

**Presentation of Canada's 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Reports to the  
Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

**May 5 and May 8, 2006**

**Head of Delegation Statement**

Canada appears before the Committee today proud of our record of achievement in the promotion of economic, social and cultural rights. We thus look forward to discussing our record with you.

Canada is at the forefront of promoting human rights internationally and domestically and our efforts have paid dividends. The latest United Nations Human Development Index ranks Canada as fifth over-all according to its various measurements of well-being and first among G-8 countries. These results indicate the success of our society. Canada is recognised world-wide as a place where people wish to live. Every year we welcome thousands of new immigrants; people who have identified Canada as a country in which they can best prosper and where their human rights are best protected.

Our commitment to the improvement of our society is continuous and continuing.

The federal government has stressed among its priorities:

**Improved child care** – The Government will help Canadian parents, as they seek to balance work and family life, by supporting their child care choices through direct financial support. In addition, the Government will provide financial incentives for employers and community groups to create new child care spaces. To this end, the Government announced this week in the budget that \$250 million will go to support the creation of new child care spaces. The goal is to create 25,000 additional spaces each year.

**Lower Taxes** – Reduction of the Good and Services and Tax will benefit all Canadians, including low income Canadians who need it most. In addition, our recently announced budget included comprehensive tax relief for individuals which will result in about 655,00 low income Canadians being removed from the tax rolls altogether.

**Health Care** – The Government will engage the provinces and territories on a patient wait times guarantee for medically necessary services. This guarantee will make sure that all Canadians receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times.

**Crime Reduction** – Among its initiatives to reduce the incidence of violent crime and thus promote individual security, the Government will work with the provinces and territories to help communities provide hope and opportunity for our youth, and end the cycle of violence that can lead to broken communities and broken lives. For example, the recent budget has announced \$20 million for communities to prevent youth crime, with a focus on guns, gangs and drugs.

These new initiatives will improve the lives of Canadians and advance our progressive development as a society.

Canada is also firmly committed to a vigorous international system which actively promotes respect for, implementation of and adherence to, international human rights obligations. We have been leaders in the development of the current international human rights monitoring mechanisms and believe strongly in the importance of these processes in discussing the implementation of human rights. Your concluding observations are of great importance to us as we consider the progressive implementation of our commitments under the Covenant; they contribute significantly to our policy development and are thus most welcome.

Human rights are fundamental to Canadian society. Active and open discussions on human rights issues are woven into the daily fabric of Canadian lives. We are happy to continue this dialogue with the Committee members today and look forward to receiving your questions and suggestions in the hopes that together we are able to better understand economic, social and cultural rights and further their implementation in Canada.

As you know, Canada last appeared before the Committee to present its 3<sup>rd</sup> Report almost 8 years ago, in November 1998. Following that appearance, we received from the Committee a series of concluding observations, which have been helpful to Canada in the on-going development of our economic, social and cultural policy. Our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> reports reflect these developments and we look forward to discussing them today. Since that time, Canada has instituted a number of programs and measures that further the progressive realization of the rights under the Covenant, and thereby improve the daily lives of Canadians. And the lives of most Canadians have significantly improved over the past decade. But we want more for Canadians and we look forward to discussing both Canada's challenges and successes with the members of the Committee in the full knowledge that while we have been making significant improvements there are areas which remain a

work-in-progress.

The federal, provincial and territorial governments work both collaboratively and independently to address human rights issues in Canada. As noted in our Reports, jurisdictions often work together to address challenges in areas such as health care, development of children, housing and homelessness, justice, and issues affecting aboriginal peoples, seniors and persons with disabilities. The Reports, and our responses to your advance list of issues, highlight significant changes and developments in laws, programs and policies by both levels of government. Three of Canada's provinces, Québec, Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador, and one of our northern territories, Nunavut, are represented on our delegation and look forward to participating directly in this Session.

Canadian women have made many gains in achieving equality. Building upon the foundation of the Federal Plan for Gender Equality (1995-2000), the Government of Canada in 2000 approved the Agenda for Gender Equality, a government-wide multi-year strategy to ensure that gender equality becomes a reality for Canadian women. In the Autumn of 2004, a new federal Standing Committee on the Status of Women was created and it has increased public attention to issues of gender

equality and has made recommendations that help us move forward. The work of this Committee will continue in the current Parliament. Consultations with non-governmental organizations have also been held and will assist in any future work with respect to gender equality we may undertake in the coming years.

Over the past number of years, Canada has developed a number of innovative programs that address the complexity of implementation of human rights in our vast territory to numerous, widely-dispersed communities. Digital access initiatives, especially for reaching Aboriginal Canadians, Canadians with disabilities, and those in remote communities, have been invaluable in realizing many aspects of economic, social and cultural rights.

Economically, Canadians are better off today than in 1998 because more are working and fewer live in poverty. Canada's overall unemployment rate has now reached a 32 year low at 6.3%, exceeding economists predictions, and meaning that more Canadians are enjoying the benefits of employment. And significantly, most of these positions were full-time jobs. Statistics Canada has also confirmed that federal investments to support low-income Canadians are having a positive impact. In 1996, 15.7 percent of Canadians were considered low income; by 2004, that

had dropped to 11.2 percent, a very significant improvement. Put another way, in 2004 about 1.1 million fewer Canadians were living on a low income than in 1996.

Provincial initiatives will also contribute positively to addressing these challenges.

For example, the Government of Quebec is implementing a five year action plan to combat poverty and social exclusion. The Government of Saskatchewan has also undertaken a new initiative called the First Nations and Metis Economic Development Program, and is planning to hold a national symposium on Aboriginal economic development with First Nations, Metis and Inuit people, governments, the private sector, labour and other partners in January 2007.

Canada believes that the most important investment we can make as a country is to help families raise their children. This was an issue specifically noted by the Committee in its concluding comments of 1998 and it is a concern widely shared in Canadian society. As a result, the Government has placed particular emphasis on support for families and children. We support them in the many ways they care for their pre-school children – wherever they live, whatever their circumstances and preferences. The Universal Child Care Benefit to be launched in July 2006 will provide \$1,200 per year for each child under six – in addition to the Canada Child

Tax Benefit, National Child Benefit Supplement and Child Care Expense Deduction. Through the creation of our new Universal Child Care Plan, we will encourage the creation of up to 125,000 flexible new child care spaces to meet the needs of families – including those that live in rural areas, or who need care outside of standard Monday to Friday hours. In the 2006 budget, the Government announced a series of other measures to support Canadian children and families. For example, a children's fitness tax credit of up to \$500 in eligible fees for physical fitness programmes and an increased Child Disability Benefit, with extended eligibility, has been included in the budget.

Canada has made considerable strides in reducing child poverty. Nearly half a million fewer children are living in poverty compared with a decade ago, and the low-income rate for children has declined significantly in recent years – from 18.6 percent in 1996 to 12.8 percent in 2004. The National Child Benefit, a federal, provincial and territorial initiative, has played a key role in reducing child poverty and supporting parents' participation in the labour force. This Benefit will continue to support families with children in the future.

In order to meet the particular challenges of Aboriginal children and families,

Manitoba restructured its child welfare system to give the responsibility for family and child services to Aboriginal authorities. These authorities will be able to ensure that family and child services respect the unique status, culture and heritage of Aboriginal Peoples.

Following our open invitation to visits by Special Rapporteurs, Canada hosted a visit by Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, in May 2004. Canada welcomed Mr. Stavenhagen's report as a positive contribution to our collective national efforts to improve the lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It was encouraging to note that the areas Mr. Stavenhagen highlights in his report as representing the greatest challenges for Canada largely coincide with the areas the Government has identified for increased action.

In a meeting in September 2004, First Ministers and Aboriginal Leaders agreed to work together to develop a blueprint to improve the health status of Aboriginal peoples and health services in Canada through a number of concrete initiatives. At the same time, the Government of Canada announced new investments of \$700 million over five years for Aboriginal health, including an Aboriginal Health

Transition Fund; an Aboriginal Health Human Resources Initiative, and upstream investments in health promotion and disease prevention programs.

To this end, the new budget addresses the particular housing challenges faced by some of our aboriginal communities by allocating \$450 million for improving water supply and housing on reserve, education outcomes, and socio-economic conditions for Aboriginal women, children and families and \$300 million for the provinces to address immediate pressures in off-reserve Aboriginal housing in the North.

Having access to safe drinking water is a necessity for all Canadians, including First Nations communities, and Canada believes strongly that State Parties have an obligation in this regard. To this end, the Government of Canada is making substantial investments in upgrading, maintaining and monitoring water and wastewater systems on First Nations reserves. The Government of Canada is committed to building strong, sustainable, economically viable and healthy communities, and will continue to work closely with Aboriginal people on all health related issues.

Canadians are quite rightly proud and protective of our system of public health

insurance. As noted, the federal, provincial and territorial governments will work together to address a “patient wait times” guarantee for medically necessary services. This guarantee will make sure that all Canadians receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times.

At the provincial level, the Government of Ontario, as part of its commitment to strengthen health care through innovative measures, has established a separate Ministry of Health Promotion to advocate healthy living and develop programs that prevent illness and promote wellness.

In 1998, the Committee noted in its concluding observations particular concerns with regard to homelessness and inadequate housing. These are genuine problems which the Government is addressing in the 2006 budget through confirming up to \$800 million to the provinces and territories to address immediate pressures in affordable housing.

Joining us here today are a number of representatives of Canadian non-governmental organizations, many of whom the Committee has had the opportunity to meet personally. Canada believes that the number of these

representatives, and the sophistication of their submissions to the Committee, reflect the maturity of Canada's human rights implementation. We welcome their presence.

Internationally Canada has also been actively promoting various aspects of economic, social and cultural rights. In relation to culture, Canada was an active player in the development of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Canada continues to participate actively in the Ad Hoc Committee on the elaboration of a new International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As noted above, government has in its recent budget announced the increase of the maximum annual Child Disability Benefit and the extension of the eligibility for that benefit to middle- and higher - income families caring for a child who is eligible for the disability tax credit. The Government has also announced the boosting of the maximum amount of the refundable medical expense supplement to \$1,000 from \$767. Canada has actively supported the elaboration of the International Health Regulations as an important global effort to protect the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Reflecting our commitment to tobacco control, Canada was one of the first countries to ratify the

Convention and Canada actively participated in the first session of the Conference of the Parties, held Geneva in February 2006. Canada will continue to support international tobacco control initiatives.

Finally, Canada recognizes the importance of creating an enabling international environment and therefore collaborates with developing nations in international cooperation projects. Our international development programs focus on various aspects relating to the realization of economic and social rights in particular.

Our delegation here in Geneva will be very happy to respond to your questions and comments.