

Nigeria: Great Nation, Good People

Text of an address

to

Canadian Association of Nigerian Physicians and Dentists

[CANPAD]

At

The 2009 CANPAD ANNUAL CONVENTION

REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN

By

His Excellency
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Nigeria's High Commissioner to Canada

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Let me congratulate you for yet another milestone achievement of your association, under the able leadership of your President Prof. Dr. Chris Ekong. You have not only added another year to the life of CANPAD, but also added a new focus, both in the number of participants and scope to this years meeting and symposium. Saskatchewan holds a special place as the home of medi-care in Canada. It was here that the late Premier Thommy Douglas initiated, what has today become the envied Canadian health care system. It is therefore appropriate that Saskatchewan hosts this gathering.

I also have clocked one year in Canada and have survived one Canadian winter, and have come to consider CANPAD annual meeting as my anniversary landmark celebration, since your 2008 annual meeting was my first official interaction with Diaspora Nigerians in Canada.

Let me say that in the course of the last one year, my respect for your organization has grown. In my personal and official interaction with your members and the leadership of your great Association, I am convinced that no other professional group of Nigerian-Canadians is better organized, nor more cohesive than CANPAD.

I point out this fact to encourage other Nigerian-Canadians professional groups like Lawyers, Engineers, Pharmacists, Academics, Quantity Surveyors, Managers, businessmen, IT experts, faith-based group leaders, Media practitioners etc. etc. to organize themselves like CANPAD, and begin to ask what they can do for our great country Nigeria.

In my responsibility as your servant in your house in Ottawa, the Nigerian High Commission, I have come across four types of Nigerians in Canada: There are those like you, who are professionals, and are making invaluable contributions to Canada and their country of origin in the public service or as private sector businessmen and women.

I have met high school, undergraduate and post graduate students, many of them your children, who are very willing return to Nigeria after graduation, to serve in the National Youth Service Corps, and others who feel embarrassed to associate with Nigeria and Nigerians.

I have met unemployed refugee claimants, some of whom have been in Canadian detention cells, and are anxious to be deported home, while some are quite prepared to go to jail, die and be buried here, rather than go back to their motherland.

I have also met several hard working, unemployed, or underemployed Nigerians, with pending immigration cases, on the long queue to being granted permanent residence or citizenship of Canada.

You all know that Canada is considered today as the Promised Land and as one of the world's best home destinations. This is not only because of its stable economy but because of its desire and commitment to global citizenship responsibilities. Canada is relatively peaceful. It prides itself on its pluralistic values and it has become a country synonymous with multiculturalism. As Nigeria searches for models of development, Canadian society offers one of the best. Moreover, in spite of the government of Canada's seeming unwillingness to embrace Nigeria in its democratic journey, today, the Canadian public, through the generosity of their NGO's

and individuals, are making a strong statement to the Canadian government to forget about Nigeria's past and to contribute in our present quest for national transformation so that we might provide our avowed role in African leadership. Since coming to Canada, I have been greatly encouraged by the warm personal relationship that exists between Canadian citizens and NGO's with Nigeria's people.

After one year in this great country, I must confess that I spend sleepless nights pondering over two major concerns or challenges. The first one is how I can somehow persuade the various groups in Canada to come together so that we form one Pan-Nigerian Association, united and strong enough to heal the migraine headache, which is to convince the Canadian government that Nigeria is a great country and her citizens are good people and not the image that Canada immigration and media think we are. The sad and pathetically wrong image that Nigerians are intrinsically crooks or fraudsters is false. Recently, we have read of vast ponzi schemes perpetrated by non-Nigerians in New York and Montreal. Are we then to conclude that Canadians and Americans or the countries of these criminals are rogue nations? Criminality appears to transcend all boundaries and borders. We therefore refuse to be so profiled.

It is only when we decide to become strong members of the Association of Nigerians in Canada and or members of the Nigerians in Diaspora Organization, that we can hope to seriously influence policies of the Canadian government about Nigeria, and be able to influence and transform continental Nigerians. Until we have a strong Nigerian Association, your efforts at CANPAD to carry health services to Nigeria

every year, to teach in Nigerian universities, or provide scholarships will be largely ineffective on both sides.

In my one year in Canada, I have come to realize that many Nigerians in Canada have refused to identify with any Nigerian group and have been submerged in their daily engagement and toil, to pay their bills and or train their kids through school. Some of these individuals have a high net worth economically, but they have said goodbye to Nigeria and any thought of associating with other Nigerians here in Canada is a source of unending pain. These are not CANPAD members even though I believe one or two Nigerian medical practitioners that you know, fit this description. In all honesty, I believe that such individuals have migrated to the wrong country. Canada is proud of its diversity. It breathes multiculturalism and it thrives best in showcasing its pluralist values. Such individuals will appear to progress, but may never know the joy and the mental health, that belonging to a community brings.

The Anglo-Canadians do not wish to be Franco-Canadians, or vice-versa, nor do the Chinese-Canadians, desire assimilation by Indo-Canadians. It would be tragic if Nigerian-Canadians, somehow wish to become something else, because in Canada unlike the United States, there is no melting pot, to be assimilated into.

How can CANPAD help the building of a strong Nigeria-Canadian Association in Canada, strong enough to influence Canada's policies about Nigeria, and policies and issues in Nigeria that affect us or our families back home? This is my poser to you after you return from the convention to your various cities across Canada. How can you help heal our festering

sore of disunity in the motherland, which we appear to have imported to Canadian shores?

As far back as 1983, there was an attempt by Nigerians in Canada to organize by affiliating professional associations like yours to form a Canada wide Nigerian association. This became a reality, and the Federation of Nigerian Unions in Canada (FEDNUC) was conceived. Like our first republic, it was still-born, after less than two years in the incubator. Today, we have an unnecessary rivalry between NIDO and the Association of Nigerians in Canada and internal rivalries within these associations themselves. Does this reflect our innate inability to organize? Certainly not! Nigerians are the most resilient people in the world. We survived tribal wars and slave trade, and colonialism, and a civil war and three decades of military dictatorship as one nation. We have survived terrible diseases, religious and ethnic clashes and other environmental scourges. We certainly will survive the scourges of poor leadership and the spirit of disunity, and corruption when we set our mind to it. Nigerians in Canada are in the best position to organize themselves and liberate us from this slave-mentality, that has made us accept to be defined by western media and a few bad eggs in our society.

As we gather here, we must never forget who we are, and where we came from. I am disturbed to find some Nigerians in their disillusionment have a poor self image and very low morale. This is the pathway to disaster. Our national character and national morale will exercise a decisive influence on the weight we put in the scale of influence here in Canada, in Africa and in international politics. As doctors and physicians, you daily represent our Nigerian peoples, you shape public opinions about Nigeria in your

interaction with our host communities. You therefore also bear the intellectual and moral qualities that make up our national character.

Let me uphold to the mirror, our true national character. We are defined by resilience, diversity, festivity, piety, mystery, spirituality, pride, passion and friendship, rather than the racist slurs of western media, and the profiling caricature as bandits and crooks.

We must teach our leaders and citizens at home to quickly reform and deny the world the visible symbols that denigrate us. The symbols of Nigeria should not be election rigging, laziness, religious fights, militancy, hysteria and belligerence.

Let us adopt the symbol of the rural farmer, or the Lagos street trader and indeed your good selves, as friendly, charming, passionate, pushy, determined, humorous and self critical. We are a country of a thousand festivals and festivities that represent passion. We are a colourful nation. Just look around at your colourful resplendent costumes, which nation in the world can challenge us to a fashion show and win? We represent unity in diversity, we are soccer loving, a land of a thousand cuisines where culinary magic is performed for a hundred and forty million mouths everyday with spicy foods that express our deep seated association with the land, and production and tenacity. We are a happy people, who richly flaunt our happiness to the world in loud colours and emotions. Let the world chide us for corruption but also applaud our generosity. We are the worlds exemplars of social and political responsibility for the less privileged African nations. We welcome strangers outside our shores with pride and openness, enduring their slights and laughing at their skepticism. This is our

national character. We can do anything that we set our mind to do, and if Nigerians in Canada can hold this reflection in the mirror to our brothers and sisters at home, there is nothing absolutely nothing we cannot achieve.

A few years ago, Canada was home to the Association of Nigerians Abroad [ANA], whose avowed commitment was to restore democracy to Nigeria. You mobilized and lobbied the Canadian government so successfully that Canada spearheaded a series of activities that led to democratization in Nigeria. You mobilized Nigerians at home in prisons and religious groups, newspaper houses, intellectuals and market women alike through debates on the internet and addresses to Canada's ruling elite. The goal of ANA whose headquarters in Canada was London Ontario, was the return of Nigeria to civil democratic society. Today these goals have been achieved, even though imperfectly. There is of course, no nation on earth that dare claim perfection in democracy. The ideals of democracy and the rule of law and human liberties are a journey and not a destination for all peoples of the earth. None of us should deny the fact that that journey, started in 1999 in Nigeria and today under President Yar'Adua, we have made significant progress. How can we now collectively together, reframe the mind of Canada and the west, that there is change in Nigeria, and that Nigeria because of its size and experience, can never be a Ghana, and that our democracy, can never be a clone of Canadian, United States, British, Indian or Chinese democracy. It is only us, that can best fashion the trajectory of our democracy. We should envision a better democracy that should evolve from best practices, but have our true human and humane characteristic, where the nation is not stolen from its citizens by vested interest and rich and powerful men, who overwhelm us with doctrines,

that put profits, markets and economic growth above social and environmental responsibility.

As you task yourselves at this annual meeting and reflect about medicine in the tropics, I challenge you to look at new ways of engaging the Canadian government through your MPs, Premiers, Prime Minister, Ministers and Senators to lift the curtain of distrust of Nigeria and Nigerians, so that we can engage in a vibrant bilateral relationship, that will mutually benefit our two nations. Nigeria is not seeking for aid in the old fashioned way from Canada. We desire Canadian technology and education, and we are willing to pay for this. In the last few years, Nigeria has bought very sophisticated medical diagnostic equipment and other medical apparatus. Hospitals are being built in various states and sophisticated machinery installed. States are also opening university teaching hospitals. We need manpower to provide these services and man these hospitals and operate these equipment which lie idle in some hospitals. How can CANPAD persuade Canada to assist in manpower training?

We have also noticed that while Canada has opened her borders to immigrants from other nations of the world, the door for Nigerian immigrants is still through riding on a camel, that must pass through the eye of the immigration officers' needle. Nigerians still go the Ghana for Canadian migrant visas. How can CANPAD or other Nigerian Canadian Associations lobby the Canadian government and politicians to become more positive about Nigeria?

In my one year as High Commissioner, we have tried to engage Nigeria's soft power capacity, through lectures, speeches, culture, arts, and intellectual intervention to reverse our poor national image and to influence Canadian policy. Recently a cultural dance troupe from Nigeria, the Benue Dance Troupe, toured several Canadian cities, performing dance and theatre. At present, we are mounting exhibition of Nigerian arts in Toronto. A Nollywood festival is envisioned to hold next September. All these efforts are to draw attention to the positivism that abounds in Nigeria. On a positive note, there has been this year, considerable improvement in the increase of visas given out to visitors and students from Nigeria, and we express appreciation to the visa office of the Canadian High Commission in Lagos. However, compared to much smaller nations in Africa, this is still mere tokenism. Canada and much of western society, is run by lobbying. How can Nigerians in Canada harness the energy they used in the nineties to isolate Nigeria from Canada and other Commonwealth Nations, to now bring Canada to be part of the developmental journey for Nigeria? Perhaps, it is not yet the right time. But if not now, then when? Let's face it, as your High Commissioner, I am limited by what you, as organized Canadian citizens of Nigerian descent, can achieve. I am willing, with my colleagues to exceed your expectations as a mission in Canada, this is also our mission statement. But unless we team up with a common strategy, Somalia, Ghana, Jamaica, Haiti and other smaller countries will continue to wave at us from the warmth of Canadian wedding banquets, while we shiver in the cold, pondering the marriage of Canada to Afghanistan.

Ladies and gentlemen, I say out these things because they are the challenges we face in this generation. The multiplicity and inter-

relatedness of problems affecting the democratic journey Nigeria has embarked upon, will require more than meetings and partnership of all Nigerians, led by Nigerians in Canada, to enter into a new mood of realism that only us and us alone, can solve our short and long term problems. Nigeria has squandered three decades of growth due to internal and external factors that fed corruption and maladministration. But the administration of President Yar'Adua is set to correct those anomalies and to set Nigeria on the firm path of progress, peace, growth and development.

I call on CANPAD to lead the way for Nigeria's renewal, let us change the quality of growth in Nigeria, where growth is expressed in Bank balance sheets and spiralling profits of oil companies. We must change the stature of growth, where politics is the only way to prosperity, where the few eat and the rest go hungry. This growth can best be done when we renew our natural and human assets, improve income distribution, and reduce susceptibility to economic assets. Nigeria needs Canada to partner with us on education, health, energy, aesthetics and other non-economic values including a robust transportation infrastructure, and films. Economic and social development must be mutually complimentary in Nigeria as is evidenced here in Canada. And you, the new global elite that bestride continents, must play your part.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of the High Commission of Nigeria, and the President and Government of the people of Nigeria, it is my honour and privilege to wish you a successful meeting and symposium. Finally, I wish your new President as much success as the preceding President and Executives.

Long Live CANPAD
God bless Nigeria.