

Rúhiyyih Khánum message, 1948

To the delegates and friends attending the First Canadian National Bahá'í Convention.¹

Dear Friends

What a blessing and privilege to be allowed to raise my voice on this historic occasion, even though from across two seas, and address these words to you in my home. You who are gathered here see this room, these walls and doors clearly, but I assure you they rise up before my eyes dimmed by the passing years, sanctified by memory and longing, and what comes to my mind is a nostalgic co-mingling of the past and of the future.

Strangely enough the most vivid picture is one neither I nor probably one of you can remember as an eye witness: 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressing in this very room, a group of believers and guests. The strong, sad, wise face, the silvery hair, the beautiful, understanding blue eyes that saw the reality of things, the reality of evil, the reality of error, of failure and deviation, and yet looked upon all men with a loving and gentle spirit and filled them with hope—this is the first and most vivid imprint of all, which surely clings to this house so blessed by His presence. And what He said on that occasion must have for you, I feel, now gathered here to carry on His work at such an important juncture in Canadian history, a special message and a special significance. He opened His speech with these words:

An hour ago a young man came here and we discussed together whether nature is perfect or imperfect, light or darkness. I wish now to complete that conversation. Nature—that is, generally speaking, the physical world, the world of nature, if we observe it carefully and seek to probe its mysteries,—this world of nature is seen to be imperfect, to be dark. Consider carefully: if we leave a plot of earth in its natural state it will remain a field of thistles, it will grow useless weeds; if we leave the hills to themselves the trees will remain fruitless, it is a jungle with no harvest, no order. Therefore, this world of nature is dark, it must be illumined. In what will its illumination lie?

'Abdu'l-Bahá then went on to answer His own question and to point out that cultivation and training in the world of nature has converted the wilderness into orchards and into harvest-bearing fields, and that just as the physical world would, if left untended, revert to a state of nature which is dark, wild, and fruitless, so men, if abandoned to themselves, if left uneducated, revert to a state resembling that of animals—nay, even worse than animals, for they can become like the cannibals of Africa, their human qualities of mind and soul remaining wholly undeveloped. Through one simile after another He pointed out that the physical world must be redeemed from its gross state of imperfection through training.

In that speech He struck at the root of the materialistic philosophy dominating the world at present. He said:

“In these days all the philosophers blindly say that the world of nature is perfect. They are not aware that it is imperfect and must become perfect through training.” For, said He, *“If we leave nature to herself she is dark, therefore we must educate man until this dark creature becomes illumined, this ignorant one becomes wise, boorishness becomes mannerliness, imperfection becomes perfection, bad character becomes good character; until this animal becomes a human. There is no doubt that man, untrained, is worse than an animal.”*

¹ This document is from the Emma Maxie Jones Collection, https://bahai-library.com/emma_maxwell_jones_collection, prepared by E. Jones, M. Thomas, and J. Winters (2021-2022). Transcribed with minor typographical and some spelling corrections from scanned photographic images of [a poorly] typewritten copy. Text checked and amended using the copy posted at <http://bahaitalks.blogspot.com/2010/02/ruhiyyih-khanums-message-to-first.html>. —M.W.T.

He went on, with caustic sarcasm, to point out that; *“All animals are natural. All materialists have physical sensations just like animals. They have no spiritual sensations. They deny the existence of God, they have no information about Him, they have no knowledge of the Prophets, of the Kingdom of Heaven, they know nothing. All animals, likewise, are without tidings of the Divine Teachings. All animals are slaves of sensation. In truth, the philosophers of this age are like animals because these too have no knowledge of God, of the Prophets, of spiritual perception, of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit, of the supernatural things. Every animal enjoys such perfections as these. With the greatest of ease philosophers, after twenty years of study, deny God, deny spiritual power and divine inspiration. Animals, without taking any trouble, are perfect philosophers, like her Highness the Cow, who knows nothing about anything. She knows nothing about God. She knows nothing about spiritual perception or spirituality. All animals know nothing of the Spirit. These philosophers, likewise, know nothing except physical things. They are like animals. But in spite of this they say we are philosophers because we acknowledge nothing but that which we perceive. Now Her Highness the Cow, without the acquisition of all these sciences, yet with perfect dignity, is the possessor of these same distinctions. This is not glory! Glory is that men should know of God, should be the possessor of spiritual sensations, should be informed of supernatural things. The glory of man is in this that he should inhale the breath of the Holy Spirit. The glory of man is in this that should imbibe the Divine Teachings. This is the glory of man, otherwise, ignorance cannot be glory, it is foolishness, ignorance is foolishness.”*

He then pointed out that Jesus Christ was obviously in every way superior to philosophers in his wisdom, His conduct, and convictions, why should a being like Him accept to forego the honors, comforts and pleasures of this world if He was not convinced that there was a spiritual condition which conferred infinitely greater benefits on man than the world of mere senses ever could?

It was during the course of this lecture that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became so engrossed in His subject, and spoke with such vehemence, that His turban fell from His head and rolled on the floor. He voiced His protest, here in this room, 46 years ago, against the materialistic philosophy of the West which has gradually engulfed the thinking element of mankind, and which, if it has not directly produced, has certainly not hindered two catastrophic world wars and is not facing us with the appalling possibility of yet a third world war.

It seems befitting, singularly befitting, that you—who are now about to have the spiritual destiny of this beautiful and promising land of ours entrusted to your exclusive care, through the election of your first and own National Assembly—should harken again to the Master’s words and realize the true implications of the responsibility you are assuming of playing a direct part in ushering in a spiritually based civilization as opposed to our highly faulty, purely materialistic civilization of the present day. For we Bahá’ís must not forget for a moment that, without any mental arrogance of conceit, we nevertheless believe our concept of nature, of the purpose of life, and of God, to be inherently different from that commonly held based on a true interpretation of evolution and of the universe.

You nine people, whoever you may be who will have the privilege of humbly serving the rest of the Canadian Bahá'ís as the trustees of the national affairs of our Faith in Canada during the coming year, are now opening a new door. Not only new to you, but new to the entire Bahá'í World. This Canadian Assembly has great significance from many standpoints. It adds one more National Assembly to the small but strong group of national bodies already existing; by being loosed from its spiritual twin, the American Nation Assembly, it creates another pillar of the International House of Justice, and it forms, significantly enough, the ninth National Spiritual Assembly to come into being.

Now that your affairs are being entrusted into your own hands, now that you are opening this new door spiritually, you are likewise being given a new opportunity as Bahá'ís and members of our world community. You can go very far. A new area of work in the New World is being born amongst you. God surely never creates great occasions without likewise conferring great calamities and powers. Your profiting by past experience and example, and your maturity in the Faith, can determine to create your National Assembly and its functions closer to the Divine pattern, more dedicated to its noble purposes, more purified of the dross of selfish shortcomings and limitations than any other Bahá'ís body hitherto constituted. For you are free and this is the morn of your work. You come to your task fresh, exhilarated by the Guardian's bright picture of your future possibilities and the important role you must play.

Whenever one thinks of Canada one thinks of cultivation. Out of the virgin forests, her wildernesses, her barren North lands and lakes, has already been wrung a great and promising nation. The darkness of nature, as the Master said, has given way to cultivation, and out of imperfection has risen the splendor of government, industry, trade, settlements and the arts and sciences of human life. But spiritually the land is still dark, promising but dark. Primarily the measure of spirituality radiated by your national body will be the measure of Bahá'u'lláh's life directly available for Canada. For He created the concept of your institution. You exist because of the functions He desired you to perform, and your fundamental function is to be the spiritual heart of Canada. I say "spiritual" advisedly, for we know from now on you are the administrative heart of the Bahá'í work here, but that is negligible compared to your spiritual position. You are elected to lead, at a fast and valiant pace, let it be said, the united efforts of the Canadian Bahá'ís, and however great the capacities of various individuals within the community may be, it is unlikely they can do more than you provide for them to do. Upon your vision, your dedication, your eagerness and reliability, rest the fortunes of the work of the Cause of God in Canada. You are the first servants in the land, servitude being the highest station as 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated by choosing it for himself, and your responsibility to the people of this Dominion is thus very great.

Unfortunately, government in the world today, even in the so-called democracies, has come to be domination from above. The original idea of a representative form of government whose members were the servants of the nation, of the common man and of the common good, a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" has disappeared and in its place too often we see the ensconced handful of public servants looking upon themselves as a superior class, free to dictate to the masses just about what they please. Only at an election time is there a rapid *volte face* in order to secure prolongation of their own privileges—not a prolongation of humble service to the public weal. We see in the world today the governing and the governed as two almost separate forms. The elders of the community, the shepherds of the flock, those whose constant thought should be for the

for the welfare of each and every individual, who should be accessible to the public, if not in person, then at least in thought, have become a self-inflated, self-righteous, haughty minority. This is the world where democratic forms of government are still practiced.

You, however, are about to elect your Bahá'í governing body for the coming year. I only mention the current picture of government bodies in order to point up the difference between it and our concept of those who are the elected representatives of the people. In the first place to accept election is a Bahá'í duty. In other words, from the very beginning we do not consider a privilege to be sought but a duty which cannot be shirked. Nowhere in the teachings are we given to suppose that administrators are a special or nobler class than others. On the contrary, anyone elected by the free and secret ballot of his fellow believers, can find himself suddenly an "administrator", unlike the world, where politicians are a class by themselves and not usually a very unsavoury one. Once elected, our Bahá'í governing body finds itself entirely free to pursue the dictates of its own joint conscience in managing the affairs of the community it represents, for, unlike the ordinary concept of a governing body, it is no longer responsible to the electorate but only to its superior body, and not particularly esteeming or coveting the job of being an administrator and also realizing no "career" lies in it and no electioneering technique exists, the members of a Bahá'í Assembly do not have to be swayed by the ordinary fears and ambition of most elected representatives. They can get down to the business of attending to the affairs of the Cause with minds and hearts divorced from a sense of personal pressure, personal ambition or personal pride. Bahá'u'lláh's system is not only good for the characters of those who govern, and good for the welfare of those who are governed, and good for the welfare of those who are governed, but [it] also eliminates at a stroke any room for the meannesses, abuses and temptations that are inherent in political systems.

This world of ours today, as the Master emphasized in this very room, [is] intensely dark, intensely materialistic, [and is] treading the path of error, firmly believing what is fundamentally wrong, has, in almost every field of human life, taken the down-hill road. One of the greatest examples of this is the way governmental powers are being used all over the world. It is much, much, easier, when you possess power and authority, to hit a person over the head and knock him unconscious, so to speak, than to lead him into the right. "Verboten". What a sway that word held in Germany and Europe! Indeed it is the easiest of all remedies: "We have the authority, we say no, do it or else." The big stick!

I say this because I think anybody, even such spiritual bodies as our Bahá'í Assemblies, do well to remember that when you have authority the easiest of all things is not to be gentle but to come down hard. It saves argument, patience, time [and] discussion. But it is wise to remember that although such a technique is highly effective, it creates hurt feelings, alienation and often inertia. As you have not yet got a National Assembly this can in no way be construed as a criticism. But as you are about to have one, it seems to me there is no reason why you should not begin your national Bahá'í work on a higher level than any other Bahá'í Assembly ever has. To be spiritually ambitious is surely the right attitude for the servants of God to take. Bahá'ís all over the world work in harmony with their National Assemblies, they carry the Cause forward under the direction of these bodies, are obedient to them, and have confidence in them. But that does not mean this first Canadian National Assembly cannot, in conjunction with its electorate now forming an independent national community for the first time, rise to a far greater spiritual height. What Bahá'u'lláh brought to the world was love and unity. Everything He revealed, His laws, His world system, His teachings and explanations, is subordinate to and designed solely to promote love and unity.

Therefore, the very first thing for the Canadian National Assembly and the Canadian believers to do is to realize profoundly their unity with each other, their love for each other. The Bahá'ís must not see their National Assembly as something now apart from them and above them, managing them or doing the work for them. The National Assembly must not go into an Olympian huddle and get a “nine complex” or become afflicted with the pox of aloofness. No, the believers must feel their National Assembly is their very heart, doing the most vital work for the whole body, needing support, protection, and full cooperation. The National Spiritual Assembly, on the other hand, must realize that although it is the heart, the hands, the eyes; the ears and the mouth are the far scattered believers whom it represents and serves, and without whom it can achieve nothing.

And speaking of the mouth brings me to the National Fund. For surely this all important orifice is the National Fund. Neither the heart nor the hands will be of much use to the body unless it gets sufficient nourishment. As contributions to our Faith are voluntary, this puts its administrators in a very difficult position. They know they must ask and they cannot grab. They also know that the Baha'ís get tired of being asked and yet, when they see the wheels of the work coming to a standstill from lack of means, they are forced to ask again and again. So it seems to me each Bahá'í should do his or her best to remember the embarrassing position of the National Assembly in this matter and try to ensure some measure of steady support to the work of the Cause. From now on Canada is on her own and must assume the necessary obligations and sacrifices along with the glory and distinction.

As I look back it seems to me unbelievable that it is so many years since I left home. But in these years I have learned that people abroad hold Canadians in high esteem. They are viewed as having the virtues of the Americans and the virtues of the British with fewer of the faults of either. It seems to be the commonly held opinion of Europeans that the Canadians are a very progressive, very well balanced, more or less morally upright nation. I say more or less because no people possesses full moral rectitude today. I think our Guardian shares in this view. I think He is looking at Canada now with a keen and speculative glance, waiting to see what such a budding, great and coming nation is going to contribute to Bahá'í History. Whatever you are going to contribute, I assure you, you cannot do it too fast to satisfy Shoghi Effendi's ambitions for you! To the North, to the East and to the West of this room you are sitting in, he sees nothing but goals for you to accomplish, victories for you to achieve, undertakings for you to launch, laurels for you to win, golden pages for you to write. His enthusiasm for you is unbounded, and, of course, we know from whence it springs. From 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For He was the one, who thirty one years ago, impatient for time to roll by, and already seeing the future as an accomplished fact, addressed you as the believers in the nine provinces of Canada and “Newfoundland, Yukon, Mackenzie, Keewatin, Ungava, Franklin Islands, and Greenland.” As He said in the course of His address in this room, before you came to this country it was all forest and wilderness and look what your cultivation has brought it to. Now a fruitful forest and wilderness stretches out before you, waiting for the husbandman's hand, the wilderness in the hearts of your fellow Canadians, the Red Indians and the Eskimos.

Montreal 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited, Montreal He blessed—the heart of French Catholic Canada. He wrote of His visit to our city: *“The time of sojourn was limited to a number of days, but the results in the future are inexhaustible. When a farmer comes into the possession of virgin soil, in a short time he will bring under cultivation a large field. Therefore, I hope that in the future Montreal may become so stirred that the melody of the Kingdom may travel to all parts of the world from that Dominion and the Breath of the Holy Spirit may spread from that center to the East and the West of America.”*

O ye believers of God! Do ye not look upon the smallness

of your number and the multitudes of the nations. Five grains of wheat will be endued with heavenly blessing, whereas a thousand tons of tares will yield no results or effect. One fruitful tree will be conducive to the life of society, whereas a thousand forests of wild trees offer no fruits. The plain is covered with pebbles, but precious stones are rare. One pearl is better than a thousand wildernesses of sand; especially this pearl of great price, which is endowed with divine blessing. Ere long thousands of other pearls will be born from it. When that pearl associates and becomes the intimate of the pebbles, they also all change into pearls.²

Therefore, again I repeat, that the future of Canada, whether from the standpoint of civilization or from the viewpoint of the virtues of the Kingdom is very great. Day by day civilization and freedom shall increase. Likewise the cloud of the Kingdom will water the seeds of guidance sown in that Dominion. Consequently, rest ye not, seek ye no composure, attach not yourselves to the luxuries of this ephemeral world, free yourselves from every attachment and strive with heart and soul to become fully established in the Kingdom of God. Gain ye the heavenly treasures. Day by Day become ye more illumined. Draw ye nearer and nearer unto the Threshold of Oneness. Become ye the manifestors of spiritual favors and the dawning-places of infinite lights. If it is possible, send ye teachers to other portions of Canada, likewise dispatch ye teachers to Greenland and the home of the Eskimos.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Bahá'í* Scriptures, p. 525.