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du Canada

## DENIS DESAUTELS – Inducted 2025



Denis L. Desautels, a name synonymous with integrity, accountability, and dedicated public service, has left an indelible mark on Canada's public and private sectors. His distinguished career, spanning from his early days at Clarkson Gordon (now EY) to his impactful tenure as Auditor General of Canada, is a testament to his unwavering commitment to excellence and his profound influence on financial management and governance.

Born and educated in Montreal, Quebec, Denis earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree from McGill University in 1964. He embarked on his professional journey by joining Clarkson Gordon in 1964, quickly establishing himself as a rising star in the accounting world. His career at Clarkson Gordon saw him rise through the ranks, becoming a partner in 1973 and eventually a senior partner in the Montreal office. He also served as EY's Regional Director of Consulting Services for the Province of Quebec and the National Capital Region. Even early in his career, Denis demonstrated an interest in public service. During his nine years with Clarkson Gordon's Ottawa office in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he twice participated in the executive exchange program with the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, foreshadowing his future role.

Denis' solid reputation as an auditor and his acute non-partisanship made him a sought-after advisor for federal and provincial commissions. He served as a consultant to Quebec's auditor general, the Parizeau Commission on the future of Quebec municipalities, and the Lortie Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, showcasing his expertise and commitment to improving governance.

In 1991, Denis Desautels reached the pinnacle of his career when he was appointed Auditor General of Canada. This role thrust him into the national spotlight, entrusting him with the responsibility of overseeing the operations of the Government of Canada, its numerous Crown corporations and agencies, and the governments of Canada's three territories.

As Auditor General, Denis' primary responsibility was to conduct examinations of government operations and report his findings to Parliament. These reports covered a wide range of issues related to accountability, the management of government programs, and the delivery of services to the public. Denis approached his role with unwavering dedication, earning the respect of both his peers and the government. He was known for his professionalism, probity, and his ability to get to the root of complex problems.

Denis quickly became known as a "super cop of the deficit" and "the most feared man in Ottawa" due to his relentless pursuit of government accountability. He challenged the government's methods of managing the national debt, urging the Minister of Finance to be more transparent and forcing government departments to be more accountable. His priority was to address the deficit, and he engineered operational changes within the Office of the Auditor General to enable it to report to Parliament more frequently.

Denis' work extended beyond financial audits. He ventured far afield to investigate the public service's activities abroad, visiting a Zimbabwe center for terminal AIDS patients and a literacy class for mothers in Pakistan. He also examined Canada's federal penitentiaries, seeking inmates' perspectives on reintegration programs. His hands-on approach and genuine interest in the impact of government programs earned him widespread respect.

His decade as Auditor General brought significant changes to the office's operations and its standing with elected and appointed government officials. Denis had a clear vision for his tenure, focusing on addressing the government's financial position. His initial objective was to foster consensus on the need to tackle these issues. His critiques of government spending garnered considerable attention from officials and the press, notably the spending control failures within the human resources department in 2000.

Beyond domestic issues, Denis also championed legislative auditing internationally and established the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development within the Office of the Auditor General. He was deeply involved with the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI), chairing the committee on environmental auditing and hosting the INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI) to train and build capacity in legislative audit offices worldwide. Additionally, in collaboration with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), his office ran a fellowship program for auditors from developing countries.

Denis was a strong advocate for environmental auditing. In 1995, he spearheaded an amendment to the Auditor General Act, creating the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. This amendment also mandated federal government departments to prepare and table sustainable development strategies in Parliament, which the Commissioner would then audit. This initiative aimed to ensure that departments considered the environment and sustainable development in their policy-making, contributing to a better future for Canadians.

Denis Desautels was a driving force in setting accounting and auditing standards in Canada and globally. He was a founding member of the Public Sector Accounting and Auditing Committee established by the

Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) in 1981 and served as its Chairman from 1984 to 1985. He later became a member and then chair of the Accounting Standards Oversight Council.

His leadership in these roles led to significant advancements in public sector accounting. Under his guidance, federal, provincial, and municipal governments began adopting established public sector accounting standards in their financial reports, making them more understandable and accountable. As chair of AcSOC, Denis played a crucial role in overseeing the Accounting Standards Board and the Public Sector Accounting Board, ensuring they delivered high-quality standards during a period of significant challenges, including the Enron scandal, the 2008 financial crisis, and the adoption of international standards.

Following his retirement as Auditor General in 2001, Denis remained actively involved in both the public and private sectors. His expertise and leadership were highly sought after, and he joined the boards of directors of several prominent organizations, including CARE Canada, the Laurentian Bank of Canada, Groupe Jean Coutu (PJC) Inc., Bombardier Inc., and Alcan Inc.

As a corporate director, Denis earned praise for his active involvement, his ability to improve financial reporting and internal controls, and his guidance in helping corporations transition to international reporting standards.

Denis also contributed his time and expertise to numerous not-for-profit organizations. He chaired the Audit Committee of CARE Canada, a global leader in fighting poverty with a focus on women and girls. His commitment to social causes and his dedication to improving the lives of others is truly admirable.

Denis' remarkable career has been recognized with numerous awards and honors. He was appointed a Fellow of the Order of Chartered Accountants of Quebec in 1986 and a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario in 1991. In 1997, he was named a Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great by the Holy See. In 2001, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada. He also received honorary doctorates from the University of Ottawa in 2001 and the University of Waterloo in 2002. In 2013, he received the Institute of Corporate Directors Fellowship Award. These accolades are a testament to his outstanding contributions to the accounting profession, the public sector, and the community.

Denis' legacy is one of unwavering integrity, a relentless pursuit of accountability, and a deep commitment to public service. His contributions to the accounting profession, the Canadian government, and numerous organizations have had a lasting impact. He is a role model for aspiring professionals and a true champion of good governance and ethical leadership.

Denis is married to Shirley Leuthold whom he met when both were at McGill University. They have three sons, Marc, Pierre and André who have blessed them with eight wonderful grandchildren.