

Mr. President of the Chamber of Commerce, members, guests and colleagues:

Thank you for your warm welcome. I am very pleased to be here today in the company of one of the largest Canadian trade delegations ever to visit Lebanon. I have only been here for two days, but already I am impressed with the incredible reconstruction effort going on in this city. The speed and scale of this effort tell me that the business people sitting around this table have not been idle, and we Canadians have our work cut out for us if we hope to catch up to our competitors!

What I have seen in Beirut gives me hope for the future of Lebanon. It is a tremendous credit to the perseverance and creativity of the Lebanese people. I am committed to developing close, solid ties between our two countries.

Yesterday I took an important initial step toward fulfilling this objective by reopening our embassy. Our new premises will soon be operational. Our Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien, and I have appointed Mr. Daniel Marchand as the next Ambassador to Lebanon. Business people can count on Mr. Marchand's experience and expertise. A trade commissioner by profession, Mr. Marchand was until quite recently Director of the Africa and Middle East Trade Development Division at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa. I have instructed Mr. Marchand specifically to develop and strengthen our trade and economic ties with Lebanon. This is an objective that all of us here share. In order to succeed, we must count on the active participation and direct involvement of the Canadian private sector and, needless to say, of the Lebanese private sector. With what I have seen while here, I don't think I have anything to worry about! On the contrary, I hope that our new embassy will have the capacity to handle the load!

Our government recognizes the importance of the private sector in developing and strengthening ties between countries. This is why I wanted to be accompanied by some of the most dynamic of Canadian companies. Without a doubt, these past weeks have enabled companies in our two countries to create, and in some cases to strengthen, partnerships that will be both long-lasting and profitable.

The confidence that I am expressing is based on recent developments, which I know will be of special interest to you. The Export Development Corporation [EDC], Canada's official export assistance agency, has announced that it is prepared to finance projects, on a case-by-case basis, in Lebanon. The financial and insurance services provided by the EDC, coupled with the selective and complementary support of the Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA] will help Canadian companies to be more active in Lebanon.