

Address by the Prime Minister

in Reply to the Speech from the Throne

February 3, 2004

to Open the Third Session of the Thirty-Seventh Parliament of Canada





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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Canada

Mr. Speaker, I would like first of all to congratulate the Member for Lévis-et-Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, the mover, and the Member for Kitchener-Centre, the seconder of the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne.

Over the past year, I spent a great deal of time travelling across Canada to listen to Canadians talk about their hopes, and their concerns.

Recently, I was asked if I had grown tired of it — all the flying, the dinners, the speeches. The answer is no. It is an incredible privilege to witness Canada's diversity, its distinct regions, and Canadians' ambitions for their country.

One of the places I visited was Charlottetown, Labrador. It's a small port of roughly 350 people. I met with a group of children who told me about what interested them, what they were going to do and who they were going to be when they grew up.

Through their eyes, the future was an ocean of opportunity. And Canada was where their ambitions would be launched. Let me tell you: these small children have big plans.

Two weeks ago, I went to Toronto to meet with fourth graders from Fenside Public School. Two of the students are here today — Steven Natskoulis, the creator of "Flat Mark" and Peter Lu; with their teacher Karlo Cabrera.

Each of the Grade Four students had written a page or two telling me of their hopes and dreams for Canada.

For instance, nine-year-old Peter wrote (and I quote) — “My wish is that everyone in Canada is free like the birds flying in the sky. . . People should be free because everyone deserves to be free.”

That’s about as eloquent a statement on liberty as I’ve read in a while, for young Peter’s words challenge us to put people at the centre of our every effort.

In fact, that’s what good government is about. Enabling citizens to take charge of their lives, making them free by removing barriers and fostering opportunity.

Canadians want in. They want to build Canada. They want their government to understand and help them to achieve their potential. They want us to “get it.”

Well, Mr. Speaker, this Government does “get it.” Our goal is the success of Canadians in every region of Canada.

To achieve this, we must strengthen our social foundations; we must build a 21st century economy; and we must ensure Canada’s role is one of pride and influence in the world.

We begin with our values — fairness, generosity, respect and caring.

Creating a more level playing field for all — not by lowering the stage upon which we stand but rather by raising the heights toward which we reach.

There are some who argue that the path to prosperity lies only in self-interest — a vision that diminishes us all and provides no place for those less advantaged.

We on this side of the House, reject that vision. Canadians reject that vision, for our path is one of shared prosperity; and shared prospects.

To those on the other hand who say spend, and spend more, we say that never again will Canadians borrow from their children and grandchildren. Never again will we ask them to pay our way.

Ours is an ambitious approach — but it is as well a responsible and balanced approach. We are moving neither right nor left, but in the direction Canadians demand — forward.

What kind of Canada do we want? What kind of a country do we want to build?

We want a Canada where our universal health care system is a proud example of our national values at work; a Canada where people with disabilities and their families, where the elderly and their families, have the support they need.

A Canada at the leading edge of the 21st century economy. A Canada where good jobs are accessible in every region of the country. A Canada overflowing with artistic creativity, where our official languages are celebrated from coast to coast to coast.

We want a Canada where every child arrives at school ready to learn. A Canada where everyone has the opportunity for post-secondary education regardless of geography or means. A Canada where universal literacy and lifelong learning are part of the national fabric.

What do we want?

We want a Canada with safe and healthy neighbourhoods, with clean air and water, and plenty of green spaces. A Canada where we have closed the gap in life chances for Aboriginal people. A Canada that respects and celebrates the diversity of its population.

A Canada which is at the leading edge of the world's technologies. A Canada where today's small businesses are tomorrow's global leaders. A Canada where there is no glass ceiling for women entrepreneurs.

A Canada that speaks on the world stage — heard by our closest neighbours and our distant friends — with equal conviction and independence.

What do we want?

A Canada where no individual, no community, no region is denied the opportunity to fully participate in the building of an even greater nation.

This agenda is ambitious. But Canadians expect no less of themselves and should expect no less of their governments and, Mr. Speaker, the time to make this agenda real is now.

The Throne Speech has proposed the first significant steps — concrete actions on the things that matter most.

Health care is the nation's first priority. Quality care; timely care. Care that is accessible regardless of income; portable right across Canada; and publicly funded.

We are committed irrevocably to the principles of the Canada Health Act. They are part of who we are — a moral statement about fundamental fairness — that all Canadians should stand equal before our health care system.

For most Canadians, the test is the length of time they have to wait for an important diagnostic result or a badly needed treatment.

And their judgment is that critical waiting times need to be reduced. We agree. We must ensure that care delayed is not, in effect, care denied.

That is why the new National Health Council is so important. Accountability requires having the right information on what is actually happening out there in doctors' offices and hospital wards. Quite simply, measurement matters.

Mr. Speaker: During the past year Canadians have seen and felt the challenge of SARS and West Nile virus.

Clearly, we need new ways of managing global health risks. Public health is more than just a local matter. No one jurisdiction can manage the challenge alone. We need an approach that is collaborative; national; in fact, global.

To this end, we will establish a Canadian Public Health Agency, centring a network of excellence and expertise across the country, and linked to its counterparts globally.

We will create with our partners a network of labs and services to rally public health expertise from across the nation to help those on the front lines deal with health emergencies.

Last Friday, I met with the provincial and territorial Premiers, and we agreed to work closely on this task in the coming months — working as we should in common cause for common purpose.

Mr. Speaker: It is in our communities that we truly experience Canada. It is in neighbourhoods that we develop our personal values and commitments and come to understand our larger responsibilities to our country and to the world. Here, newcomers learn about their new home. Here, we develop and express our citizenship daily.

Canada's municipal governments, big and small, urban and rural, are responsible for creating the conditions for communities to thrive. And they are cash strapped.

They are working from out-moded financial foundations — they need stable, reliable and predictable funding. Many lack the resources to deliver affordable housing, modern transit, green spaces, clean air and water — the prerequisites to healthy and safe communities.

They carry much of the responsibility, often without adequate resources, for integrating recent immigrants and serving the increasing number of urban Aboriginals.

As a country, we cannot permit this to continue. We all want our municipalities to be great places to live; to be able to compete for talent and investment, and to play a role in strengthening our regional economies.

We want our small towns to be able to share in our prosperity. We want our large cities to be international, and internationally competitive; to be centres of commerce and culture. And we want them all to provide safe and healthy homes for our families.

That is why we have made a new deal for Canada's municipalities one of our highest priorities. That is why we created a new Secretariat. We want the voice of our municipalities to be heard nationally. That is why we asked former Premier Mike Harcourt to head an advisory committee to help shape our policy thinking, while respecting the jurisdiction of the provinces.

Recently, some have questioned the depth of our commitment — wondered whether we would match rhetoric with results.

Well, we have answered those questions. The New Deal is a real deal.

We are committed to providing a portion of the gas tax if, eventually, that's what works best for municipalities.

Yesterday's Throne Speech announced a significant down payment. A 100 percent GST rebate for municipalities. They will now get back every penny of the tax spent in providing municipal services and community infrastructure.

Furthermore, we will act now — not in a year, or even in a month. I am pleased to announce that as of two days ago, February 1st, the GST rebates for all our municipalities began to accumulate. This will mean \$7 billion over 10 years for housing, transit, clean air and water, roads — in communities right across Canada.

But this new deal is not just about money. It is about engaging municipalities as partners.

So too, it is about engaging and building on local initiatives.

Enhancing quality of life in our cities is about wanting to help each other. It is about a willingness to work together to build great places to live.

Today this willingness is everywhere in Canada. We see it in the efforts of a million Canadians working in the voluntary sector. And they have our support.

We see it in the efforts of the people who are applying entrepreneurial creativity — not for profit, but rather to pursue social and environmental goals. That's what we call the social economy — and while it may be a less familiar part of our economy, we must not underestimate its importance.

Its contribution to the social fabric and to the economic vitality of our municipalities, urban and rural, is real and is growing. Here are some examples.

The social economy is about community groups like RESO in southwest Montréal, with which I have been involved since the start of my political career. RESO is a large coalition of unions, businesses, community groups and active citizens, all concerned about the future of their community. Several years ago they joined forces. Southwest

Montréal, a struggling district in the 1980s, today is revitalized. RESO played a pivotal role then, and still does.

The social economy is everywhere. For example, just a few blocks away from the Parliament Buildings is the Roasted Cherry Coffee House. This wonderful social enterprise was created to offer employment and a welcoming environment to young Canadians, particularly those at risk. The creators of this coffee house understood how valuable it is for youth at risk to work side by side and to share their life experiences with other young people who are still in school. Through the interaction, youth at risk can see that anything is possible. What is more, the coffee house management sets aside part of its profits to create scholarships to encourage these young people to go back to high school.

Canada abounds with similar examples.

The people who are dedicated to these efforts understand the power of the social economy. The people themselves represent a powerful social resource, and it is high time that the federal government recognizes this. We intend to make the social economy a key part of Canada's social policy tool kit.

So, for the first time, these organizations will have access to our small business programs.

Over the course of the next year we will work with these groups to develop the tools they require. Just as entrepreneurs are essential to a strong economy, social entrepreneurs are essential to strong communities, and they require our support.

This Government will offer it.

A great place to live starts with a neighbourhood with clean water, unspoiled land, and air we can safely breathe. We have much to do and many old habits to break.

The Speech from the Throne sets out an ambitious agenda on air, water and climate change. It reaffirms our intention to meet the Kyoto challenge — and it makes environmental technologies an important part of both our economic and social agenda. We must be ambitious if we are to leave the planet in better shape for future generations.

And so we must.

The Speech from the Throne Speech commits the government to an aggressive plan to clean up federal contaminated sites and to return land to its natural state. This will ensure in our municipalities opportunities for new housing, and new parks.

This will ensure in the North an environment as clean as our children believe it should be.

And it will ensure that we don't leave a heritage of pollution to Aboriginal communities.

We are committing \$3.5 billion over 10 years to this goal. What could be a better investment? An investment in our children, in our future, in our health.

And we aren't stopping there. We need to do more. More for Sydney, Nova Scotia, for example, where the tar ponds have stood as a national disgrace — a relic of an unsustainable past.

Mr. Speaker: There is one aspect of Canadian society, one aspect of our history, that casts a shadow over all that we have achieved. The continuing gap in life conditions between Aboriginal and other Canadians is intolerable. It offends our values, we cannot remain on our current path.

To turn the corner will require a new partnership. It will require a shared commitment to improving Aboriginal governance — essential to self-government and economic development.

With our partners, we will expand health care, education, skills development and entrepreneurship, and match our training programs to real economic opportunities — from Voisey's Bay to northern pipelines.

With our partners, we will tackle head on the particular problems faced by the increasing number of urban Aboriginal people and by the Métis. We will not allow ourselves to be caught up in jurisdictional wrangling, passing the buck and bypassing their needs.

Mr. Speaker: Who would have imagined the remarkable and hard-earned economic success Canadians have achieved in the last 10 years? Red ink has turned to black. Job creation is up. Interest rates are down. We're on the right track.

However, we cannot be complacent. The markers keep moving in the face of global competition and technological innovation.

We need to boost our competitiveness and productivity, not as an end in itself, but rather because today's world demands that we do so in order to keep and create good, well-paying jobs for Canadians.

What must the government do to ensure that Canada continues to be one of the world's top economic performers?

First — we need a sound foundation.

Some in this House would tell you that we can spend our way to the promised land. They are wrong. This has been tried — and it doesn't work.

Neither social justice nor economic strength can be achieved under a government that answers first to its creditors, and only second to its citizens.

This Government is committed to fiscal prudence — unalterably committed.

We've proved that by maintaining a balanced budget, even as other nations slipped into deficit. We've proved that by steadily reducing the debt ratio.

We've also proved it by reforming the Canada Pension Plan so that all Canadians — today's pensioners and tomorrow's — have a public pension they can count on.

Hard decisions taken in 1995 to get our fiscal house in order have allowed us to re-invest in Canadians' priorities: our social programs; science and technology; and to return more of their hard-earned money to them.

Since 2000, low-and middle-income Canadians have been reaping the benefit. As of January 1st, 2004, our most recent tax cut took effect, allowing them to spend more, to invest in their future.

These tax cuts, combined with low interest rates, have allowed more Canadians than ever to buy a house of their own. And, yes, Mr. Speaker, we've cut taxes for medium and small businesses, too. Allowing them to hire more people, invest in our economy, and build a vibrant Canada. We've cut those taxes to help create jobs and a more dynamic economy. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Mr. Speaker: Equality of opportunity is the pillar of a successful society. What parent has not held up their newborn child wondering what tomorrow holds, knowing that their future depends on the best possible education.

Readiness to learn is shaped at the earliest stages of childhood. That is why early childhood development is a national priority. That is why we will accelerate the implementation of the federal-provincial agreement on early learning and care.

That is also why we will provide communities with the diagnostic and remedial tools they need to assess and enhance the learning readiness of their children.

Equality of opportunity is also why we must do more to help encourage families to save for the education of their children. The Registered Education Savings Plan and associated grant have been very successful. But not all families have received the full benefits of these instruments.

A change is required to increase the awareness and use of the RESP among low-income families. To that end, the Government will develop a new “learning bond” for every child born to low-income families.

Building on the Canada Education Savings Grant, we will provide a starter grant, a new incentive, to encourage savings for post-secondary education. Over time, the value of the “learning bond” will grow. And over time, the government’s contribution will be increased as well, as resources permit.

Providing a solid foundation for the future education of our children is among the finest commitments government can make. Today we have taken an important added step toward fulfilling that commitment.

Mr. Speaker: The situation facing those who are about to decide on their post-secondary education path, or who are currently embarked on it, requires immediate action.

To this end, the Speech from the Throne sets out our plan to overhaul the student loan and grant program. We will increase access for middle- and low-income families

and better reflect the higher cost of education. We will help those who earn while they learn, and we will better address student debt. We will help low income students get in the door with a first-year education grant.

Mr. Speaker: In the new economy, education comes in many forms. Over the last several years I have visited many union training centres. They are an essential part of our education system and they should have a much stronger relationship with government.

There are many union leaders, some in the gallery today, with whom I have had the opportunity to work and whose advice the Government could benefit from. That is why we intend to work with unions on their training sites, with businesses in the workplace, through sector councils — to develop a new Workplace Skills Strategy, boosting literacy and other essential job skills for apprentices and workers.

In the same vein, all of us have heard stories of highly trained immigrants who cannot get a job because their credentials aren't recognized. We have heard of Canadians who cannot get their credentials recognized when they move to another province. Neither case is acceptable.

I raised these issues with the Premiers last Friday and all agree that we must work together to achieve demonstrable progress as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker: A world made small and integrated has changed the international rules of the game. I believe Canada has a unique perspective. We must lead the way in developing new thinking about how the international community governs itself.

Everyone agrees: globalization must be made to work for everyone, if it is to work at all. Few countries are as well positioned as is Canada to be the catalyst to make this happen.

Peace and freedom, human rights and the rule of law, diversity, respect and democracy — these are the values that form the foundation of Canada's experience and our success. They are, in truth, potentially our most valuable export.

For this reason, we must take up the challenge of building democratic societies — assisting countries broken apart by conflict and giving them life and hope.

One of the distinct ways in which Canada can help developing nations is to provide the expertise and experience of Canadians, in justice, in federalism, in pluralistic democracy.

There is also, I believe, an opportunity to more fully harness the idealism of young Canadians in this effort. We will therefore create a new initiative, Canada Corps, to help Canadians to participate in this international assistance, harnessing the energy of young Canadians and allowing them to learn while they contribute.

This same spirit animates the proposed legislation that will provide anti-HIV/AIDS drugs, and others, at low cost to African countries. I am pleased to advise the House that we will proceed with this legislation. And in recognition of the former Prime Minister's efforts, it will now be titled The Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa Act.

Building on this, Canada's National Science Advisor will work with the research community to identify additional steps we can take to bring the benefits of our research and development to bear on the challenges faced by the developing world, from learning technologies to environmental and life sciences.

Our long-term goal as a country should be to devote no less than 5 % of our R & D investment to a knowledge-based approach to develop assistance for less fortunate countries.

We in Canada are rich in medical science and research. We have a moral obligation to share our capability with those in desperate need.

Mr. Speaker: Our engagement with the world is why it is fitting and most welcome that next month Kofi Annan will be speaking in our Chamber. This demonstrates the importance to Canada of multilateralism and the reform of its most fundamental institution, the United Nations.

My first foreign trip as Prime Minister was to meet with the countries of the Americas at the Monterrey Summit. This was an important opportunity to develop our hemispheric relations and, significantly for Canada, to take a first step toward a new relationship with the United States.

Our Government is committed to a more sophisticated approach, not only to manage our shared objectives, but also to manage difficult issues, such as BSE and softwood lumber, which have exacted a troubling toll right across Canada.

We want to buttress our mutual understanding by having greater parliamentary engagement with members of the United States Congress; greater engagement between Canadian officials and their counterparts; between representatives of our provinces and territories and their states; and between mayors.

Mr. Speaker: In the 10 years since we last conducted a review of Canada's foreign policy, many things have changed the way the world looks at itself: the extraordinary influence of the United States worldwide; the economic emergence of China, India, and Brazil; the explosion of the global movement of people, goods and capital; the new threats of non-state terrorism; and the rise of new doctrines such as the "responsibility to protect" in the wake of genocides in Rwanda and Kosovo.

During these past 10 years, Canada too has changed. But our outreach to the world has not. It needs updating.

The Government is therefore developing a contemporary approach to: our foreign policy objectives, our trade and investment needs, our defence requirements, and, our development assistance programs.

This may seem remote from our daily experience. But, in truth; it is about our role in the world. It is about our interests, and how to make our trade and diplomacy advance them. It is about ensuring, as we invest in defence, that we do so to meet the next challenge and not the last one; and it is about our values and how to make our international assistance reflect them.

Mr. Speaker: The ideas I have described here today are part of an outline of a future Canada. To achieve that future, Canada requires the participation, the engagement, the active debate of all Canadians.

That means a democratic debate, resting on open discourse where good ideas win through persuasion, not coercion.

Canadians don't send Members of Parliament to Ottawa simply to fill seats. They send them here to fulfil expectations.

I believe that begins with adherence to rules and procedures that ensure the integrity of the institution and the individual.

That is why we have a stronger code of conduct and new ethical guidelines.

We will also have an independent Ethics Commissioner and a Senate Ethics Officer. The new Ethics Commissioner will report to this House and will have authority to review the actions of all Members of Parliament, including Ministers and the Prime Minister.

The Government has a new Expenditure Review Committee to ensure that spending remains under control and accountable, and is closely aligned with the priorities of Canadians.

We will promote continued public service excellence and achievement. Our goal is nothing less than the finest public service in the world. And I believe that goal is shared by every public servant.

We will do all of this, and we will do more.

We will re-engage Canadians with their Parliament.

In 1901, after barely a year in the British House of Commons, Winston Churchill gave an address in which he lamented the party discipline that overrode free thought and free debate.

“Nothing would be worse,” he said, “than that independent men should be snuffed out and that there should be only two opinions in England — the government opinion and the opposition opinion ... I believe in personality.”

Well, this Government believes in personality too, and the responsibility of private members to represent their constituents as they see fit.

I have no doubt that some votes may not go our way. But it’s my firm belief that from debate comes strength, and from dispute comes clarity.

Some in this House and perhaps in the media may try to tell you that a lost vote is an embarrassment to me or to the Government.

Don’t you believe them. The real embarrassment would be to have members of Parliament playing silent extras in the epic story of Canada.

I'm proud to announce that the government will table tomorrow an Action Plan for Democratic Reform.

Our goal is clear. To make Parliament what it is supposed to be — a national forum in which citizens of Canada from every region of our vast land make their views known and their interests heard.

A place where the voices of all of Canada, all of its regions are included. What does that mean? I have said that alienation in the West and British Columbia is not a myth. It is a reality. We must address that reality — it's a question of earning people's trust. So too, we must ensure that the North has greater control of its destiny. We must ensure that the people of Québec will recognize themselves within Canada. We must ensure that Ontarians see their ambitions fulfilled; that the hopes and dreams of Atlantic Canada as reflected in the report, "Rising Tides" are realized.

Mr. Speaker: We are entering one of the most important decades in our history. A decade where we will seize the opportunities before us. And with a new Parliament, and a new Government, we will honour the unparalleled values of our nation.

A proud nation, a nation confident in its future.

Our country, our Canada.

And that, Mr. Speaker, is only the beginning.