

Transcript: Looking Past the Crisis

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjimttibzQI>

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a genuine delight and privilege to be with you this evening, to be welcomed into each of your homes, for this launch of the virtual set of Ismaili Centre Lectures. I'm joining you from my home here in Ottawa, where we have been physically distancing, like I think many of you have been for several weeks.

This is the traditional territory of the Algonquin people, and just meters from where I'm sitting here, there are three rivers that come together. The Algonquin, for centuries, have been coming together at this place called Ottawa, where the three rivers meet, in a spirit of exchange – exchange of goods and services certainly, but also of relationships and, critically, of ideas. And so, it's a very special privilege to be continuing that century-old Canadian tradition of exchanging ideas and relationships, even as we do so more virtually than perhaps was ever before possible.

It's also of course, a privilege to be asked to speak on the world of post-crisis, looking past this COVID crisis. I do so with some anxiety because we are at a moment which is highly unusual, almost unprecedented probably, and where any glance into the future is likely to have a very tentative flavor to it as we still learn about the situation we're confronting and as it evolves very, very quickly. I'm, finally, very privileged to be joining you because I finally have a chance to put on a tie after several weeks of not wearing one. My undistinguished, but well-used tie collection has been languishing at the bottom of my closet, and this one is very happy to have been released from quarantine, at least for tonight's important event.

Ladies and gentlemen, human civilization has known crisis from the beginning of history. It is no stranger to crisis – empires rise, and empires fall. But just as crisis is a fact of human history, so of course is resilience, the ability of human communities to bounce back, and often to bounce back even better. But of course, resilience itself is not inevitable. It doesn't happen as a matter of automatic lockstep process. Again and again, I think what we've learned is that resilience in the face of crisis is a choice. It must be embraced. And one of our great challenges at this crisis in history is to understand what are the choices we confront, and what are the choices, open and available to us, to choose resilience.

The power of that choice was powerfully recounted by His Highness The Aga Khan, when he spoke at the gold medal ceremony of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, here in Ottawa in 2013. He chose that moment, that occasion of receiving the gold medal from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, to reflect a little bit on some of the choices in the architectural efforts that he had initiated globally. And he spoke specially about Canada, and I want to read an excerpt about the way in which His Highness framed response to crisis. He talked about the arrival of Ismailis in Canada in the 1970s.

He said, "The story goes back to 1972, when the then-president of Uganda, Marshal Idi Amin, expelled all the Asians from Uganda, no matter what their faith, their citizenship, or position in society." He said, "Many thousands left Uganda in a matter of days. Most had nothing more with them than their brains and the languages they spoke." He called it one of the ugliest experiences of

ethnic cleansing in those times. He said, "The leaders of the Ismaili communities in the UK and Canada consulted with one another, and with me, as to how to respond to this forced migration. There was unanimity that wherever we would settle, we would never become a demotivated, marginalized minority. And that we would instead demonstrate the will and the capacity to rebuild our future." He carried on to say that as they thought about building new spaces, new Ismaili centres, he said that he committed at that moment, with the leaders of the community, that these new buildings would be symbols of new hope, replacing past pain. This is an extraordinary example of the way in which our community – and indeed, all communities – can confront even very, very difficult moments of crisis and of difficulty with a sense of optimism and hope for the future.

One of the things I've learned in my time, over the last several years with the Aga Khan Development Network system, is that an approach – an important approach – to dealing with crisis situations, wherever they erupt in the world, is to respond to them with a certain bifocal vision with one of our eyes and one of our lenses, looking very squarely and with a focused way on responding to the urgent needs that we are confronting today. But with the other eye, and with our other lens, looking, even now, past the crisis, so that we are able to look to the future, and establish the mechanisms and ingredients for how we might build post-crisis, even during the crisis.

So, the burden of my remarks today are really to unravel how is it that we might look at the current crisis with this bifocal vision. How can we ensure that even as we deal with the immediate needs in front of us, we can do so in a way that looks past the crisis, and then begins to establish the foundation stones and the ingredients for rebuilding with strength and progress and success post this crisis? My view, my speculation, my proposal, is that there are four things you might keep in mind, four principles or cornerstones of an approach to dealing with the crisis that might help us put in place the ingredients for life post this crisis.

Principle number one is we need to help each other. At moments of crisis, often we'll find that forces that pull us apart start becoming stronger and stronger, that the forces of division become stronger and stronger, that the incentive, and maybe the appetite to blame, and to scapegoat become very severe. It is my view that at moments of crisis, these forces of division are exactly the wrong response. They are the things that are going to be the most dangerous. And that people of goodwill and of long-term orientation must seek to overpower those forces that pull us apart with forces that bring us together. You know, even pre-COVID, there were many people in the world who were concerned that globally, as a result of certain political and social forces, there were many trends of fragmentation, of forces pulling us apart, that were deeply worrying. That we were confronted with a great choice as humanity as to whether we were going to understand our condition as being a condition where we are in it for ourselves, or a condition in which we were all in this together.

And again, I think it is clear that the most successful approach to underwriting a future of peace and prosperity for us all, is to adopt the mindset that we are all in this together. Margaret Mead, the acclaimed anthropologist, was once asked what she had understood to be the origins of human civilization. And her response was that in her view, human civilization begins in the archaeological record at the site of discovery of the first human fossil of the thighbone that had been broken and repaired. Her reflection was that in the animal world, you will never find such a fossil of a thighbone, such a critical bone in the animal or human's ability to function physically, you would never find an

example of a broken thighbone that had been repaired. That is a uniquely human phenomenon because for that fiber to have been repaired meant that another human would have come to rescue the person who was hurt, would have helped that person get to a safe place, would have tended and cared for that person, until the bone had healed. She said that the essence of human civilization was the capacity of people to help each other.

Well, at moments of crisis, this idea of helping each other, has to be the biggest theme, guiding everything that we do to conduct ourselves. Even the imperatives of the public health guidelines that we've been given to stay at home, to distance ourselves physically, to wash our hands, to wear face masks, are as much about protecting ourselves as they are about protecting people around us. They themselves, and our commitment to adhering to them, in a sense, is also an expression of this idea of helping each other. So that's principle number one, to embrace the idea that we're all in this together. That if we conduct ourselves now, in the face of the immediate crisis, with this in mind, we will lay the ingredients for a sense of solidarity post-crisis that will give us the strength to continue to build an inclusive future for us all.

Principle number two is to think institutionally, not just individually. Another thing that I have learned in my years with the Aga Khan Development Network system, looking especially at societies in the developing world, is how difficult it is and how rare it is for us to find networks of strong institutions that can help societies advance. You know, here in Canada we are surrounded, so surrounded, by rich, social, political, and economic institutions and support us, that they've almost become invisible to us. But let us never forget that our network of schools, hospitals, universities, and governance institutions from City Hall all the way to the national government and everything in between, and even the critical institutions of the private sector, banks and financial institutions, that that thick network of institutions are the ingredients that allow us to both advance in our everyday life, but also that come together to create a safety net in moments of crisis.

Let us never take those institutions for granted because in many parts of the world, there are populations who simply cannot count on that network of institutions being present. And these are institutions for sure in the public sector, in the private sector, but, as many of you will know for the AKDN system, institutions crucially of civil society. This idea of private energies coming together for public purposes. Institutional strength is in a sense the secret weapon of society's ability to advance. Now, in moments of crisis, we often find that institution's fragilities are uncovered. But when an institution's fragility is uncovered, our response to that shouldn't be to abandon the institution. It should be to redouble our efforts to invest in those institutions. So, when you look around and look at all the ways in which we were either unprepared for this crisis, or in which the institutions that are built to serve us have somehow fallen short, we shouldn't lose hope in those institutions. This should be a moment when we recommit to those institutions and invest in our re-imagination of what those institutions could be in the future. In fact, one of my convictions, is that our capacity as a society, to engage in a process of continual institutional renovation and reinvention is going to be key to our forward success.

There are many people who are saying that the post-COVID world is going to look different from the world before the COVID. And therefore, we're going to need different kinds of capacities in our institutions, maybe even whole new institutions, to be able to cope with the challenges and

difficulties and opportunities that are going to be presented to us in the future. What it says to me, is that we need to have a strong institutional vision and commitment now, even in the context of addressing the crisis today, so that we are left with strong institutions who can help us after the crisis. There is a very famous German play in which there is a dialogue between two characters, and the first character says "Unhappy," he says, "is the land that has no heroes". And the response to him is, "No. Unhappy is the land that needs heroes."

The point that this exchange uncovered for us is that a society is not made simply on the backs of individual acts of heroism. In fact, a society that depends on ongoing acts of individual heroism for its advance is in a society that has a lot of inbuilt fragility. What we need is strong, reliable, high quality, accessible, and inclusive institutions at all levels of societies that we can draw upon, that we can rely upon, that we can use to help us advance as a community, and as a society. Not only here in Canada, but then we must share that institutional strength in every part of the world where there is a need. And again, it's one of my convictions that into the future, that one of the great gifts that Canada is going to be able to give to the world is this capacity to think about how to build strong institutions that take into account public issues and public interests in a variety of ways. So that's the second principle – that we should think institutionally, not just individually, as we look past this crisis.

The third principle that I would advance is the importance of knowledge, and the knowledge economy and the knowledge society. Even pre-COVID, we were in experiencing an extraordinary shift, transformation, in the basis of our society and our economy. This has sometimes been called the fourth industrial revolution, the advent of the knowledge economy, where combinations of technology, capital, and knowledge, were changing, and the ability to be combined in different ways were creating entire new sources of economic value and economic advance. What we have seen over the last decades has been an absolute proliferation of new methods of production in the economy, new forms of innovation in society, and new demands for the ability of knowledge and knowledge workers to contribute to advancing society. It is a huge opportunity, and it brings with it all kinds of big concerns. But one of the things we know is that the future is going to be in the hands of those who are able to continue to advance the state of the art of knowledge, to continue to learn in a lifelong way, to be able to combine advanced knowledge with an ability to collaborate with others.

A recent paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed the growth of a jobs in different job categories. And the only job category that has been growing and is projected to continuing growing are those jobs that combine advanced state-of-the-art knowledge with the skills of collaboration, of collegiality, and of cooperation. That combination is going to be the winning combination for economic success, but also for our ability to work together and to advance in the society. Just look at the key priorities for the world, as we try to confront the COVID crisis. They are all challenges of knowledge and knowledge discovery, the need for better and new testing, the need for a vaccine, of new therapeutics, new methods and models of care, new kinds of epidemiological modeling, new views and visions of population health and their prioritization. These are all questions at the frontier of human knowledge and our ability to deal, even with the crisis we are in today, will be driven by how quickly our knowledge horizon advances.

So, this idea of embracing knowledge and the knowledge economy and the knowledge society, I think, is going to be another key principle for us to position well past the crisis. If anything, the situation we're going through is likely to accelerate the move toward the knowledge economy. And so, all of us I think can really focus during this period on ensuring that we are clear about our own vision for how our professions, our jobs, even our interest and hobbies, relate to state-of-the-art knowledge. What is our own personal learning agenda, what is our personal knowledge agenda? What are the knowledge institutions to which we are connected? How is it that we are contributing to the development and establishment and strengthening of knowledge institutions for our own community, and around the world? Understanding that those knowledge institutions are likely to be the most important trampoline for progress into the future, both now, but even looking past the crisis. So that's principle number three.

My final principle is to embrace pluralism. Another thing I've drawn from my time now with the Aga Khan Development Network institutions is this understanding and appreciation of pluralism. His Highness the Aga Khan's great contribution to Canadian public discourse, it seems to me, over the last two decades has been his extraordinary observation of the genius of Canadian pluralism. This idea that Canada is, while far from perfect, the most distinctive example of pluralism in action that the world is seeing. This ability to make difference work, to make people of radically different worldviews and cultures and origins, come together in a community of peace and prosperity, is an extraordinary thing in human culture and human history. And something that I think Canadians, in a sense can be very proud of, but not something we can be smug about. Again, at moments of crisis, it seems to me that the possibilities of us creating divisions, and in fact the forces against pluralism gaining strength, are ever present. In fact, I think you will know that we've seen examples around the world of the crisis being used as a pretense for many other agendas to be pursued, and many of those agendas anti-pluralist ones.

So, this is a time to recommit to pluralism. One of my reflections after reading and listening to people talk about pluralism a lot over the last 15 years, is this idea that pluralism might be the king of virtues of a society, the virtue from which all other important virtues of a society, and of a successful society, stem. If you can commit to this idea of embracing difference, not just tolerating it, not just putting up with it, not just organizing around it, but truly embracing it, celebrating it, drawing from diversity as a source of progress and advance a source of insight and extraordinary creativity, if you can figure out how to do that, we will have been able to lay the path for a successful society across every dimension of human concern.

Economically, we are seeing that the demands of collaboration and being able to bring diverse voices together is becoming the key differentiator of the great economic entities of our time. Politically, the ability to make sure that difference does not become division is the source of long-term peace and security. As a cultural matter, we are seeing that our ability to be confident in our own cultures allows us to be more and more curious of other people's cultures, and to absorb and learn from them, and not to fear them. This idea of pluralism is massively powerful, but as I said, it can come under strain at moments of crisis. And so, the principle, the fourth principle I want to articulate as we look past the crisis, is to make sure we are recommitting to pluralism now. Even as we deal with the crisis in front of us, we do not let the forces of exclusion and of division enter in like a Trojan horse into our responses now. And if we do so, we will be setting the stones in place for a

much stronger recovery and rebuild past the crisis, knowing that pluralism will be the key to social and economic advance for us after this crisis is over.

So those are my four principles, four speculations, for what we might hold onto as ideas and ideals, almost like anchors, that help us steady the ship, as we respond to the crisis and position ourselves past the crisis. One, that we must help each other, that we must maintain our sense of social solidarity, we must remember that we're not in it for ourselves, but that we are all in this together. Two, that we must think institutionally, not just individually. But we must use this moment of crisis to recommit and strengthen the key institutions that we rely on to be both a safety net but also an engine of progress, and that we use this moment to continue to reinvent and reimagine our institutions to make them better and more suited to the opportunities and challenges ahead. Number three, that we embrace the idea of knowledge and the knowledge society, that we draw from that inspiration to invest in ourselves and in the right knowledge institutions and organizations that will be a trampoline for our progress. And finally, that we remember and cherish the notion of pluralism, that we safeguard our pluralism here in Canada, and we advance it, we strengthen it. And of course, we find every opportunity to share it with the world.

These four principles are not only, it seems to me, practically required today. It seems to me, they are also ethically required. These are not only practical ploys. I think they are actually deep ethical commitments that remind us of our commitments, not only to ourselves, but to each other. That they provide a strong ethical and moral compass at a difficult time. It seems to me that we should never underestimate the power of these moral commitments, the power they have in moments of crisis especially, to give us conviction and courage, and to inspire us to bold action.

It reminds me of one of these extraordinary stories about Abraham Lincoln that Doris Kearns Goodwin writes about in her beautiful book *Team of Rivals*. She talks about Abraham Lincoln as being such an extraordinary leader during the Civil War, that he had this combination of insight and vision and moral courage, along with a practical and political savvy which was really quite remarkable. One of the stories she tells is of the day he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This was the document that freed the slaves in the US, that recognized the ill of slavery that had essentially been one of the most important drivers of the Civil War and continued to be a source of division. It allowed Lincoln to provide a deep and abiding moral purpose to the Civil War. On the day that he was to sign it, January 1st, 1863, the White House had been open for a traditional set of receptions where people were invited into the White House to greet the First Family and wish them Happy New Year. For the first half of the day, Abraham Lincoln had been in the White House shaking hands, for I think several hours. He got back to his desk to review the final draft of his most important document that ended up being an absolute turning point for the war. And that document was in front of him, and he reviewed it finally, and he realized the extraordinary moral import that he was about to lead to the war effort, and he was convinced in the rightness of what he was doing. He picked up the pen and was ready to sign the document – but just as his pen was about to hit the paper, he noticed in his hand a quiver. The muscles in his hand had weakened from a day-long set of handshaking in the reception that had preceded this moment, this important moment at his desk, and he paused. He put down the pen. And he said to his colleagues in the room, “If I sign this paper with a quivering hand, history will record that I hesitated.” And he said, “It will weaken the moral and ethical impulse with which I am signing this document.” So, Lincoln pauses. He waits until the

strength in his arm and his hand has returned. And then he picks up the pen, and with boldness and conviction, he signs the Emancipation Proclamation.

Let us never forget the importance of ethical commitments. The moral purpose, which is called for at moments of difficulty and crisis, that we can come up with a practical agenda that is both relevant to our time, as well as an expression of our deep ethical commitments to each other and to humanity. And then, with boldness and conviction, and with hope and optimism and confidence in the future, we can act.

Thank you.