

Thank you for your kind introduction, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for this opportunity to join you at this important Conference on Total Quality Management. Over the years, events like this organized by the Conference Board of Canada have provided an important forum for business leaders to consider the challenges facing the Canadian economy.

The luncheon is held in conjunction with the Canada Awards for Business Excellence. We have with us today the finalists. The trophy winners will be announced at a gala dinner tonight. But it is clear that all these finalists are winners. That was certainly evident yesterday when each had the opportunity to demonstrate their company or product to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

This Conference is also the occasion for the release of the findings of an executive study tour conducted by the Conference Board. In past years, the study has been based on the experience and expertise of Canada Awards for Business Excellence winners. Last year's study was entitled "Total Quality Management: A Competitive Imperative."

In the months that followed the report's release, many Canadian corporations and institutions have responded to the study's conclusions. According to the report, quality has evolved from its early definition of ensuring that a product consistently met a specified requirement. Quality, today, is a much broader concept engaging all aspects of an organization -- and its suppliers -- in an effort to increase value for the customer. Quality is perceived by the customer.

This forum is also an appropriate finale to Quality Month, and I would like to take this opportunity to commend the organizers of Quality Month for their efforts to focus national attention on this increasingly important issue.

Today's Conference holds special importance for the Government of Canada. I can think of no better audience with which to introduce to the business community the new Prosperity Initiative that I launched in the House of Commons yesterday.

You are the men and women with the leadership qualities, the sense of vision, and the ability to innovate that will be essential to ensuring Canada's prosperity in the decades to come. You understand the full measure of Canada's competitive challenge. You know that the way in which we respond to that challenge will determine our continued prosperity.

The people of Canada are already feeling the impact of that challenge. Nearly two-thirds of Canadian families have two income-earners. And yet, they struggle to make ends meet when their parents lived comfortably on one income. They feel the competitiveness challenge when they try to stretch real wages that are not much better than they were 20 years ago. And why?