Your Highness,
Friends,

It is a privilege for me this evening to introduce you to His Highness the Aga Khan, the Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims.

He embodies the values that we Canadians most cherish, and the actions that have created the country that we are. He not only celebrates diversity, he also honours the differences between people that can paradoxically give them their greatest bond. He has two roles in this world; one which he has inherited as an extraordinary charge, and the other that he has built upon and recreated, that now involves all of us. He manifests the creative relationship of spiritual values and material concern, which is unique in the world today, and is a model for all of us.

He is the forty-ninth hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. He is a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), through the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law Ali, the first Imam, and his wife Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter. He is the spiritual leader of approximately 14 million Ismailis, living all over the world, mainly in West and Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, North America and Western Europe.

In his own being, he encompasses the world. He was born in Geneva, son of the Prince Aly Khan, grandson of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan. He spent his childhood in Nairobi, Kenya, and attended LeRosey school in Switzerland and graduated from Harvard University in the United States in 1959. When he was 20, and still a student at Harvard, he succeeded as the hereditary Imam, directly designated by his grandfather, as is the custom. I was at university here in Canada at exactly the same time when His Highness became Aga Khan and I remember vividly how I thought he must have felt, knowing that suddenly he had this enormous responsibility at our age, and that the trust had been placed in him by his remarkable grandfather, who had the complex task of administering the Ismaili community during the colonial era. His grandson has seen the world evolve in size and complexity, particularly following the independence of the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union.

But his family had already taken their place in the development of the world’s interconnectedness. His grandfather was the President of the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations in the 1930s. His father Prince Aly Khan was Pakistan’s ambassador to the United Nations. His uncle Prince Sadruddin headed the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and was charged with the Humanitarian Program in the Middle Eastern states including the border areas of Iraq and Turkey. His brother Prince Amyn, whom we welcome here tonight, entered the economic and social affairs of the United Nations directly upon graduation from Harvard and is now involved with the governance of the network of activities supervised by the Aga Khan.
Historically, the Ismailis created a state that developed arts, science, and trade, centred in Cairo for a number of centuries. In the 13th century, the Ismailis were dispersed, living in Persia, Central Asia, Syria, and India. The Aga Khan Development Network is His Highness’ way of bringing together the faith and action of the Ismaili beliefs. Ismaili tradition means that their Imam leads in the interpretation of matters of faith and the relationship of that faith to the conditions in the world in which we are living, the world in which we find ourselves. It is grounded in the ethics of Islam in which economic, social and cultural all come together to determine the quality of life for human beings. As the Aga Khan often says, “we have been created as one by a single Creator.”

Since 1957, projects have been initiated and always supported by the communities served no matter how diverse. They are aimed towards becoming self-sustaining, and frequently involve partnerships outside the Ismailis. Anyone who knows Ismailis in Canada, knows that they are the first to volunteer and give of themselves to causes which involve the common good. This is within their tradition and is admired by everyone in Canada. Through the Aga Khan Development Network, enormous work has been done because as His Highness has said, “development is sustainable, only if the beneficiaries become, in a gradual manner, the masters of the process.”

The Aga Khan Health Network has 168 centres in countries like Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The Aga Khan Development Network is inclusive of the enormously different cultural traditions in all the countries and areas in which it all operates. And if you think about them, they’re so varied, that they are the very definition of diversity and plurality itself. In all these works, the Aga Khan seeks to create bridges, between the developed and the developing world. This is done with a very conscious sense of the dignity of all human beings. The consciousness that we are all human and nobody is more human than any other and the right of all human beings to the best that life has to offer in this world in culture, in health, in education, in participation.

I was very pleased that the Aga Khan accepted to be an honorary companion of the Order of Canada while I was Governor General in 2005 and during my last year in Ottawa I assisted as he put the spade in the ground for the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat on Sussex Drive which is now open and is a beautiful architectural example on that very prominent roadway in Ottawa. Recently I was at the Foundation ceremony here in Toronto where ground was turned for the new Ismaili Centre and for the Museum for Islamic art which will grace a wonderful place just beside the Don Valley Parkway. In 2009, he was made an honorary citizen of Canada. Last week the Global Centre for Pluralism which is a partnership between the Aga Khan Development Network and the Government of Canada had its first meeting. I am delighted to be on that Board and to chair the Executive Committee to help forward His Highness’ vision with the partnership of Canada about plurality and diversity, making us all stronger. Canada should be very proud that he has chosen us as the centre for this work, which he holds very dear to his heart. On behalf of all Canadians, I thank him for this.

We could have no finer citizen and we could have no finer bearer of the motto of the Order of Canada: “they desire a better country.” With the Aga Khan and what he represents, we are a better country.

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