

# In memoriam: The Hon. Lincoln M. Alexander

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The Honourable Lincoln MacCauley Alexander P.C., C.C., O.Ont., C.D., Q.C., LSM

In his memoir “*Go to School, You’re a Little Black Boy*,” the late Lincoln Alexander wrote, “Being first means you have to do more... you can’t be ordinary.”

He lived well by those words.

The extraordinary life of The Honourable Lincoln MacCauley Alexander P.C., C.C., O.Ont., C.D., Q.C., LSM, was defined by firsts — from his beginnings as the child of immigrants to his appointment to the highest official position in Ontario.

Mr. Alexander died on October 19, 2012. He was 90 years old.

Mr. Alexander was the first member of his family to go to university, the first black Member of Parliament (1968), the first black federal Cabinet Minister (1979), the first black person to be chair of the Worker’s Compensation Board (1980) and the first person to serve five terms as Chancellor of the University of Guelph (1991-2007).

As Ontario’s 24th Lieutenant Governor, he was also the first person of colour ever to be named to Ontario’s viceregal role (1985-1999).

## Early life

Lincoln Alexander was born in Toronto on January 21, 1922.

His mother, who had emigrated from Jamaica, worked as a maid. His father, from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, was a porter with Canadian Pacific Railway.

These were “default jobs” for many immigrants and people of colour in Canada at that time, Mr. Alexander explained in his 2006 memoir *Go to School, You’re a Little Black Boy: The Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander — A Memoir*.

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The book's title echoed a belief his mother, Mae Rose, had instilled in him since childhood: that determination and education could have an important and lasting impact on one's life.

"Success was possible and education was the vehicle to take you there," he said.

### **Law school**

Mr. Alexander graduated in 1949 with a bachelor's degree from McMaster University. He went on to study law at Osgoode Hall in Toronto after he was denied employment in the white-collar offices of Hamilton's steel plants where he had wanted to work.

"I went into law because I couldn't get into industry," he said in a 1997 interview with *The Lawyers Weekly*.

He continued in his memoir: "I chose law as a career after deciding that self-employment made the most sense for a young, black man with ambition."

He graduated from Osgoode Hall in 1953, ranking in the top 25 per cent of his class.

"Back then, you discovered if you had passed by waiting to read the published results in *The Globe and Mail*.

"When the day came, I cautiously opened to the appropriate page and there it was — my name near the top of the class."

### **Articling and law**

Despite his success in law school, in 1953, Mr. Alexander had difficulty securing articling positions at Toronto and Hamilton firms.

The few articling positions for minorities were mostly in firms operated by Jewish lawyers.

"Almost inevitably, these lawyers had been confronted by the same obstacles I was facing," he said.

Mr. Alexander articulated with Sam Gotfrid, Q.C., and they formed a lifelong friendship.

In 1963, Mr. Alexander became a partner at Millar, Alexander, Tokiwa and Isaacs in Hamilton, Ont., the city he considered his hometown.

He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1965.

In 1968, Mr. Alexander was elected a Member of Parliament representing Hamilton West, becoming the first black MP in Canada.

He was re-elected in 1972, 1974, 1979 and 1980.

He remained with his law firm until 1979 when he became Minister of Labour.

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### **Honorary Benchers**

Mr. Alexander was made an honorary bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 1992.

Upon learning of the benchers' decision to elect him, he wrote to then-Treasurer James M. Spence, Q.C., on stationary embossed with the Hamilton address of his longtime Proctor Boulevard home:

“This is an honour I never thought possible and I would appreciate you advising the benchers. I will try my best to maintain the confidence they have in me and as well thank them on my behalf for this very unique recognition.”

A special Convocation was held at Osgoode Hall on June 10, 1992, with Mr. Alexander and his wife, Yvonne, in attendance.

At the event, then-Treasurer-elect Allan Rock read in his citation: “...[Mr. Alexander’s] long career of service has been aptly described as a journey of pride and excellence.

“It is a journey which he has invited people of all circumstances to share and to make their own. In doing so, he has helped us all, not least the lawyers, to see our public responsibilities more clearly, and we are greatly in his debt.”

### **Lincoln Alexander Award**

The Law Society’s Lincoln Alexander Award was established in February 2002 to recognize his dedication to the people of Ontario and the legal community.

The award honours an Ontario lawyer who, like Mr. Alexander, has shown enduring commitment to community service.

The inaugural award was presented that June to Ms. Jean Teillet, a Métis lawyer and the great grand niece of Louis Riel.

At the same 2002 ceremony, Mr. Alexander received the Law Society Medal.

The medal, the highest honour the Law Society bestows on members, recognizes lawyers who have made lasting contributions to the profession.

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## Law Society Convocation on the death of Lincoln Alexander

Following Mr. Alexander's passing, Law Society Bencher Gerald Swaye, of Hamilton, paid tribute to him during October Convocation: "...Hamilton and the country have suffered a great loss. Our friend and colleague, Lincoln Alexander, has passed on.

"It seems that I have always known him, but if you asked around Hamilton, everybody in the community feels that they have always known him.

"He was a *cause célèbre* in Hamilton long before he was a *cause célèbre* in Ontario or in Ottawa. Linc changed people's lives, and always for the good.

"He was vibrant, intelligent, compassionate and gracious. He was a man of the people and never aloof. His titles changed, but the man never did."

Law Society Treasurer Thomas Conway attended the Oct. 26 state funeral held in Mr. Alexander's honour and said of the ceremony: "It was a moving tribute to a great Canadian and an honorary bencher."



## Family, awards and honours

Mr. Alexander was father to son, Keith, father-in-law to Joyce, and grandfather to Erika and Marissa Alexander.

Mr. Alexander was a husband of more than 50 years to his first wife, the late Yvonne Alexander (Harrison). He wed his second wife, Marni Alexander (Beal), in 2011.

He received countless honours and awards throughout his life. At least three public schools have been named in his honour.

In 1992, he was appointed both an Officer of the Order of Ontario and a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Mr. Alexander received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers in 1997 and has been awarded honorary Doctor of Laws degrees from five universities.