Keynote Address at the Governor General’s Canadian Leadership Conference on Leadership and Diversity
His Highness the Aga Khan
May 19, 2004
The Canadian Museum of Civilization
Gatineau, Quebec, Canada

Your Excellency the Governor General, Excellencies, Conference Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank Your Excellency for inviting me to share some thoughts in this closing session of the Leadership and Diversity Conference. On this occasion, I would also like to thank Your Excellency and the Government of Canada for the warm welcome and the kindness and courtesies that have been extended to me.

In the course of the conference proceedings, you have had the good fortune of listening to people of high eminence and erudition — from Canada and abroad. I therefore seek your indulgence and generosity as I speak to you with much humility and no little apprehension!

I have not accepted to speak today about Canadians and Canada, because you have just completed a wide number of visits to different parts of your lovely country, and, as Canadians, you know a great deal more about her than I do. Where I feel I may have something worthwhile to contribute to your discussions and reflections today deals with Canada and the developing world.

It is a joy and a privilege to address the young leaders of Canada who represent different walks of national life, as well as its social, cultural and regional diversity. I am particularly happy at this opportunity as you have been jointly exploring a critical aspect of the role of leadership: How the leadership — political and civil — can help sustain the moral and dynamic coherence in public life that Canada has so successfully constructed, predicated on the ethic of respect for human dignity. This coherence recognises and builds on difference, enables a spirit of compromise and consensus in public and legislative policies, and marks out a healthy space for the role of civil society as a sound – indeed an essential – bulwark for democratic processes.

Canada has an experience of governance of which much of the world stands in dire need. It is a world of increasing dissension and conflict in which a significant contribution is the failure of different ethnic, tribal, religious or social groups to search for, and agree upon, a common space for harmonious co-existence.
This situation of conflict and instability poses a grave risk for the future relationship between the industrialised world and the developing world. The polarising and paralyzing Cold War, which impacted millions of people in the developing world, has gone. The new issue that demands the attention of the international community is the need to create stable states with self-sustainable economies and stable, inclusive forms of governance.

Much of the world’s attention is periodically focused on the phenomenon of so-called ‘failed states’. But of the global threats that face us today, apart from nuclear war or HIV/AIDS, the most preoccupying is not failed states. It is the failure of democracy. The global picture at the beginning of the 21st century is a story of failed democracies in the Muslim world, in Latin America, in Eastern Europe and in sub-Saharan Africa.

A startling fact today is that nearly forty percent of UN member-nations are failed democracies. The greatest risk to the West itself, and to its values, is therefore the accumulation of failed democracies. That in turn will cause deep undercurrents of stress, if not conflict, among societies. It is essential, in the West’s own interest, to admit to itself that democracy is as fragile as any other form of human governance.

It is essential that the question be asked, in every national situation and within each society, ‘if democracy is failing, why is this the case?’ Every effort needs to be made to help correct the situation, rather than referring dismissively to failed states. To my knowledge, democracy can fail anywhere, at any time, in any society — as it has in several well-known and well-documented situations in Europe, as recently as the last 50 years. For it is self-evident, in Europe and across the globe, that the existence of political parties and elections do not alone produce stable governments or competent leadership.

Three concepts seem to me to be essential in creating, stabilising and strengthening democracy around the world, including among the people of Africa and Asia with whom I have worked in the past. These concepts are meritocracy, pluralism and civil society. In particular, I will ask, what role can Canada play, drawing upon her national genius, in creating or enhancing these great underpinnings of democracy in the developing world?

A recent UN audit of democracy covering 18 Latin American countries re-emphasises the virtues of democracy in advancing human development; but it also warns that stagnant per capita incomes and growing inequality, in access to civil rights as well as income, are producing doubt, impatience and civil unrest. Thus, the report underlines a key concept that you will all know instinctively, and which my experience working in the developing world has illustrated, decade after decade: the primary, daily concern of peoples everywhere is their quality of life, which is intimately connected to their value systems. When it turns toward solutions, the report recognises a crucial fact: ‘An important relationship exists between citizenship and organisations of civil society, which are major actors in the strengthening of democracy, in the oversight of government stewardship and in the development of pluralism.’

My interest in these themes of development and governance arises from my role as the hereditary spiritual leader — imam — of the Shi’a Ismaili Muslim community. Culturally very diverse, the Ismailis are spread across the globe, mostly as a minority, in more than twenty-five countries, in South and Central Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. In recent decades they have also established a substantial presence in Canada, the USA and Western Europe. Since succeeding to this office as the 49th imam in 1957, I have been concerned with the development of the Ismailis and the broader societies in which they live.
The engagement of the Imamat in development is guided by Islamic ethics, which bridge faith and society. It is on this premise that I established the Aga Khan Development Network. This network of agencies, known as the AKDN, has long been active in many areas of Asia and Africa to improve the quality of life of all who live there. These areas are home to some of the poorest and most diverse populations in the world.

Our long presence on the ground gives us an insight that confirms the UN’s detailed assessment in Latin America, which is that a democracy cannot function reasonably without two preconditions.

The first is a healthy, civil society. It is an essential bulwark that provides citizens with multiple channels through which to exercise effectively both their rights and duties of citizenship. Even at a very basic level, only a strong civil society can assure isolated rural populations and the marginalised urban poor of a reasonable prospect of humane treatment, personal security, equity, the absence of discrimination, and access to opportunity.

The second precondition is pluralism. Pluralism means peoples of diverse backgrounds and interests, coming together in organisations of varying types and goals, for different kinds and forms of creative expression, which are valuable and deserving of support by government and society as a whole.

The rejection of pluralism is pervasive across the globe and plays a significant role in breeding destructive conflicts. Examples are scattered across the world’s map: in Asia, in the Middle East, in Africa, in Europe, in the Americas. No continent has been spared from the tragedies of death, of misery and of the persecution of minorities. Are such high-risk situations predictable? If the answer is, ‘Yes’, then what can be done about them, to pre-empt the risk that the rejection of pluralism will become the spark that sets human conflict ablaze? Is the onus not on leadership, in all parts of the world, to build a knowledge base about such situations and consider strategies for preventing them? For, I deeply believe that our collective conscience must accept that pluralism is no less important than human rights for ensuring peace, successful democracy and a better quality of life.

I am optimistic that much constructive work can be done, and I would cite one example — only one from the perspective of forty years of experience of agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network — in which the careful, patient development of institutions of civil society helped to created the capacity to manage and legitimise pluralism.

In Northern Pakistan, once one of the poorest areas on earth, our Network has been working for over 20 years, with CIDA as our lead partner. Isolated and bypassed rural communities of different ethnic and religious backgrounds — Shi’a, Sunni and non-Muslim — struggled to eke out a meager living, farming small holdings in the harsh environment of this mountain desert ecosystem. Relations among the communities were often hostile. The challenge for the Network was to create sustainable, inclusive processes of development in which diverse communities could participate together and seek joint solutions to common problems.

To summarise two decades of work in Northern Pakistan: over 3,900 village based organisations, comprising a mix of broad-based representations and interest-specific groups in such fields as women’s initiatives, water usage and savings and credit were established. The quality of life of 1.3 million people living in a rural environment, representative of the majority of the population of Asia and Africa, has been dramatically improved. Per capita income has increased by 300%, savings have soared, and there have been marked
improvements in male and female education, primary health, housing, sanitation and cultural awareness. Former antagonists have debated and worked together to create new programs and social structures in Northern Pakistan and more recently in Tajikistan. Consensus around hope in the future has replaced conflict born of despair and memories of the past.

This micro experiment with grass roots democracy, civil society and pluralism has also underlined for everyone involved the enormous importance of competence and advancement by merit. Inherent in the notion of merit is the idea of equality of access to opportunities. Citizens who possess potential, whatever the community to which they belong, can only realise their potential if they have access to good education, good health and prospects to advance through enterprise. Without this equity, merit does not develop.

A secure pluralistic society requires communities that are educated and confident both in the identity and depth of their own traditions and in those of their neighbours. Democracies must be educated if they are to express themselves competently and their electorates are to reach informed opinions about the great issues at stake. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to pluralism and democracy, however, is the lacuna in the general education of the populations involved.

A dramatic illustration is the uninformed speculation about conflict between the Muslim world and others. The clash, if there is such a broad civilisational collision, is not of cultures but of ignorance. How many leaders even in the West, whether in politics, the media or other professions which in their own ways shape public opinion, grow up aware that the historic root cause of the conflict in the Middle East was an outcome of the First World War? Or that the tragedy that is Kashmir is an unresolved colonial legacy, and that neither had anything to do with the faith of Islam? To what extent is the public aware that the deployment of Afghanistan as a proxy by both sides in the Cold War, is a major factor in her recent history of tragic woes? These matters, which now touch the lives of all world citizens, are simply not addressed at any level of general education in most Western countries.

Humanities curricula in many educational institutions in the West rarely feature great Muslim philosophers, scientists, astronomers and writers of the classical age of Islam, such as Avicenna, Farabi and al-Kindi, Nasir Khusraw and Tusi. This lack of knowledge and appreciation of the civilisations of the Muslim world is a major factor that colours media stereotypes, by concentrating on political hot spots in the Muslim world, and referring to organisations as terrorist and Islamic first, and only obliquely, if at all, to their national origins or political goals.

No wonder that the bogey of Islam as a monolith, irreconcilable to the values of the West or, worse, as a seedbed of violence, lurks behind its depiction as being both opposed to, and incapable of, pluralism. This image flies directly in the face of the respect that Islam’s cherished scripture confers upon believers in monotheistic traditions, calling upon Muslims to engage with them in the finest manner, and with wisdom. History is replete with illustrations where Muslims have entrusted their most treasured possessions, even members of their families, to the care of Christians. Muslim willingness to learn from Jewish erudition in medicine, statecraft and other realms of knowledge is well exemplified by the place of honour accorded Jewish scholars at the court of the Fatimid imam-caliphs of Egypt.

Intellectual honesty and greater knowledge are essential, if current explosive situations are to be understood as inherited conflicts and — rather than being specific to the Muslim world — driven by ethnic and demographic difference, economic inequity and unresolved political
situations. An excellent example of what is needed, to shape national sentiments as well as
guide foreign policy in this perilous time, is the recent Parliamentary committee report
ettitled, ‘Exploring Canada’s Relations with the Countries of the Muslim World’. I wish there
were time to comment on a number of the observations of the report, but in its very opening
sentence, which begins, ‘The dynamic complexity and diversity of the Muslim world….’ the
report sets the tone of balance and wisdom that suffuse its recommendations. It emphasises
history, education and the urgent need for communication and general knowledge in
observing that, ‘Understanding Islamic influences on government and state policies, on social
and economic relations, cultural norms, individual and group rights and the like, necessarily
goes far beyond the question of the extreme, violent-minority edges of Islamist activity’. I
warmly hope that the resources can be found to bring to life the constructive
recommendations of this fine report, as the need for such rational voices is great.

It is urgent that the West gain a better understanding of the Islamic world, which, as the
Parliamentary report notes, is a hugely diverse collectivity of civilisations that has developed,
and continues to evolve, in response to multiple societal influences — agricultural and rural,
commercial and urban, scientific and philosophical, literary and political. Just like other great
traditions, the Islamic world cannot be understood only by its faith, but as a total picture
whose history is closely tied to that of the Judeo-Christian world.

In this situation of a conflict of ignorance between the Muslim world and the West, an
example of Canada’s bridging is the support given by CIDA and McMaster to the Aga Khan
University School of Nursing. Not only did this partnership transform nursing education, and
the nursing profession, in Pakistan, but is also now having a significant impact in Kenya,
Tanzania, Uganda, Afghanistan and Syria by offering women in these countries new and
respected professional opportunities.

Canada is in an almost unique position to broaden the scope of her engagement with the
developing world by sharing very widely her experience in humane governance to support
pluralism, the development of civil society and meritocratic premises for action. For instance,
incipient, home-grown civil society institutions in developing countries need expert assistance
to strengthen their capacities for management, programme design and implementation, fund
raising, self-study and evaluation. They require help in such other areas as defining
answerability and the criteria that measure success, as well as in identifying how a sector can
be financed and sustained. I am happy to note that this is the declared intention of your
Government. In the words of Prime Minister Paul Martin speaking in the House of Commons:
‘One of the distinct ways in which Canada can help developing nations is to provide the
expertise and experience of Canadians in justice, in federalism, in pluralist democracy’.

In living through her history and confronting its challenges, Canada has established strong
institutions to sustain her democracy, the cornerstone of which is your multi-faceted, robust
civil society. Canada offers the world an example of meshing, and thereby fortifying, civil
society with merit from all segments of its population. You are, hence, able to harness the best
from different groups because your civil society is not bound by a specific language or race or
religion.

My intention is not to embarrass you with too rosy a picture of the Canadian mosaic as if it
were free of all tension. But you have the experience, an infrastructure grounded in wisdom,
and the moral wherewithal to be able to handle challenges to your social and political fabric.

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The Ismaili imamat strives to ensure that people live in countries where threat to democracy is minimal and seeks to draw on the experience of established democracies, which have a vibrant civil society, are sensitive to cultural difference and are effective in improving the quality of life of their citizenry. Canada is a prime example of such a country. It is for this reason that the Aga Khan Development Network is establishing, in Ottawa, what is to be known as The Global Centre for Pluralism.

This secular, non-denominational Centre will engage in education and research and will also examine the experience of pluralism in practice. Drawing on Canadian expertise, and working closely with governments, academia and civil society, the Centre will seek to foster enabling legislative and policy environments. Its particular emphasis will be on strengthening indigenous capacity for research and policy analysis on pluralism, while also offering educational, professional development and public awareness programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There are compelling reasons, as I have tried to articulate, why Canada can and should take the lead in investing to safeguard and enhance pluralism. We inhabit an overcrowded planet with shrinking resources, yet we share a common destiny. A weakness or pain in one corner has the tendency, rather rapidly, to transmit itself across the globe. Instability is infectious! But so is hope! It is for you — the leaders of today and tomorrow — to carry the torch of that hope and help to share the gift of pluralism.

Thank you.