

Statement

Discours

Department of
External
Affairs



Ministère des
Affaires
extérieures

88/38

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE JOE CLARK,
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
TO A RECEPTION
FOR THE CANADIAN-ARMENIAN COMMUNITY

TORONTO

August 31, 1988

Secretary of State
for
External Affairs

Secrétaire d'État
aux
Affaires extérieures

Canada

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Canadians:

I am particularly pleased to be with you this evening. While I will speak only briefly I very much look forward to meeting many of you here tonight.

In my worldwide travels I am constantly struck by the fact that so many people in this world view Canada as a land of opportunity and Canadians as a people who attach paramount importance to freedom and democracy. We are seen as a nation which understands world problems and is determined to contribute to international peace and stability.

More importantly, we are increasingly seen as a country whose strength and vitality have their roots in Canada's multicultural reality. Canada is a place of refuge, and a home, to people, cultures and traditions from around the world.

This country has been enriched beyond measure by the contributions of our immigrants to the political, social and economic fabric of Canada. We have been particularly blessed by the thousands of Armenians who have settled on our shores. Their deep commitment and unquestionable loyalty enrich the fabric and the quality of Canadian life.

The contribution of the Armenian Community to Canadian society is vividly reflected in the construction of churches, schools and cultural centres across the country. It is mirrored in your significant contributions to the arts, to architecture, literature, photography, commerce, industry, law, and administration and education.

Many Canadians of Armenian origin came to this country to escape from injustices suffered elsewhere. They arrived in pursuit of the dignity and enjoyment of basic rights which were denied them elsewhere. Their plight was shared by others who came to our shores seeking escape from international conflict, civil war, pestilence, and religious, racial, political or ethnic persecution. Many Canadians who share this sad legacy are proud of Canada's prominence in defence of international human rights and our example to the world of how different cultures can work together.

Our Government is pledged to the pursuit of justice and a respect for human rights throughout the world. We cannot redress the injustices suffered in other countries, in other times. We must ensure that future generations are spared such indignities, such injustices, such atrocities, and the consequent need to flee persecution.

Work goes on now in the Councils of the United Nations where Canada is dedicated to enhancing the standards of International Human Rights. It is not an easy task. Many states resist international scrutiny or even the concept of international standards.

Minorities are the group most directly affected, because it is minority populations -- whether defined in religious, racial, ethnic or other terms -- who suffer the greatest discrimination and are the targets of the most systematic forms of persecution.

For 40 years, the world community has been considering effective ways to act on the question of minorities. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted, the United Nations refrained from taking action on that question on the grounds that minority situations in each state were so different and so complex as to preclude universal definitions and treatment. But eighteen years later, when the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted, article 27 of that covenant guaranteed protection of the culture, religion and language of persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities. More recently, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has attempted to embark on a draft declaration on the rights of persons belonging to minority groups.

During the past year, Canada has closely followed the events in Soviet Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. We were deeply troubled by the tragic consequences of the tensions between neighbouring peoples. In this country we hold strongly to the belief that peoples of all ethnic backgrounds should be encouraged to find viable means to preserve their respective heritages and cultural identities. Indeed in Canada, people from a wide variety of backgrounds are enjoined to share a common citizenship without losing their distinctive heritage.

In the Soviet Union we are witnessing the hopeful beginnings of a transition to a freer, more open society with an enhanced respect for the rights of all its citizens. Among those rights are the creation of opportunities for people of different ethnic groups to exercise greater control over their own affairs and to preserve their particular cultures. In this regard, we will continue to press the Soviet Union to respect its international obligations by finding the appropriate means for its many nationalities to express their deepest concerns and protect their traditions: including those Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The Soviet Union has undertaken open commitments to enhance economic and cultural development of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as to develop closer ties between the Armenian people of the region and the Republic of Armenia proper. This is a promising step which we trust will lead to better things.

Respect for ethnic and other minorities is crucial to the achievement of peace and stability in this world of ours. It is based upon the realistic acceptance that change cannot be initiated by force. Rather conditions must be created for peaceful change. Only by allowing minorities to nurture and promote their distinctiveness can nations hope to reduce tensions within and between their borders.

Our objective, which has been enunciated most forcefully through proposals at the Third Follow-Up Meeting in Vienna of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, is to ensure that citizens who are members of national minorities or regional cultures enjoy a status equal to that of any other citizen. Furthermore, they must be able to establish and maintain unimpeded contacts by foreign travel or other means of communication with those sharing a common heritage.

The twentieth century has been marred by too many wars, too much destruction inflicted on innocent victims. It is the duty, of every Canadian, whatever our background, to remember, and to remind our children, of the atrocities of the past and to ensure that they do not occur again. As Canadians we look, with our children, towards shaping a better future, towards working together to build a better world -- a world where the rights of individuals are respected, where people are not deprived of their life or liberty because of their sex, their race or their religion -- a world more human and more civilized.

And I value, in particular, the contribution that your community has made to the building of our contemporary Canada. A Canada that is strong, self-confident and caring, a Canada that looks forward to the turn of the century, and an even brighter and more promising future for all of us who are bound to contribute to its unique and multicultural heritage.