

PC.DEL/974/03
4 September 2003

ENGLISH only

Speaking Notes

of

**The Honourable Jean Augustine
Secretary of State (Multiculturalism) (Status of Women)
Canada**

**on the occasion of an
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination**

**Vienna, Austria
September 4, 2003**

I am honoured to have been invited to speak on behalf of the Government of Canada at this important event. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has made a major contribution to international efforts to achieve democracy, equality and respect for human rights and human dignity. I would like to congratulate the OSCE for putting the challenging issues of racism, xenophobia and discrimination at the forefront of its agenda.

For Canada, this forum is an opportunity to share our successes and acknowledge the common challenges we face in combatting racism and discrimination.

The importance Canadians place on eliminating racism is tied to the nature of the country itself. Our country's history is built upon three strong pillars:

- Our Aboriginal population
- Our linguistic duality
- And our ever-increasing diversity – ethnic, racial and religious.

Canada is one of the world's most multicultural countries. Our population claims more than 200 ethnic origins. More than 13 percent of us are visible minorities – a figure that is expected to rise to 20 percent by 2016. Immigration is now at its highest rate in 70 years.

We Canadians pride ourselves on having an open and welcoming society. We recognize that our diversity is a source of our strength – economically, culturally and socially. And it is part of what makes Canada distinct.

But Canada is not immune to the issues we are discussing here today. We face some tough challenges:

Our Aboriginal people continue to be disadvantaged by lower rates of education, and higher rates of poverty.

Some of our country's longstanding ethnoracial and ethnocultural communities still suffer inequities, and some immigrants face barriers to becoming fully integrated and included in our society.

We are working hard to address these issues – so that each Canadian has the opportunity to maximize his or her potential in every facet of life.

Racism – or any form of discrimination against any group or individual – undermines the very fabric and values of Canadian society.

From the Canadian experience, I would like to suggest five key elements in any national approach against racism:

First, a strong legislative framework needs to be in place. It should protect the rights of all against discrimination and racism. It should also prevent and condemn incidents of racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

Over the past 40 years, the Government of Canada has laid down a solid legal framework that is enshrined in our Constitution and that is aimed at ensuring Canada's citizens are protected from racism and discrimination.

Underlying all that we do is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter has led to the recognition and enforcement of equal rights of a number of minority and disadvantaged groups.

For more than 20 years, it has been the driving force for progressive change.

The Charter is supported by other laws such as:

- The Canadian Human Rights Act,
- The Canadian Employment Equity Act,
- The Official Languages Act,
- The Canadian Citizenship Act and
- The Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

Central to our approach is our Multiculturalism Policy, which was first introduced in 1971 by the federal government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

This policy, enshrined in the *Multiculturalism Act*, acknowledges that multiculturalism is a part of our national identity.

It ensures the right to full social, political and economic access for all Canadians, regardless of race, religion, national or ethnic origin or colour.

Under this policy, ethnic groups are encouraged to nurture and celebrate their traditions.

Thus, our human rights paradigm is somewhat unique in that our goal is not assimilation – but integration based on the preservation of and respect for differences.

These official laws, policies and programs of the Government of Canada are the foundation of our strong commitment to human rights and the value of diversity.

Second, we must ensure that our judicial system is accessible.

The Court Challenges Program of Canada, for example, is a unique, non-profit organization that provides financial assistance for important court cases that advance language and equality rights guaranteed under Canada's Constitution.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission resolves individual complaints, promotes knowledge of human rights, and ensures equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination.

But, laws and policies are not enough to achieve our goal of social inclusion.

My third point is that a healthy and active civil society has a crucial role to play in fighting racism and discrimination.

Governments and institutions cannot alone ensure a just society for all Canadians. We are committed to engaging civil society in the discussion, and to sharing the responsibility for eliminating racism and discrimination.

Civil society must be a strong voice, one that is heard by the government and other public institutions. Several programs exist in Canada that build the capacity of NGOs to ensure that this is the case.

Fourth, public education and awareness campaigns that clearly demonstrate that racism and discrimination have no place in our society. Our youth should be the main target of these campaign because they are our future. For example, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation works at arm's length from government to shed light on the causes and effects of racism, and to help lead the fight for social justice.

The final point I wish to share with you is that racism is a socio-economic reality.

Typically, we think of racism in terms of specific individuals who act hatefully toward people they deem inferior.

While these acts are harmful, even more harm can result from the systemic barriers that exclude certain ethnoracial groups. Despite legislative safeguards, language and cultural differences sometimes translate into differences in recognition and success, both economically and socially.

In addressing racism, we must take into account challenges to minority groups, regional differences, our policy of two official languages, and the issues faced by our

Aboriginal people who have long had to contend against marginalization.

Our approach challenges public institutions – such as the police, the education system, the health care system – to ensure that they respect the cultural, social, racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of our citizens.

Above all, we are encouraging dialogue, not only within our country, but also among all countries.

It has been two years since the international community gathered in Durban, South Africa, for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related intolerance.

Canada engaged in a comprehensive consultative process leading to this important event. We engaged Canadians and the organizations they belong to, in the communities where they live.

If there was consensus on one point, it was the belief that we all need to work together to effectively eradicate racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia.

Canada was disappointed with aspects of the World Conference. However, we recognize that many key issues were advanced in areas such as multiple grounds of discrimination, health and indigenous issues.

One of the lessons we took from Durban is that it is important for the international community to work together, in the spirit of universal human rights, to achieve these objectives and to increase our understanding of the various manifestations of racism throughout the world.

In conclusion, Canada's fight against racism and discrimination is based on our human rights paradigm, a comprehensive legislative framework, the engagement of civil society and a multi-faceted approach.

In Canada, we are not immune to racial prejudice or discrimination.

Nevertheless, we believe that Canada's experience on multiculturalism is successful – successful because we are continuously evolving, learning from our mistakes, building on our achievements.

We have made significant progress! We have and will continue to persevere to improve.

Dialogue is crucial to this evolution. I look forward to the forthcoming discussion with participating states as we share both our successes and our opportunities for improvement, and move forward to create a better world.