

Madame la Présidente,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind welcome ... and for the concern for human rights which has brought you together. I take great pleasure in being here, and seeing this gathering. It is sad to think that, today, in a great many countries, people who share your passion for freedom and human rights cannot do what we are doing - cannot express their thoughts, feelings and deepest personal values. It is sad indeed ... but it is also a reminder of just how important our discussions are. And it is an incentive to our efforts, a spur urging us onward to practical action.

As Minister for External Relations, and on behalf of the Department of External Affairs, I want to welcome you most warmly to the Pearson Building. Some of you have been here before on similar occasions; others are first-timers. As you may realize, the schedule itself reveals at least one important innovation: sessions for working groups to carry out intensive discussion on regional themes of interest to significant numbers of participants.

I am happy to say that these are the largest consultations on international human rights ever held here, with the most comprehensive agenda. And on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am happy to tell you that this growing interest and participation is noticed, appreciated and shared.

In fact, if I were allowed to make only one point in my speech ... if you were to recall only one sentence that I said ... I would want it to be this: the present government is putting a very strong emphasis on international human rights - stronger, I believe, than any previous Canadian government.

I think that a fair-minded, objective look at the record of the past couple of years will show that there has been less pussy-footing and more commitment - not just in rhetoric, but in policy and in action - than in the past.

For starters: when the Government put forward a policy paper on our international relations, two years ago, it described the defense of human rights - briefly but clearly - as "a moral and political imperative". Last year, the report of the Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations - the Simard/Hockin report - asked the Government to confirm its commitment and carry out an active human rights policy. And the Right Honourable Joe Clark tabled the Government's response, accepting those recommendations with enthusiasm. In fact, the key principle was put in these words: "human rights are and will remain a fundamental, integral part of Canadian foreign policy". That is, to me, a given, a basic, a first principle from which a great deal flows.

Human rights is an elusive subject that defies easy definition and refuses to be shut in any watertight compartment. It is, at the same