

AAAS 2012 Annual Meeting—Opening Ceremony
Professor Stephen J. Toope, Co-Chair
16 February 2012

The Right Honourable David Johnston, Dr. Fedoroff, my esteemed colleagues, members of government and the international media, friends:

I am honoured to share the chairmanship of such a critical event in international science and policy, and to do so with two associates whom I hold in such high regard. And I am privileged that in this capacity, I represent not only The University of British Columbia but also the province we call home and the country we serve. Like Dr. Huang, I wish to acknowledge the magnitude of planning required to bring all of us together today, and the effort that was made across the whole of Canada to execute a successful event in Vancouver. The Government of Canada and specifically Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada; the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada; the Social

Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Canada Foundation for Innovation—all were instrumental in the national effort that led to this moment. Just three institutions are represented on stage tonight, but in fact individuals from sister universities in every province and territory worked to ensure that we could stand before you now. To all of you, my thanks.

In the early years of this new millennium, American journalist Thomas Friedman was in India conducting research for a book on globalization. In the middle of a conversation with Nandan Nilekani, then-CEO of InfoSys Technologies Ltd., he heard him say, “The playing field is being leveled.” Friedman says he understood in that instant that “technological and political forces [had] converged [to produce] a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration without regard to

geography or distance or ... even language.” What resulted from that realization was his now-famous bestseller, *The World Is Flat*.

Praise for the book was not universal. Matt Taibbi, a journalist with the New York Press, for example, wrote a scathing review that included this comment: “The significance of Columbus’s discovery was that on a round earth, humanity is more interconnected than on a flat one. On a round earth, the two most distant points are closer than they are on a flat earth.”

The theme of this year’s conference is “Flattening the World: Building A Global Knowledge Society.” The question I raise is, *should* we be trying to flatten it? To level the scientific playing field so that all people everywhere have the same access to learning, research, and new knowledge? Or should we be taking advantage of our round earth? Using technology to shorten the

distance between science and policy, and between scientists and the general population?

The answer, of course, is that we must strive to do both, and I think we have to do both simultaneously. In order to bridge the gap that remains between scientific discovery and public policy, we—all of us in attendance at this conference—are going to need a public, a global community of citizens who understand enough about what's going on in *here* to get engaged out *there*. To comprehend, and then to think and reason and grapple with the issues. To vote in and support the government representatives who will do what needs to be done. Comprehension, politicization, interconnection ... and *action*.

There are nearly 8,000 of us here—researchers, academics, policy makers, and members of the media. To achieve our stated goal of

building a global knowledge society, we are going to have to acknowledge our own interconnectedness, and our interdependence. The most brilliant discovery cannot be fully exploited unless its significance can be grasped by decision makers and put into practice by and for the general populace.

So let's flatten the world. Let's share our stories with one another, and then let's broadcast those stories, and the new ideas they engender, as widely as possible. It should be our aim that by the end of these four days, everyone with access to a computer, wireless handheld, television, radio, or good old-fashioned newspaper should know what we have learned.

I, for one, want the world to know that Canada is leading the way in making critical contributions to the way all of us understand our oceans, the changes in our climate, the sustainability of the

planet. I want the world to hear of Dr. Karen Bakker's interdisciplinary research on water governance issues such as privatization and water access in developing nations. To know the work of Dr. Julio Montaner in treating and preventing HIV/AIDS. To learn of Dr. Michael Hayden's predictive genetic test for Huntington's disease, now the standard of care worldwide. And to understand how Dr. Carl Weiman, now with the Executive Office of the U.S. President, is revolutionizing the way science is taught. All of them are with The University of British Columbia, and all of them are changing paradigms in their respective fields.

Most exciting of all: There are just four of nearly 170 different symposia, lectures, seminars, and workshops by delegates from over 50 countries. So researchers, tell your stories, to as many people as will listen. Delegates, take in as many sessions as you

can, and begin to build connections—between ideas and among one another.

And then: Let's take that flat world, that level playing field, and form the links and networks and connections that will bring it back around full circle. Members of the media, you have an extraordinary responsibility here. I want to take this opportunity to thank you in advance for the role you will play in ensuring that the ideas and intelligence and insights brought forth over the next four days are translated in such a way as to inspire understanding and action on the part of audiences around the world. Through modern technology, ideas presented at a seminar here can appear on newsfeeds thousands of miles away even before that seminar ends. And as will become apparent during presentations on food production and safety, global health, energy, and climate change, that urgency is critical. I don't envy you the task, but I

speak for all of us when I say we are grateful to you for taking it on.

After 177 gatherings, the AAAS conference is truly an international and interdisciplinary event. With this, the 178th meeting, we must acknowledge our *interdependence*, and ensure that our *interconnectedness* extends beyond the duration of this conference. The importance of the discoveries being shared here is matched by the imperative that they be translated into policy, and put into practice. Our world—flat and round—depends on it.

Thank you.