

Reply by the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to the toast by the Governor-General of Canada

Rideau Hall, Ottawa: 3 November 2003.

Your Excellency, Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson,
Your Excellency, John Ralston Saul,
Prime Minister, Jean Chretien,
Madame Aline Chretien,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

My wife, our entire delegation and I are deeply honoured and delighted to visit Canada, and thank you, Governor General, most sincerely for your kind invitation. We bring with us the warmest greetings of the people of South Africa to your Excellencies and to the people of Canada.

We also thank Your Excellencies for your most charming and gracious hospitality within the elegance of historic Rideau Hall, which stands out during this uncertain beginning of the new millennium as a beacon of hope and a unifying symbol of a vibrant society.

We marvel at the transformation of Canadian society and salute you, Your Excellency, for your bold vision in re-shaping the office of the Governor-General. It is truly inspiring to witness, at first hand here at Rideau Hall, a multicultural work-in-progress. Your work and your vision would undoubtedly inspire many people, here and abroad, to emulate you as a nation-builder.

When you unveiled the Women Are Persons! Monument in Calgary on Oct 18, 1999, you spoke of those pioneering Famous Five Women as nation-builders, who paved the way for Canadian women to become leaders in every field in the most exciting and most imaginative ways possible and you said:

"And we must always fight against the status quo: otherwise progress will not be made in creating a new, renewed Canada."

Indeed, it is when we constantly seek new ways of facing our challenges, when we begin to think anew, that we are able to reconstruct communities, our nations and ourselves.

Your Excellency, Canadian women, aboriginal groups and new immigrants achieved the seemingly impossible when they fought for and won rights previously denied to them. Today, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, like our own Bill of Rights, is a living testament as to how a dynamic and evolving nation can re-draw its own roadmap.

The collective and civic endeavours of many people of this country demonstrate that each and every person can truly make a difference in renewing our nations and indeed creating a better world in which we wish to live.

After centuries of racism, colonialism and apartheid oppression, as South Africans, we also gained, for the first time, the freedom to decide our own destiny in 1994. We are very pleased to say that the many acts of solidarity by many Canadians over many years, contributed greatly to the democratic victory of 1994. For this, we will forever be grateful to Canada and all her people.

As we continue along our own path of development and the renewal of our continent, we will draw strength from people like you, Your Excellency, because yours is a truly inspiring life story.

Your journey from the Far East to Canada brought you to Mozambique during the war years, past our own shores, the southernmost part of Africa, to the land of the fabled North Star. As you passed our shores, you and your family would not have had the opportunity to interact with our people.

Nonetheless, and despite your brief stay in Mozambique, we think we would still be correct to claim that part of your being belongs to us, as Africans, as Africa is of you.

I would imagine, Your Excellency, that it might not have occurred to you that one day, you would, as Governor-General, make a joyous new voyage of discovery as you did in 2002 in Labrador, where your compatriots would enchant you with their ancient Inuit wisdom and yet surprise you with their enthusiastic embrace of other cultures and religions such as is represented by the Moravian Church.

Canada and South Africa developed as new nations into vibrant rainbow societies of indigenous communities, colonists, freed slaves and immigrants. Necessarily, our development as nations has been influenced by the legacies of our past.

One of Canada's foremost artists, Tom Thomson, has, through his vibrant and bold brushstrokes in his masterpiece, Autumn Foliage, used a kaleidoscope of autumnal colours as a metaphor for the resilient, proud, prosperous and multicultural Canadian nation.

Sturdy trees brought you a bountiful harvest of maple syrup and gave you a pine log cabin with the help of the axe, the plough and the hammer, which so inspired the celebrated 19th century Canadian poet, Isabella Valancy Crawford to proclaim:

"When rust hath gnawed me deep and red, A nation strong shall lift his head."

The glorious autumn hues of falling leaves of maple, birch, cedar and oak, remind us of impending winter with a promise of eternal spring. Whether we are beneath the heavens of the Southern Cross or here near the North Star, we know that human societies too have similar cyclical patterns as we face life's immense challenges in the perpetual rhythm of the earth.

We are confident that in South Africa and Africa we will renew our Continent and eradicate the desperate poverty, hunger, disease and underdevelopment, which continue to afflict almost all our countries.

The road ahead is no doubt challenging. Canada, our ally against apartheid, has become our strongest partner as we confront the challenges of underdevelopment.

Your commitments before and after the Kananaskis G8 Summit are bearing fruit. Strengthened by the wisdom and material support of Canada and the rest of the world, we are certain that the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the African Union's programme for the regeneration of our continent, will succeed.

Over the next couple of days, our delegation hopes to renew old friendships and build new and enduring partnerships. As we know, in one particular industry, mining, there are many similarities and much cooperation between our countries. Both South Africa and the new Eldorado, Canada, have been blessed with riches buried deep in the bowels of the earth.

But our bonds go much deeper than the deepest mines. Our two nations share the same values and aspirations. We have the same vision for a peaceful and stable world. We truly believe in and promote equitable, fair and mutually beneficial global partnerships to create prosperity for all, to build and sustain a better life for all human beings.

It is because of this bond that the Canadian people occupy a special place in our hearts. To give all our people the possibility directly to convey their feelings of friendship to the people of this country, we would be honoured and delighted if Your Excellencies could pay us a visit. H.E. the Governor General would also see some of the land she would not have seen when she passed by 60 years ago or when she came to South Africa as a journalist.

Ladies and gentlemen:

Please rise and join me in a toast to the good health and prosperity of their Excellencies, Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul and the wonderful people of this great country, Canada. To your good health!

I thank you.