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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS
BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE
:FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
THE HONOURABLE MITCHELL SHARP,
TO THE FIRST NATIONAL CONGRESS
OF
ITALIAN-CANADIANS

OTTAWA, FEBRUARY 24, 1974 6

I am delighted and I am very much honoured to have been invited here today -- to the founding conference of the National Congress of Italian-Canadians. This is, I think, not an occasion to speak about foreign policy nor even about the important and prospering relations between Canada and Italy. Nor do I think you would like to hear from me the many clichés often considered appropriate for occasions such as this -- about the greatness of the Italian nation.

The greatness is there, of course, set firmly in the history of civilized man and no cosmetic polish of mine will add to its lustre. No, there are other things I would like to talk about, which may have more relevance to this Founding Meeting.

But before you hear further from me, you are going to hear from the Prime Minister. It is my pleasant duty to read you his message which, as it is in three languages, I shall do in descending order of proficiency:

"It is with great pleasure that I send warmest greetings to all in attendance at the historic Italian-Canadian Founding Conference of February 23 and 24, 1974. Your meeting together is a culmination of months of planning and is indicative of the vigorous life and energy of the Italian community in Canada.

" -- Le Canada est un pays fortuné: de nombreuses races s'y côtoient, chacune apportant sa contribution particulière. Dans la diversité repose notre force; dans la variété, notre richesse, notre souplesse. Le partage de notre héritage culturel particulier avec nos concitoyens nous permet d'établir ensemble le fondement de la tolérance et de la compréhension entre les races et les nations.

" -- Siamo tuttavia conscienti del pericolo di diventare talmente assorti nel nostro gruppo particolare da perdere il contatto con gli altri elementi in mezzo a noi. Mantenendo aperto lo scambio con altri gruppi, con una comunicazione costante e con un dialogo ininterrotto, possiamo sventare questo pericolo. Spero e confido che il fatto di avere fra di noi una comunità italiana vigorosa e attiva arricchirà la vita di tutti i canadesi. Invio i miei più vivi auguri per il successo della Conferenza."

I expect that some of this ground will have been covered by Mr. Haidasz last night -- but at the risk of duplication I would like to give you some of my views on the ethnic community and its relationship to Canadian society as a whole.

It is fashionable to say that the United States is a melting pot and Canada a mosaic.

A mosaic, or perhaps a fresco, we have used these phrases as symbols or catch-words. But the symbols we use are not adequate. A mosaic or a fresco is a work of imagination, skill, even of faith. But it is frozen in time. It is not living and growing, changing and maturing as is Canada.

What we are trying to describe is something which is uniquely Canadian and for which there is not one adequate descriptive word -- unless it is Canada itself.

In other words, the ethnic pieces are not self-contained. Multi-culturalism does not mean closed ethnic communities -- the careful reproduction of a European environment and the shutting out of North American influence. It means becoming integrated members of a Canadian society -- members who can relate to other groups on a basis of a common Canadian background, who can enrich themselves as they will enrich the wider Canadian society by drawing on their own spiritual and cultural heritage. It means knowing that their opportunities are not limited by the size or character or customs of their own community.

But on this, as in many other things, our thinking is in parallel. You have rejected the notion that a national congress or society should be a cocoon, sheltering its members from interaction with other groups. I was pleased to note that the first purpose in the Congress' statement of objectives is "To foster the evolution of a better Canadian society by promoting mutual understanding, goodwill, and cooperation between Canadians of Italian and of other origins."

I will not mislead you by suggesting that this process of relating to other parts of society and of feeling comfortably integrated with Canadian society is always easy. Most Canadians at one time or another, of whatever origin, bump against brittle or insensitive barriers. This may be a smug so-called establishment -- and they exist even in our comparatively open and mobile society -- or it may be just plain ignorant bigotry. Ours is not a perfect society and the artificial barriers are there. I do know that they seem even higher and more forbidding to the first generation Canadian. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness and increasing respect for the values of a plural society. The barriers aren't disappearing but they are getting smaller.

There is, as I see it, a very dynamic process of change and maturing in our society. There was a time when it was common-place for the second generation to scoff at parents whose accents and whose customs identified their origins -- to be slightly embarrassed because they did not sound fully "Canadian." It is my experience, and I hope it is yours, that we have come -- not all the way -- but some distance from these narrow attitudes.

There is other evidence of this very positive change. Italian Canadians -- Polish Canadians, Ukrainian Canadians, Canadians of non-Anglo Saxon or French origins, are not anglicizing their names as much as they have in the past. This is a sign of pride in their community, confidence in themselves, and confidence in the basic fairness of the system.

How have these changes occurred? As the Prime Minister has said, it is, in part, "the vigorous life and energy of the Italian Community." But it takes more than one element for this national chemistry to work -- for the

maturing to take place. A successful multicultural Canadian society must be a collective enterprise of all the minorities including those of British and French origins.

I have been talking about our multi-cultural society as it was and as it has become. But the collective enterprise is a continuing one. What is it going to become?

For the size of the Italian Community in Canada, it may be that the Community is not sufficiently represented in senior positions of Government. But, as I say, this is a dynamic and maturing society and these changes will come. Why not a Secretary of State for External Affairs of Italian origin? In fact, there are some -- I assure you -- not necessarily of Italian origin, who would favour this change right away -- who take the view that red-haired, mid-Western Canadians of Scottish origin are not suited to the job.

However, the question of where we are going is more profound. For Italian Canadians here today what will our multicultural society mean to your children, your grandchildren? No politician on my side of the House -- at least not for some time -- has had a crystal ball that good. Nevertheless, I think that the broad course we are taking is fairly clear. It is not to a homogeneous society nor is it to a system of minority communities keeping to themselves and co-existing within a federal state. Our society is continuing to develop a new and harder kind of freedom -- a freedom for diversity. It was a promise of our two founding groups to respect each other -- something that they have not always done but are increasingly doing -- that guarantees to all groups the freedom to be different. This is a goal well worth the effort, both for ourselves and for the example we will be setting for the world at large.

As you and I are shaping the new Canada, we are learning about Canada. This process of learning about Canada -- learning to be Canadian is never-ending whether you are a first or a second generation Canadian, (as I am) or a 12th generation Canadian. Although I was born in this country over half a century ago, I am still learning to be a Canadian. The chances are I shall not complete my education before I die.

So far as I can observe, the 22 million other inhabitants of this country are going through the same school. We are all learning to be Canadians whether we have recently immigrated from Italy or Scotland, whether we are the sons and daughters of immigrants or whether our ancestors came to New France or were United Empire Loyalists. And we are all teaching one another.

Canada will continue united and continue to be more than the sum of its parts as long as our varied elements keep our minds and our hearts open to this learning process, as long as we all see that it is within Canada's very special framework that we have our best chance for material and spiritual fulfillment.