OPENING ADDRESS

SPEAKING THE TRUTH FOR A NEW BEGINNING

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN

The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean is the 27th Governor General, Commander-in-Chief of Canada, former UNESCO Special Envoy to Haiti, 3rd Secretary General of La Francophonie, and co-founder of the Michaëlle Jean Foundation.

Dear Friends,

I would like to begin by recognizing, with all my love and infinite gratitude, the First Peoples who have carried the breath and soul of this immense boreal land that is Canada, since time immemorial.

For First Nations, the Métis and Inuit peoples, this land holds no secret. For millennia, they have been the guardians and custodians of a rich and diverse, natural, cultural and linguistic heritage of great tangible and intangible importance… only a sliver of which we can now appreciate.

The loss is abyssal. How many languages and precious artifacts have now disappeared, depriving of critical knowledge not only the peoples whose identity and existence were its originators, but all of us, humanity as a whole.

Time and again, our Indigenous brothers and sisters persist in reminding us of the treasured memories that they hold, ones they long to share with us and with the rest of the world, on the importance of safeguarding the land with all the life that it shelters. They say it with fervour, in the vibrant, beating heart of their drums, songs and incantations, dances and stories that not only evoke the Creator, but also summon the spirit of the ancestors, their precious teachings, an appreciation for all the knowledge and wisdom they passed down to us.

The depth of Indigenous words never ceases to move and amaze me. They are living testimony to

the scale of the hardships, the suffering, the wounds.

Above all, these are words that speak the language of resistance, tongues that stand proud and fierce, to this day, over no less than five centuries of colonization, and struggles.



National Black Canadians Summit, Ottawa, February 2019.

Indigenous words speak of an incredible willpower to safeguard experience, knowledge, stories, civilizational traits and that constant relationship to the universe, the sacredness of all creatures and the land.

How hard it must be to remain perpetually excluded, kept at the margins of this very land, land of which they were abruptly dispossessed, while they gave so much and still have so much to offer.

And it is in these terms that Indigenous peoples wish to be heard, so that we can conceive with them of a future together.

As Governor General of Canada, on October 15, 2009, when I had the immense privilege of launching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with survivors of the residential schools, accompanied by their children and grandchildren, I had these words:

"When the present doesn't recognize the wrongs of the past, the future takes its revenge. For that reason, we must never, never turn away from the opportunity of confronting history together – the opportunity to right a historical wrong."

Isn't that what we are confronted with, now more than ever in these days of social strife, even as we look into what this pandemic is revealing?

> **"Indigenous words speak of an incredible willpower to safeguard experience, knowledge, stories, civilizational traits and that constant relationship to the universe, the sacredness of all creatures and the land."**

See how critical it is that we, Canadians from all walks of life, strive to come together by remembering where we come from, the stumbling blocks, the difficult and painful times, the long winding path we have travelled as well as our many accomplishments, the achievements and the values we want to continue to see prevail in order to move forward, together.

We can only celebrate Canada on the basis of this vibrant hope; an urgent, fundamental, foundational hope.

In these times of great uncertainty and anxiety, who can say how and in what state we will emerge from this crisis?

After putting so much distance between ourselves, after the lockdown, with shops, offices and businesses closed up for months, will we see with infinite sadness our efforts falter?

We have feared. We have seen many of our elders die. We often could not attend to their final moments with dignity. Neither could we pay them the tribute they deserved.

The grief does not leave us.

A full light has finally been shed on the abuse our elders have suffered.

It took a pandemic to expose the horror and the consequences of the irresponsible blind spots that we now need to take into account, in shame.

It took the pandemic to realize, with shame, the horrific consequences of our carelessness, the irresponsibility behind our structural blind spots.

We will have to do everything we can to make sure the words of goodwill are put into action.

For the most vulnerable among us, for our most underserved communities, for marginalized young people, for abused and imperiled women and their children, for migrants, asylum seekers and seasonal workers, we see the worst scenarios unfold. We are deeply concerned by the gaps widening.

What gives us hope, however, is the valour of the women and men on the front lines. The many who do not spare any effort, who, on the contrary, answer the call of duty with a sense of dedication that commands admiration. Those, many of them immigrants, who face all manner of risk to alleviate the suffering of others, to save lives, and provide essential services.

“It took the pandemic to realize, with shame, the horrific consequences of our carelessness, the irresponsibility behind our structural blind spots.”

I remember my beloved mother, a psychiatric and geriatric nurse, who followed the same vocation, with the same work ethic. Like my aunt, who died alone in Montreal in a long-term care centre, stricken by COVID-19. No member of her family was allowed to assist her.

Our gratitude also goes to those along the chain links of solidarity who persist in making the voices of the most vulnerable and the most deprived heard, their realities known.

What is also being vocally expressed these days are much heightened demands towards respect for life, human rights, the rule of law, key principles and values. Thousands of citizens are taking to the streets to demand, clamour, speak up with a concern for constant vigilance.

The brutality and agony inflicted on George Floyd in the course of a murderous police intervention in Minneapolis did not fail to ignite outrage and fright.

The black man pinned to the ground.

The white man in uniform, leisurely putting his weight through his knee on the neck of his prey.

The black man moaning, crying out in pain, clearly saying that he is dying.

The white man in uniform, leisurely pushing even harder to suffocate him. Until his very last breath.

George Floyd is neither the first nor the last one on the receiving end of such rage. The list is unending and overwhelming, not just in the United States, but elsewhere, right here at home as well.

The list that includes George Floyd is a long and damning one. The rage has taken so many lives, not only in the US, but elsewhere and here at home also.

Police brutality, the use of excessive force, racial profiling are realities that Blacks and Indigenous people know too much about.

> **“The air has become increasingly unbreathable, fouled with hatred of the other.”**

The data, statistics, studies, reports, testimonies and the images of assault and brutality abound, all pointing with evidence to the heinous nature of racism.

They also conjure up the heritage and stigma of a certain colonial history that, for centuries, denied Black and Indigenous peoples their humanity, that put them down, as the least of the least, the last of the last; Let us remember that Black and Indigenous peoples were enslaved together in the founding years of this country and across this continent.



National Black Canadians Summit, Ottawa, February 2019.

Hope that this may change is now within our grasp. It is found in the hearts and courage of thousands of demonstrators of all skin colour, shades and origins, many of them young who, in the midst of the pandemic, have taken to the streets in cities across Canada and around the world, chanting: “Black Lives Matter! Our lives matter too! All lives matter!”... along with George Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe!”

Because this much is clear: the air has become increasingly unbreathable, fouled with hatred of the other, the creeping stench of xenophobia, racism against Blacks, the dark-skinned, the Asian, the Aboriginal, so many brutal and deadly homophobic incidents or against Muslims, recurrent antisemitism, extremism, terrorism, mass shootings and massacres, some targeting women. This madness is suffocating and poisoning the world.

But worse is the indifference.

Do we betray our country when we say the racism is systemic, that it is cunningly embedded in the attitudes, biases and practices found within many sectors of our society, businesses and institutions?

Do we betray our country when we say that such systemic racism undermines and destroys lives?

Some people seem to think so and would rather take refuge in denial.

Hope is in the desire to serve our country, the courage to speak the truth as a call of duty, crying out for a new beginning. Nothing shows greater determination than this rallying call to end, yes, systemic discrimination and racism.

Individuals and communities are rising, asking for more, making their voices heard, demanding action. Respect! Recognition! Equity for all!

The time has come, I believe, to take action and to build together upon the strong foundation of everything we share, our universal humanistic values, and invest our best selves in the cause of justice.

Hope is in our sense of urgency, our pressing calls to combat all forms of economic and social inequality, to ensure that all have a right to freedom, peace of mind, dignity coupled with serenity, physical and mental wellbeing, safety, along with decent living conditions, and the same confidence towards the future.

Hope is in the loud calls and manifest desire to break down the walls of indifference, to let it be known that nothing good comes from excluding others, to help everyone understand that marginalization is one of the worst forms of aggression, that it leads to so much violence.

Hope is in all of us, the life forces of Canadian communities coming together to press relentlessly for uncompromising public policies that address and redress inequalities.

Hope is in our combined qualities and capacities coming together, our collective intelligence towards nothing less than the eradication of all forms of discrimination and injustice.

Hope is in all our voices united, as sisters and brothers of a unique race, the human race, clamouring for change, through all the small gestures that make a difference and allow us to move forward, to overcome terror, cruelty and contempt.



Planning Committee for the National Black Canadians Summit, Halifax, March 2020 (postponed to March, 2021-2022).

Dear friends,

The Canada we love, the Canada we want to celebrate today cannot be on the wrong side of history.

We will not let the country that we love go adrift, turn its back on the hope that is within our reach, even in these difficult times.

> **“This hope also requires courage. The courage to look reality in the eye, to see clearly and understand better so we can take action in a truly inclusive and exemplary manner.”**

The hope requires us to spare no effort. It demands we always remain vigilant.

We are marking Canadian Multiculturalism Day, an ideal established as a system in Canada and for which we celebrate 50 years of implementation filled with good intentions, an intent in marked contrast to policies of assimilation, seeking to highlight the richness of our diversity.

However, this ideal of multiculturalism that we celebrate today should not distract us from the sum total of the persistent inequalities and injustices that jeopardize our ability to live well together.

This hope also requires courage. The courage to look reality in the eye, to see clearly and understand better so we can take action in a truly inclusive and exemplary manner.

I heard, “nothing about us, without us!” and I agree. The change we want to see has to include all, matter to all and be a shared responsibility.

The voices of the oppressed, their experiences and outlooks are part of the solution.

The time is ripe for all of our hopes, ripe for recognizing and celebrating each and every stone that women, men and youth, organizations and institutions bring to the edifice, the building of the country that we want, a Canada founded upon justice and equity.