



Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

Pils laukums 3, Rīga-50, LV-1900, tālr. 7092122, fakss 7320404,
prese@president.lv, www.president.lv

Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the Empire Club of Canada “Multilateralism as the Response to Contemporary Challenges”, Toronto, September 21, 2006

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak here at the Empire Club in Toronto, the city where I first lived upon arriving in Canada in 1954 as a 16 year old war refugee, and to join a long list of illustrious speakers who have addressed it in the past. Among the first speakers to address the Empire Club after the Second World War on the subject of transatlantic relations was the last British Governor General of Canada, Lord Harold Alexander. Long before he became known as Alexander of Tunis, he had served in my own country of Latvia. As a 28-year-old Lieutenant Colonel, Alexander had been given command of the Baltic German *Landeswehr* in the Latvian War of Liberation. In 1920, leading the units of the *Landeswehr* that were loyal to the newborn Republic, Alexander helped to liberate Latvia from Bolshevik rule.

Latvia had declared its independence on November 18, 1918, but was able to hold its first national elections only in the spring of 1920. Our first freely elected parliament, the Constituent Assembly, drafted the constitution that we still use today. The relations between Latvia and Canada, then still a Dominion, date to January 26th, 1921, when the Entente acknowledged our sovereignty. This is the day we still celebrate in Latvia as the anniversary of our *de jure* recognition.

Like Canada, which was a founding member of the League of Nations, Latvia tried to find its place among the nations of the world through multilateralism. However, by 1936, when Latvia was elected to the Council of the League, storm clouds had already gathered over Europe and Asia. The League of Nations was in decline.

In the words of the historian Inesis Feldmanis, “the hopes of Woodrow Wilson ... that the League might lift international relations from the use of force to a new level, namely, the cooperation of all countries to secure world peace, were destined to remain an idealistic dream. The United States refused to join, and Germany and Russia were long outside it.” The Western democracies abandoned the principle of collective security, opting instead for policies of appeasement.

Precariously balanced between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, with the League of Nation’s ineffectiveness becoming increasingly obvious, Latvia abandoned the League’s ailing principles of collective security in 1938, and declared itself to be a neutral country. This did not prevent it from being invaded in 1940, as a result of the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 that divided Eastern Europe into zones of influence between the two totalitarian states.

Hitler was the initial victor of the “lost peace” that inexorably moved on to become the wide scale conflict of the Second World War, but Stalin was the one who ultimately triumphed and benefited. Latvia was only one among the many victims. When Alexander of Tunis, the liberator of Italy and North Africa, addressed the Empire Club in 1946, Latvia was not able to re-emerge as a nation and to attempt to make the idealistic dream of world

peace become a reality. My country had to suffer under Soviet occupation for nearly half a century more, before its sovereignty was at last restored in 1991. Canada, which had never recognized the forcible incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR, was the first of the G-7 countries to resume diplomatic relations with Latvia.

In the fifteen years that have passed since then, Latvia, with the assistance of its partners, including Canada, has transformed itself, a proof that sometimes painful reforms can be accomplished rapidly if there is the political will and concerted effort to do it. For half a century, Latvia had been reduced to a province in a totalitarian empire. Today it is a full member of the European Union. Free speech was persecuted with repressions and deportations. Today, according to Reporters Without Borders, we rank with Canada among the countries with the freest press. Fifteen years ago, we were part of a stagnant command economy that had criminalized private initiative. Today, we have a free economy with double-digit growth rates. In the first quarter of this year, Latvia's annual GDP growth rate was a stunning 13.1%, the highest rate in the European Union. Only twelve years ago, the last Soviet occupation troops were withdrawn from Latvia. By 2004 we were full members of NATO, and this November we will host the NATO Summit in our capital city of Riga.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The dream of world peace is indeed idealistic – but it is not unrealistic. By understanding history we can learn from our mistakes and do better in the future. The League of Nations failed dismally in its primary mission of preventing another world war. Nevertheless, the League was not a total failure. The World Health Organization began life as a League body. The International Court of Justice, now the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, is a stepchild of the League. The International Labour Organization, now a specialized agency of the UN, was also originally an agency of the League. No small part of the body of international law was developed in connection with the League of Nations. Latvia is proud to be counted among those nations that have made a significant contribution to that institution.

After World War II, the West did not abandon collective security in favour of appeasement, as it had done in the period leading to its outbreak. With the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, Canada and the other eleven democracies made a strong commitment to the survival of democratic values and free market economies. The establishment of the Warsaw Pact confirmed what had been apparent to many already in 1945. An Iron Curtain had descended upon the continent. To the east of that curtain, totalitarian regimes rejected the values we hold dear. The strivings of those who sought to restore those values were crushed by brute force, most notably in Hungary fifty years ago, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The Member States of NATO, including Canada, stood firm for half a century in the face of a Soviet threat, thus establishing a balance of forces that the Soviets dared not challenge. These democracies consolidated their forces to provide true collective security. When the ultimate collapse of the USSR ended the Cold War, the transatlantic alliance did not need to search for a reason to continue existing. The maintenance and expansion of a secure space for democracy had become vital elements of contemporary international relations.

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The strength of the transatlantic alliance lies in its effectiveness and in its real capability to respond to real threats. Unlike the pre-war League of Nations, the post-war NATO has not failed. The European nations that had been held captive by a totalitarian power could see evidence of the effective collective security that NATO had provided during the Cold War. For Latvia, NATO membership provides the security that had proven so

elusive when we achieved independence after the First World War. A recent survey shows that nearly 80% of the inhabitants support our membership in NATO and 57% feel that our participation in peacekeeping operations abroad is necessary. We are grateful for the extensive support we have received from Canada during our path to membership into NATO and for the fact that Canada was the very first country to ratify the NATO membership protocols for the new members in 2003.

The transatlantic alliance does not require complete agreement in all matters. Its members retain their national interests – their differing geopolitical, cultural, and historical experiences. We are united by our common values. We are united by our shared vision and our commitment to working in concert to protect our democratic societies. We are also united in our understanding that the threats we face have changed dramatically since the Iron Curtain came down. We are now confronted with such pressing issues as international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the trafficking of drugs and human beings. In order to overcome these new threats to our values and our security, NATO, which has been a creative instrument for shaping change in the past, must continue its process of transformation and rejuvenation. NATO must remain an active alliance that projects stability not only in Europe, but also elsewhere in the world.

In view of the warm welcome that the Euro-Atlantic community gave it, Latvia is especially devoted to maintaining the open door policies that made its own transformation possible. Those countries that support our values and embark upon the path of reform must be offered a helping hand. By supporting the efforts of those who are eager to integrate into the multilateral structures of which we are members, by offering them partnership and the promise of full membership in the future, we strengthen our own security.

Latvia is devoting concerted efforts to assist Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, in particular. We support offering NATO's Membership Action Plan to Ukraine by the Riga Summit or soon after, if there is a political will in that country for continued reforms and progress. We also support Georgia's endeavours to establish a closer relationship with the alliance.

Latvia also hopes that Europe can establish a pragmatic working relationship with Russia, which has an important role to play in the world's security architecture. Russia's active participation is essential for countering international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, we must not shy away from a constructive dialogue with Russia even on the most sensitive issues, including the consistent adherence to democratic principles and the rule of law.

Europe must strengthen its capacity to contribute to our collective security. The role of the European Union in the resolution of so-called "frozen conflicts," for example, is particularly important. Europe must also realize that it cannot rely upon North America to the degree that it has in the past. Europeans must continue to work towards the creation of a common foreign policy. The recent crisis in Lebanon demonstrates the need to enhance Europe's ability to respond to crises rapidly and effectively.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The transatlantic alliance can be seen as a successful breakthrough after the failed attempts at collective security between the two world wars. NATO has provided its Members States with security, but it is not, and is not meant to be, a global organization. The major challenges we face today are global in scope. Just as NATO needed a transformation to respond to 21st century threats to our security, the United Nations Organization needs to be transformed today. Secretary General Koffi Annan has called for the most far-reaching reforms in UN history, but what we have accomplished thus far can only be called the initial steps.

We need to take larger, more ambitious steps in this process. We should bear in mind that what some perceive as the United Nations' weakness can also be seen as its strength. The UN's decisions are often prolonged and diluted due to the difficulty of reaching agreement among a diverse community of nearly 200 member States. These decisions, however, bear a unique legitimacy, moral weight, and political authority, having reached consensus despite these differences.

UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld addressed the Empire Club in 1954. He spoke of "a world that has become so closely and irrevocably interdependent as ours" requiring a "world organization – a centre, in the words of the Charter, 'for harmonizing the actions of nations' in the attainment of common ends." Today we live in a world where States are even more "closely and irrevocably interdependent" than they were half a century ago. Mr. Hammarskjöld went on to say that "it is, of course, true that at almost every session of the United Nations you will find more evidence of disharmony than of harmony. In this respect the United Nations is only an accurate mirror of the actual state of affairs in the world. But disharmony is the very reason why a centre for harmonizing is necessary. We may regret and even deplore the frequent bitterness of the debates in the United Nations, but we should never make the mistake of thinking we would be better off if these debates did not take place. For the differences and the conflicts exist. We cannot escape them. We have to live with them and deal with them."

Dag Hammarskjöld's insight has even more validity in today's world. As a Special Envoy of the Secretary General on the reform of the United Nations, I have been emphasizing that none of the members of this global organisation will be able to receive everything they desire from the reform process. We cannot afford to approach the reform of the UN as a "zero-sum game." It is natural for different areas of the world to have different priorities and threat perceptions, but it is surely in our common interest to adopt an inclusive and democratic approach to the reform of the UN and to achieve positive changes for the benefit of all.

While I welcome the progress made so far in Management Reforms, I consider them to be only the first steps in the process of transforming the United Nations into a more efficient and accountable organisation, as agreed at the General Assembly last year. A Secretariat with the necessary resources to deal with contemporary challenges is an important element in any system of collective security. The issues of governance, oversight and accountability, human resources management and procurement reform are among those where further action is necessary.

With regard to the challenge of post-conflict rebuilding, we set our hopes on the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission. By bringing together the UN's broad experience in conflict prevention, mediation, peacekeeping, respect for human rights, the rule of law, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and long-term development, the Peace-building Commission will strengthen the capacity of the United Nations in maintaining sustainable peace and security.

A revitalized, more effective General Assembly is a goal for which the UN's member States have been striving. Much has also been said about the need for reforming the Security Council. While this matter should not overshadow the rest of the reform process, I have no doubt that progress on this issue would invigorate overall reform efforts at the UN.

One of the major changes in the international system since the end of the Cold War is that concerns about national sovereignty or territorial integrity are sometimes outweighed by concerns for human security. Such concerns have been occasioned by the international community's increasing focus on the observance of human rights. The creation of the UN Human Rights Council this June was an attempt to bridge the looming gap between some member States' commitment and performance with regard to human rights.

As Canada's Foreign Minister Peter MacKay recently said at the inaugural session of the HRC, "Canada has always been a proponent of multilateralism -- but above all, we are

proponents of effective multilateralism that favours concrete results over processes.” I would agree with the Honourable Mr. MacKay. Canada has long been at the forefront of protecting and promoting human rights. Latvia, too, believes that countries must make human rights considerations a top priority in all decision-making processes. If the HRC is to produce the results we hoped for when this new institution was created, we must make a common effort to ensure that the Council provides real and effective leadership. The Council needs a capacity for timely and efficient response to deteriorating human rights situations, wherever they may arise, in order to help those people whose welfare is at stake. The effectiveness of the Council depends entirely upon the political will of the UN’s Member States.

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We must always remember that the lives of people in peril are often dependent upon the strength of our multilateral institutions. Secretary General Koffi Annan has urged Heads of State and Government to “embrace the ‘responsibility to protect’ as a basis for collective action against genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.” Latvia sees Canada as its strategic ally and trusted partner not only in this regard, but in many others. We look forward to working together with Canada to restore faith in the UN, to build a greater sense of trust and balance among its member States and “to reaffirm,” as the UN Charter declares, “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.”