

An Address at the
Cultural Event of the
National Student Commonwealth Forum

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University of Ottawa

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Good evening to you all, and thank you for a very kind and complimentary welcome. And in return, I am happy to welcome you to Ottawa. Bonsoir à tous et à toutes. Il me fait plaisir de vous souhaiter la bienvenue à Ottawa. There is a long and healthy Canadian tradition of complaining about what is said and done in our national capital; condemning politicians and public servants is the birthright of every Canadian. But I think you will see, in your work here this week, some of the excitement, and importance, and real moral purpose, in the politics and the practice of Canadian democracy.

In any event, I congratulate you all for engaging so actively in the affairs of our country and the world.

Your theme for this Forum is education—which I take to mean the discovery, exploration and exchange of knowledge. And in a way, that describes the mission of my organization, the International Development Research Centre. IDRC was created by Parliament in 1970 with one enduring purpose: to help people in developing countries discover, explore and share the knowledge needed for their own development. Le Centre s'efforce d'optimiser la création, l'adaptation et l'appropriation du savoir que les populations des pays en développement estiment prioritaires pour assurer leur sécurité et atteindre une plus grande équité. Vous trouverez plus de détails à ce sujet sur le cédérom qui se trouve dans la trousse d'information qui vous a été remise.

Much of our work in the last 35 years has been done with partners in the Commonwealth. In fact, three of our six regional offices—in Kenya, India and Singapore—are based in Commonwealth countries.

Now, it will not surprise you to hear that economic and social development turns out to be endlessly complicated. It defies simple answers, and simple-minded slogans. True development invariably grows out of the very particular details of the countries and communities where it takes root.

But if there is any safe generalization—any one rule that can be applied anywhere—it is this: The strongest and fairest development occurs where people are free to innovate. Economies grow, and social justice advances, where people enjoy the freedom to learn, and try, and fail, and to learn and try again.

Let me illustrate with two examples.

One of the biggest mistakes made by many developing countries, right after their independence, was to ignore and even to suppress the energies of small business. Throughout the developing world, entrepreneurs were usually neglected by governments, and often penalized, for investing in innovation and testing new ideas.

One of the results—apparent in all too many Commonwealth countries—has been economic stagnation and reversal. In some countries, people are poorer now than they were decades ago.

What we now know is that entrepreneurial innovation—the freedom to risk money on a new idea and profit from it—is a key element in securing a country's long-run development. We in the rich countries have proven this point with our own histories. Canada grew prosperous by investing in the railways and roads and energy and airports and telephone networks that are basic to fostering private enterprise.

Developing countries, each in its own way, will thrive by encouraging their own entrepreneurs to innovate.

Among Commonwealth countries, some today are doing better than others. The World Economic Forum has devised what it calls its “Growth Competitiveness Index,” which tries to measure a country's policy environment, the quality of its institutions, and its technological readiness. On the Growth Competitiveness Index, Singapore now ranks seventh out of 104 countries. India ranks 55th. And Kenya ranks 78th out of 104 countries. (By comparison, Canada ranks 15th.)

Stimulating entrepreneurship demands good policy and good governance. That means regulations and tax laws to strike the balance between creating wealth and improving social justice. And it means strengthening systems of democratic governance, so that everyone can have a say in making and carrying out those laws and regulations. Voilà donc un exemple d'innovation au service du développement : l'innovation entrepreneuriale.

Mon deuxième exemple renvoie directement au thème de ce cette semaine : l'éducation. Innovation starts with an educated imagination—with some understanding of how the world works, and by imagining how it could work better. And in the developing countries, nothing holds back progress more catastrophically than the inability of children and teenagers to attend school.

UNICEF has recently estimated that 121 million primary-school-age children are currently denied schooling worldwide. More than half of those uneducated children are girls.

And here is another inescapable lesson for international development: There is a powerful correlation between economic development and the education of girls. Where girls and boys have equal and open access to schooling, the whole society benefits.

When you look at the evidence, the reasons are obvious.

Educated girls marry later and have fewer children. Their own children tend to grow up healthier and better educated. An educated woman is more productive at home, and better paid in the workplace. She will be better able to protect herself against HIV/AIDS and other health risks. And she will be readier to take part in the public life of her community and her country.

In short, education empowers young people to innovate in their own lives—to experiment, to seize opportunities, to stand up for their rights, and to contribute to their societies.

After all, innovation is an expression of freedom. And freedom belongs by right to every one of us, men and women.

But our exercise of that freedom is shaped, and sometimes curtailed, by the rules that govern our lives. So we have to ask, when judging the governance of any country: How free are young people to make and test their own choices? How free are they to go to a school that is available and affordable? How free are girls to choose their sexual partners, or their marriage partners, or whether or not to have children?

These are choices shaped not only by governments, of course. Freedoms can be violated, and choices denied, as much by a shari'a law or a papal edict as by any parliament or dictator.

And when a freedom is violated, each one of us is entitled (I would say obliged) to demand to know why. Whose interests are served by the breach of a human right? What are the politics of this injustice? What are the effects?

When a girl or boy cannot go to school, these questions become especially urgent. Because when any person is denied their right to an education—because they are poor, or female, or live in the wrong village or neighbourhood—the injustice is doubly damaging. First, that person suffers the private loss of personal security and opportunity. And second, the whole society bears the lasting public cost of lost prosperity, lost chances.

This is the promise of education—and the imperative of providing it to everyone. It frees us to live our lives more fully, by informing the ways we imagine our shared future.

In closing, let me again salute you all for your participation in this National Student Commonwealth Forum. Je vous félicite encore une fois de vous engager si activement dans les affaires de votre pays et du monde. I hope you will fully exercise your freedom this week—to discover, explore and share new knowledge and a fresh experience.

Thank you. Merci.