



Akaash Maharaj speaking at the “Joining Forces on Youth Engagement” equine industry symposium at University of Guelph.

# Growing Together or Diminishing Apart

Akaash Maharaj is CEO of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption and a former CEO of Equestrian Canada. He was asked to give the opening address at the University of Guelph’s Equine Industry Symposium “Joining Forces on Youth Engagement” in February. Here is an excerpt:

*by Akaash Maharaj*

**G**uelph has called us together from across Canada and from every corner of the equine industry. This is no mean feat; our sector is utterly vast and fiendishly complex. But we are bound together by a single article of faith: our shared passion for the horse.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given my background, I feel that equestrianism is the most noble of all sports: a partnership between two beings who must, without words, learn trust and sympathy for one another; a partnership between one who literally holds the reins, and one who can not defend his own interests; and therefore, a partnership that calls to our better selves, to place the wellbeing of our horses ahead of our personal ambitions.

We are at a turning point in the history of Canadian equestrianism, a time of both high potential and deep peril. The decisions that we take – or fail to take – will determine whether Canada’s equine sector remains viable, whether we will pass on to succeeding generations the opportunity to live the passion for the horse, which previous generations passed on to us.

By any rational assessment, our industry is a cornerstone of our country’s economy and society. We generate nearly \$20 billion of Canada’s annual GDP. We create over half a million full-time equivalent positions. We care for a million horses.

We are responsible for more of Canada’s wealth and employ far more of Canada’s citizens than the dairy industry. Nevertheless, the dairy

industry wields infinitely more influence in the corridors of power. The figures comparing the equine and dairy industries have been accepted by Agriculture Canada. Yet, whenever I cite those figures to legislators or Ministers, they are always shocked. The only people more taken aback are equestrians ourselves.

My sense is that the reason we have underestimated our own industry – and worse still, that we have allowed our industry to be underestimated by political decision-makers – is that we are dispersed and divided, and have rarely summoned the will to make common cause in defence of our common interests.

As equestrians, we value the ideal of the rugged individual, the one man or one woman who stands alone with his or her horse, in defiance and contempt of the frailties and ignorance of a shallow world. That is a phenomenal way to end a film, but it is no way to build an industry. Painfully few Canadians know that Canada's equine industry employs more people than our film and television production industries combined.

It is no disservice to our culture of independence to acknowledge that we as a sector will grow together, or we will diminish apart.

Numbers do not lie, but they can beguile. It might be tempting to draw the false conclusion that in an industry this expansive, perhaps inertia alone will sustain it, and we need not worry about collaborating on recruitment, engagement, or succession for young Canadians. We must resist any temptation to substitute such comforting fictions for hard realities.

In 2003, Canadian equestrians were older than the general Canadian

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population. Our median and modal adult age was in the 40 to 49 years bracket, with a clear underrepresentation of Canadians in their 20s and 30s.

Seven years later, in 2010, our median and modal age had increased to the 50 to 59 years bracket, and the gap between our community and the population at large had expanded.

Another seven years later, in 2017, the average adult age of our community appears to have crept into the 60 to 69 years bracket, with a yawning gap between ourselves and Canadians in their 20s, 30s, and 40s.

In essence, adults who were involved in equestrianism at the turn of the century have generally remained involved, but have of course grown older, while neither recruiting nor making way for younger Canadians.

To be blunt, we are galloping towards a demographic precipice.

The average lifespan of a Canadian is approximately 80 years. As a result, in 15 years, the current vanguard of our sector will begin to die off. In 25 years, we will be in one of two positions.

The first possibility is that we will have succeeded in rejuvenating ourselves, by bringing in additional cohorts of younger Canadians, developing them to form a new core for our industry, and promoting them to

serve as Canada's new equestrian leaders.

The second possibility is that we will have failed to achieve this rejuvenation, and in consequence, the Canadian equine industry will be tumbling into a catastrophic collapse, one that will damage the national economy and lay waste to rural communities.

I encourage all of us to reflect on how we can co-operate together: to combat the widespread misperception that equestrianism is creature of elitism; to bridge the yawning gap between rural and urban Canada; to create equine career development paths from schools through to industry; to lift public understanding of and public respect for professional standards; and to foster viable employment opportunities that do not rely on the willingness and capacity of equestrians to substitute passion for living wages.

I believe we need also address the allied challenge of broadening the pool from which we draw Canada's equestrians. By 2031, a majority of Canadians over 15 will be either immigrants or the children of immigrants; the recruitment of young Canadians and new Canadians are rapidly becoming two sides of the same coin.

Ultimately, each of us individually, and all of us collectively, will have to live up to our responsibilities to implement the solutions. 🐾

## Suggestions from the Roundtable

Some of the outcomes from the “Joining Forces on Youth Engagement” round table discussions on Recruitment, Engagement, and Succession that federations, organizations, or individuals can practice included:

- Quash misconceptions that getting involved in the equine industry requires a lot of money, existing experience and age
- Have a large, unified, education presence at events across Canada
- Develop a social media presence and encourage face-to-face sessions at schools
- Develop partnerships with other organizations outside of the equine industry to appeal to non-horse people and parents
- Partner with schools to get youth involved (clubs, career nights at school, field trips)
- Create an equine professional association to bring together industry professionals
- Use branded hashtags and post selfies with your horse and include your personal story
- Entice youth at an early age
- Bring clinicians into small towns
- Operate family-oriented riding programs
- Bring a friend or parent to your lesson
- Educate participants and visitors and emphasize safety
- Arrange free racetrack invitations and tours
- Unify the various groups to get everyone on the same page
- Remind people that working with horses helps build life skills
- Make participants aware of opportunities to increase their engagement, develop their skills, network
- Develop educational incentives for participants to strive for a consistent level of animal care and management
- Connect people who want to learn with those who want to share their knowledge
- Help the educated and established to sustain their operations and mentor their students
- Promote the message that horses are for everyone