

Exactly a hundred years ago this year, a 19-year-old youth landed in Montreal as Canada's first Arab immigrant. He was Abraham Bounadere from Zahle, a Lebanese village from which many of our Windsor people have come. Because he did not come through Ellis Island like the forefathers of our chairman of the evening, Professor Jim Peters, he was not discouraged from settling here under his own name. By 1901, there were about 2,000 Arab immigrants in Canada, and today there are between 70,000 and 80,000 Canadians of Arab origin. Among these is my colleague and close associate, the Honourable Pierre De Bané, the Minister of State for External Relations.

What does it mean to be an Arab? I am sure that to many, perhaps to some here, it conjures up images of nomads, deserts, sheiks, tents and perhaps lovely dancing girls. But it could just as well bring to mind such contributions to civilization as algebra, the decimal system, medicine, chemistry, geography, astronomy or art. In my own original discipline of philosophy, Arab thinkers made a particularly large contribution. In fact, knowledge of the Greek philosopher Aristotle came down to the Christian Middle Ages through Arab hands.

Clearly, physical and racial characteristics do not provide a valid basis for defining Arab ethnicity. Nor does religion, despite the common but incorrect belief that all Arabs are Muslim. The only objective criterion of Arab ethnicity is Arabic language and culture. Thus all Arabs share essentially the same language, myths, music, art, cuisine and customs, modified only by regional differences.

Canada's formal links with the Arab World go back to 1953. In that year, we established diplomatic relations with Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and opened up a mission in Beirut covering all three of these countries.

Since then our relations with the Arab countries have grown and we now have missions not only in Lebanon but in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. Later this year we will be opening a new mission in Jordan. This has been one of my personal priorities since becoming Secretary of State for External Affairs.