

This luncheon is to mark the deliberate decision to ask Canada's athletes to help make our country better known and more effective in the world. We have two motives. One is that Canada's athletes are usually better known than Canada's diplomats. But the other is that sport genuinely reflects the nature of this country - diverse, democratic, competitive, proud.

Those of you here today are the pros behind the scenes in national sport organizations, and you work with and for some of the best athletes in the world. You know the gruelling hours every one of them has spent in order to be good enough to compete internationally.

And you will also know that the athlete who practises to excellence has her counterpart in thousands of other Canadians who have a different talent, but the same tradition of bringing out their best. Free societies urge everyone to excel, and millions of Canadians follow that urge. Their ambition is what creates Canada's jobs, and builds our schools, and gives us the reputation of a hardworking innovative people. The best teachers, the best business people, the best in other fields, can often be examples, but they rarely become symbols. Our best athletes become symbols, and speak to the world of what Canada is and can become.

And it's time for us, in Canada, to let the world know who we are - and to let ourselves know. We used to be a colony of Britain, and of France. We used to be afraid that the United States would overwhelm us. We used to think that if you were a kid from Williams Lake, B.C. and you lost the use of your legs, your life would be over. We used to think that Canadians couldn't excel in track and field, women's field hockey or soccer.

That is not this Canada. We are the Canada which pioneers in outer space, and has the world's best architects, and is home to Antonine Maillet, the Acadian whose writing won the Prix Goncourt. This is the Canada of Gaetan Boucher and Lori Fung and Brian Orser and Anna Fraser and Ben Johnson and scores of other world-class competitors.