

Excellence that unite business, government and university research facilities in grids that stretch across the country; research and development (R&D) tax credits that are among the most generous in the world; negotiations to open up a North American market that will be the largest in the world.

I could go on. But my purpose this afternoon is not to extol what government is already doing. The Prosperity Initiative wants to create a plan of action on what we all can do. By coming together to analyze problems and making recommendations for solutions, all Canadians will be able to gain a better understanding of the role that each of us must play.

Many of you here today have well developed views on how to improve our competitive position. But labour or other groups may have different views. Canadians should use the public consultations to bring differing views together and build a consensus, so that Canada can be more united in our approach as we deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

This goes back to some of the basic premises of Total Quality Management. We all feel more committed to working toward solutions if we have been consulted in defining the problem and assessing the options.

Like any good Total Quality Management company, Canada must empower the people and the organizations that are the key to improved competitiveness. The Prosperity Initiative does just that: it seeks the input of the people of Canada in building a plan of action; and it will depend upon the action of all groups to put that plan into action. We don't want to take long. We have asked the Steering Group to produce a plan of action by the end of next summer.

To focus the deliberations, the Government of Canada has issued two discussion papers. They identify areas in which Canada must improve in order to compete effectively, efficiently and profitably in the global marketplace.

One, "Learning Well ... Living Well," has been released by my colleague, the Honourable Bernard Valcourt, Minister of Employment and Immigration. It addresses the many challenges we face in creating a culture for continuous learning that is a key to our prosperity in a knowledge-intensive economy.

The other discussion paper, "Prosperity Through Competitiveness," analyses Canada's challenge in terms of five areas. The first of the five is a commitment to learning -- continuous learning.

Canada's public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross national product is among the highest in the industrialized world. But public expenditure alone cannot support the weight of