

Secretary Daley, fellow Canadian Parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen:

I must admit that one of the best things about the job of International Trade Minister is the opportunity to assist and represent our Canadian business community when we take on the world on missions such as this. It is a source of great pride for me.

I believe that when we export our products and services, we are also exporting our country's values and promoting our country's international image. In this way, you, the women entrepreneurs from Canada and the United States here today, are preparing for an important task when you take on the challenge of preparing for export markets for the first time.

But this is not the only reason your governments take an interest in your success.

In this era of rationalization of precious government resources, we cannot afford to be complacent. We cannot continue to do things the way we always have. We cannot be all things to all people.

We in government must target our activities more sharply toward those sectors that have the most potential for growth and that will benefit the most from our help. In a country where international trade sustains one job in three, I cannot afford to fail in this task.

And who is responsible for the bulk of our trade? It seems incredible that 50 Canadian firms alone achieve almost 50 percent of our exports. And when you consider that only 10 percent of our small and medium-sized businesses [SMEs] export, this tells me that there is a lot of room for growth in this important segment of our business community.

We asked ourselves the questions: "Why are SMEs not exporting?" "What innovative strategies can we develop to help them get their goods and their services into international markets?" "In which areas can we focus our resources where it makes the most sense?" "What are the trends and how can we take advantage of them?"

Well, when I look at the face of SMEs in Canada today, one striking trend emerges. And that is the incredible dynamism of women entrepreneurs.

In the last 20 years, self-employed women have had the fastest rate of growth of all employment sectors in our economy. Today, women own and lead almost one third of all Canadian companies.

In total, their businesses employ more people than Canada's top 100 companies.