

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For the past eight years, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has consulted with Canadian non-governmental organizations [NGOs] in preparation for annual meetings of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Your knowledge of human rights issues is an important resource for the Canadian government. Let me begin by thanking you for participating in the 1994 consultation and for the recent letters and briefs outlining your concerns. The Minister [of Foreign Affairs] and I both look forward to the results of the dialogue that is about to begin.

This government believes that it is time to develop a more independent foreign policy. The opportunities which exist to strengthen Canada's leadership role in international human rights, environment, development and trade issues are numerous. With new relationships and responsibilities on the horizon, the foreign policy that will guide our activities must reflect the changing world, along with the values that we uphold as Canadians.

While in Opposition, Liberals called for a review to examine specific aspects of Canadian foreign policy as well as examine the process of policy development. This review will begin next month as the Liberal government seeks out ways to increase consultation and transparency throughout the development of Canada's foreign policy. It is my hope that you will work with this Department in order to ensure that the views of non-governmental organizations are fully considered.

Canadian foreign policy must evolve from a more democratic, open process. I believe a clearer, more meaningful role for Parliament needs to be developed. In the human rights arena, this role might include an annual review of Canada's concerns by a parliamentary committee and ongoing dialogue between parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations. Your views would certainly be welcomed on this matter.

Not only has the work of Canadian NGOs been recognized within our own country, it has also been recognized on the international stage. In the past year, important events in the domain of international human rights have taken place and the involvement of Canadian NGOs has noticeably influenced the results. While that involvement has raised your profile within the human rights community, it has also enhanced Canada's reputation as a thoughtful, proactive and caring nation, one that is committed to working with all countries in the resolution of international issues.

Nowhere was this better demonstrated than at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights. While the outcome of Vienna inevitably did not address all desired reforms, results were achieved that many had previously thought impossible.