

SPEECH GIVEN BY SPEAKER KINSELLA TO THE SLOVAKIA-CANADA FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

Ahoj (A-hoi)

On behalf of the members of the Canadian parliamentary delegation, allow me to tell you how pleased we are to be in Slovakia. I would like to thank the members of the Slovakia-Canada Friendship Group for hosting this luncheon.

One of the purposes of our visit here is to improve our understanding of Slovakia. Of course, Canadians know that Slovakia produces great hockey players. Over the years, Slovaks such as Stan Mikita, the Stastny brothers, and Marcel and Marian Hossa have earned the respect of Canadian hockey fans.

Canadians, however, do not know enough about the progress Slovakia has made since taking its place among the nations of the world. Most would be surprised to know that the ties between our countries go back nearly 130 years.

The first Slovak immigrant to Canada, Joseph Bellon, landed in Toronto in 1878. Other early immigrants settled on farmland in the western Canada, while those who arrived later tended to settle in urban centres. During the Cold War, Canada welcomed political refugees from Slovakia. Today, over 50,000 people in Canada claim Slovak ancestry. Indeed, it is the third-largest Slovak community outside Slovakia.

The personal ties Canadian Slovaks have with their ancestral home is an important asset as our two countries build on the ties we have established over the past 17 years. As you know, Canada was the first country to ratify Slovakia's membership in NATO. While you were making the transition to democracy and a market economy, Canada funded more than 150 development projects.

Given the great strides Slovakia has made, our program of aid was wound down when you joined the European Union in 2004. Today, rather than being a recipient of aid, Slovakia works with Canada to fund development projects in other countries

Visits such as this go a long way to building and reinforcing these ties between us. As parliamentarians, we will be called upon to make decisions regarding our common interests, and the more we know about Slovakia, the better we will be able to make informed decisions. At

the same time, we are able to tell our Slovak counterparts about Canada's concerns and goals. By sharing information, we help each other develop images of each other's country that are built on personal information, rather than second-hand knowledge.

In closing, on behalf of my colleagues, let me thank you once again for providing us with this very pleasant opportunity to learn about your country and to discuss our evolving relationship.

On our return home, be assured that we will continue to follow developments in Slovakia.

Dakujem (Dya-ku-yem')