



Government
of Canada

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STATEMENT

No. 94/1

AS DELIVERED

AN ADDRESS BY

THE HONOURABLE CHRISTINE STEWART

SECRETARY OF STATE (LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA)

AT THE 9TH ANNUAL CONSULTATION

BETWEEN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND

THE DEPARTMENT FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

IN PREPARATION FOR THE 50TH SESSION OF THE

UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

(JANUARY 31 - MARCH 11, 1994)

OTTAWA, Ontario
January 19, 1994

Canada

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.

The Vienna Declaration reaffirmed the basic premise of the universality of human rights. Last December's endorsement of the Vienna Declaration by the 184 member states of the United Nations General Assembly, and the subsequent decision to create the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, represents a historical advancement in the promotion of human rights worldwide. In my view, these results flow directly from a partnership built upon the common goals of governments and NGOs committed to strengthening the UN's role in protecting human rights. I am hoping that this NGO community will come forward with suggestions on how Canada can provide assistance to the new Office of the High Commissioner.

I represent a government that takes involvement in the United Nations seriously. We believe that full participation in a multilateral structure addressing crucial international issues of security, environment, development and human rights is an essential means through which both Canada's interests and values will be advanced.

One challenge that all member states of the United Nations now face is the revitalization of the human rights machinery. In Canada, we want to ensure that we are well-placed to make a positive contribution, and this is something we can work on together. With this in mind, the Minister of Foreign Affairs directed that Canada seek re-election to the Commission on Human Rights this year; the Prime Minister strongly supported that decision.

An important goal for Canada at the upcoming session of the Commission on Human Rights is to build upon the achievements of last year's Commission and the World Conference in promoting the full and equal enjoyment by women of all human rights. Solutions to the problem of violence against women are a priority within the borders of our own country, and Canada's leadership in recognizing violence as a violation of women's human rights led last month to the adoption of the UN Declaration on Violence Against Women. I must commend the NGO community for its support in this regard and assure you of the continued leadership of the Canadian government in pursuing the appointment of a UN special rapporteur.

Canada also wants to strengthen the UN's role in securing respect for the basic rights and freedoms of indigenous people in all parts of the world. We expect that the Commission will soon take up the draft declaration prepared by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and Canada will play an active role in this exercise. Most importantly, the Canadian delegation will insist on full representation of indigenous representatives throughout the process.

Being effective on such questions requires that we keep the lines of communications open through forums such as this one. This consultation each January, as well as attendance by officials at the Network on International Human Rights meetings in the spring and prior to the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, are all important opportunities to ensure free and open dialogue continues between the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the NGO community. They must remain meaningful elements of our consultative process.

Opportunities exist for increased partnership in communication and education. Let us work together to raise the profile of Canadian NGOs within Canada so that Canadians have an increased understanding of your role and impact, and an increased familiarity of the concept of human rights and why it is so vital that human rights are protected.

While inspiration for Canadian foreign policy will continue to flow from the purposes of the United Nations and human rights must remain in the forefront of all UN activities, I ask you to remember the decision made on October 25, 1993. On that day, Canadians made an overwhelming statement about the need for economic renewal and growth. A Liberal government was elected because of our clear commitment to ending the unemployment crisis in Canada, along with our concrete ideas on how to accomplish this task.

International trade will play an important role in the stimulation of the Canadian economy but that does not mean that Canada's standards on human rights need to be sacrificed. There doesn't need to be a contradiction between economic expansion and human rights. Indeed, we can have an effective influence on a country's internal policy by urging our trading partners to uphold the values of the United Nations.

The relationship between Canada's economic interests and its human rights concerns is among the issues that should be considered in the foreign review process and upon which your input will be sought. The relationship between human rights and our development assistance objectives will also be considered. In my view, Canadian assistance toward the creation of an environment for sustainable development should contribute to the protection of human rights and to good government. Again, the involvement of the NGO community is of the utmost importance.

Our foreign policy challenge is to address international concerns in a fashion which fits into the Liberal government's agenda and represents the values of Canadians. I am hoping that the next three days of consultation will assist the Canadian government in meeting that challenge. With your help, I am sure we will succeed.