

Keynote Address at the University of Witwatersrand on Canada-South Africa Relations (South Africa)

The Governor General of Canada, His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston

Johannesburg, South Africa, Tuesday, May 21, 2013

Thank you for your warm welcome.

Let me begin by offering greetings and best wishes on behalf of all Canadians. It is truly an honour to be invited to speak on the subject of Canada-South Africa relations at this impressive university.

As governor general, it is my privilege to represent Canada abroad on State visits. We arrived in Cape Town yesterday, and already we are getting a sense of contemporary South Africa, of its great beauty, creativity and promise.

We have also had an opportunity to glimpse some of the ways in which Canadians and South Africans are working together.

And we are looking forward to learning more about our partnerships and potential for further collaboration for the remainder of our visit.

Of course, Canadians and South Africans have been working together for many years.

Despite our distinct histories, geographies and cultures, the people of our two nations have a shared vision.

That vision is one of diversity and dynamism, of societies comprised of smart, caring communities where equality of opportunity and excellence coexist.

Canada, for example, is known the world over for its commitment to multiculturalism. In Canada, we strive to accommodate difference, and we proudly view diversity as a source of strength, not a weakness.

And here in South Africa—the “Rainbow Nation”—you are home to 11 official languages, a truly remarkable expression of your values.

Without a doubt, Canadians and South Africans both have work to do in achieving equality of opportunity and excellence in full measure. But these are the democratic values that unite us, and that we aspire to live up to.

As you know, the roots of our modern-day relationship were formed during a very difficult period in South Africa’s history.

The government and people of Canada first demonstrated their support for today’s South Africa—for your South Africa—in the early 1960s, when we insisted on an end to apartheid in exchange for South Africa’s re-admission to the Commonwealth.

And we stood in solidarity during the dark days of the 1980s, when we backed the anti-apartheid movement.

I can assure you, Canadians are very proud to have as an honorary citizen of our country your former president, Mr. Nelson Mandela. I would like to take this opportunity to extend to Mr. Mandela the thoughts and best wishes of all Canadians for good health.

I would also like to say that the sugar maple tree he planted while visiting Rideau Hall in Ottawa, the official residence where I live and work, is now in full bloom in beautiful spring weather.

Mr. Mandela is also an honorary Companion of the Order of Canada, the centrepiece of Canada's honours system.

Its motto: DESIDERANTES MELIOREM PATRIAM.

They desire a better country.

That is what we each desire for our respective countries, is it not? Whether Canadian or South African, we all aspire to build better, now and for the future.

Since 2003, our two countries have held annual bilateral meetings to discuss common issues and priorities. These talks reflect the broad nature of our relationship, touching on foreign policy, trade, development, peace and security, arts and culture, education, sports, and science and technology.

Put simply, South Africa is one of Canada's most important partners in this vast and diverse continent.

Today, we stand on the cusp of a new era in our relationship, a fact that is borne out by the growing number of partnerships between Canadians and South Africans.

Allow me to highlight a few specific examples of our co-operation.

As members of the Commonwealth, our two countries are working together to strengthen respect for human rights in Africa. We have also worked as partners in peace-building and conflict prevention. Examples include our support of joint African Union-United Nations operations in Darfur, as well as our backing of the African Union's Mission in Somalia, or AMISOM.

Just this week, South Africa advised Canada that it is willing to join a working group on mediation chaired by Canada under the Malta Process that addresses child protection issues in cross-border cases where Muslim law differs from other legal traditions.

Sometimes, we co-operate with each other indirectly through our work in different fora.

Through the Southern African Development Community, South Africa has played a key role, for example, in advancing the return of democracy to your island neighbour, Madagascar. Canada too has a strong interest in Madagascar due to important people-to-people and commercial ties.

Besides our own efforts, we have worked through the councils of La Francophonie to achieve the restoration of constitutional order in a country with which we have great potential for partnership.

Also, like South Africa, Canada seeks to diversify its relationships in ways that knit the world together in mutually supportive networks. South Africa's participation in the BRICS (the organization of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) represents a significant diplomatic achievement for this country.

Canada for many years has had a partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Canada is also a strong member of the Asia Pacific Economic (APEC) forum and is joining the negotiation for a Trans Pacific Partnership.

Clearly, Canada and South Africa both understand the importance of building international networks in this era of globalization.

We have demonstrated this understanding through our actions.

Over the past several years, Canada and South Africa have signed or made progress on a number of bilateral agreements, ranging from air services to customs to nuclear co-operation. These and other agreements and negotiations reinforce the fact that, for an increasing number of Canadians, South Africa is seen as the gateway to the African continent.

Canadians and South Africans are partners in new and exciting initiatives in research, education, mining, aerospace, agriculture, food services, transportation and energy.

Another example of our collaboration involves a number of South African post-secondary institutions, including the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape, Stellenbosch University and, of course, this impressive university where we gather this evening.

Earlier today I had the privilege of visiting faculty and students from these universities at the Cape Town campus. They are involved in a wonderful partnership, which sees Canadians and South Africans working together in the building of the Square Kilometre Array Telescope.

Though still in the early stages, this project is a symbol of international co-operation for the benefit of all humankind. The building of this telescope has drawn in a wide range of partners. It boosts our collective knowledge, has positive impacts on our economies, and brings us closer together.

It also reminds us that, in today's world, new discoveries are rarely made in isolation. Rather, they more often occur as the result of collaboration between schools and research institutions, the private sector and governments.

Another great example of Canada-South Africa collaboration is our work in establishing and nurturing the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences and the Next Einstein Initiative. This idea came from physicist Neil Turok, a South African who now heads up the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Canada—and whose father, Ben, is, of course, a member of the national assembly.

Permit me a small digression to say that I have quoted Neil Turok in my speeches on a number of occasions. He is a close personal friend and a brilliant and humane individual. The institute he set up with support from the Canadian Government and others here in Cape Town is truly innovative. The aim is to help build a critical mass of scientific and technical talent on this continent, and I am delighted to see the idea catching on in other African countries.

I am very hopeful of its success. I believe that they will produce the next Einstein from Africa.

What a remarkable example of the positive impact our partnerships can have!

That which is true for scientific discovery applies to so much in our world today. A curious feature of globalization is that it both enables and requires collaboration.

Working together, we can help one another to develop, grow and diversify.

As governor general of Canada, I can assure you that our country is eager to strengthen ties with South Africa. This is true, not least in higher education, a sphere of particular interest to me as a former teacher and university administrator.

Last year, Canada was pleased to host 615 post-secondary students from South Africa, and we would, of course, welcome many more.

Similarly, I never hesitate to encourage Canadian students to study, teach or volunteer overseas as all of my five daughters have—in 17 different countries, and counting. As someone who strongly believes in the power of learning to bring people together, I am hopeful that our students, teachers and schools will embrace what I like to call the diplomacy of knowledge.

Time and again in my life, I have seen how remarkable things can happen when people from diverse backgrounds and communities come together to learn, innovate and share knowledge and experiences.

The diplomacy of knowledge works on many levels, through governments, institutional contacts and people-to-people ties. We have so much to learn from each other.

Let me share with you one last example of how our respective experiences are helping us to build smarter, more caring societies.

I am speaking of South Africa's experiment in truth and reconciliation following the end of apartheid.

This country's innovative Truth and Reconciliation Commission was widely viewed as a model for addressing the injustices of the past while laying the foundations for a brighter future.

Canadians noticed, and today we are attempting our own journey of reconciliation using a similar truth-telling commission, which aims to address the historic injustices of the Aboriginal residential school system.

Learning from our mistakes, while seizing the opportunities before us, are the means by which we can create the better world we all desire.

For two countries situated at opposite ends of the planet, we have much to offer each other. Our relationship is politically, commercially and culturally significant.

As leaders of our respective nations, we must ensure that every one of our partnerships achieves prosperity, sustainability and social responsibility in equal measure. When it comes to increasing wealth and well-being in the 21st century, our choice is not "either/or," but rather "and/both."

Canadian poet and lawyer F.R. Scott once wrote:

“We grow to one world / Through enlargement of wonder.”

And he also said “I am a citizen of the world living in a country of the mind”.

How apt for this time in history and for our young.

Canadians are interested in learning more about South Africa and discovering its great potential. And the gracious welcome South Africans have shown to us can be taken as a sign that the people of this country, as well, are ready to discover the promise of Canada.

Let us therefore seize this opportunity to work together for a more fair, just and prosperous world.

Thank you.