

Banquet Speeches

Address by Mowlana Hazar Imam

Your Excellencies, Your Honours, Your Grace, Chief Rabbi, Honourable Ministers, Your Worship, ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to begin by thanking the Prime Minister of Canada and the Premier of Ontario for the extremely kind messages which they sent this evening. And to thank also, the Honourable Lt. Governor of Ontario, the Honourable Minister for Multiculturalism, the Honourable Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, and His Worship, the Mayor of Toronto for their very generous and their very kind words about the Ismaili community, and about my wife and myself.

For my wife and me this has been a very memorable evening as well as a most moving one. We are almost at the end of a tour of your country which has taken us from coast to coast and back again. We have been greeted everywhere with immense kindness and warmth by your Government and your civic leaders. This has been our first extensive visit to Canada and we have enjoyed the experience immensely and we express to you this evening, our deep thanks.

The tributes which have been paid to the Ismaili community this evening have been generous indeed and I am extremely happy to know how well the Ismailis are regarded and how quickly they have established themselves as good citizens of your country. You have heard from the first speaker tonight that we take pride in being an organized community. This characteristic has served us well in Canada, where the great majority living here today arrived just six years ago having been expelled from Uganda almost overnight by President Idi Amin.

Of the three East African countries where Ismailis lived, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, only Uganda has displayed such a blatant disregard of human rights. I am indebted to the Governments of Tanzania and Kenya for a consistent and humane understanding of our problems. Most Ismailis came here stateless, destitute and almost literally with only the clothes they stood up in. Canada was the first of several countries to recognize this as the immense human tragedy it actually represented.

Spontaneously, you opened up your arms to our people, you welcomed them and made it possible for them to start a new life in a new world. It was a gesture we shall never forget. We are not a large community, but in six years since the Ismailis left their country on the other side of the world, with a totally different society and economic environment, they have adjusted themselves to new customs, new laws, new institutions and a new way of life. They have done this in the best of our traditions of self-reliance, free enterprise and good citizenship. Equally important, I think, we were fortunate in that the majority of immigrants were well equipped both physically and intellectually for such a sudden transformation. In Uganda, as in Pakistan, India and elsewhere, our schools fortunately, were amongst the best.

Some might say that our academic systems are a little old-fashioned. Yes, we believe in examinations, but judging by results, these institutions are performing well by international standards. In this sense at least, Canada's generosity is beginning to be repaid, and it will be my community's and my permanent effort to see that this generosity is repaid and more than repaid.

Many of our boys and girls who attended our schools in Uganda, also went on to leading universities and colleges in Europe and North America. They arrived here, therefore, with skills to offer and today you will find them in a wide range of businesses and professional activities. There are doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, engineers, insurance brokers, pharmacists and nurses. Many more have started their own businesses on their own account. Indeed, as I remarked the other night to the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of Alberta, the Honourable Donald Getty, who shares by the way my interest in horse-racing, about the only Ismaili occupation I have not yet discovered is the ancient and honourable craft of book-making and turf accounting!

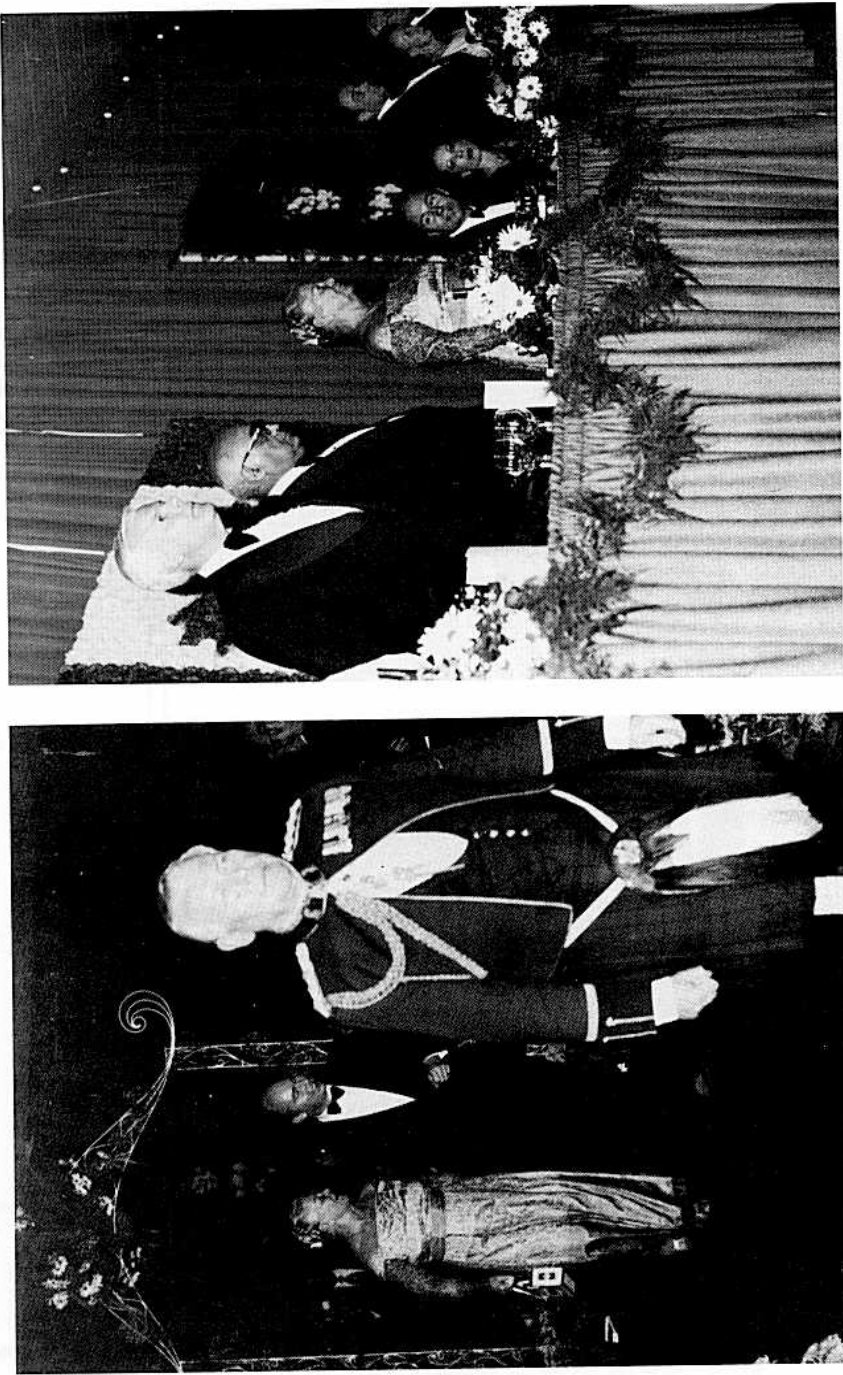


Not all Ismailis who came to Canada were university graduates. Some of our older people and others who were less well-educated, had a much more difficult period of adjustment. Here again however, the specialized facilities which Canada was able to offer us, through private as well as official channels, married well with our own internal community programs from which we have gained experience from other parts of the world. Without the active participation and encouragement of our Canadian friends, however, we could never have achieved so much in such a short time. Under our own lending programs, for example, and with the ready and good assistance of two of your leading banks the Bank of Nova Scotia and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, special loan facilities have been organized for small businesses. Nearly 1000 of these have been started and the failure rate is less than 10%. I believe this compares quite favourably with the national average.

I am happy and honoured to see among our many distinguished guests this evening, a number of representatives from African and Asian countries. I travel a good deal and often visit different parts of Africa and the Indian sub-continent. Your Excellencies, I feel sure, will agree with me that Canada is regarded very highly by the developing world.

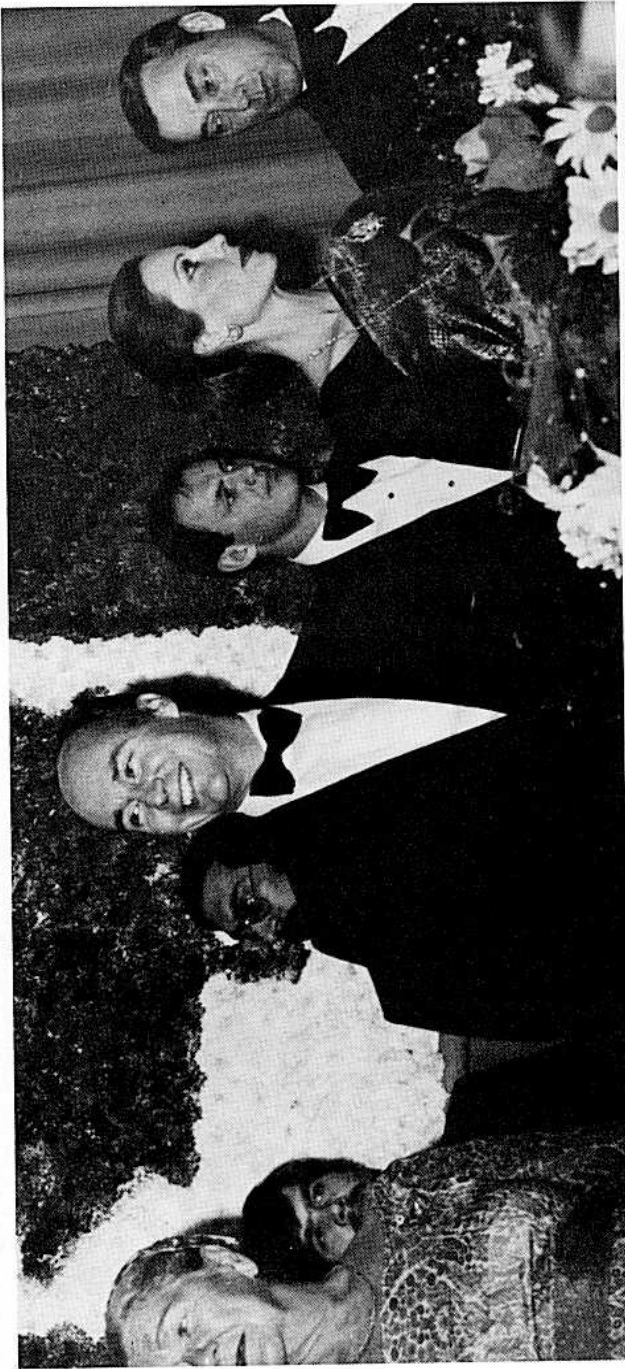
She is welcomed diplomatically everywhere in the world and her influence extends far beyond her natural size and wealth. The foreign aid administered by the Canadian International Development Agency illustrates very well what I mean. Canada is not among the largest international donors, but her programs are extremely well administered and reach the ordinary people whom they are intended to benefit. That is a rare accomplishment today. Foreign aid is but one facet of Canada as an international power who takes her responsibilities seriously and whose policies have never in her history been tainted by the cruder forms of colonialism, racialism or isolationism. I believe it is this great tradition more than any other, which prompted your country to help my people in their hour of need.

On behalf of my wife, my family and the Ismailis all over the world, I thank you from my heart. Thank You.



Mowlana Hazar Imam and Ontario's Lieutenant Governor, The Hon. Mrs. Pauline McGibbon, lead the head table guests into the Banquet Hall.

Introduction of the head table guests.



At the head table - front: l. to r.: Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour Pauline McGibbon, Mowlana Hazar Imam, Begum Sallimah and the Hon. Norman Cafik, Canada's Minister of State for Multiculturalism.