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Speech – Foreign Policy Association Medal
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Secretary General John McNee

Minister, Excellencies, Thank you Alex Lawrie for such a generous introduction. It is wonderful for Sue and me to be back in New York and among so many friends.

It is a great honour to receive this prestigious Medal on behalf of His Highness the Aga Khan and the Global Centre for Pluralism. His Highness asked me to convey his deep appreciation to the Board of the Foreign Policy Association and to Noel Lateef, its President. He has been a real admirer of the FPA since he was an undergraduate at Harvard.

Many of you may not know much about the Aga Khan. He is both a faith leader—he is the Imam of the Ismaili Muslims—and a major global philanthropist who has devoted his life to making the world a better place for all, regardless of faith or ethnicity. In the last decade, he has founded two major new institutions in Canada—the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa in partnership with the Government of Canada and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, a spectacular new museum that showcases his family’s collection of Islamic art.

I am delighted that leaders of the Ismaili community in the US are here at this wonderful dinner.

I am honoured to be here tonight with Dr David Skorton, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. He has achieved great things as president of Cornell and now at the Smithsonian. It is very flattering and fitting that the Global Centre for Pluralism should be recognised alongside the Smithsonian. Our mandates intersect: the Smithsonian is all about explaining and communicating the rich strands of American history and culture. The Global Centre for Pluralism is about respecting and, indeed, celebrating diversity, in the United States, in Canada and globally.

As His Highness has said:

Diversity is not a reason to put up walls, but rather to open windows. It is not a burden, it is a blessing. In the end, of course, we must realize that living with diversity is a challenging process. We are wrong to think it will be easy. The work of pluralism is always a work in progress.

Now, behavioural science has long taught that the best solutions emerge when people of different experiences and perspectives are brought together to solve a problem. It is the same in societies. As Tom Friedman has persuasively argued in his latest book, *Thank You For Being Late*, in the 21st century the countries that will be most successful will be those which value their diversity.

Our thesis is that every society in the contemporary world is diverse in some way, whether social, linguistic, ethnic, tribal or religious diversity. This is true for all continents --for Africa and Asia, North and South America and Europe – and for developing countries, the emerging powers and industrialized countries alike.

If that diversity is accommodated and valued, it will lead to greater prosperity and peace. But, the opposite holds true, too: if diversity is seen as an element of weakness or division, it leads to discord and negative social outcomes—less peace, less development, less prosperity. At worst, civil strife or even genocide.

Well, what do I mean by “pluralism”?

Diversity in society is a fact, but pluralism is a deliberate choice - by governments, by civil society organisations like the Foreign Policy Association, by communities and by individuals, to accommodate and value diversity in society.

Now, the members of the FPA are a very sophisticated group. If I were to ask you to name the common global challenges of the 21st century, your list would probably include climate

change, nuclear proliferation, alleviation of poverty, human rights and democracy and a sound global financial system. To these, His Highness would add the challenge of living together productively with difference.

Why is pluralism so urgently needed in today's world? To be blunt, the trends are very troubling. Stephen Toope, the incoming President of my alma mater, Cambridge University, argues that we are entering a new "age of anxiety". A tide of nationalist populism, nativism, intolerance and xenophobia is sweeping across Europe. It may yet upend European politics. A close analysis of the Brexit vote by *The Economist* shows that fear of immigrants and refugees, not economic dislocation, was the crucial factor. The United States, the great beacon of hope and opportunity for the whole world, is not immune, and nor is my country, Canada. Fear of the accelerated pace of change, fear of those who are different, fear of the future propel this wave.

As these developments roil Western societies, in the developing world the challenges of living together with diversity are endemic and often cause violent conflict—over access to land and water, or to economic opportunity, or to sharing political power, or the right to practice one's faith, or to maintain one's language and culture.

This is true in Africa and Asia as well as in the Americas. Think only of Iraq and Syria, where sectarian and ethnic differences have, in part, been the cause of tragedy. Think back to the former Yugoslavia, to Sri Lanka, to Rwanda to consider the terrible depths to which ethnic conflict can descend.

Now, to go back to Canada. Canada is not perfect. But the Aga Khan would argue that it is the most successful country in respecting its wide ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity and in harvesting the benefits of that diversity.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said:

“...our diversity isn’t a challenge to be overcome, or a difficulty to be tolerated. Rather it is a tremendous source of strength. Canadians understand that diversity is our strength. We know that Canada has succeeded –culturally, politically, economically, because our diversity, not in spite of it...”

The Global Centre for Pluralism is a unique private - public partnership between a global philanthropist, His Highness the Aga Khan, and the Canadian government.

Its mission, as an applied knowledge organisation, is to promote understanding of the principles and practices of pluralism around the world, and to share that knowledge and those experiences with others through research, education and dialogue.

To cite just one of the Centre’s exciting new initiatives, in November we will confer the first Global Pluralism Awards that will celebrate “pluralism in action” around the world.

On May 16th, His Highness and the Governor General of Canada will officially open our Global Headquarters, a major heritage building in Ottawa, Canada’s capital.

I invite you all to come and see us and also to engage through our website.

Ladies and gentleman, to conclude, pluralism needs champions and supporters, it is under assault. By conferring this prestigious Medal on His Highness, the FPA is giving important recognition and profile to the cause. We are very sincerely grateful.

To paraphrase that wonderful old line from Casablanca, I hope this is the start of a beautiful friendship. Thank you very much.