Message for the Youth Employment Summit 2002
Alexandria, September 7-11, 2002

by the
the Honourable Donald J. Johnston,
Secretary-General of the Organisation
for Economic Co-operation and Development

I regret that circumstances prevent me from being with you at this important Conference at the beautiful Bibliotheca Alexandrina which I had the pleasure of visiting earlier this year.

But this is my loss, not yours, because you will enjoy the presence of much wisdom from older generations, not the least of which is Dr. Serageldin, who has a legion of admirers, including me.

I have just a few thoughts to offer you via this remarkable technology that we enjoy today. The first is a short poem from one of my professors in Law School of almost 50 years ago, who was also an important poet, and one might say philosopher, because it is impossible to be a good poet without being a philosopher. His name was Frank Scott. He wrote:

The world is my country
The human race is my race
The spirit of man is my God
The future of man is my heaven

I knew Frank Scott very well, well enough to claim that he would have enjoyed being with you today, the young of this world, you, young women and men, the future of mankind, his heaven.

An indeed you are the future. There is no other for planet earth. One might judge from the poem that Frank Scott was an agnostic or even an atheist. Many are, and perhaps that is sometimes an advantage in a world so often divided by strife based on creed. Frank saw no colours, he saw no creeds. And you, the leaders of the future, be you of whatever faith; be you black, white, bronze or yellow, or some
beautiful mix of some; please see your race as the human race, each and every one of you without distinction of any kind.

Now I realise that this Summit is to focus on issues of youth employment, a subject where the OECD has made major contributions, but within the OECD universe, that is to say, in the most industrialised countries. We have had many conferences and produced many good analytical studies which you may indeed benefit from. There remain many challenges to each OECD country in assuring satisfactory employment opportunities for youth. For example, the unemployment numbers of youth are normally about two times the levels for adults within the OECD. So we have lessons to share, but also much to learn.

But one thing we have learned is the importance of education, especially as we become knowledge-based economies.

Education is the asset which enables. It enables youth to find employment, to be entrepreneurial and create jobs, to migrate where their skills are in demand, to have fulfilling and creative lives, and to treat fellow travellers on planet earth, of whatever colour or creed, with respect and without discrimination. That is why I have recently created an Education Directorate at the OECD. I have called Education our priority of priorities.

It is education in the broadest sense of the word which will be the answer to Frank Scott’s heaven, where the terrible lessons of history will not be forgotten as they so often are, and where we will not be condemned to see them repeated.

I wish you a productive and enjoyable experience in historic Alexandria.