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A typically Canadian story

Haroon Siddiqui
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From Saudi Arabia

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia - Sometimes you have to go far to see what has been near you all along.

It was at a dinner here that a senior Saudi official, making small talk to a visiting columnist, got rapturous about Canada for producing a scientist who has been deemed worthy of this region's most prestigious honour.

Dr. Sajeew John, professor of physics at the University of Toronto, is this year's co-winner of the \$200,000 (U.S.) King Faisal International Prize for Science. The other winner is the eminent physicist and Nobel laureate Chen Ning Yang, Albert Einstein Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York.

Much sought-after in the scientific community, the Faisal awards have been a bellwether for the Nobel Prize. Five of its winners have gone on to win the big one.

Dr. John is being recognized for inventing a way to transmit information by optical pulses, rather than via electrons.

His optical microchip can process light the same way that the semiconductor processes electrical current. In plain English, that means messages can be sent through computers and telecommunication devices faster and cheaper.

The discovery promises to revolutionize information technology, including the Internet.

That the good professor - a graduate of MIT; a Ph.D. from Harvard; a former professor at Princeton; and winner of several international awards, including the Guggenheim Fellowship in the United States and the Humboldt Scientist Award in Germany - is more celebrated abroad than at home is typically Canadian.

As if in keeping with this national trait, our media seem even more preoccupied than usual with peddling trivia to pay any attention to our best and brightest.

The organizers of the Canadian Gairdner Awards for top scientists usually have a hard time getting coverage.

The announcement about John's honour, released in Riyadh and Toronto recently, was ignored by Toronto's seven dailies, including this one, and even by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

John will receive his \$100,000 cheque and 24 carat gold medal here on Feb. 17. It will be a fitting moment for our global times: a visible minority Christian immigrant from India incubated in multicultural Canada being feted in a Muslim state by a foundation headed by a bearded prince in long robes who is himself a product of the West's Ivy League schools.

Prince Khaled al-Faisal is the elder brother of the more well-known Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister. As their names suggest, they are the sons of the late King Faisal (reigned 1964-75).

He is remembered in the West for quadrupling oil prices in 1973-74. But around here, he is revered as a wise leader who, besides setting a personal example of modest living amid overflowing wealth, transformed this desert kingdom by modernizing its economic and social structures.

His eight sons established the foundation in 1976 to promote his ideals: preserving Islamic values, among which he included upgrading living standards in the developing world, improving health care and promoting education.

Shrewd investments have swelled the foundation's assets to \$3 billion, including a new \$400 million conical business tower in downtown Riyadh, designed by British architect Sir Norman Foster.

The foundation has donated \$200 million in 40 countries, including humanitarian relief in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Its Centre for Research and Islamic Studies assists students around the world working on Islamic culture, history and faith. Free of charge. It does so from its library of 160,000 volumes and 20,000 original manuscripts, or through links to the British Museum Library and the Biblioth*que Nationale in Paris. It will soon hook up with the Library of Congress.

The international awards, five each year, are given for science, medicine, Arabic literature, Islamic Studies and Service to Islam. Selection is by a nine-member jury of experts in each field, only two of whom can be Saudi nationals.

The specialized field in each category is specified a year in advance; next year's science award will be for mathematics, and in medicine, for the whys and wherefores of chronic heart failure. (Details on <http://www.kff.com>).

More interesting than the institution is its chairman. Prince Khaled, 60, is a graduate of Princeton and Oxford. Since 1968, he has been governor of the most scenic province in the kingdom, Asir, on the Red Sea. He is a well-known poet and, more unusual for this society, a painter. His acclaimed works have been exhibited in the United States, Germany, Britain and Morocco.

His 1999 show in London was in collaboration with another artist prince, Charles, who is known to take his canvasses and brushes along on his extensive travels.

Held at the baroque Banqueting House, it turned out to be a memorable event.

The Queen, along with Baroness Thatcher, assorted royals from across Europe and about 500 members of the diplomatic corps were ushered in by the Queen's Bargemen, entertained by Saudi folk musicians and served cardamom-flavoured coffee brewed on coal-burning braziers.

John is assured of similar hospitality when he arrives here to collect his award.

Sunday: Saudi Arabia, 10 years after the Gulf War

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