**Opening Remarks
Canada’s Delegation to the UN Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review**

**April 26, 2013**

Thank you Mr. President

Distingués Ambassadeurs et représentants d’entités onusiennes et représentants de la société civile, mesdames et messieurs

I am here to address the working group of the Human Rights Council on the occasion of Canada’s second Universal Periodic Review. I’d like to thank those of you who have taken the time to send us questions in advance. We will address these throughout this session today.

**A. Context – Diversity and Federalism as Strengths**

By way of opening remarks, I would like to provide a general overview of how human rights are approached in Canada, and of how we are making progress for Canadians.

Canada takes the protection and promotion of the human rights of its population very seriously. By this I mean that all levels of government, federal, provincial and territorial, share a strong commitment and work together to protect and advance the human rights of Canadians. We see human rights as inherent to individual dignity; we also understand the fundamental link between the full realization of human rights to a secure, prosperous and peaceful society.

Canada is a country marked and enriched by the many different backgrounds of its people. It is a multicultural society of 34 million people, with two official languages, English and French, and with Canadians representing over 200 ethnic origins. Aboriginal peoples include more than 600 First Nations communities, representing some 50 nations or cultural groups, which, together with the Inuit and Metis, make up a total population of over one million people according to the 2006 Census.

Canada is an open and democratic society characterized by a vibrant civil society, a free media and a dynamic private sector, with strong public institutions, including elected legislatures, responsible executive branches and an independent and impartial judiciary. These defining characteristics are underpinned by shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights and respect for the rule of law. Within this context, Canadians are able to exercise their rights without discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, disability, age or sex, including sexual orientation. Canadians are free to practice the faith of their choice, to associate freely and peacefully, and to express their ideas and opinions. Canadians also enjoy a high standard of economic, social and cultural rights protection. Where Canadians consider themselves to be subject to a violation of their rights, their avenues to advocate, challenge and seek redress are well-established and openly accessible.

Human rights in Canada are protected by constitutional and legislative measures, and are also advanced through the many policies and programs in place at all levels of government. The *Canadian Constitution* guarantees such civil and political rights as freedom of religion, expression, association and peaceful assembly; the right to vote and stand for election; mobility rights; the right to life, liberty and security of the person; various rights relating to the legal process; and the right to equality and non-discrimination. Canada’s Constitution also recognizes and affirms the rights of Aboriginal peoples.  All government action is subject to scrutiny under these constitutional guarantees, and the courts are empowered to strike down laws that are found to be inconsistent with them.

All levels of Government in Canada cooperate and collaborate to ensure human rights protections are in place across the country. This co-operative federalism approach allows a variety of perspectives to be brought to bear, producing a diverse range of ideas for the protection and promotion of human rights in Canada. Consultations with civil society take place at the national, provincial and territorial levels. Innovative policies and programs developed in one jurisdiction are shared and discussed amongst various levels of government. While the initiatives of individual governments may vary across the country, all governments share common objectives and a strong commitment to achieving positive results. This is in fact a reflection of the strengths of Canadian federalism.

Since Canada’s last UPR, we have ratified the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in March 2010.

Mr. President, I would like to turn now to five significant areas for Canada and lay the groundwork for our discussion today. These areas are Canada’s Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples; Violence against Women and Children; Canada’s Social Protection Framework; Immigration and Refugee Protection; and National Security and Public Safety.

**B. Our relationship with Aboriginal Peoples**

The Government of Canada’s efforts to renew and strengthen the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians are fundamental to reconciliation and to paving the way for the full participation of Aboriginal people in the social, economic and cultural prosperity of Canada.

I would like to outline briefly some developments since our last UPR appearance which support these reconciliation efforts:

Building on the historic June 2008, formal apology made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on behalf of the Government of Canada in the House of Commons to former students, their families, and communities for Canada's role in the operation of the Indian Residential School system, progress on implementation of all aspects of Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement has been made. This includes financial compensation and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to give voice to those who experienced residential schools.

In August 2010, the Government apologized for relocating Inuit from Inukjuak and Pond Inlet to the High Arctic in the 1950s, and for the hardship, suffering and loss they experienced.

In November 2010, Canada endorsed the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as one more step to build a positive and productive relationship with Aboriginal peoples.

In addition, the Canada-First Nations Joint Action Plan, announced in June 2011, will explore new ways to improve the long-term prosperity for First Nations people.

The Government of Canada provides over $10 billion each year in programs directed to Aboriginal people through 34 federal departments and agencies and through partnership with Aboriginal communities, and provincial and territorial governments. These investments are aimed at ensuring an improved quality of life for Aboriginal individuals and groups through a policy agenda focused on the following key areas: reconciliation; governance and self-government; resolving and implementing land claims; education; economic development; and empowering citizens and protection of the vulnerable. Governments across Canada are also taking action to support better health outcomes and improved access to programs and services for Aboriginal peoples.

**C. Addressing Violence against Women and Children**

Mr. President, Canada is a world leader in the promotion and protection of human rights and the equality between men and women. These issues are central to Canada’s foreign and domestic policies. Canada is committed to the view that equality between women and men is an essential component of sustainable development. The rights of women and girls are firmly entrenched in our Constitution, which ensures that women are on an equal footing with men.

Women in Canada enjoy relatively high rates of employment and labour participation. Their enrolment in university studies is higher than that of men and that number continues to increase. We are also seeing a reduction in the wage gap and levels of poverty for some groups of women.

Canada is committed to continuing to improve the lives of women and girls in our country and is particularly committed to ending all forms of violence against women. Women, particularly Aboriginal women, are more likely than men to be victimsof some forms of violence, including the most severe and frequent forms of spousal assault. However we are encouraged by recent signs that the prevalence of reported spousal violence is declining and that spousal homicide rates have also decreased in recent years. The decline may be a result of improved social interventions and the increased use of services by women who have experienced violence.

Canada’s approach to addressing violence against women and children includes a combination of legislative and non-legislative responses designed to prevent and reduce the prevalence of violence against women and children; provide health and social assistance to those affected by it; and hold the perpetrators accountable.

The Government of Canada has introduced numerous criminal law reforms to better protect women and all Canadians from violence. In addition, federal, provincial and territorial governments have adopted strategies to eliminate violence against women and address the immediate needs of women and their children who are victims – or who fear becoming victims – of violence. Resources and initiatives include access to emergency shelters and counselling, provincial and territorial action plans against sexual violence, and Aboriginal-specific services, including culturally adapted health services, and the creation of culturally sensitive residential and outreach programs.

Addressing violence against Aboriginal women and girls is an important priority. Canada continues to take concrete steps to address this complex issue, including improving the law enforcement and justice system response so they can better meet the needs of Aboriginal women and girls and their families.

For example, the province of British Columbia established the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry to examine the police investigations conducted into women reported missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and has taken steps towards addressing extensive recommendations made in the Commission’s final report. This has included appointing Steven Point, former Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, to chair a new advisory committee on the safety and security of vulnerable women. The BC Government has expressed its commitment to use the Report as a blueprint for building a legacy of safety and security for vulnerable women over the coming years.

In addition, to address the specific issue of trafficking, the Government of Canada launched its National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking in June 2012. This Plan acknowledges that women and children are most often the victims and includes measures to prevent trafficking, protect victims, prosecute offenders and work in partnership with relevant stakeholders.

**D. Canada’s Social Protection Framework**

Mr. President, Canada has a comprehensive social protection framework that enables Canadians to reach their full potential. Due to the policies of our governments, Canada has an enviable record of human development and social mobility. We are better educated, living longer, and less likely to experience poverty.

Canada recognizes that it is critical for our society and economy that all Canadians, including vulnerable and underrepresented groups, have the support they need to help them find gainful employment and live active and healthy lives. In this regard, Canada is continuing to strengthen its comprehensive social protection framework and advance social innovation so that all individuals and communities can reach their full potential

Canada’s approach to addressing disparity focuses on providing individuals with the opportunity to achieve independence and find long-term solutions to their circumstances through the provision of appropriate employment, income, housing, education and health supports.

This approach allows all Canadians to enjoy a high quality of life while helping those that face particular barriers. For example, effective employment supports help those who are gainfully employed to remain attached to the labour market, but also help underrepresented groups such as Aboriginal peoples, older persons, youth, or persons with disabilities to find or return to employment. These supports target the long-term unemployed, the temporarily unemployed and underrepresented groups such as Aboriginal people, older persons, youth, or persons with disabilities.

Income benefits for families such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the National Child Benefit Supplement for low-income families, the Universal Child Care Benefit, the Child Tax Credit and the Working Income Tax Benefit are also having a strong, positive impact on Canadian families. Between 2006 and 2010, the national low-income rate fell from 10.3 percent to 9 percent; the low-income rate for children fell from 11.1 percent to 8.2 percent. This represents 743,000 fewer children living in low income situations.

Our governments also offer opportunities for Canadians to gain the education, skills and credentials they need to succeed. Provinces and Territories support this goal by providing tuition free primary and secondary education to give Canadians the best possible start in life and the skill set to continue studying to reach their potential. At the post-secondary education level, many financial support programs such as student loans, bursary programs, and tax free and government assisted savings plans provide further opportunities for all Canadians.

**E. Immigration et protection des réfugiés**

Parmi tous les pays à revenu intermédiaire et élevé, le Canada est celui qui accueille le plus grand nombre d’immigrants par habitant. Et cette année, en 2013, le gouvernement du Canada maintiendra – pour une septième année consécutive – son objectif global, qui consiste à accueillir de 240 000 à 265 000 nouveaux résidents permanents.

À cet égard, il convient de noter que l’installation ainsi que l’intégration économique et sociale réussies des nouveaux arrivants est le premier objectif de notre programme d’immigration. Outre une orientation et de l’information générale, les services à l’intention des nouveaux résidents permanents englobent l’acquisition de compétences linguistiques et professionnelles, la participation au marché du travail et la création de liens au sein des collectivités.

Le Canada s’est également doté d’un régime d’aide aux réfugiés généreux, qui permet d’offrir un asile sûr à des personnes considérées comme nécessitant une protection internationale. C’est ainsi que notre pays accueille un dixième des réfugiés réinstallés dans le monde. De plus, les personnes qui obtiennent le statut de réfugié peuvent devenir des résidents permanents du Canada, bénéficier de services à l’intention des nouveaux arrivants et, en temps opportun, présenter une demande pour obtenir la citoyenneté canadienne. Un réseau d’organismes de bienfaisance et à vocation religieuse, privés ou bénéficiant d’un soutien de l’État, aide à l’installation et à l’intégration des nouveaux arrivants dans la société canadienne.

**F. Sécurité nationale et sécurité publique**

Monsieur le Président, j’aimerais terminer cette intervention liminaire du Canada en appelant votre attention sur la sécurité publique.

Les services de police, les services pénitentiaires et les organismes chargés de la sécurité nationale du Canada sont fermement résolus à assurer la protection et la sécurité du Canada et des Canadiens, et cela dans le respect des droits de la personne. Le cadre dont nous nous sommes dotés pour prévenir la criminalité, faire appliquer les lois, lutter contre le terrorisme et protéger la frontière est assorti d’un système de contrôle rigoureux, conforme aux obligations nationales et internationales au regard des droits de la personne, voire plus strict que celles‑ci.

Plus spécifiquement, tous les responsables concernés sont tenus de respecter les dispositions applicables du droit national et international, y compris la Constitution, et ils font l’objet d’un contrôle et d’un examen indépendants. Des mécanismes de plainte permettent de s’assurer que les allégations d’inconduite fassent l’objet d’enquêtes, et des recours sont prévus lorsque le bien‑fondé d’une plainte se confirme. Ces mécanismes font partie du cadre de responsabilisation de portée plus générale que procure le système judiciaire canadien. À cela s’ajoutent de nombreux mécanismes non judiciaires, tels que des commissions de surveillance parlementaire, la tenue d’enquêtes publiques et des mécanismes indépendants pour l’examen de la police civile, et cela à tous les échelons du gouvernement, qui contribuent également à l’efficacité de ce cadre de responsabilisation élargi.

Enfin, le Canada estime qu’une action efficace pour assurer sa sécurité nationale passe nécessairement par la sensibilisation et la participation active de tous les citoyens, étant entendu qu’il s’agit d’une responsabilité commune. En conséquence, nous avons pris des mesures importantes en amont pour que les Canadiens participent au dialogue sur les droits de la personne, la sécurité publique et la sécurité nationale. À titre d’exemple, dans le cadre de son Programme des enquêtes criminelles relatives à la sécurité nationale, la Gendarmerie royale du Canada (GRC) poursuit le dialogue avec les différentes communautés ethniques, culturelles et religieuses du Canada afin d’assurer la sécurité nationale. Il s’agit aussi de favoriser une communication efficace et éclairée entre l’État canadien et ces communautés. Grâce à ce programme, la GRC et les collectivités les plus touchées par les enquêtes criminelles relatives à la sécurité nationale ont l’occasion de collaborer afin de mieux comprendre les préoccupations et les objectifs des uns et des autres.

**Conclusion**

En conclusion, Monsieur le Président, le Canada est fier de ses réalisations en faveur des droits de la personne et de ses efforts actuels visant à bâtir un pays solide et pacifique, où les personnes issues de différents horizons peuvent vivre côte à côte et prospérer. Nous continuons à mettre à profit ses réussites, et, bien que des difficultés subsistent, nous sommes déterminés à œuvrer en faveur d’une société ouverte et libre, en surmontant celles‑ci au bénéfice de tous les Canadiens.