

Notes for a speech by
Deepak Obhrai, M.P. and Parliamentary Secretary
to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
at the Inaugural Session of the
PBD Canada 2011 Convention

Toronto, Ontario. June 9, 2011

Your Excellency the Rt. Honourable Governor General of Canada David Johnston,
Premier McGuinty of Ontario,
Minister of State for External Affairs of India, Preneet Kaur,
High Commissioner Gavai,
Distinguished friends,

I am indeed very pleased to attend the PBD Canada 2011 representing the government of Canada. Both the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, and my colleague the Honourable John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs, send their best wishes for the success of PBD in Canada.

It goes without saying that credit goes to the Indo-Canadian Chamber of Commerce for organizing this historic event here in Canada. I want to thank ICC President Vinay Nagpal and Asha Luthra and others for a job well done.

Briefly, let me talk about the growing ties between our two governments. When we were making our platform I insisted that when we form the government, that India would be a priority country of focus for Canada, following years of neglect. Subsequently, this policy has paid dividends today, as the relationships between our two countries are on solid and strong footing.

But this is about the diaspora and its contribution to the development of India. My ancestors left the shores of India way before Partition, for East Africa where I was born and grew up. In my young life in the early 70s, I was sent to India to gain an education.

I can tell you that in those days the diaspora was looked upon as people who had left India and were considered as foreigners. I even read an editorial in the Hindustan Times alluding to the diaspora as those who had forsaken India. The diaspora was not really welcome and did not merit much attention in India.

Since leaving India, the early diaspora had started making its mark around the world. In Fiji, West Indies, Mauritius, they participated in the political affairs in their adopted homelands. In Africa, the continent where I was born, the diaspora strongly participated in the freedom struggles against colonialism, apartheid, and discrimination. Nobody can forget the immense contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in fighting these injustices. Hence, January 9th was selected as the PBD date, chosen because this was the day Mahatma Gandhi returned to India.

The Indian diaspora worldwide has made an incredible mark on the world stage. The first diaspora that left the shores of India were workers. They worked hard in the fields, on roads, and railways as my ancestors did in East Africa. However they also ensured that their offspring received an education, so they could proceed to contribute to all aspects of development in their home country.

The early 80s and 90s saw even a greater number come from India, but this time not workers but those with degrees and skills required in the modern world.

Well the result of all that, ladies and gentlemen, is “YOU.”

All of you today sitting in this room have an immense wealth of expertise in all aspects of Canadian life.

You have brought pride, not only to the country you have chosen but also to your mother country, India.

Therefore, we must congratulate the visionary leaders of the 90s. This leadership looked at the diaspora and said “THEY ARE US. THIS IS THE HIDDEN STRENGTH WE EXPORTED YEARS AGO. WE CAN USE THEM. WE WANT THEM TO BE OUR PARTNER – OR ONE CAN SAY, PAYBACK TIME.” :- And hence, the PBD was born and here we are in Toronto recognizing the diaspora in Canada.

When I returned to my school four years ago as Chief Guest I was asked to say to students my thoughts of inspiration to them. I said “look at me and by extension all of you sitting in front of me. A product of strong values taught to us by our cultural, religious, and family traditions that have made this diaspora the most successful in the world. That is India’s contribution to the global family.

Thank you.