

Honourable ministers,

Dear friends,

I am delighted to represent the Government of Canada at this Ministerial Conference on Ageing hosted by the Austrian Government.

To start, I would like to take this opportunity to commend the countries represented here for the celebration of the European Year of Active Ageing 2012.

We know that population ageing is having a profound impact on society, politics, and the economy.

I think our industrialized world is currently at a crossroads, and our ability to thrive and prosper will depend on how well we succeed at addressing our common challenges with respect to an ageing society.

This is why conferences such as this, are a valuable opportunity to share knowledge and exchange best practices.

Because of my role as Minister responsible for Seniors, I have developed an appreciation of the issues faced by older Canadians and the impact of an ageing population on society.

Let me share with you my perspective on the Canadian experience.

In Canada, we know staying active as we grow older is key to maintaining personal health and well-being. Staying active also allows us to contribute to the prosperity of our country.

Older Canadians play an important role in Canadian society, and our government is committed to helping them stay active, engaged and informed.

Today, 1 in 7 Canadians is aged 65 or over. In less than 20 years, that ratio will be 1 in 4.

At the same time, the average life expectancy in Canada continues to increase.

Canadians are not only living longer and healthier lives, they are also working longer.

The rate of participation in the labour market of older workers (55-64) has increased from approximately half in 2000 to almost two thirds today.

Furthermore, the labour force participation of those aged 65 to 69 has more than doubled in the last decade, from 11% at the turn of the century to 24% in 2011.

The Government of Canada has a number of programs and initiatives to support older people in the labour market.

The Targeted Initiative for Older Workers is one of our success stories.

This initiative provides employment assistance services and employability improvement activities, such as skills upgrading and work experience, to help unemployed workers aged 55 to 64 with their return to the workforce.

Across Canada, this initiative has made a difference in the lives of thousands of unemployed older workers.

More and more, we also see Canadians making a gradual transition to retirement, and employers are beginning to provide increasingly flexible options to support part-time work or semi-retirement for workers who wish to stay in the labour market.

Recognizing this trend, our Government has made changes to our federal income tax and pension programs to facilitate and provide incentives for working longer.

In addition, across all jurisdictions in Canada, the mandatory retirement age has been eliminated, allowing those who wish to continue working to remain in the labour force.

But we are also aware that many barriers still exist, preventing seniors and older people from working.

I also oversee the National Seniors Council. This Council was established to advise the Government on all matters related to the well-being and quality of life of seniors.

Last year, the Council examined the barriers faced by seniors in the labour market. Currently they are talking with employers about how they can recruit and retain older workers.

This is really important to us. The participation of older workers and seniors who wish to remain in the labour force is good for our national economy and has a positive impact on communities. And of course, work can be an important way for older people to stay active and maintain their standard of living.

However, despite relatively high levels of labour force participation by older workers and our efforts to remove barriers, the ratio of working people to retirees continues to decrease.

The statistics tell the story. Currently, there are four working Canadians per retiree and in 20 years that ratio will be 2 to 1.

It is true that in many ways Canada's social programs are performing well in providing retirement income security for our seniors.

Thanks in large part to our public pension system, our country has among the lowest rates of seniors poverty in the OECD.

That being said, our public pension system must remain on a sustainable path for generations to come.

Old Age Security, for example, is a social program for seniors financed out of the Government of Canada's general tax revenues.

To keep Old Age Security strong for future generations, we decided to gradually raise the age of eligibility.

Starting April 1, 2023, the age of eligibility for OAS and Guaranteed Income Supplement will be gradually increased from 65 to 67, with full implementation by January 2029.

We have done this to maintain the sustainability of Canada's social programs for current and future generations.

As I said earlier, in Canada, there are a multitude of opportunities for seniors to make a contribution to the labour force, as well as to their communities, neighbourhoods, and families.

Therefore, it would be a shame if some seniors missed out on these important opportunities because the information wasn't accessible or presented in the right way.

This is why, this past summer, I held stakeholder roundtables across Canada to find out how we can improve ways to share information with Canadian seniors.

It is essential to keep seniors informed about available jobs, services, benefits, protections, and resources offered by the different levels of government, stakeholders, employers, and community groups.

At the federal level, we developed a website – seniors.gc.ca – to serve as a central resource for information and initiatives relating to seniors, their families, caregivers, and service organizations.

It also provides key links to seniors-related information from other Government of Canada and Provincial/Territorial websites.

To conclude, there's no doubt that the aging of our population is forcing us to re-evaluate the way we do things.

I look forward to hearing from my ministerial colleagues about how they are facing pressing issues related to promoting a longer working life.

We need to talk about maintaining the ability to work for those who choose to by eliminating age-based discrimination and promoting the social inclusion of older people.

Canada values the work of the members of the Commission in exchanging experiences that can help us all address our knowledge gaps.

Canada joins the Commission members in our continued support for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

We must remember this: seniors have spent their lives raising families and building their countries. We owe them a great deal.

As Canada's Minister for Seniors, I am personally committed to helping all seniors stay active, engaged and informed.

Their well-being and our future prosperity depend on it.

Thank you.