

SPEECH TO HONOUR THE PRESIDENT OF LATVIA

Your Excellency President Vike-Freiberga,
Honourable Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Your Excellency, we are honoured by your visit, which also marks a return among friends. As most of us know, you spent many years here in Canada.

Your story is an extraordinary example of perseverance and determination. Forced to flee your country in 1945 following the Soviet occupation, you spent time in refugee camps before arriving in Canada in 1954. Shortly after, you began university studies in psychology, first at the University of Toronto, and later at McGill University. From 1965 to 1998, you taught in the Department of Psychology at the University of Montreal.

During your years in Canada, you never lost touch with your Latvian roots. You conducted scholarly research on Latvian folksongs and were actively engaged in community service. You returned to Latvia in 1998, and were elected President of the Republic of Latvia the following year. In 2003, you were re-elected for a second four-year term.

During your time in office, Latvia has made remarkable strides. We do not hear much about Latvia in the news these days, but that is because it is a stable, democratic country, one that has assumed its rightful place in the community of nations. Latvia is a member of the European Union and is an ally of Canada in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Canada is honoured to be a partner of Latvia as it consolidates its integration in Europe and the international system.

President Vike-Freiberga, the personal ties that you have with Canada have helped our two countries develop the excellent relations we enjoy today.

Canada is proud to have been one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Latvia following the reestablishment of its independence. Since then, relations between our two countries have developed on several levels. Canada has, among other things, provided training to the Latvian military. I would also like to point out that Canada was one of the first G7 countries to ratify protocols paving the way for Latvia's accession to NATO.

In addition, Canada provided assistance to help you develop a more effective public sector and helped with your language-training program. You made rapid progress in developing your democracy and building a market-based economy, and by 2004 Latvia no longer needed assistance from Canada. This marked a new phase of our bilateral relation --- that of equal partnership.

During that time, trade relations between Canada and Latvia began to develop. Although trade between our two countries continues to be rather modest, it has shown continued signs of growth, reaching nearly \$50 million in 2005; that is, double the figure for 2002.

President Vike-Freiberga, it is no exaggeration to say that Latvia's remarkable progress over the past decade and a half could not have been possible without your active participation in the public life of your country. In a world all too often beset by tragedy, Latvia's is a story with a happy ending.

Please join me in offering a toast to the President of the Republic of Latvia,
Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga.