

**Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean
Speech on the Occasion of a State Dinner Hosted by
His Excellency Václav Klaus, President of the Czech
Republic, and Mrs. Livia Klausová
Prague, Monday, December 1, 2008**



Fortune has certainly smiled upon us, Excellency, to have brought us back so soon to your capital and to your country.

My husband, Jean-Daniel Lafond, and I have fond memories of our very animated discussions during an unforgettable luncheon with you, Excellency, and with the First Lady.

It was just over a year ago, and I was in Prague for the 11th annual Forum 2000 conference.

I gladly agreed to deliver the opening address at the conference. It was also important to me that I join in a roundtable discussion on the need for us to tap into the strengths of our youth.

I have made youth a priority during my mandate as governor general of Canada and take every opportunity to listen to their concerns, to their solutions, and to their aspirations.

In our country and around the world, young people are speaking out about the major issues facing all of our societies and have told me time and again that solidarity is a responsibility.

They do not define that solidarity in terms of ethnicity or a place of belonging, but rather in terms of the values we all share.

Values, Excellency, that are opposed to the one-track thinking of the years of communism that you yourself defined, last October in Seattle, as “a model of radical rejection of freedom.”

This year, as we mark the 40th anniversary of the Soviet invasion, it is so important that we listen to what our youth have to say and allow them at last to share their visions of the world with us.

I will be focussing on youth during this State visit to the Czech Republic because my delegation and I are absolutely convinced that their points of view will bring a much-needed dimension to our joint reflection on issues as crucial as integration in an increasingly open world.

Youth, who are not limited by time and space thanks to new technologies, circulate freely on global networks that we could never have imagined less than 30 years ago and explore new ways of ensuring social harmony.

For one thing, they know that culture, as Franz Kafka said of literature in his journal, is an “assault on the frontiers.”

It is an assault on everything that seeks to restrict thought, to stifle expression, to cause us to withdraw into ourselves, to stigmatize the Other.

Which is something to which my husband, filmmaker and philosopher Jean-Daniel Lafond, is particularly sensitive at a time when so many would prefer to reduce culture to market logic rather than uphold it as a critical element of civilization.

During our last visit to Prague, last year, Jean-Daniel met with students and faculty members of the FAMU, a faculty known worldwide and specializing in cinema, at St. Charles University.

And tomorrow, accompanied by members of the Canadian delegation involved in the film and documentary filmmaking industries, Jean-Daniel will pursue this dialogue.

My husband and I firmly believe that culture is one of the most effective ways to bring people and nations together.

Excellency, we know what the oppression of the last century cost the people of the Czech Republic, what it cost an entire generation.

Today, Canada is home to some 80 000 citizens of Czech heritage, most of whom came to our country following the Second World War and the events of 1968, in search of freedom.

Those women and men helped to build today’s Canada and forged strong bonds between our two countries.

We can see those bonds in the very successful academic exchanges between us over the years, notably since the creation of the Central European Association of Canadian Studies in 2003, at Masaryk University in Brno.

We can see them in our economic co-operation, highlighted by the presence of nearly 50 Canadian businesses in the Czech Republic.

Excellency, I would be remiss if I did not also emphasize as a promise for the future the 2006 signing by both of our governments of a Framework Agreement of Youth Mobility.

This Agreement's objective is to enable youths aged 18 to 35 to gain work experience in either of our countries, which will in turn help to build bridges and opportunities for exchange between us.

Furthermore, Canada and the Czech Republic are working together within a number of multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as in peacekeeping and reconstruction missions in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

We are delighted that we were the first country to ratify the Czech Republic's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

And we are so pleased that your country is a part of the great family of La Francophonie.

Canada recently hosted the 12th Francophonie Summit in the City of Québec, a city that is celebrating its 400th anniversary this year.

We look forward to the Czech Republic assuming the presidency of the European Union in 2009, and we hope to begin working with you on the next Canada-European Union Economic Summit, held last month in the City of Québec.

In an increasingly open and complex world, it is important for Canada to reinforce its alliances with member countries of the European Union and to create new networks of collaboration.

Clearly, the fraternal bonds between our two countries extend well beyond our mutual love of hockey.

Earlier today, my husband and I had very productive discussions with you, Excellency, as well as with the president of the Senate of the Parliament and the Lord Mayor of Prague. And we look forward to meeting with the Prime Minister tomorrow.

Over the past few days, my husband, the members of the Canadian delegation, and I have had the opportunity to walk in the majestic steps of your history, having visited Slavkov Castle and Telč Castle, and have had some very inspiring conversations with many of your fellow citizens.

May I ask the members of the Canadian delegation to stand up? They represent dynamic sectors of Canadian society and are of diverse backgrounds: youth, Aboriginal, academics, social activists, artists, community and cultural leaders.

On the theme of togetherness, we have also had a unique opportunity to have a most interesting discussion with members of the Roma community on their aspirations and the challenges they face, at the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno.

Over the next few days, we plan to continue the dialogue with women, men and youth from institutions and civil society on issues of global importance such as the integration of minorities and civic engagement amongst youth.

Your perspectives on these issues are of utmost interest to us, and the dialogue in which we have already engaged with your citizens is most promising.

My husband and I would like to thank you, Excellency, for the warm welcome you have shown us and for hosting this dinner in our honour.

Rest assured that you have the friendship of all Canadians.

Our two countries are proof, in this world that would seem to crave it, that the sum of our solidarities is infinitely greater than the sum of our differences.

May the friendship between Canada and the Czech Republic continue to grow and may our youth steer this friendship in new and daring directions!