

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you to this meeting of the chairs of the sectoral groups. I'm also pleased that the chairs of the Aboriginal Economic Development Boards have been able to join us today. I also want to thank the chairs and secretaries of the sectoral consultative groups for taking on the task of managing the sectoral consultations related to the Prosperity Initiative. You are here because I am sure that you share my belief that the old economic order, which served us well for many years, is gone. We have to change our ways. We have to raise our sights. We have to recognize the meaning of global change. And all of us -- management, workers, organized labour, educators and all levels of government -- must be part of that change.

A number of my colleagues are also with us. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge their co-operation in, and commitment to, the Prosperity Initiative which has been, and will continue to be, of immeasurable value: the Honourable Perrin Beatty, Minister of Communications; the Honourable William McKnight, Minister of Agriculture; the Honourable Frank Oberle, Minister of Forestry; the Honourable Tom Hockin, Minister of State, Small Businesses and Tourism; and the Honourable William Winegard, Minister for Science. Unfortunately, the Honourable Jake Epp, Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, was prevented by other commitments from being with us today. However, he fully intends to be actively associated with the consultations in his sector. Representatives of the Business Council on National Issues, the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Exporters' Association are also with us today.

In the weeks since we launched the Prosperity Initiative, some people have said: "Haven't we had enough talk? It's time for action, not consultation. Isn't your Prosperity Initiative just an admission that you're bankrupt of ideas?" My reply is, no. We already do have a very good idea about what the challenges are.

We have a very good idea of how we can respond to those challenges. In fact, I am sure all of us in this room have some good ideas on how we could improve our training systems, our research and development situation, and so on. But even if most Canadians agreed on the solution, there is no way that the federal government could effectively address the challenges in these areas by acting alone. The issues the Prosperity Initiative tackles are questions whose solutions lie beyond the capacity of government -- any government, federal, provincial or municipal -- to devise or implement on its own. Competitiveness must be a truly national project -- one that Canadians commit themselves to for the long term.

We're inviting Canadians to work together to develop a national plan to create a globally competitive Canadian economy. That is