

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**CONVOCATION ADDRESS BY
HIS HIGHNESS THE AGA KHAN
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FRIDAY, 18TH JUNE 2004**

Bismillah-ir-rahmanir-rahim

**Chancellor Poy,
President Birgeneau,
Dean Gaskell,
Members of the Governing Council,
Faculty,
Students and Parents,
Fellow Graduates,**

I thank you for your warm welcome, and am deeply moved by the honour that this renowned institution of learning has done of conferring upon me the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*. I accept this award with much happiness, but also a profound sense of humility, cognisant that many men and

.../... women, of higher distinction

women, of higher distinction and more notable achievements, are also being recognised, joining an illustrious line of previous recipients.

But, above all, today's event belongs to you, the graduands of OISE, as you contemplate the nature of the world which awaits your engagement. From your choice of education as the area of knowledge of greatest interest to you, there are, at least, three questions which I assume will apply to most of your future endeavours. First, what will future generations of educated people in Canada and around the world need to know to earn for themselves, and their families, honourable livelihoods? Secondly, what will future generations need to know to make our world a better place? And third, what can you, as Canadians, do to play an optimised world role?

In 1957, the year I became Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims,

.../... the Nobel Peace Prize winner

*the Nobel Peace Prize winner was a 60 year-old statesman who, two years earlier, in a book entitled *Democracy in World Politics*, had written:*

"We are now emerging into an age when different civilisations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's history and ideals, art and culture, mutually enriching each other's lives. The only alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe."

The prescient writer, whom some of you will recognise as a distinguished alumnus and former teacher at this great institution, went on to lead this country as its fourteenth Prime Minister: Lester B. Pearson.

Four weeks ago, speaking at the Leadership and Diversity Conference in Ottawa, I noted that some 40% of the countries in the United Nations are failed democracies, and the U.N.'s own experience pointing to the general weak state of civil society in these countries as one of the major causes for this

.../... widespread failure.

widespread failure. What is civil society? Why is it so essential to the good health of any modern state? And what is the role of education in shaping and enriching civil society?

The World Bank uses the term to refer to a wide array of organisations that have a presence in public life but are not affiliated to the state. They function on a not-for-profit basis to express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. In this sense, civil society organisations are multifarious: from community and indigenous groups through faith-based and charitable organisations, to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions, professional associations and foundations.

A broader definition holds that civil society embraces an even wider diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms that

.../... vary in their degree of formality

vary in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Besides the Bank's categories, these spaces are populated by such organisations as village and women's groups, neighbourhood self-help groups, social movements, business associations, microcredit organisations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

In an era of rising expectations and unmet needs, both in the developed, but much more in the developing world, civil society institutions play an essential role in the provision of social services, the protection of the marginalised and the delivery of development programmes. The positive action of these civil society initiatives is especially critical where governments are weak or non-performing, as in situations of failed democracies or post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction.

Whatever definition is used, a quality civil society is independent of government, pluralist and led by merit-based educated leadership.

.../... Not only does Canadian

Not only does Canadian civil society eminently meet these three criteria of being non-governmental pluralist and merit-led, I know of no country where civil society is more empathetic with the needs of civil society of the countries of Africa and Asia in which I have been working for some 45 years. I have, therefore, asked myself, not once, but hundreds of times, if and how Canadian civil society can mobilise its resources more vigorously to help improve the quality of life of the peoples of Africa and Asia.

Asked in these terms, the issue is that of sharing the many forms of human knowledge and experience that create and then sustain a civil society of quality, rather than the massive injection of monetary resources. There are, however, two obvious pre-conditions: First, that the governments and peoples of the developing world wish for, and welcome, the help being offered. This requires an enabling social, legal and fiscal environment. Secondly, that Canadian institutions and human resources must see in their willingness to help, real enrichment in life's purpose.

.../... Assuming these preconditions are met

Assuming these preconditions are met, you may ask how this wide civil society partnership for development can occur in practice. There are innumerable forms which have achieved genuine successes in the past. These include: the sharing of best practices, the twinning of institutions, quality improvement in delivery of healthcare and education, secondment of leadership such as school head teachers or university professors in specialised fields, strengthening civil society institutions in forward programming and performance measurement, continuing education for the most marginalised professions such as nursing or journalism, teaching best practice in the not-for-profit and charity field. The opportunities for partnership are many. But they are not being realised, or if they are, it is at a level infinitely below the needs, and dramatically below the potential for change. This is the nature of the true regime change we need, where the civil society of the industrialised world gives wide and encompassing support to that of the developing world.

.../... True regime change occurs

True regime change occurs when liberty is guaranteed by a people free to create or support institutions of their own choosing. True regime change occurs when that strength and that freedom are defined by the depth, breadth and quality of education shared across the society in question.

Partnerships between the developed and developing worlds can and do work. Moreover, they demonstrate how essential universities and their lifeblood -- you their graduates -- are to civil society.

Today, in Pakistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tanzania, at the forefront of curricular change and new teaching technologies, are young men and women who, like yourselves, have studied at OISE. They are graduates of the Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development, which was established with the help of the Universities of Toronto and Oxford. Today, also, the Aga Khan University is collaborating with international

.../... research institutions in the

research institutions in the developed world in areas ranging from cancer and HIV/AIDS to cardiovascular disease, perinatal infection and hypertension. These collaborations, across national, cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic boundaries are serving to find ways of preserving life.

At the nascent University of Central Asia, we are researching and addressing the challenges of mountain societies, drawing on a multiplicity of traditions to create stability and prosperity in remote yet geopolitically sensitive regions of the world -- preserving not just life, but societies, cultures and, perhaps, nations.

Today, you are graduating from one of Canada's greatest universities in a field of study that is of paramount importance. I am speaking to you as a person whose roots and institutional engagement are in the developing world; as a Muslim; as someone seeking to engage with, and improve, the lives of the millions of people who live in Asia and Africa.

.../... It is against this background

It is against this background that I invite you -- indeed, that I urge you -- to reflect deeply on the needs of our world today. I am sure you will wish to seize the opportunities for sharing your knowledge with future generations here in Canada, but should you wish it, the reach of your knowledge can go far beyond your shores, and will be deeply welcomed. Because civil society is so critical to the quality of life, and the pace of progress, and because it finds expression in so many pluralist forms and spaces, I am convinced that the future before you, in this global environment we share, offers you a remarkable spectrum of opportunities.

Thank you.