

SPEAKING NOTES
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SPEAKER OF THE SENATE

ON THE OCCASION OF
AN ORIENTATION DAY FOR DIPLOMATS

January 30, 2009

Mr. Speaker,
Ambassadors,
High Commissioners,
Distinguished guests,

Good morning:

Together with my colleague, Speaker of the House of Commons Peter Milliken, I would like to welcome all of you to Canada, and to the Parliament of Canada. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has done us all a great service in organizing this diplomatic outreach program, and I would like to thank them for their work in making this possible.

As Speaker of the Senate of Canada, I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet with you as you begin your tenures as new Heads of Mission. I look forward to meeting and working with all of you to strengthen the relationships between our countries.

Today, I would like to speak about my international diplomatic role and the importance of parliamentary diplomacy.

It is often said that international policy is the strict purview of state governments, that it is the executive branch of government which is responsible for relations between states. While this is certainly true, we have also seen the development of an important and complementary role for parliamentarians in international diplomatic initiatives, which run alongside the functions of government in the conduct of foreign policy.

Our primary functions as parliamentarians include voicing the concerns and expectations of the people we represent, analyzing problems carefully and putting forward strategic legislative solutions to help guide the actions of governments. Internationally, in the domain of foreign policy development, this is also what parliamentary diplomacy seeks to do. In a global environment, citizens are more aware of the international implications of many issues. Citizens expect and demand greater contact between their parliamentarians and those of other countries.

This role encompasses a range of activities for the Speakers of both chambers of the Canadian parliament, and for individual parliamentarians. We participate in a broad array of parliamentary exchanges. The Speakers and parliamentary delegations undertake visits abroad and, in turn, receive reciprocal visits from our parliamentary counterparts from around the world. The exchanges take place on both the bilateral level and the multilateral level. Multilateral exchanges include parliamentary conferences and meetings of international parliamentary associations.

All of these opportunities help to build personal connections between parliamentarians. They enhance cooperation between our countries, and bring fresh perspectives on the key international issues facing us. These include human rights, good governance, security, prosperity, health, education, and inter-cultural understanding – all of which are issues that we must tackle together in an inter-connected world. Importantly, these diplomatic initiatives also allow parliamentarians to share best practices in areas of legislative oversight and scrutiny.

Now I would like to elaborate on the role of parliamentary exchanges in the Canadian Parliament.

PARLIAMENTARY EXCHANGES

Parliamentary exchanges include our visits and fact-finding missions abroad as Speakers of the Senate and House of Commons. We also receive visits to Canada by our foreign counterparts. These exchanges enhance ties with other countries and facilitate the sharing of ideas, values, knowledge, and experience.

On our visits abroad, we are often accompanied by a delegation of parliamentarians, representing Canada's various political parties from both chambers of parliament. The diverse parliamentary composition of these delegations can have networking and collaborative benefits that might not be possible for a strictly governmental delegation.

The presence of delegates from the various political parties represented in parliament also conveys the message that holding different political views does not prevent us from setting aside our differences and working together in the interest of promoting parliamentary dialogue.

As one example of such an exchange, I recently led a parliamentary delegation to France. Our visit highlighted the importance of Canada's relations with France, and served to strengthen ties between our two countries. With our French counterparts, we discussed a host of issues, including international education, the seal hunt, and NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

Last year, I was privileged to lead a delegation to Kuwait, Yemen, and Oman. We met with His Highness, the Emir of Kuwait, and His Highness, the Crown Prince of Kuwait, whereby we were able to further our understanding of the Muslim world and to discuss opportunities to explore our countries' economic and cultural ties.

On another occasion, I led delegations to Portugal and Russia where we discussed with our counterparts many issues, including those surrounding human rights and international student exchanges between post-secondary institutions.

One very memorable exchange involved a delegation visit to Libya. Previously isolated in the international community, Libya has begun to develop a new approach to its international relations. In this context, we met with senior government officials, including most notably a two-hour meeting in the Libyan Desert with Colonel Gaddafi. This Speaker-led visit succeeded in opening the diplomatic door a bit wider, following up on the original work of the government. This should facilitate future opportunities for the government to further its bilateral work.

PROTOCOL EVENTS

In addition to receiving parliamentary delegations, our duties as speakers of the Senate and House of Commons include being involved in official welcoming ceremonies for foreign Heads of State and Government. Last May, Speaker Milliken and I were honoured to receive His Excellency Victor Yushchenko, President of the Ukraine. During his visit to Parliament, the President addressed Senators and Members of the House of Commons. In 2006, we welcomed His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCES

Our role as Speakers also involves participating in parliamentary conferences on important thematic issues facing legislators around the world.

This past fall, we were pleased to host the parliamentary assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Toronto. Parliamentarians were able to meet and exchange ideas on timely topics, including regional issues facing the Mediterranean. There were also thematic debates around trade, security, and migration, among other political and economic issues. Of note, parliamentarians were able to exchange views on the recent conflict between Georgia and Russia, and to hear the perspectives of representatives of the two countries involved.

Another notable occasion was in 2006, when we hosted both the 52nd annual session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Quebec City, and the 12th General Assembly of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians' Conference on the Environment and Development in Whistler, British Columbia.

The diversity of parliamentary conferences held in Canada alone illustrates the important range of issues covered by the parliamentarians in attendance, from security and global governance to sustainable development.

In closing, I would like to wish you all well in your new diplomatic roles in Canada. I would also like to express my sincere hope that I will have the opportunity to speak with you all individually, at a later date. I look forward to continuing to build strong partnerships and understanding between our countries.