


The year diversity defined our strength

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By John Tory *Opinion*

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Earlier this year, the BBC named Toronto as the most diverse city in the world. Time and again, we have been praised for raising the bar on what it means to function as a diverse and inclusive society. But looking back at 2017, it's clear that our city's continued work to promote inclusion and diversity played a role not just in our quality of life, but in our global standing, our reputation and our economic growth.

As the Aga Khan has said, "Genuine pluralism understands that diversity does not weaken a society, it strengthens it."

During a trade mission to India this April, I visited the Aga Khan Academy in Hyderabad, which gave me a wider glimpse into how Canada's partnership with the Aga Khan here at home translates into action in some of the most vulnerable communities in the world.

That particular academy is one of 18 schools in 14 developing countries dedicated to preparing next generation leaders through outstanding facilities and an educational framework that emphasizes service, ethics, civic responsibility and an understanding of global issues. This framework is anchored by principles of collaboration and consultation where best practices and insights from top leading institutional partners around the world including the University of Toronto are bilaterally shared and utilized.

As the Aga Khan marks his Diamond Jubilee — 60 years of leadership that has made our city, our country and our world a much better place — his promotion of Canadian values and ideals extends well beyond our borders, while the 17-acre Aga Khan Museum continues to draw thousands of local and international tourists each year who contribute to our economy and reinforce our city's international appeal.

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The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson once noted that Canada is "not immune" to the type of hateful acts driven by fear and ignorance that we see around the world. But our city has dedicated itself to being productive in the face of such realities, and to work to strengthen our values of inclusiveness and appreciation of our differences through efforts like the city's new Action Plan to Address Anti-Black Racism.

This work was also evident in Madame Clarkson's own event this fall, The Six Degrees conference on citizenship and inclusion, which celebrated Canadian artists such as Kent Monkman and international leaders such as Ai Weiwei.

Through efforts like this, Toronto was the place to be this year for world leaders interested in demonstrating their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama chose Toronto as the venue for a major speech in September on global citizenship, hosted by Ottawa-based think-tank Canada2020. Prince Harry was here to celebrate the abilities of injured soldiers through the Invictus Games, and in November, the former First Lady Michelle Obama followed suit with an address at the Mattamy Athletic Centre on “The Economics of Equality: Advancing Women and Girls to Change the World”

This year also marked the undeniable arrival of Toronto on the world stage as centre for innovation and technology. Headlines around the world noted that our openness to immigration was drawing increased tech investment and talent to the city, reinforcing the belief of founders, such as Wattpad’s Allen Lau, that Toronto’s approach to diversity and inclusion makes it the best place in the world to start a company.

Over the past two years, our region’s tech sector has grown faster than Silicon Valley and New York combined, and this growth is undoubtedly the result of our highly diverse, highly educated population.

International enrolment at our universities is spiking, companies are seeing increased interest from workers in the U.S. and overseas and our Canadian tech leaders have dedicated themselves to increased focus on diversity, with many issuing an open letter earlier this year stating that “as a community, we stand together in opposition to the marginalization of people based on their birthplace, race, or religion.”

Of course, there is still more work to be done to ensure that our economic growth benefits and reflects all elements of our talented population. While we are the most diverse city in the world, women and visible minorities remain under-represented in the sector, its leadership and in how we present ourselves to the world.

To help propel further change, I committed earlier this year to only participating in Toronto technology events that showcase the true diversity of our City — and was proud to see leaders, such as Ontario’s Chief Digital Officer Hillary Hartley, follow suit.

In 2018, I remain committed to championing inclusion not just as a moral imperative, but as an economic advantage in a truly global world.

John Tory is the mayor of Toronto.

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