

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**The Governor General of Canada
His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston**

Official Opening of the Global Centre for Pluralism

Ottawa, Ontario, Tuesday, May 16, 2017

The world is my country /
The human race is my race

Those are the words of Canadian poet and lawyer F. R. Scott, from his great poem “Creed.”

I think those words capture something of the creed of this Global Centre for Pluralism.

The world is your country.

The human race is your race.

I’ve had the pleasure of hosting a number of you who serve on the Centre’s board at Rideau Hall several times during my mandate. And I’m inspired by what all of you are achieving here.

This centre is a beacon of internationalism and humanism. It shines brightly.

Thank you all, and a special thank you to His Highness the Aga Khan for showing such dedication to pluralism and to strengthening Canada’s commitment to and leadership of this critically important issue.

Your Highness, establishing this centre in our capital city is a wonderful gift to Canada.

I often speak of the importance of knowledge diplomacy in our world, which I define as the process by which distinct peoples and cultures improve lives by sharing knowledge across borders and disciplines.

The Aga Khan is a wise practitioner of this brand of diplomacy. He appreciates that the success of our increasingly interdependent world is based on people of many faiths, cultures and values expressing tolerance, openness and understanding towards others.

The depth of His Highness' commitment to diplomacy and pluralism is profound. I know this from personal experience. We first met at another official opening, 36 years ago, in Karachi, Pakistan. The details may differ but the underlying theme is the same: diverse peoples working together to improve lives.

Back in those days, I was serving as principal of McGill, and I had the privilege of being present at the birth of a wonderful partnership between the Aga Khan University and a number of North American universities, including McGill.

This partnership saw renowned epidemiologist Walter Spitzer and his team working closely with their Pakistani counterparts to share McGill's lessons learned in establishing a successful community medicine model.

Thanks to this collaboration, the new Aga Khan University Hospital was able to build on McGill's experience in deploying public health services in the community.

I was and remain so impressed by the boldness of that initiative. The goal was ambitious: bring the best of Western medicine to a country with distinct customs and traditions.

This goal was only achieved by showing a great deal of cultural sensitivity.

In essence, this is the challenge of pluralism.

How do we ensure respect for diversity while sharing ideas and resources in order to improve our lives and societies?

Your mission at the Global Centre for Pluralism is to advance respect for diversity as a new global ethic and foundation for inclusive citizenship. And these headquarters are a place for learning and sharing the lessons of pluralism from a Canadian perspective.

I'd like to say a few words about the importance of that mission, as well as Canada's unique opportunity to lead.

First, why does pluralism matter?

The answer is as straightforward as it is urgent.

Pluralism is critical to the long-term peace and prosperity of societies worldwide. Without a commitment to pluralism, diversity can too easily become a source of conflict and division.

Too often we have seen those conflicts and that division occur.

So what do we do?

We develop a narrative and approaches that ensure diversity is properly understood as a source of strength and prosperity.

In other words, (1) we need to develop and tell a compelling story.

And (2) we need ideas and plans for action that allow that story to unfold.

If diversity is to be an asset and not a liability, we must allow diverse peoples to reach their full potential and to contribute as full and equal partners in our society. We must empower people to succeed. This is crucially important.

In other words, we must be inclusive.

Louise Arbour recently spoke about this in her new role as the UN's special representative on international migration.

She, too, emphasizes the importance of a new narrative around pluralism.

In an interview she said:

“[We must] move away from a discourse that over-emphasizes the so-called burden of migration and bring to the surface how countries . . . have been able to harness the benefits.”

Pluralism will succeed if we're able to tell the most convincing story. Why? Because a good story is more than just words.

A good story both reflects and creates reality.

A good story can help us to reimagine our lives and society, to imagine possibilities.

And a good story can guide us toward taking right actions for change—actions that are consistent with our story.

Let me tell you one recent story that comes out of Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis—especially that of private citizens.

Here in Canada, when we look around for this pluralism story, and listen for it, we begin to realize that in fact it isn't a new story we need, but rather a very old one that continues to unfold.

It's a story of partnership: balanced, reciprocal and respectful.

This old story predates Canada itself, to at least the time of the Royal Proclamation in 1763, which laid the basis for the treaty relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

This year marks Canada's 150th birthday, but as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reminded us a quarter-century ago:

“The first confederal bargain was with First Peoples.”

That bargain recognized we must work together if we are to survive and thrive in this vast and challenging land. And it saw several fundamental truths begin to be enshrined in law:

We are all here to stay.

And we are better off as partners.

Those truths, that story, are the beating heart of our modern, pluralistic society.

Listen to it, and hear the Confederation debates taking place in the colonial legislatures and the homes and gathering places of ordinary people in the years prior to 1867.

Listen to it, and hear more than 200 languages from around the world spoken today in Canada, and the estimated 65 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada.

Listen to it, and hear the call to action:

Canada has an opportunity—a responsibility, perhaps—to demonstrate how pluralism is a viable, and perhaps the only, path to lasting peace and prosperity.

What is this confederation if not an exercise in pluralism among diverse peoples?

People sometimes dismiss a commitment to diversity as starry-eyed idealism.

It's anything but. In a diverse, globalized, high-tech world, nothing could be more pragmatic than an inclusive, pluralistic society. Diversity helps us to enrich our society, to better understand other countries and to forge connections with people around the planet.

Now, I don't need to tell you we have no reason for complacency here in Canada. Terrible, violent rejections of pluralism can and do happen here.

Where Canada has failed in the past—for example, the disastrous residential schools policy—it has been in trying to reduce diversity and restrict inclusiveness.

And where Canada has succeeded, it has been through a commitment to inclusiveness—to pluralism.

Canadian society is at its best when it mirrors its geography: broad, expansive, diverse.

Canada is a constantly evolving experiment in inclusiveness and making pluralism work. This is what positions us to tell the pluralism story not just here in Canada, but around the world.

And that is why your work at the Global Centre for Pluralism is so essential both for the Canadian experiment and for the capacity of people everywhere to live with difference—to live pluralism.

I wish you the very best in your magnificent quest, and in your beautiful new home.

Thank you.