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Naheed Nenshi

In October 2010, Calgary witnessed the wonderful and surprising election of Naheed Nenshi as mayor. Still under forty, Naheed was thrust into the spotlight, as was the Ismaili community. Everybody wondered what had precipitated this unexpected event; very few people knew that Naheed had been preparing himself for quite a long time.

John Ralston Saul and I met Naheed Nenshi when he came with a group of some of the brightest twenty-five-year-olds we'd encountered to talk to us at Rideau Hall. They had founded Canada25, a group that wanted to understand and help shape public policy. These young Canadians were working in the arts, in government and consultancy firms, and in universities. They had published a report called *A New Magnetic North: How Canada Can Attract and Retain Young Talent*, which focused on how Canadian cities could become engines of economic development. They held eleven round-table discussions across North America, involving 350 young Canadians.

Naheed was already working at the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, but this Canada25 was part of his community activity. We struck up a friendship. When we went to Calgary on various official visits during my time as Governor-General, we would get in touch with him. So we were not completely surprised when he decided to run for mayor and were thrilled when he was elected. But somehow, with what I would call our Canadian "gradualism" so ingrained in us, we thought that he would first run for city council and a few elections later aim for the mayoralty. Or we thought that he might contest a seat in the provincial legislature. And never did we dream that he would soon capture the imagination of the adventurous Calgarians and become their mayor.

When you look at Naheed, it's hard not to smile. He is positively jolly-looking—curly black hair, dark brown eyes, and a huge smile. His enthusiasm and the speed with which he talks is captivating. It's not so much that this man was born for politics as that politics has a great need of people like him: humane, bright, someone whose eyes actually focus on another person. The word that comes to mind to describe him is "expansive." It feels as though he can take everything in and you are part of his being. This is a rare quality, and it would be a fine thing if more people in public life had it. Perhaps it's not just a quality; perhaps it's actually a gift. Whatever it is, Naheed Nenshi has it.

Naheed will state emphatically that the world needs more Canada. He feels that he experienced an equitable sharing of opportunity, something that would not have been offered in any other country. He knows that no matter how long he might have lived in Japan, he would never be Japanese; that no matter how long he lived in Norway, he would never become Norwegian. But as a first-generation Canadian he has become mayor of a large Canadian

city. That openness should not be underrated. Canada, especially Western Canada, offers people the chance to overcome obstacles and move into the future.

Naheed feels fortunate to have come from an ethnic group in which there is a very deeply ingrained ethic of community service and volunteerism. The spiritual drive behind the Ismailis is also the drive that enables them to succeed individually, to be part of the larger community, and to be recognized as leaders.

Naheed says that the Ismailis have always been a minority (Shiite) within a minority (Muslim) within a minority (the Third World), and therefore, they've had to stick together. They have realized that since their diaspora in the thirteenth century, they've become problem-solvers in order to survive. Curiously enough, the volunteer work of the Aga Khan's followers has become what Naheed describes gently as a giant bureaucracy providing all kinds of services. When he was thirty-seven, serving on the National Education Board in Canada for the Aga Khan, he discovered that a lot of young Ismailis who had recently arrived from Central Asia were not succeeding at school. So the board set up a system of nationwide tutorial centres to provide after-school help, and also some mentoring programs. The aim was not only to improve the students' secondary school performance, but to increase rates of admission to post-secondary education. Interestingly enough, the board charged ahead even though there were other non-Ismaili organizations trying to do the same thing. Says Naheed, Ismailis are such self-starters that they don't seek help from other organizations, choosing instead to implement their own programs. He is proud of his community's ability to build something from nothing, but he also warns of the danger of spending time and energy solely in your own community without paying heed to what's happening

to the rest of the world. He thinks Ismailis have an obligation to say to others, "We can help you to do this, we can help you bring this kind of success to bear on your own endeavours."

I would characterize the Ismailis, Naheed among them, as amazingly successful overachievers. In 2007, when the Aga Khan was celebrating his golden jubilee as their imam, the Calgarian Ismailis wanted to do something very special. It has been their custom for a number of years to host a huge Calgary Stampede breakfast, the largest community-driven Stampede breakfast entirely run by volunteers (as is everything the Ismailis do). They had become used to feeding four to five thousand people, but this time they wanted to make the event even larger. Because the Aga Khan was coming, they rented the largest tent in North America and had it shipped from Florida. But when they erected it, before they were able to get it staked properly, a sudden windstorm caused it to collapse. They were lucky no one was killed. The tent was irreparable, and soon thousands of people would be turning up for breakfast. So between 3 and 6 A.M., the volunteers moved the entire operation two kilometres away to a parking lot. Volunteers were dispatched to guide the traffic to the new site and by 8 A.M. they were serving pancakes—five minutes later than promised. They fed more than six thousand people that day.

Naheed's brother-in-law has worked as a volunteer for three three-year terms, while Naheed used to put in forty or fifty hours a week. In addition to this, most Ismailis regularly attend meetings and social events at the jamatkhana. There are services every day. Growing up, Naheed didn't realize that most Christians attend church only on Sundays; Ismailis pray several times a day, and very devoted Ismailis go and pray in congregation twice a day, every day. Naheed himself goes to a service on Tuesday evenings and is in and

out in thirty minutes. "Quick set of prayers, hello, goodbye," he laughs. Friday prayers can be even shorter. Some people stay for a sermon, some don't, and some stay for another service.

The faith of Ismailis like Naheed is braided into their everyday life; it is not a "Sundays only" deal. There seems to be something very practical about God's presence among them, and at an Ismaili wedding I recently attended, I observed that same feeling. There was a warm sense of community about the ceremony. The spiritual and the material are entwined. It's very different from the Christian tendency of separating the sacred and setting it in opposition to the secular. There is something integrated about Ismaili lives. A lot of it has to do with volunteerism as the lived expression of their faith.

The Aga Khan and his network of volunteers throughout the Third World—and now through his new Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa—accomplishes astounding work. He asks people to give up their jobs to carry out projects, and they do. Nurjehan Mawani, for example, was a high-ranking civil servant in Ottawa, chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board and a Public Service commissioner after that. In 2005, she was asked to go to Kyrgyzstan to develop a diplomatic presence there for the Aga Khan, and she's still there after six years. I first thought it was astonishing that someone would abandon such a high-powered career, but the Aga Khan Foundation tends to seek out people at points in their lives where a change like that makes sense or might be welcomed. Naheed says he is unlikely to be asked to relinquish his position as mayor of Calgary.

For most Ismailis, family comes first, and it's no different with Naheed. He considers his family's history to be "a beautiful story." Beautiful, even though it involves loss, displacement, and misunderstanding.

Naheed's own story began in East Africa, in Tanzania. But years before, his maternal grandmother came from a village in India, where she spoke Kutchi (an Indian dialect) and Punjabi. She was put on a boat and sent to be married to a man much older than her, a man who had already emigrated to Tanzania. She had ten children with him, and one of those children, Naheed's mother, married into another family of ten children. Many others had died in childbirth. They were poor, but they got along, working in a small shop and doing anything to stay alive and bring up their children.

Naheed's paternal grandfather died when his father was only eight years old, so his grandmother used to make food and sell it on the street. Eventually, the extended family moved to Arusha, a larger town in Tanzania, where they ran a small hotel. Arusha was a centre for a lot of UN activity, and Naheed's parents met some Canadians who worked for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and got the *Toronto Star* mailed to them. When they were finished with the newspaper, they would pass it on to Naheed's parents. And in 1968, his father saw pictures of the new City Hall in Toronto, designed by Viljo Revell, two semicircular shapes embracing each other. He was astounded by this piece of architecture; he didn't know how a building could be so tall and also so round. So he vowed that someday he was going to see it.

In 1971, the family gathered enough money together to make a trip to England, because his father's sister was getting married there. Her family had managed to save enough to send her to secretarial college in London. Once in England, Naheed's father was so determined to see Toronto's City Hall that they took off for Canada. At that point, Naheed's mother was pregnant with him, but they

decided to go anyway. They arrived in June 1971. Decades later, when Naheed was sworn in as mayor of Calgary, he was allowed to have anybody he wanted to perform the swearing-in ceremony. Some people pick famous politicians, but he picked his sister, who told the story about his father and Toronto's City Hall and how, in a way, that led to the point where Naheed was now.

Obviously, Naheed's father was looking out for his family, because things were not going well in Tanzania. It wasn't as bad as Uganda, where Idi Amin was insanely attempting to eradicate the whole Asian population. But in Tanzania, President Julius Nyerere was applying the socialist principles of *ujamaa*—in many ways an idealistic attempt to abolish discrimination based on ascribed status, decentralize production down to the village level, and emphasize self-reliance through the group. This vision did not seem to include the country's Asian population, however, though much good was accomplished in vital areas of social development like infant mortality, education, and literacy. The Asian community saw that their rights were being taken away, that they were being marginalized and disenfranchised, and that their citizenship would disappear. A minority within a minority within a minority is always aware of any threat, and the Nenshi family saw no future for themselves in East Africa.

The Nenshis liked Toronto. They had a wonderful summer in 1971 and decided they would try to stay. Back then, it was possible to apply for permanent residency status after arriving in Canada. When they decided to do that, the Tanzanian government froze their assets at home and they were not allowed to take anything out of the country. All they had with them was their holiday clothes, and they weren't allowed to work. They lived in a rooming house and had several terribly difficult months, but luckily there was

the kindness of strangers. At the time, there were only ten Ismaili families in Toronto, so they banded together and tried to help each other out. The longest any of them had been in Canada was one year.

Naheed's father decided that since he had run a hotel in Tanzania, he would try to get that kind of job here. He went to apply at the Inn on the Park, a large hotel north of the city. To get there, he took the Don Valley Parkway, but he ended up driving the wrong way on the expressway, and in a panic abandoned the car and started up the median on foot, with four lanes of traffic on either side of him. He presented himself for the interview covered in snow. He didn't get the job.

When applying for permanent residency status, there was a very simple way in which people could help each other. In order to get status, it was necessary to have a certain amount of money in the bank. Among Naheed's community (and probably among many other communities), the same amount of money, which various people had pooled together, was circulated between different bank accounts, so that when immigration officials checked, the money was there. It was done on a basis of total trust, and at the end the money was divided up again. Legally speaking, I'm sure this would be looked on as bending the rules, but what if you were in the same position? Most Ismailis could not return home without being persecuted or starved out, so, because they trusted and helped each other, they were able to arrive at this creative solution.

Naheed was the first in the Nenshi family to be born in Canada. His parents couldn't return to Tanzania; there was nothing to go back to. They had only high school educations, but Naheed characterizes them as being "very, very, very smart." People from minority groups do tend not only to develop intellectual abilities but also

to become what my father called, in his 1920s slang, "quick on the uptake." And Naheed's parents knew that they would have to forge a future for themselves and for their children. They worked as junior office clerks and were able to call on their experience of running and managing hotels.

Soon after they arrived in Canada, the Asians from Uganda were accepted, and very quickly the tiny Ismaili community of a dozen families became a community of one thousand. So the ten families that had got here first had to help sort everything out for the people who came later. One of their members worked for CP Rail; that was a foot in the door. Now they could get jobs there for other Ismailis.

Naheed was living with his parents and sister in a small apartment in a high-rise with his uncle and his family: a total of two couples and four kids, in two bedrooms. But the family always maintained a spirit of adventure. After all, they were young, and they were alive and healthy and out of East Africa. They decided they would find more opportunity in Alberta, and that to get there they would drive across the country. They packed up their Dodge Dart and set off, with probably no idea how far it was. They set out in 1972, not really knowing what their prospects were, not knowing if they would ever see their families from Tanzania again, but with the hope that things could be better and the knowledge that they must make a start. Naheed remembers how they would save up to make long-distance phone calls to Tanzania. His family was lucky, because they all ended up in Toronto and Calgary. His mother's sisters all eventually settled in Calgary, and her four brothers moved to Los Angeles. Naheed's father worked as a bookkeeper in a company that made boxes, and his mother worked in the office of an appliance company. But they were entrepreneurs, like many Ismailis. So, with

the little bit of money that they saved, they bought some real estate in Alberta, and in partnership with some other Ismaili families and friends started buying motels in very strange, small places such as Marble Falls, Texas.

When Naheed's family and friends bought a motel in Red Deer, Alberta, his parents quit their jobs and moved there. Although it was a small town, they thought they had a big opportunity.

The idea of the Nenshis going to Red Deer resonated with me, because I had learned in 2001 that the immigration and settlement committees of Lacombe and Red Deer were very active in welcoming immigrants. I paid an official visit to Red Deer, where I met new Canadians from eighteen different countries. They told me that at first they had worried about coming to a small town (Red Deer has a population of about fifty thousand), but its smallness turned out to be an advantage. It was easier to make friends in the larger community and to become familiar more quickly with details of Canadian life than it would have been in a city of millions. Their stories were overwhelmingly positive, whether they were Chinese, Filipino, Pakistani, or Croatian. One of our first programs for the Institute for Canadian Citizenship was inaugurated in Red Deer with enthusiastic co-operation from the city's officials, Red Deer College, and many of the new Canadians I first met there.

Naheed's family was part of that movement of immigrants beyond the large cities. But unhappily the recession of the early 1980s and interest rates of twenty-two percent nearly sank them. After about three years in Red Deer, they returned to Calgary and started again from scratch, even though they had become landlords of several properties by then. They managed to hang on to one property, but the rest were gone on foreclosure. They moved back into their old house in Calgary. Naheed's mother got a job first as

a chambermaid in a hotel that was owned by people they knew. Saving a bit, his parents bought a small laundromat. When Naheed was thirteen years old, he worked the counter at the laundromat and did his homework while minding the cash and selling detergent and fabric softener. His father went back to work at the box company in a more junior position and eventually found himself working for his sister. He stayed on there until he retired. His mother also worked in Marlborough Mall, selling lottery tickets at an information booth. She was doing really well, but the entrepreneurial bug kept biting her, so they decided to open their own little lottery booth in a grocery store, eventually adding more. Later they sold them, but Naheed's mother continued to work at a lottery booth until she retired.

Naheed thoroughly enjoys telling the story of his resilient family and their attempts to be entrepreneurial. The family was on unemployment insurance for a while in the early 1980s when there was absolutely no income. Naheed knows what it is to depend on that very basic guarantee that can keep you from total destitution. He says they never indulged in self-pity because they could always see that there was someone worse off than them.

Naheed says his parents worked hard to ensure their children went to university. They didn't dream that he would go to university: they required him to go. It was not an option. It was for this that they worked all the time. They loved their children, but they depended on them to have initiative. And the children knew that their parents had a goal for them.

Naheed grew up in the area of east Calgary known as Marlborough, which he describes as a diverse community, not in terms of race but of class. Back then, working-class people and people in trades did quite well economically; they could afford a

boat and a cottage. While he was in school, the neighbourhood changed as Vietnamese boat people began to arrive. It was mostly a pleasant neighbourhood, with decent-sized single-family homes, big trees, a lot of recent immigrants. He calls it a typical suburban upbringing. Over the years, the community became more ethnic. Naheed still lives near Marlborough, but a little farther northeast. He says, very modestly, he's done rather well with some investments, so he made a deal with his parents that they would sell the house, buy a new one, and he'd pay for the difference so they could live mortgage free. It's clear that he still belongs to his family and wants to be part of it economically and emotionally—one of the beautiful things about his immigrant experience.

While he worked his way through university, Naheed always had at least three or four part-time jobs, and since Grade 6 he has worked in various family businesses. He served coffee in a bingo hall where everybody was white. All the other employees were children of people who played bingo, and they made up a shifting community. They'd work for two or three months and then move on, but Naheed stayed for three years. He insists that it's his immigrant mentality that made him stick to the job for three years.

I asked Naheed if the people at the bingo hall ever made him feel second-class or treated him badly. He said they never talked much to him, but they weren't cruel or hateful. Even so, they emphasized the difference they felt by giving him a funny nickname. They didn't mean anything by it, he says. I found it significant that Naheed did not say the nickname aloud. I think in fact it probably isn't something he can shrug off and make fun of. He describes it in a very interesting and self-protective way: he says it was their way of "observing the world." He remembers that at the time there was debate about whether Sikhs in the RCMP should be

allowed to wear turbans. He would sell lottery tickets to nice old ladies wearing protest pins depicting a Sikh in a turban with a big X through it. Those ladies would think nothing of buying a ticket from him and then inviting him to coffee. Naheed regards this as a kind of interesting dichotomy. He doesn't think of it as anything profound or anything that couldn't change. And, indeed, in this specific case things did change. Sikh members of the RCMP not only wear turbans, they wear them during the iconic Musical Ride. All that was needed for this idea to lose its novelty was time.

Naheed ran for president of the student council in high school and won, he says, because "I'm pretty outgoing." Later, he was part of the team that won the provincial debating championships and placed eighth at the world championships. He played Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Every year, he served on student council. He insists that he was one of the nerdy kids as opposed to the popular kids, and when they had a party at graduation, he realized the nerdy kids outnumbered the popular ones. He loved high school. He went to Queen Elizabeth High, and he says that many people from the school volunteered to help him when he ran for mayor. People he would not have expected, those "popular kids," were coming out on Facebook saying what a great guy he was. He says he never suffered teenage angst; he just had a great time and a splendid university experience. He loved the idea of being with people who were completely different. As president of the student council, he tried to set up a new national student lobbying organization, and he managed to get himself flown to Toronto and be interviewed for a job at McKinsey at the same time. He got the job at McKinsey, and the rest is history.