

We applaud the vital work of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in promoting the observance and protection of human rights in the hemisphere.

And the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Committee is an increasingly vital instrument to fight drug abuse. As a contribution to the activities of this body, Canada was pleased to host a successful seminar for law enforcement officers earlier this year.

By taking our place in the OAS, Canada accepts our full responsibility to be an active participant in the larger political discussions which come before this organization.

We will not let down those states in Latin America who have sought our membership for so long, and who have looked forward to Canada's increased engagement in the region. Our autonomy, our interest in practical solutions and our pursuit of bridge-building will continue as the hallmarks of our diplomacy.

It was not simply our expertise which led the countries of Central America to seek our assistance in constructing a durable mechanism for peace. I believe it was also our refusal to close doors or borders, our willingness to listen, to maintain a dialogue with all parties, and our steadfast determination to separate political preferences from the needs of suffering people.

This is not an isolated example of Canada's approach to the affairs of Latin America. It is an illustration of our overall commitment as a nation and as a government.

I must admit to you that there are some Canadians who believe that our membership in the OAS will diminish our capacity to act according to our interests and our beliefs. They are profoundly wrong.

Our purpose is clear. We have a responsibility to be at the table where issues of importance to Canada - and of the region - are discussed. Our place at this table is not to sit in silence, but to add a voice of commitment and moderation.

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In the lobby of this headquarters are the names of the famous heroes and explorers of this hemisphere. Those names include the great Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin. Also among them is Samuel de Champlain, the great explorer of Canada.