
Lecture by His Highness the Aga Khan: The LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture (Toronto, Canada)

Bismillah-hir-Rahmanir-Rahim,

The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson

Mr. John Ralston Saul

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Mesdames et Messieurs

Lorsque j'ai été invité à donner la conférence de ce symposium LaFontaine-Baldwin, ce fut pour moi un grand honneur et j'ai éprouvé beaucoup d'émotion. Je dois dire, chère Madame Clarkson que j'ai encore plus d'émotion depuis que vous avez fait tous ces commentaires si flatteurs pour moi. C'est également un grand plaisir de se retrouver parmi de si nombreux amis tant anciens que nouveaux, ici à Toronto et je suis particulièrement heureux d'avoir été présenté, comme je viens de le dire, si chaleureusement ce soir par mes bons amis John Ralston Saul et Adrienne Clarkson. Je me sens profondément reconnaissant de cette très aimable invitation et de votre généreux accueil.

When I first received this invitation, I was deeply honoured. But I was also, perhaps, a little intimidated.

I was impressed by the lecture's prestigious history, the contributions of nine former lecturers, and the lecture's focus on Canada's civic culture.

As you may know, my close ties with Canada go back almost four decades, to the time when many thousands of Asian refugees from Uganda, including many Ismailis, were welcomed so generously in this society. These ties have continued through the cooperation of our Aga Khan Development Network with several Canadian institutions, including the establishment, four years ago, of the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa. I had the opportunity last week to chair a highly productive meeting there of the Centre's Board of Directors.

Earlier this year, we also celebrated here in Toronto the Foundation Ceremony for the Aga Khan Museum and a new Ismaili Centre. So there are powerful chords of memory – from four decades ago, four years ago, and even four months ago, that tie me closely to Canada.

I was also deeply moved by Canada's extraordinary gift to me of honorary citizenship.

I always have felt at home when I come to Canada – but never more so than in the wake of this honour. And if I ever felt any trepidation about accepting this evening's invitation, it has been significantly reduced by the fact that I can now claim – however modestly – to be a Canadian!

Many thanks go to all of you who are attending this lecture – or are watching and listening from elsewhere. It is a busy autumn night, I know.

For one thing, I believe the undefeated Maple Leafs are playing on television at this very hour!

My Canadian friends like to tell me about a time when the Stanley Cup playoffs were in full swing, and a gentleman took his seat in the front row of the stadium – leaving a seat open next to him. His neighbour asked why such an excellent seat for such an important event was unclaimed, and the man explained that his wife normally sat there but that she had passed away. The neighbour expressed his sympathies, but asked whether a member of the family, or another relative or friend might have been able to use the ticket. “No”, the man replied, “they’re all at the funeral.”

The subject of tonight’s Lecture, Pluralism, may not have quite the emotional hold of the Stanley Cup, but, for me, it has been a matter of immense importance.

One reason, no doubt, is that the Ismaili people have long shared in the experience of smaller groups everywhere – living in larger societies. In addition, my lifelong interest in development has focused my attention on the challenge of social diversity. My interest in launching the Global Centre for Pluralism reflected my sense that there was yet no institution dedicated to the question of diversity in our world, and that Canada’s national experience made it a natural home for this venture.

The Centre plans, of course, to engage expert researchers to help in its work. Those plans remind me of a “think-tank” executive who found himself floating aimlessly across the sky one day in a hot air balloon. (I suspect he was the chairman!). As he hovered above he called down to a man below, “Can you tell me where I am?” The man shouted back, giving him his longitude, latitude and altitude. “Thanks,” said the chairman, “that’s interesting, but you must be a professor!”

“Why do you say that?” asked the man below.

“Well,” the chairman responded, “you have given me a lot of precise information, which I’m sure is technically correct, but which is not of the faintest use to me.”

The man below replied, “And you must be an executive.”

“How did you know?” asked the balloonist.

“Well,” said the man, “you don’t know where you are – or where you’re going. You have risen to where you are on a lot of hot air. And you expect people beneath you to solve your problems!”

I trust that this story will not characterize the work of the Centre.

I would like to talk with you this evening about three things – first, the long history of pluralism in our world, secondly, the acute intensification of that challenge in our time, and third, the path ahead, how we can best respond to that challenge.

I. THE PAST: PLURALISM IN HISTORY

A. Early History

Let us look for a moment at pluralism in history. I would like to begin by observing that the challenge of pluralism is as old as human civilization. History is filled with instructive models of success and failure in coping with human diversity.

In looking at this history, I am going to do an unexpected thing for a graduate of Harvard University – and that is to quote from a professor at that “other” New England school, a place called Yale.

You may remember how President Kennedy, when he received an honorary degree from Yale, observed that he now had the best of both worlds – a Yale degree – and a Harvard education!

Perhaps I am trying to reap something of the same advantage tonight – mentioning my Harvard education, but quoting a Yale Professor. Amy Chua, of the Yale Law School, recently published a persuasive warning about the decline and fall of history’s dominant empires. Their downward spiral, she says, stemmed from their embrace of intolerant and exclusionist attitudes.

The earlier success of these so-called “hyper powers” reflected their pragmatic, inclusive policies, drawing on the talents of a wide array of peoples. She cites seven examples – from ancient Persia to the modern United States, from ancient Rome and the Tang Empire in China, to the Spanish, Dutch and British Empires. In each case, pluralism was a critical variable.

You may know how, in ancient times, the common view was that nature had separated humankind into distinctive peoples. Aristotle was among the first to reject such arbitrary distinctions, and to conceptualize the human race as a single whole. It is interesting to note that his young pupil, on whom he impressed this notion, turned out to be Alexander the Great – whose international empire was animated by this new intellectual outlook. And, similarly, the Roman Empire thrived initially by extending the concept of Roman citizenship to distant, highly disparate peoples.

But even as Europe fragmented after the fall of Rome, another success story emerged in Egypt. I have a special interest in this story; it concerns my ancestors, the Fatimid Caliphs, who founded the city of Cairo 1000 years ago. They were themselves Shia in an overwhelmingly dominant Sunni culture, and for nearly two centuries they led a strong pluralistic society, welcoming a variety of Islamic interpretations as well as people of Christian, Jewish and other backgrounds.

Similarly, on the Iberian Peninsula between the 8th and 16th centuries, Muslim, Christian and Jewish cultures interacted creatively in what was known as al-Andalus. Remarkably, it lasted for most of seven centuries – a longer period than the time that has since passed.

The fading of al-Andalus came as a new spirit of nationalism rose in Europe – propelled by what scholars have called a sense of “imagined community.” Where local and tribal loyalties once dominated, national identifications came to flourish.

As we know, these nationalist rivalries eventually exploded into world war. The post-war emergence of the European Union has been a response to that history, much as regional groupings from South East Asia, to Central Asia, from Latin America to Eastern Africa, have been testing the potential for pan-national cooperation.

B. Canada and Pluralism

This brings me to the story of Canada – shaped so fundamentally by two European cultures. This dual inheritance was an apparent weakness at one point, but it was transformed into an enormous strength, thanks to leaders like LaFontaine and Baldwin, as well as those who shaped the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, and so many others who contributed to a long, incremental process.

That process has been extended over time to include a broader array of peoples, the First Peoples, and the Inuit, and a host of new immigrant groups. I am impressed by the fact that some 44 percent of Canadians today are of neither French nor British descent. I am told, in fact, that a typical Canadian citizenship ceremony might now include people from two dozen different countries.

To be sure, the vision I am describing is sometimes questioned and still incomplete, as I know Canadians insist on acknowledging. But it is nonetheless an asset of enormous global value.

C. The Developing World

Let me turn to the less developed world, where the challenge of diversity is often the most difficult problem our Development Network faces.

This legacy was partly shaped by European influences. In the 19th century, for example, European economic competition was sometimes projected onto Middle Eastern divisions, including the Maronite alliance with France and the Druze alliance with Britain. Meanwhile, in Africa and elsewhere, Europe’s colonial policies often worked to accentuate division – both through the use of divide-and-rule-strategies, and through the imposition of arbitrary national boundaries, often ignoring tribal realities.

In my view, the West continues at times to mis-read such complexities – including the immense diversity within the Muslim world. Often, too, the West’s development assistance programs assume that diversity is primarily an urban phenomenon discounting the vast size and complexity of rural areas. Yet, it is in the countryside that ethnic divides can be most conflictual – as Rwanda and Afghanistan have demonstrated – and where effective development could help pre-empt explosion.

I remember a visit I made almost half a century ago – in 1973 – to Mindanao, the one part of the Philippine Islands that was never ruled by Spain. It is home to a significant Islamic minority, and I was struck even then by how religious distinctions were mirrored in economic disparities.

Since that time, in predictable ways, economic injustice and cultural suspicion have fuelled one another in Mindanao. The quandary is how to break the cycle, although the Philippine government is now addressing the situation. But when history allows such situations to fester, they become increasingly difficult to cure.

The co-dependent nature of economic deprivation and ethnic diversity is evident throughout most of Asia and Africa. And most of these countries are ill-prepared for such challenges. The legitimacy of pluralist values, which is part of the social psyche in countries like Canada or Portugal, where so many Ismailis now live, is often absent in the developing world.

I think particularly, now, of Africa. The largest country there, Nigeria, comprises some 250 ethnic groups, often in conflict. In this case, vast oil reserves – once a reason for hope – have become a source of division. One wonders what might happen in other such places, for example in Afghanistan, if its immense subsoil wealth should become an economic driver.

The lesson: economic advantage can sometimes ease social tensions, but social and cultural cleavage can undermine economic promise.

D. Central Asia

Let's for a moment, look at the situation in Central Asia. Our Network's activity there includes the University of Central Asia, founded ten years ago, with campuses now in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

You will recall the outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan last June – thousands died, hundreds of thousands were made homeless. And yet, this high mountain region had traditionally been a place of lively cultural interchange – going back to the time of the Silk Route, one of history's first global connecting links.

The violence that raged between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities had tangled roots. The Kyrgyz, traditionally nomads, were forced in the last century to settle on Soviet collective farms – joined by new Russian settlers. Tensions mounted, especially with the more settled Uzbeks, and a harsh economy compounded the distress.

Kyrgyzstan – along with Tajikistan – is one of the two poorest countries to emerge from the Soviet Union. But economics alone do not account for its tragedies. Observers had long noted the absence of cross-cultural contact in Kyrgyzstan, the weakness of institutional life – both at the government level and at the level of civil society – and a failing educational system.

Another element in the equation was international indifference – indeed, almost total international ignorance about Central Asia.

The result was a society ready to explode at the touch of a tiny spark. How that spark was first struck has been much debated. But the fundamental questions concern the perilous preconditions for violence, and whether they might better have been identified – and addressed.

Meanwhile, a spirit of hope persists, even in this troubled setting. Shortly after the violence, a public referendum approved constitutional reforms which could open a new era of progress.

E. Other Developing World Examples

Let us look for a moment at other developing world examples. The referendum in Kyrgyzstan this summer was followed one month later by a similar referendum in Kenya. I spent a part of my childhood in Kenya and our Network is very active there. So we watched with great sadness as Kenya descended into tribal warfare following the disputed election of 2007. In Kenya's case, the institutions of civil society took a lead role in addressing the crisis. One result was the public endorsement this past August of a new constitution – by a two to one ratio. Like the reforms in Kyrgyzstan, it includes a dramatic dispersion of national and presidential power.

We are reminded in such moments that hope can sometimes grow out of desolation. I think of other places in Africa, like Mozambique, which also found a path to greater stability after a long period of warfare.

I think, too, of Indonesia, which emerged from its colonial experience as a radically fragmented state – both ethnically and geographically. Its response included a nationally oriented educational system – teaching a shared national language. But we must be careful in drawing conclusions. Other attempts to foster a single language as a unifying resource – Urdu, for example, or Swahili, or Bangla, have sometimes worked to separate peoples from the main currents of global progress.

The question of language is very sensitive, as Canadians well know. And one of the central truths about pluralism is that what works in one setting may work differently in others.

Afghanistan is another case in point. In contrast with places where inflexible nationalism can be a problem, Afghanistan suffers from the opposite condition – an inability to imagine, let alone create, a broad sense of nationhood.

One of the prime lessons of history, ancient and recent, is that one size does not fit all.

II. THE PRESENT: INTENSIFICATION AND URGENCY

Let's for the moment look at the present situation. Let me move to a second major topic, which is the present intensification of the pluralism challenge – and the sense of urgency that comes with it.

Clearly, the challenges posed by diversity are mounting. New technologies mean that people mix and mingle more than ever before. Massive human migrations are part of the story – two-thirds of recent population growth in the 30 largest OECD countries has resulted from highly diverse migrations. Meanwhile, communications technology means that even those who live on the other side of the world are as near to us as those who live on the other side of the street.

The variety of the world is not only more available, it is nearly inescapable. Human difference is more proximate – and more intense. What was once beyond our view is now at our side – and, indeed, to use the popular expression, it is “in our face.”

Almost everything now seems to “flow” globally – people and images, money and credit, goods and services, microbes and viruses, pollution and armaments, crime and terror. But let us remember, too, that constructive impulses can also flow more readily, as they do when international organizations join hands across dividing lines.

The challenge of diversity is now a global challenge – and how we address it will have global consequences.

Economic stress and new environmental fragilities have further intensified the difficulties, and so has the fading of the bi-polar political order. It was once said that the end of the Cold War meant “the end of history.” In fact, just the reverse was true. History resumed in earnest in the 1990's – as old tribal passions resurfaced.

Meanwhile, the way we communicate with one another has been revolutionized. But more communication has not meant more cooperation. More information has also meant more mis-information – more superficial snapshots, more shards of stray information taken out of context. And it has also meant more willful dis-information – not only differences of opinion, but distortions of fact. A wide-open internet allows divisive information to travel as far and as fast as reliable information. There are virtually no barriers to entry – and anyone, responsible or irresponsible – can play the game.

New digital technologies mean more access, but they also mean less accountability.

The advent of the internet and the omnipresence of mobile telephony seem to promise so much! But so, once, did television and radio – and the telegraph before that – and, even earlier, the invention of the printing press. Yet each of these breakthroughs, while connecting so many, was also used to widen cultural gulfs.

Technologies, after all, are merely instruments – they can be used for good or ill. How we use them will depend – in every age and in every culture – not on what sits on our desktops, but on what is in our heads – and in our hearts.

It has never been easy for people to live together. I am not one who believes in some natural, human disposition to welcome the stranger. Wiping away superficial misunderstandings will not by itself allow a spontaneous spirit of accommodation to blossom.

As Adrienne Clarkson said at this lecture in 2007, we cannot count on the power of “love” to solve our problems – as important as that quality is. A part of our challenge, as she said, is learning to live and work with people we may not particularly like!

To do so will require concerted, deliberate efforts to build social institutions and cultural habits which take account of difference, which see diversity as an opportunity rather than a burden.

I have mentioned both social institutions and cultural habits – each dimension is critical. In a sense, one concerns the hardware and one concerns the software of the pluralism experience.

III. THE FUTURE; THE PATH AHEAD

This brings me to my third and final topic this evening, the path ahead – how we might better predict and prevent breakdowns, and encourage progress.

A. Institutional Concerns

On the institutional level, we can begin by looking at the structures of public governance.

Let me warn, first, against a naïve hope that simply advancing the concept of democracy will achieve our goals. Not so. The high count of failed democracies – including some 40 percent of the member states of the United Nations – should disabuse us of this notion.

Too often, democracy is understood to be only about elections – momentary majorities. But effective governance is much more than that. What happens before and after elections? How are choices framed and explained? How is decision-making shared so that leaders of different backgrounds can interactively govern, rather than small cliques who rule autocratically?

We must go beyond the simple word “democracy” if we are to build a framework for effective pluralism.

This will mean writing more effective constitutions – informed by more sophisticated understandings of comparative political systems. It will mean explaining those arrangements more adequately – and adjusting and amending them. It will mean separating and balancing powers, structuring multi-tiered – and often asymmetrical – systems of federalism, and defining rights and freedoms – as Canada has learned to do. I would also point here to the experience of the largest democracy, India, which defines specific constitutional rights for eight distinctive cultural groups, an approach which has been echoed in Malaysia. And we have seen how Kenya and Kyrgyzstan are moving now to decentralize power.

All of these institutional arrangements can help resolve political deadlock, build social coherence and avoid the dangers of “winner take all.” They can provide multiple levers of social influence, allowing individuals of every background to feel that they have a stake in society – that they can influence the forces that shape their lives.

How we define citizenship is a central factor in this story – but one that is newly in dispute. Even the well-established concept that citizenship belongs to everyone who is born on national soil has been questioned recently in parts of Europe and the United States – as attitudes to immigration intensify.

Independent judicial and educational systems are also essential to effective pluralism, and so are non-governmental agents of influence – the institutions of civil society. As we have seen, Kenya presents a positive case study in this regard, while civil society in Kyrgyzstan was largely marginalized during its crisis.

Independent news media are another key element. This is why our Network has been involved for fifty years in the media of East Africa, and why the Aga Khan University is planning to create there a new Graduate School of Media and Communications.

The value of independent media was summarized recently by a veteran Ghanaian journalist, Kwame Karikari, who wrote of the media’s “... remarkable contributions to peaceful and transparent elections in Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia; to post-conflict conditions ... in Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone; and to sustaining constitutional rule ... in Guinea, Kenya and Nigeria.”

Finally, let me emphasize that healthy institutions will tap the widest possible range of energies and insights. They will optimize each society's meritocratic potential, so that opportunity will reward competence, from whomever and wherever it may come independent of birth or wealth or theology or physical power.

B. THE PUBLIC MINDSET

But institutional reforms will have lasting meaning only when there is a social mindset to sustain them.

There is a profound reciprocal relationship between institutional and cultural variables. How we think shapes our institutions. And then our institutions shape us.

How we see the past is an important part of this mindset.

A sense of historic identity can immensely enrich our lives. But we also know how myopic commitments to "identity" can turn poisonous when they are dominated by bad memories, steeped in grievance and resentment.

The marginalization of peoples can then become a malignant process, as people define themselves by what they are against. The question of "who am I?" is quickly transformed into "who is my enemy?"

Some would address this problem through a willful act of historical amnesia – but suppressing animosity can often produce future explosions.

In Kenya, national history is largely missing from the public schools. And, in the absence of shared history, divided communities feed on their own fragmented memories of inter-tribal wrongs.

On the other hand, the value of confronting memory lies in catharsis, an emotional healing process. As we know, the Truth and Reconciliation Process has helped South Africans address deep social divisions, as has Chile's Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago.

As societies come to think in pluralistic ways, I believe they can learn another lesson from the Canadian experience, the importance of resisting both assimilation and homogenization – the subordination and dilution of minority cultures on the one hand, or an attempt to create some new, transcendent blend of identities, on the other.

What the Canadian experience suggests to me is that identity itself can be pluralistic. Honouring one's own identity need not mean rejecting others. One can embrace an ethnic or religious heritage, while also sharing a sense of national or regional pride. To cite a timely example, I believe one can live creatively and purposefully as both a devoted Muslim and a committed European.

To affirm a particular identity is a fundamental human right, what some have called "the right to be heard." But the right to be heard implies an obligation to listen – and, beyond that, a proactive obligation to observe and to learn.

Surely, one of the most important tests of moral leadership is whether our leaders are working to widen divisions – or to bridge them.

When we talk about diversity, we often use the metaphor of achieving social "harmony." But perhaps we might also employ an additional musical comparison – a fitting image as we meet tonight in this distinguished musical setting. We might talk not just about the ideal of "harmony" – the sounding of a single chord – but also about "counterpoint." In counterpoint, each voice follows a separate musical line, but always as part of a single work of art, with a sense both of independence and belonging.

Let me add one further thought. I believe that the challenge of pluralism is never completely met. Pluralism is a process and not a product. It is a mentality, a way of looking at a diverse and changing world. A pluralistic environment is a kaleidoscope that history shakes every day.

Responding to pluralism is an exercise in constant re-adaptation. Identities are not fixed in stone. What we imagine our communities to be must also evolve with the tides of history.

As we think about pluralism, we should be open to the fact that there may be a variety of “best practices,” a “diversity of diversities,” and a “pluralism of pluralisms.”

In sum, what we must seek and share is what I have called “a cosmopolitan ethic,” a readiness to accept the complexity of human society. It is an ethic which balances rights and duties. It is an ethic for all peoples.

It will not surprise you to have me say that such an ethic can grow with enormous power out of the spiritual dimensions of our lives. In acknowledging the immensity of The Divine, we will also come to acknowledge our human limitations, the incomplete nature of human understanding.

In that light, the amazing diversity of Creation itself can be seen as a great gift to us – not a cause for anxiety but a source of delight. Even the diversity of our religious interpretations can be greeted as something to share with one another – rather than something to fear.

In this spirit of humility and hospitality – the stranger will be welcomed and respected, rather than subdued – or ignored.

In the Holy Quran we read these words: “O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul ...[and] joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace ye became brethren.”

As we strive for this ideal, we will recognize that “the other” is both “present” and “different.” And we will be able to appreciate this presence – and this difference – as gifts that can enrich our lives.

Let me conclude by emphasizing once again the urgency of this challenge. We are at a particularly complex moment in human history. The challenges of diversity are frightening for many people, in societies all around the world. But diversity also has the capacity to inspire.

The mission of the Global Centre for Pluralism is to look closely at all these challenges – and to think hard about them. This will be demanding work. But as we go forward, we hope we can discern more predictably and pre-empt more effectively those conditions which lead to conflict among peoples. And we also hope that we can advance those institutions and those mindsets which foster constructive engagement.

The world we seek is not a world where difference is erased, but where difference can be a powerful force for good, helping us to fashion a new sense of cooperation and coherence in our world, and to build together a better life for all.

Thank you very much.