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Minister of Immigration Jason Kenney's speaking notes at an ISNA meeting

Original address: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/speeches/2008/2008-11-29.asp> (dead link)

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Web Archive (French):

<http://web.archive.org/web/20090430151953/http://www.cic.gc.ca/francais/ministere/media/discours/2008/2008-11-29.asp>

Date: November 29, 2008

Location: Mississauga, Ontario

Original title: Speaking points for the Hon. Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P. Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism on the occasion of a breakfast meeting hosted by the Islamic Society of North America

Thank you very much to the Islamic Society of North America Center here in Mississauga, to Mr. Ashraf, to each and every one of you for your warm welcome for myself, my colleagues, Terence Young, Member of Parliament from Oakville, Bob Dechert, Member of Parliament for Mississauga-Erindale. We really do appreciate this opportunity to get to know each other better and to begin a closer dialogue between the Government of Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada, and the Muslim community in general, ISNA in particular.

I'd also like you to acknowledge the presence of my former caucus colleague and my very dear friend, Wajid Khan. Wajid, thank you for being here.

This is an organization that I've known for some time. I first attended an ISNA conference, I think, in the year 2000, and around that time got to know about the good work of your organization, in particular your school here, through my good friend Khalid. It's good to see you again. And Khalid impressed me as the kind of person who is really the model for our Canadian approach to pluralism and immigration. Someone who came here with a tremendous education and professional background, who, like so many of you, took a risk to come to Canada and did so with the hope and prospect of a brighter future for your families. And who embraced

Canada's approach to pluralism and multiculturalism, who embraced the family, education, and the institution that you have all built here after-tax contributions. It is this school, for your children and the future of your community and faith, that is a shining example of what is best about Canada.

So, on behalf on the Government, on behalf of the Prime Minister, I would like to commend all of you who have made sacrifices to build your community here, this important institution, and also, for being open to our broader Canadian society and to other cultural communities. Because multiculturalism in Canada doesn't mean that we all go into our own separate communities, cultural and faith communities, and stay there isolated, or "ghettoized." That doesn't work. Multiculturalism, properly understood in the Canadian tradition, means that we value, respect, honour our particular traditions and convictions and our family backgrounds, our faith backgrounds, while we maintain an openness to the broader society, that we integrate into the broader Canadian society, that we are all loyal first and foremost to Canada. Some people think that this is an impossibility to reconcile. Some people say you can't be absolutely true to your religion and absolutely loyal to Canada. And I say that's nonsense. Those of you here who were involved in this demonstrated that you can be, in fact, you are better Canadians by being good Muslims.

This is something I learned from an earlier Governor General of Canada, Lord Tweedsmuir, who was also known as John Buchan, a British novelist. And he understood very early on this Canadian approach to pluralism. He gave a speech in Manitoba in 1923 to an audience of Canadians of Ukrainian origin. And he said to them that by being good Ukrainians you will be good Canadians. By which he meant, by maintaining a sense of fidelity and honour and respect for your own particular cultural and religious traditions, if you are true to those values you will also be loyal and dedicated and productive Canadians. That's the model of pluralism we are seeking to build here in Canada, and I'm very eager to work more closely with the Muslim community to that end.

I believe members of your community live and articulate every day the values of personal responsibility, devotion to family, fidelity to, and respect for, tradition and properly ordered authority, your belief in liberty and freedom of conscience, and your desire to build a strong society through hard work and initiative. These are all the values that I believe. They're the values I know that Terrence and Bob believe. They're the values that animate our party's place in Canadian political discourse.

Now, there are many issues that I could discuss, but I want to take on directly some of the concerns I hear voiced frequently or by members of Canada's diverse Muslim community. First, let me say that while there is, of course, the Muslim community of faith, that is, united in faith, too often in Canada we speak about Muslims as though they are all of one monolithic culture, when, in fact, we know that Islam is a universal faith that is practiced and respected in every country in the world, and that it has within it an amazing cultural diversity that is indeed reflected in the Muslim community in Canada. From North Africa through the Arab world, through South Asia to Oceania, from Europe across the world, this Muslim community of faith has its own pluralism and can teach us something about respect for cultural differences here in Canada. I think, for instance, about the history of Islam in Canada. I asked where the first mosque in Canada was built.

Not in Toronto. Not in Ontario, but in Edmonton, Alberta. Imagine. Shiite Muslim Lebanese immigrants to Canada, a hundred years ago, went out to the big, cold, newest part of the New World in northern Alberta, as furriers, as traders, as merchants. I can't imagine why they left Lebanon to go to northern Alberta, or what they thought of their first winter.

They did it with courage and tenacity, with a belief in the future, with those same kinds of conservative values I'm talking about. And they built the first Muslim community in Canada and erected a mosque in Edmonton. The man who founded that mosque, his name was Shaben, and his grandson, Larry Shaben, became the first Muslim to be elected to hold public office in Canada in 1972 as a member of Alberta's Legislative Assembly from Edmonton. And Larry Shaben, who recently passed away, went on to become the first Muslim Canadian cabinet minister in the Conservative government of Peter Lougheed in 1976, where he served with great distinction for the next 12 years. Mr. Shaben is an example for all of us in terms of his commitment to community, but he's also a particular example for Canadians of Muslim faith. He was willing to overcome adversity, like his grandfather did in building the Alberta mosque in that difficult Edmonton of the 1910s. But Larry succeeded. And you know somebody followed in his footsteps. Do you know who the first Muslim elected to the Parliament of Canada was?

Rahim Jaffer. From Edmonton as well.

From the Ismaili Muslim tradition, he was elected the first Muslim in Canada.

So my message to you today is, yes, we all know that there are negative stereotypes which exist in Western societies about Islam, about Muslims. We know that sometimes this creates a more difficult life for people of the Muslim faith. But my message to you is that this is nothing new in our history. When my ancestors arrived in this city 150 years ago from Ireland, as Catholics, they walked down Yonge Street in Victorian Toronto, and saw signs in the windows of businesses that said, "No Irish need apply." No dogs, no Irish. But my ancestors didn't let that discourage them. They were committed to the dream of building Canada. They overcame that kind of prejudice. They believed that most Canadians didn't share those ideas. And they moved forward and they succeeded. And that is a message we must teach all of our young people. Never to find an excuse in the intolerance of a small minority, never to develop a hatred for others because of the difficulties that we may experience, but to be patriotic and loyal Canadians who believe in this country and the promise that people like Larry Shaben and Rahim Jaffer demonstrate.

Look at my friend Wajid Khan, the first Canadian of Pakistani origin to be elected to the Parliament of Canada. He came here 30 years ago, worked hard like so many of you, gave real meaning to those conservative values of enterprise that I talked about and succeeded beyond imagination in his business, became a household name through his advertisements, got elected to the Parliament of Canada, became a special adviser to the Prime Minister.

My message is I know there are some, just as there are some in the broader Western societies in the Canadian society, who do have distorted and negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. So, too, there are some in the Muslim community who would seek to exploit or exaggerate those challenges and tell our young people, our young Muslim Canadians, that they can't get ahead in Canadian society, that they need to find excuses, that they should be attracted to bad ideas. We need to tackle that head on. We need to demonstrate to young people that this is a society of equality of opportunity and when they face obstacles or challenges, they just need to buckle down and overcome that, with our support. That is what is best about Canada.

Now let me also address an issue that has come up frequently from within the community. Some people try to exaggerate the adversity that Muslims sometimes face in our society. Prime Minister Harper has received a great deal of criticism from a wide range of organizations, media, foreign countries, for having stood up for Canadian citizen Huseyin Celil, who is in prison in China. Now, I've worked very hard to help protect the rights of Huseyin Celil. He is a man who grew up in the Sichuan western part of China as a Uighur Muslim. He attended mosque. He was a faithful Muslim. He was arrested because of that, because of his membership in the most persecuted Muslim community in the world. He somehow escaped. Eventually he got to Canada as a refugee thanks to the generosity of this country. He started his family here, had three beautiful children. He was assisting and sometimes preaching at a mosque in Hamilton, and got his Canadian citizenship. After five or six years he wanted to go back to Central Asia to visit relatives. He went to Uzbekistan. He was picked up by secret police on a Chinese arrest warrant. They threw away his Canadian passport. They hustled him into China. And for the last two and half years he has been suffering in a jail in that country without any Canadian consular access and without the due process of law. The Prime Minister said publicly that he would, in the case of Huseyin Celil, when he challenged the Chinese authorities on this matter, never allow the almighty dollar to overcome the importance of defending human rights and religious freedom. And every time he has met with the president of China, one of the first items on the agenda has been to protect the legal rights and grant consular access to Huseyin Celil. I don't want anyone saying that this government doesn't stand up for the interests of Muslims.

Our government came to office after the tragic situation, the unjust situation, experienced by Maher Arar. We came to an honourable settlement with him, expressed an apology and a generous settlement. I'll just give you some examples of some of the ways in which we've expressed our solidarity with Canadian Muslims and the Muslim world.

Here's an interesting story. There was a lot of pressure on us about who to vote for in the World International Exposition. There were three bids. One from South Korea, one from Poland, and one from Morocco. Morocco was the first-ever Muslim country to ask for the International Expo to be held there. The first African country. And the South Koreans were throwing around a lot of money, millions of dollars, rounding up votes. You know, Poland is a very important ally of Canada. But we believed that it was very important to demonstrate to the Muslim world this kind of symbolism of an international exposition situated in a place like Morocco. And so Canada voted, against enormous pressure, to hold the International Expo for the first time in a Muslim country, Morocco.

You know, just recently we dispatched the Canadian Navy to patrol the waters off the coast of Somalia to ensure that World Food Program shipments can come into port in Mogadishu and deliver emergency food aid.

The top recipient of Canada's foreign aid in the world today, and the largest recipient of the Canadian foreign aid in history, is, under this Government, a Muslim country, Afghanistan, with \$130 million annually of Canadian foreign aid going to that country.

Now I know there are some here that may disagree about Canada's role in the security mission in Afghanistan, but let me say I respect those disagreements. I'd be happy to have a dialogue with you about that. But let me say that we are there at the invitation of the democratically elected government and within a mandate of the United Nations. We believe in multilateralism. Mr. Ashraf talked about the image of Canada abroad as a champion of peace. We are a champion of United Nations peacekeeping and that is precisely why, in that context, we are in

Afghanistan. I want you understand that the motive is an altruistic one, to create a state for the development of a civil society and social and economic development, and to protect individuals from violence. We may disagree, some of us, about the mission, but please understand that Canada is not there against a Muslim people. It's our view, and that of the United Nations, that we are there to develop a society that can take care of itself in due course.

So, in immigration some people say the government is somehow biased against immigration from Muslim countries. This is nonsense. In fact, Pakistan remains, I think, our fourth-largest source country of immigration to Canada and Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada. Since our government came to office, over 650,000 permanent residents have come to Canada. Over 550,000 new citizens have been sworn in. We are maintaining historic high levels of immigration from across the world, including South Asia, including North Africa. In fact, many developed countries are actually cutting their immigration levels right now because of the economic difficulty. Yesterday I was proud to announce that Canada, I think alone in the developed world, is going to maintain historically high levels of immigration because we believe that immigration helps fuel our economic security and future.

And, in fact, I also announced yesterday measures to help finally to reduce the enormous backlog in immigration and to speed up the time that people take to wait to come to this country, which is far too long. That will benefit many people from the countries of origin that you represent here.

So I believe that we have demonstrated our belief in civil rights, human rights for all, in authentic pluralism.

In Alberta, for example, all of the faith schools receive support without any controversy. The Jewish schools in Calgary receive support from the Catholic school board, the Muslim schools in Edmonton from the public school board. If people want to pursue their own educational approaches, they have support and flexibility to do so. It's not even a controversy. And so I just want you to understand that we must have a pluralism which is respectful of people's real beliefs, of their deepest convictions, of their conscience. We must have a pluralism that is deeply respectful of the freedom of religion, that doesn't just give superficial lip service to cultural differences, but believes in a real profound pluralism where we can have different beliefs grounded in our faith, but live together peacefully and coexist in this magnificent country.

ISNA is an important part of that. I look forward, together with my colleagues Terrence, Bob, and all of the others in the Government of Canada, and Prime Minister Harper, to working more closely with you and other institutions within the Muslim community to ensure the experiment that is Canada continues to succeed.

We all saw with great sadness the unacceptable violence in Mumbai this weekend. And I know with all of you we condemn that kind of violence. India is a multi-confessional society: a Muslim vice president, a Sikh Prime Minister, a Catholic governing party leader in a majority Hindu state. They have a long tradition of a pluralistic society and yet they still have these kinds of incidents, this kind of violence. We all must work together to ensure that those things never happen, that those kinds of hatreds never arise in Canada. And I know that those are the values that you are teaching the young people here, a belief in peaceful coexistence, in loyalty to Canada, to Canada's values, and at the same time fidelity to your faith.


Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for being such great Canadians. Thank you for choosing to help build this country. We look forward to working with you.

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Speaking notes

Speaking points for the Hon. Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P. Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism on the occasion of a breakfast meeting hosted by the Islamic Society of North America

Mississauga, Ontario, November 29, 2008

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Thank you very much to the Islamic Society of North America Center here in Mississauga, to Mr. Ashraf, to each and every one of you for your warm welcome for myself, my colleagues, Terence Young, Member of Parliament from Oakville, Bob Dechert, Member of Parliament for Mississauga-Erindale. We really do appreciate this opportunity to get to know each other better and to begin a closer dialogue between the Government of Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada, and the Muslim community in general, ISNA in particular.

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Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for being such great Canadians. Thank you for choosing to help build this country. We look forward to working with you.

Date Modified: 2008-11-29