, and he won that primary.

Once he won that primary, what was to prevent him from winning the general? Then, I also think there was just a complacency on the Democratic side, of course: Hillary will win. Then, you have to show up and vote. People did not. I think that they were not missing the signs. Now, I did not know this, because I was not privy to anything important or top secret when I worked in the White House, but, in retrospect, clear-

ly, the American government understood what Russia was doing. They tried to warn Congressional leaders and Mitch McConnell refused to do anything about it. The FBI, now, we know—Jim Comey was investigating Trump’s interactions with Russia before they were even investigating Hillary Clinton. That stuff was going on. People who know more than I do, did know that was going on. What was tricky was that they were scared to bring it up to the American people, because of the fear that if Hillary won, it would seem as though Obama had put the thumb on the scale for her.

Of course, Republicans would have capitalized on that. They were so afraid of how Mitch McConnell would politicize it that they did not say anything.

That, I find chilling. That is the stuff that is scary. I do think, globally, generally speaking, we have all been complacent and Brexit happened, and I think people—we were surprised in America and terrified that it would happen and it happened.

There is something in the air. There is something going on and people have to pay attention to it.

The last thing I will say about this is I think what is unhelpful is the billionaires at Davos sitting around twiddling their thumbs being like there it goes, liberal world order, there it goes, as long as I am still making a buck. I think that is not helpful. The conversations

have to get bigger than that, and they have to be more inclusive. We cannot keep letting those people make these decisions, for what that is worth.

DG: I said I had one last question, if you do not mind.

SP: Of course.

DG: You cannot help but get this impression sharing a stage with you, which is would you ever consider running for office?

SP: Oh, God no. No. Fortunately, I live in Washington, D.C., where there is nothing to run for because we are effectively disenfranchised, so no, I never have to do that.

DG: You should move.

SP: No, I have zero desire to do that, but I might be applying for asylum here, so, please.

KE: Thank you so much for doing this. This is amazing. I am going to bring up Karim Bardeesy to give the thank you remarks.

**Note of Appreciation, by Mr. Karim Bardeesy,
Co-Founder and Executive Director,
Ryerson Leadership Lab**

Thanks, Kent, and thank you Don and Sarada. It is a real privilege to have on stage and be on stage with two people from whom I have learned so much about the how and why of politics. It is a great privilege. Thank you.

I just want to say thank you to the sponsors, to the Empire Club team, Kent, Jenna, Bill and Marie, the Ryerson Leadership Lab team, which I believe is mostly over there, including the students and TAs who are associated with Ryerson Leadership Lab. The Leadership Lab, as Kent mentioned, is an action-oriented think tank working at the intersection of leadership development and public policy to really advance some of our most pressing public challenges.

I am really proud of this Visiting Global Fellows Program that we have that brings people like Sarada here for three to five days to teach, to engage with stakeholders, to engage with people like you, to tell their stories.

Sarada started this morning at eight o'clock with a workshop on speechwriting and then spent time with my students, with some Indigenous changemakers, young Indigenous leaders, and now she is at this event, and we have got her chock-a-block tomorrow. And then we will be taking her to Ottawa on Wednesday, so we are very much appreciative of her time and that she has let us call her a Visiting Global Fellow and all that that means. Turns out I have the

power to just decide who is a Visiting Global Fellow.

If there are any non-Canadian citizens here, we can talk. Also, thank you to the staff at Malaparte, the media team and all those who helped to prepare the food and make this event a very welcoming one. Thank you very much.

Concluding Remarks, by Kent Emerson

Thanks, Karim. On that note, there is more food coming. The bar is going to be reopened, so you can go home on the subway. You can also stay.

Our evening events are something that a president, Paul Fogolin, started a couple of years ago. They are meant to be fun and interactive and engaging. We will be having some more announcements on that in the next few weeks about what our next one is, but we try to do one a month. We really find that it just kind of gives more of a chance to unwind than our lunches. We have some great lunches coming up. We will have Victor Montagliani, the Vice President of FIFA on Wednesday, and we have a number of announcements coming up about provincial and federal cabinet ministers. Check the website in the next few days.

Thank you guys for coming.

Meeting adjourned.