

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

I-STAR Awards 2004

Richmond Hill, Toronto

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Parents, students, honoured guests and friends:

I wish to thank President Alnasir Samji for inviting me to speak today at the 2004 I-STAR Awards Ceremony & Luncheon. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to participate in this important event, especially so soon after having dinner with, as well as conferring an honorary Doctor of Laws degree on His Highness Prince Aga Khan just last week. From that experience, I feel a special closeness with the Ismaili community.

During that dinner, which was co-hosted by President Bob Birgeneau of the University of Toronto and myself, I had the honour of sitting between His Highness and Shafik Sachedina, his Director of Diplomatic Affairs. While our conversations were mainly concentrated on the alleviation of poverty, on history and world politics, I came to realize the importance of the work His Highness is doing in the field of education worldwide.

Today, we are here because of his Highness's devotion to the well being of future generations of Ismailis. We honour the youth in the Ismaili Muslim community with the I-STAR Awards for 2004, organized by the Ismaili Council for Ontario and the Aga Khan Education Board for Canada. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge everyone's efforts in making this event so successful.

Before I start telling you my story, I would like to congratulate the award winners. You are the stars today. At this time, please join me in acknowledging your parents, and teachers, who no doubt had a great deal to do with shaping the attitudes that have made you so successful. As we celebrate yours and their achievements, I know that they are sharing your pride and happiness today.

I note that the awards, while recognizing high levels of academic achievement, also stress achievements in sports, community service, arts and culture, science and technology, leadership, and outstanding effort.

As someone who has just completed her doctorate last year, I would be the last person to deny that academic achievements are not important. However, we can all excel in a variety of areas, and make a difference. Through my own experience, and observations, I have discovered that good grades are but part of the formula for success in life. Ultimately, the goal of these awards is to motivate future winners, as well as to celebrate this year's winners as outstanding members, not only of the Ismaili community, but also in the global community in which we are all members.

I have often been asked why I work so hard, how I manage to do all that I do without losing my cool, and what makes me who I am? So I will tell you about some defining moments in my life.

I was born in Hong Kong in 1941 into what was considered the Chinese Establishment. When Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese, my family went into free China as refugees, and for 4 years, we were on the run from the advancing Japanese forces.

Despite my very young age, I have vivid memories of events during the war, of not having the daily necessities, of travelling by transport trucks, because often they were the only available form of transportation, if you were lucky. I remember climbing on top of the cargo by rope ladder, and for the small child that I was, it was not easy. We had to hang on for dear life when the trucks were on the move. The only food that was easily transportable and nutritious was hard boiled eggs. I still remember being motion sick and throwing them up. To this day, the smell of hard boiled eggs still reminds me of the War years.

I remember holding my mother's hand while walking past the house we lived in, after a bombing raid. I said, "That's our house!" But there were only the crumbling walls left. It meant we had to be on the move again.

I never had a toy during those years, and neither did I have shoes. I wore wooden clogs because leather was reserved for boots for the soldiers. On Christmas day, 1945, back in Hong Kong, I had my first doll.

We were fortunate enough to be able to return to our home. We had a place to live, but there was very little money. Our family was in properties which were worth nothing after the War. My father was a well -educated man, who had many friends, and good connections, in China, Hong Kong, as well as abroad, and our situation gradually improved.

As the Second World War ended, civil war was waged in China. In 1949, when the Communists won, waves of refugees poured into Hong Kong. I will never forget the sight of a decrepit looking man with one leg who was still in his tattered soldier's uniform. The conditions many of the refugees lived in were deplorable. The hillsides of Hong Kong turned into shanty towns.

I watched my father contribute to prosperity in the Colony, as well as improving, and bringing dignity, to the lives of the refugees, by helping them establish businesses, as well as urging the government to build public housing. He did this, both as a member of the Urban Council, and later as a Member of the Legislative Council and Executive Council, in the Hong Kong government, as well as in the position of a private citizen.

In the days when there were no government scholarships, he offered assistance wherever it was needed, including providing funding for students to go to university. He used to keep letters written to him, by young people asking for help, in his pocket so that he wouldn't forget to attend to them.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China by the Communists in 1949, high school students in Hong Kong, who were educated with Chinese as the main language of instruction, could no longer go back to China for university, and they could not get into the University of Hong Kong because the language of instruction was English. So my Father became instrumental in the founding of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

I learnt from my father that people, and not politics, are important. He strived to help the people in Hong Kong as well as in China. He negotiated for China to pipe water to Hong Kong in the 1960s when there was a severe water shortage. That marked the beginning of the end of water rationing in the life of the citizens of Hong Kong. He was also instrumental in

introducing business investments into China, from Hong Kong, Europe, and Japan. You can say that he was a man with many friends from all over the world, and he had positive influence in the society he lived in.

My father was an early riser, and a very hard worker. He worked until the day he died at the age of 78. You can guess that he was the major influence in my life. His philosophy towards others was very similar to that of His Highness the Aga Khan, but he was doing it on a smaller scale, concentrating mainly in East Asia. His concern for the Chinese people is similar to the concern His Highness has for the Ismaili people. His belief in the power of education had a profound influence in my life. I also learnt from him that we don't exist in the world just for ourselves, but that we have responsibility to the community in which we live in.

I was an observant child. I learnt how difficult life could be, no matter what circumstances we come from. From observations and personal experiences I have had throughout my life, I learnt never to take anything for granted, and I am always thankful for what we have everyday.

I remember at age 11, a teacher once said to me that he didn't understand, for someone from my family background, why I was so hard working. People are still asking me the same question - with my family circumstances, why don't I just relax and have a good time. But, my formative years have had a profound effect on the way I live my life. I continue to work hard, and contribute to society, and hopefully, I will be able to improve the lives of many of those around us. Besides, if I didn't work, I would be bored to death!

When I am asked how I am able to do so much, my answer is, I don't waste time. I will tell you an incident when I was around 6 or 7 years old. One day, my mother came into my room and said that it was a mess, and that I had to clean it up that day. I thought it was unfair since she didn't give me prior warning, so I pulled everything out of the drawers, and threw them on the floor in a temper. Then I looked around, and right away regretted it, because now I had even more to tidy up. I learnt then that I was never going to lose my temper again! Losing your cool is a terrible waste of time.

Every experience you have in your life helps to mold your character. The I-STAR Awards are designed to develop well-educated youth with leadership qualities, and community spirit, who will become model citizens

for the Canada of the future. What do we mean by leadership qualities, in particular for visible minorities, in Canadian society?

In order to be a good leader, you first have to be proud of who you are, no matter where you come from, your religion, background, or the colour of your skin. In the Ismaili community, the education and assistance you give each other helps you to define yourselves. Since September 11th, the world has entered dangerous times, and ignorance has become our worst enemy. There is a great lack of cultural literacy between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world. I believe, for everyone, the most important issue is to keep an open mind and to learn from each other.

Most importantly, leadership comes from believing in your own abilities, as well as the value of your heritage. In my case, I have always believed that I can do anything I want to do, even when I was very young. I think that is because I am proud of my heritage, no matter where I am in the world. As a teenager, it didn't bother me that I looked different when I went to school in England, and today, I pity those who call me a Chinaman. As Ismailis, your culture stresses education, good work, volunteerism, and support for humanitarian causes. And His Highness Prince Aga Khan is himself a man who exemplifies all the principles that Ismailis live by. When you have pride in your heritage, confidence follows.

Canada is a multicultural society, and we are fortunate to be able to celebrate our heritage, and work together in our communities, to help our young people to be successful. Everyday, intercultural and inter-religious dialogues occur between Canadians of all backgrounds.

However, despite these positive attitudes, something is still missing in Canada. The diversity I see on the streets is not reflected in Canada's boardrooms, in the executive of the Public Service, or in politics. All of us – in particular young people like our award recipients – need to make a commitment to change this situation for the better.

In 1998, I became the first Canadian of Asian descent to be appointed to the Senate of Canada. My question was, why did it take so long? In recorded Canadian history, the first group of Chinese arrived in Nootka Sound in 1788. Asians are now beginning to represent a significant part of the Canadian population, but our representation in Parliament is insignificant, both in the House of Commons and in the Senate. Senator

Mobina Jaffer became the second Asian Canadian appointed to the Senate a few years ago, so now there are two of us. We need to do a lot better.

We see a similar situation in the Public Service and in the Boardrooms of Canadian Corporations. The business case for including visible minorities in leadership positions is clear. The Conference Board of Canada reports that given current growth rates, the visible minority population will rise from the current 13.4% to almost one fifth of the population by 2016. Keep in mind that new immigrants, most of whom are visible minorities, tend to be younger, and Canada's population is aging, so the importance of removing barriers to the full-participation of visible minorities will grow over time. To put it bluntly, we will need new immigrants to be working at their full potential to support our rapidly aging population, and to keep our economy on track.

The Conference Board recognizes that we are already losing billions to the Canadian economy because there is a wage gap between visible and non-visible minorities, and visible minorities are underemployed. In a major report published in April this year, they successfully made the business case to employers to argue for change at the executive levels. So, awareness of this problem is growing, and even though leadership must begin at the top, I do believe that we can make a difference as individuals.

I believe there are many commonalities between the Chinese Canadian, and Ismaili Canadian communities. We have always assisted one another in our overseas communities. We raise money for good causes, readily supporting hospitals, charities, schools, seniors' homes, and other resources within our communities. We stress the importance of education above all else. But in terms of politics, and leadership, outside of our own communities, we have tended to eschew our role in Canadian society, both as mentors for others in our communities, as well as our potential as individuals to bring about positive change in this country.

So, as Ismailis, and as prominent citizens in Canada, I believe you, like the Canadians of Chinese descent, have a role to play in changing Canada for the better. Where are our representatives in Parliament or in the Boardrooms of Canadian corporations? If change is going to happen for visible minorities, established individuals who have been successful in Canada need to take the lead. Our young people need to know that they can be whatever they want to be - CEOs of Canadian corporations, Chief

Executives of the Public Service and, the Prime Minister of Canada. For those of us who are in a position to help, it is up to us to open the doors so that those who follow us will find their way.

A few months ago I was speaking to a group of Asian Canadian law students in Ottawa about this topic. One of the problems, particularly with entering politics, is that, when visible minorities vote as a block for a visible minority candidate, we are said to be manipulating the process. When we don't vote at all, we are said to be apathetic and apolitical. The truth is, many individuals are still not comfortable with the idea of ethnic groups having any real power in policy making. Well, times have change, and so should perspectives on this issue. Tomorrow, you have a chance to make a difference, so exercise your democratic rights to protect diversity and tolerance in this country.

I believe the most important thing that you can take away from the I-STAR Awards today is the emphasis on self-esteem. This was the most important thing for me as a young person. I always knew I could be anything I wanted to be because I had a sense of my own worth. In Canada, my Asian heritage is an asset because it gives me a wide perspective on issues, and I, like you, can draw on thousands of years of culture and tradition which give us distinct advantages in many situations.

Your heritage, as Ismailis, is one of triumph over obstacles, in maintaining your religious values in the face of great challenges, especially in recent times. I know many Ismailis came to Canada from political persecution. For those of you born in Canada, I would ask that you not forget your heritage, and your history, because it is truly a gift to you. As Mawlana Hazar Imam said, "We should draw great learning from the past and project it towards the future." (*The Ismaili Canada*, p. 23, Mar. 2004.)

Finally, I wish to stress that education is more than learning from books or getting a degree. In Chinese, the word "knowledge" is made up of 2 characters, "learn" and "ask". Keep an open mind, and an open heart, and ask a lot of questions. Life is the best teacher, and learning continues until the day we die. In time, we can transform information and knowledge into insights and wisdom which are what make us human.

I would encourage today's award winners, as well as all future winners, to gain insight from your life's experiences. Reach out to other

cultures and communities, make friends and share knowledge, with the firm conviction that you have much to offer others, and that you can make a difference in Canadian society.

Again, congratulations to the winners, and thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with you today.