

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I want to extend a warm welcome to this year's finalists for the Canada Awards for Business Excellence that are with us this afternoon.

Two days ago, the people of Canada turned the page on constitutional reform. I took from their answer that Canada's prosperity can and must be built within our existing constitutional arrangements. That is precisely what this federal government has been doing for the last eight years and will continue to do in the future.

A year ago at this conference, I spoke about the then newly launched, far-reaching and wide-ranging exercise to build a consensus on the future of Canada's economy: the Prosperity Initiative. Conscientiously, without fanfare, in hundreds of communities across the country, the Steering Group -- co-chaired by David McCamus and Marie-Josée Drouin -- has sought the advice of thousands of Canadians. Even as the media's focus was elsewhere, Canadians were helping this independent Steering Group build an action plan that will help Canadians secure prosperity in a rapidly changing world. That action plan will be released tomorrow by the Steering Group. It will help focus Canada's attention on what actions we need to take, together, to maintain and enhance our competitive position.

I want to acknowledge the contribution of the Conference Board of Canada to Canadians' understanding of the challenges facing us. Since the late 1980s, the Board has been leading the way in defining the competitive challenges before Canadians. In 1990 the Conference Board released its first report on total quality management (TQM), and last year came the study entitled, "Customer Satisfaction Through Total Quality." It examined the need to define the customer's needs: the so-called "hard issue" of TQM. This year the Conference Board has released its findings on the "soft issues": how to empower people within an organization.

The Prosperity consultations showed that Canadians value partnership and consensus-building; I think that the Conference Board's initiatives have gone a long way to demonstrate the value of such consensus-building.

None of us can overcome these challenges alone. Neither the federal government, nor the provinces, business nor labour, educators nor research institutions, acting alone, can meet these challenges as effectively as they can by working together. This is because there is no one solution, and there are no panaceas to be found. Canadians have seen that the so-called easy solutions do not work. Neither issuing directives about total quality commitment nor throwing tax dollars at the challenges will work. That is why building a consensus about the challenges and how to deal with them is so important. The prosperity consultations showed that Canadians understand that a total quality commitment -- with all that it entails -- will position Canada to meet the