



Keynote by The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean

**to the International Women's Day Breakfast
hosted by the City of Ottawa**

March 8, 2022

With handing of the keys to the City of Ottawa

Council Chamber of the Jean Pigott Place,
Ottawa City Hall
110 Laurier Avenue West

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English version

(Une version française est aussi offerte)

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Diplomatic Corps

Honourable Mona Fortier, President of the Treasury Board

Mr. Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen

Councillors and administrators of the City of Ottawa,

Dear Elder Verna McGregor,

Distinguished guests,

Dear Friends,

Mr. Mayor, I am very moved and touched by the honour you bestow upon me as you present me with the **key to the City of Ottawa**, where my family and I have taken up residence and where we have put down roots.

Ottawa is home to one of the most important chapters in my life. This city is part of me.

I salute the presence here of so many women and men who, through their talent, skills and actions, contribute to the development of our capital.

Dear friends,

Thank you for being here!

. . .

Let us acknowledge our good fortune to be able to gather in this place, in peace and security.

Let us gather in solidarity with the populations of the cities of Ukraine subjected to terror, to the murderous assaults and mass destruction, deployed by Vladimir Putin in his senseless, belligerent fury.

Let us **pause and appreciate being together, in peace and security**, while we take stock of the moment, the torment being rained on the cities of Ukraine.

Let our hearts, our souls connect with the suffering being brought on by war to the women—especially on this day—as well as to the children and the men, all those lives being upended by a **toxic and lethal plan** to invade a peaceful sovereign country.

May I suggest we take a moment of silence.

[. . .]

Dear Mr. Mayor

Dear Jim Watson,

What if the city of Ottawa launched an appeal to mayors and cities around the world, including those in Russia, calling on them to stand in solidarity

with the cities of Ukraine, that Russian troops have been ordered to invade and bomb.

May this appeal also include the cities in the neighbouring states where hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees are pouring in daily—the United Nations reports two million as of today—among whom are also students and workers from other countries, including African and Asian countries. May they all be welcomed with dignity, kindness, fraternity and solidarity.

Such an appeal would be extraordinary, coming from the Canadian capital, where so many people have had to flee horror, repression, insecurity, and conflicts.

Take a look at my story, I myself came to Canada as a child, with my parents, in 1968 to escape a bloody, dictatorial and predatory regime. Being granted asylum saved our lives. We were able to settle and rebuild ourselves in Quebec, and became full-fledged Canadian citizens.

My heart was full of gratitude when on September 27, 2005, I took the oath to serve my adopted country. I became the 27th Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada.

I remember with the greatest emotion this radiant day, under a sky so clear, so blue, the perfect backdrop to the emerging colours of autumn.

In the long, slow motorcade to Parliament, sitting quietly together, my husband Jean-Daniel Lafond, our daughter Marie-Éden, 6 years old at the time, and I marvelled at the majestic landscape along Sussex Drive, one of the most beautiful scenic routes in the world.

The view is breathtaking, as the Rideau River empties into the Ottawa River whose shores bring together the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

And I said to our little one, who was also very impressed by what she saw happening, “Isn’t it beautiful, Marie-Éden, this city that welcomes us? Do you see the mountains and the forests nearby?”

It was love at first sight with the sumptuousness of Ottawa’s lush setting, which we embraced with our eyes, and still marvel at.

I could feel the long winding flow of memory stream past us in this place of confluence, starting with the history of its first inhabitants, the proud Anichinabe people. . .

Anichinabe which means “human.”

Among them, the Odawa, which means “merchants,” great enterprising traders that they were.

I like to imagine the comings and goings of the big canoes, transporting foodstuffs, products and goods of all kinds, navigating on this vast waterway all the way to strategic markets, in what constituted a huge trading area.

The history of the Anichinabe became most tumultuous with the arrival of the conquering Europeans.

Recognized as one of the most influential native nations of the early eighteenth century, the Anichinabe allied themselves with the French in the 1763 rebellion against the British, and then, a decade later into the 1790s, against the Americans, in a series of battles and campaigns called the Northwest Indian War.

Ottawa is a place of immemorial historical tales that deserve to be more widely recounted.

The words of my pledge in the Senate chamber on September 27, 2005, were addressed to all Canadians, but also to this city, the nation’s capital, where so many decisions are made.

And from here, my words were also intended for the rest of the world.

Breaking down solitudes—and there are many—has been my motto. I made it the *raison d’être* of my Governor General mandate and my mission.

From here, I drew the energy to travel from one ocean to the other, and then to the other, all the way to the territories of the Great North—a Canada which I like to describe as a land that goes from finite to infinite, on to infinity, a country that remains to be discovered still, and forever, one that we must protect, together.

I have seen the beauty of Canada, that of its vast geographical expanse, and that of its wide human and cultural landscape, rooted in a rich and stunning diversity.

I paid attention to our differences . . . and recognized how much we have in common . . . our strengths, our potentialities, our hardships, the challenges we face, the actions and initiatives we take to succeed, the powerful voices we use to speak our wounds, our anger, all that needs to change so urgently, the powerful voices we use also to sing our accomplishments, what we were able to build, and what we continue and need to build.

I love our resolve and our ability to mobilize.

This country is shaped by so many women, men and youth, so many communities, whose courage is astounding.

What a privilege it is to be able to reach out and meet them, to listen to their voices and to have them heard.

All the realities of this country converge on the capital, along with the responsibility to take notice, focus and reflect on their specificities, their underlying issues, their urgency.

Our greatest courage is to face the truth.

As Governor General of Canada, when I had the privilege of launching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2009, 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 an opportunity to confront history together—for it is the opportunity to right a historical wrong.”

This being International Women’s Day, I want to pay tribute to all the remarkable and courageous women whom I had the honour to join on this journey of truth towards reconciliation.

Among them, Mary Wilson, from the Northwest Territories, Commissioner along with the Honourable Murray Sinclair and Chief Wilton Littlechild.

And from the Arctic, Mary Simon, now Her Excellency Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada.

On the long path towards the truth, we must keep pace with each other, build a common front, indigenous and non-indigenous together, to confront and share the pain, and the injury.

Part of the ordeal is the recent uncovering of the graves and burial sites of Indigenous children who were taken by the thousands from their families to be brought into residential schools to be assimilated. The stories of violence and trauma told by the survivors are horrific.

Among all efforts to heal the wounds of the colossal enterprise of dispossession that was colonization, I want to salute the work carried out by the Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada. Here is an organization that brings together hundreds of Indigenous women artists who strive to preserve and revitalize endangered Indigenous art forms and enrich lives through Indigenous arts and culture.

Using the healing power of the Arts, through inclusive community-based learning, they pass on vital cultural knowledge; allowing the next generation to retain and cultivate intrinsic cultural connections.

On Truth and Reconciliation Day, last September 30th, we saw these empowered women gather on Parliament Hill and at Confederation Park, to pass on the feather of memory.

The Fondation Michaëlle Jean Foundation is very proud to be standing with them, and their efforts. Dawn Setford, the founder of the Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada, is here, accompanied by Marleen Murphy.

Thank you for the essential work you do. . .

What we experienced recently during the weeks of noisy occupation in downtown Ottawa caught us all by surprise, with the confusion of words, claims, insinuations, slurs and gestures of defiance against institutions and the state.

We have shared the experience of the last few weeks in Ottawa, but we have yet to share some of the horrifying details of it: Nazi flags and that of the Confederate States of America, emblems of white supremacists, absolute racists.

Racialized people were warned to stay away from the occupation area. Witnesses told me of the most threatening and offensive words being hurled at them. Women were harassed by raging misogynists. The most vulnerable were made to suffer.

Hear this testimonial from Cornerstone, housing for Women / Le pilier, logements pour femmes, an organization that welcomes and accompanies hundreds of women in situations of homelessness and extreme precariousness in Ottawa each year:

“staff are scared to go outside of the shelter, especially women of colour . . . being able to go outside is the only reprieve many women experiencing homelessness have and they cannot even do that. The incessant honking and noise from the trucks have caused significant anxiety and distress for staff and shelter residents. Women have admitted themselves into hospital due to the increased trauma from the noise and fear. All shelters are having to figure out alternative plans for client transportation to any other program or hospitals in the city. This past weekend Cornerstones operations moved to a crisis response far beyond the impacts of the Pandemic. Senior Managers working the frontlines to ensure staff and women are safe travelling to and from our shelter and residences. Supporting staff and shelter residents while they shake with fear waiting for a bus that never arrives.”

I am particularly touched by this, having worked and participated for over 10 years in building the largest network of emergency shelters for abused women and their children in Canada.

I can feel every word they say. Pictures of women in their most vulnerable moments come back to me, from the years I spent at the side of women fleeing male violence.

How long the journey for women's rights. . .

Yet our struggle for our fundamental rights, emancipation, for more justice and equity throughout society, is universal in nature, indisputably tied to the liberation of all oppressed people.

Did you know that the Black Lives Matter movement against racism is also driven by Black women in the US and Canada, women who are actually artists and creators that use the power of arts and culture as a conduit for resistance and awareness.

The power of the arts to speak up, to convene, to take action.

History has shown how this works and continues to prove it.

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Allow me here to tell you about the struggle that runs through my veins.

We are all shaped by unique circumstances and forces of history.

The best thing we can do is testify to our experience.

Haiti is where I come from.

The Haitian experience defines who I am, my way of looking at the state of the world. I've learned from it some essential and fundamental lessons.

My hope is that in sharing it, some of it might create a personal connection with something more universal, and allow a broader, collective meaning to surface.

We are all of one humanity.

My ancestors are your ancestors because we are all part of the human experience defined as humanity.

I was born from a history immersed in darkness.

I was born from those women, those men, those children cruelly torn away and dispossessed of everything they had: their names, their languages, their cultures, their lands and homes, their communities, their dignity, their humanity.

I was born of some of the 20 million to 30 million human beings who were captured and then deported to be sold as pack animals.

I come from lives crushed and destroyed under the juggernaut of an abhorrent, perfectly run machine with circuits across continents and over oceans, a very normalized and convenient commerce that lasted centuries: the transatlantic trade between Europe, Africa and America.

For each survivor, it is estimated that five others perished—fallen victims from the raids and the attacks carried out for their capture.

Multitudes would die during the forced marches, and the many cruelties endured before deportation.

Thousands upon thousands would perish from sickness and abuse while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, turned into a mass grave.

The numbers are troubling and hide even more appalling losses.

The crimes are unspeakable.

The victims, countless.

I was born of plantations that, through total enslavement, the forced labour of millions of my ancestors for 400 years, ensured the prosperity of the European colonial powers which seized a continent they called the Americas, whose indigenous populations they massacred, impoverished and in some cases exterminated.

I was born of Saint-Domingue, the former crown jewel of the French colonies.

Saint-Domingue where a powerful call came from valiant Black combatants, like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Pétion, Henri Christophe followed boldly by 500,000 revolted slaves, women and men, armed with an invincible courage.

I was born of this struggle whose improbable achievement we must celebrate.

A struggle determined to end an immoral trade, the shameful exploitation that condemned them to non-existence, and who found in the words and shining values of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, a breathtaking possibility to be born again.

These words and values from the Enlightenment shed a new light on humanity.

I was born of these men and women who found in the searing power of such ideas, remedy to the pangs of their own thirst for freedom . . . an answer to their deep aspiration for equality . . . a response to their immense need for fraternity.

Today, dear friends, we would not be in the presence of one another—and the woman that I am would not be here with you a free woman—were it not for the astonishing success of that struggle.

Thus was born, in 1804, the first republic of Black men and women who freed themselves, and who soon gave back to the land, once defiled by their degradation and painful captivity, its original name: Haiti.

Ayiti boyo kiskeya . . . our mountainous land, in the language of the first Caribbean indigenous peoples, the Arrawak, Taïno and Caribe . . . now decimated.

The dream, the Hope embodied by Haiti quickly caught on.

The moment became a movement.

From Haiti came the spark that would ignite the fight for the abolition of slavery throughout the Americas.

Still, standing before history, Haitian women and men remember how they opened up the march of emancipation . . . and what price they paid.

Over the course of nearly six generations—right until my generations' parents! —Haiti paid a total of \$21 billion in today's dollars to the French state, to compensate, with interest, the slave owners who had been forced off their plantations.

From this odious debt, the Haitian economy never recovered, to the point of becoming the poorest country in the hemisphere, a stigma that remains, the only terms Haiti is now consistently referred as.

Regardless . . . from the moment of Haiti's independence, in 1804, the Abolition movement grew to become the very first global movement.

Three years later, the British Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act of 1807, an edict banning the slave trade, not yet the possession of slaves.

The liberation of the countries of Latin America, complete with the abolition of slavery as such, was achieved within thirty years. And, you know what? It was thanks to the support of the Republic of Haïti whose first President Alexandre Pétion, decided to finance Simon Bolivar's expeditions, known as El Libertador, but on one condition: that all slaves be freed.

Fifty-six years hence, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln called for the abolition of slavery in the secessionist slave states of the US south.

Over decades, prominent abolitionist women, and men took a similar creed to claim and win women's right to vote . . . including Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Lydia Maria Child, who observed, and I quote:

“The comparison between women and the coloured race is striking . . . both have been kept in subjection by physical force.”

End of quote.

Indeed, women, Blacks, Indigenous peoples, all had to fight to be recognized as persons, and their rights as human rights.

We are of one history . . . steeped in the same bravery.

In 1927, remember the persons' case brought on by the Famous Five.

After the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that women were not “persons” according to the British North America Act, five women—Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby and Henrietta Muir Edwards—took up the case to the Judicial Committee of

the British Privy Council in London, the highest court of appeal for Canada at the time.

On October 18, 1929, the decision was announced by Lord Sankey, Great Chancellor of Great Britain. Quote:

“The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours.”

“The word ‘person’ may include members of both sexes, and to those who ask why the word should include females, the obvious answer is why should it not.”

Indeed: why should it not?

We must seize the intersection of our histories, see ourselves in the continuation of our struggles to break down barriers and injustices, to break down solitudes where they persist to this day, to keep demanding that things change, always armed with the same question: Why should it not?

“Why should it not” is exactly the question behind the struggle to eradicate racism and all forms of systemic discrimination.

Answering that question is at the core of the National Black Canadians Summit, le Sommet pancandien des communautés noires, organized by the Fondation Michaëlle Jean Foundation since 2017 to answer the call for Recognition, Justice and Development of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024) proclaimed by the United Nations.

The upcoming summit, the third one, will be held this year in Halifax, from July 29th to 31st, to coincide with Emancipation Day, on August 1st.

I invite you all to Halifax, on Mi’kmaq territory, also the cradle of Black presence in Canada for over 400 years, as the Transatlantic Slave Trade also included Nova Scotia.

Canadian historians are definite that Canada was not only a land of freedom for slaves fleeing the United States. Blacks and Indigenous were also enslaved here.

Let us stop pretending, as we tend to do, that we in Canada are immune to the misappropriation of the common good or the distortion of the word freedom.

Those who have experienced the suppression of their most fundamental rights, suffered total dispossession, been entirely deprived of their humanity, their dignity, their physical and moral integrity, know the price of freedom, how costly the struggle to recover it.

It was nothing like the disconcerting and distressing ranting we could still hear a few days ago in downtown Ottawa.

Our peace of mind has been harmed. Our economy has been harmed. But what has also been harmed is everything that we hold dear, the deep sense of all the values that we like to promote, of all the achievements that we need to protect and nurture.

In a sense, the pandemic has highlighted our blind spots, our failures, our mistakes, our vagaries, our anxieties and our solitudes.

Mr. Mayor,

As you do me the great honour of presenting me with the key to the city of Ottawa, I want to tell you my dream for our capital.

The treasure in this city is to be found in the sum of all its strengths: a vigorous community of associations, organizations, solid institutions, dynamic economic players, vocational training institutes and institutions of higher learning, several colleges and schools, three universities—with which Jean-Daniel and I love to collaborate—Carleton University, Saint Paul University and the University of Ottawa, which is the largest bilingual university, in English and French, in the world, of which I have very much enjoyed being the chancellor.

We must be able to harness all of these assets—businesses, academic institutions, government entities, civil society organizations—to establish Ottawa as a living laboratory, a hub of excellence, a city where inclusiveness, sustainable development, creativity, knowledge ignite unique synergies.

The dream for our capital is to be a nexus of startup incubators, accelerators and coworking spaces dedicated to new creative enterprises in the fields of technology, innovation, social entrepreneurship, environmental development, and other strategic domains.

The dream also included an abundance of creative workshops and amazing artistic and cultural productions.

Why shouldn't Ottawa be a hub where creatives from across Canada could come to use dedicated spaces built around support from our existing cultural institutions.

Ottawa has every opportunity to be a capital of knowledge and shared experience. A capital that invites dialogue and leads by example.

Ottawa should set an example as to how an urban environment can be devised with a concern for aesthetic harmonization, enhancing the value of our architectural heritage while serving the needs of neighbourhoods with social mixing.

There is splendid work to be done, with a solid policy of urban development leveraging social housing and access to property.

We need to revitalize all these neighbourhoods, these areas that have been neglected and disfigured by decaying buildings.

Mr. Mayor,

You also know my attachment to bilingualism and my wish, which is not a secret I have been shy to share, that the capital set an example for the rest of the country: of the richness and benefits that come from our two official languages, by promoting their coexistence.

I look forward to restaurants, businesses and services in Ottawa being encouraged and proud to practice, to display, to say with conviction, here we like to welcome you, to serve you in English and in French.

Why not think in terms of what could promote and add value to a strong bilingual identity that we could tangibly see in all commerce and service in the city? A campaign could incentivize, "Ottawa, Canada's capital, proud to celebrate the country's two official languages."

My dream for Ottawa is that we stop seeing it as a dormitory city for federal employees.

I dream of a capital where diversity and inclusion are celebrated as cultural successes, as value-added assets, fiercely opposed to the forces that feed the violence of exclusion and systemic discrimination, creating a deficit that is hugely detrimental to all, and to our development, growth and prosperity.

For exclusion is indeed a form of violence, which results in a crippling deficit of participation, perspectives, ideas, energies and synergies; a crippling deficit of everything that drives more democracy, responsible development, towards fully shared growth and prosperity.

Ottawa boasts an extraordinary pool of young people from all horizons, particularly Black and Indigenous, who want to join in and be counted as major contributors.

The Youth Ottawa Spirit of the Capital Awards, which you support, Mr. Mayor, is a testament to this every year, and the Michaëlle Jean Foundation is delighted to be a partner.

So on this March 8th, with the key to this city held to my heart, as a citizen of Ottawa, I wanted to tell you what our city aspires to, its ambition and the many strengths it carries within it, including the ever invigorating and inspiring heritage of its original peoples.

Merci... Miigwetch. . . Thank you.