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Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[*English*]

JOURNEY TO FREEDOM DAY ACT

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC) moved that Bill S-219, An Act respecting a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, on April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War ended. The capital city of South Vietnam, Saigon, fell to the Communist invaders from the north, but that is not where the story ends. April 30, 1975, began a new chapter in the lives of the people of South Vietnam.

It was the start of the exodus of millions of people fleeing that country, the land they had called home for generations. They were fleeing the harsh treatment and suppression of human rights by an authoritarian government; ethnic, religious, and political persecutions; political executions of former South Vietnamese officials and their families; forced resettlement in remote areas; and deteriorating living conditions brought on by food shortages, flooding, and drought. By 1979, some 600,000 South Vietnamese had fled.

Over the next three years, the refugee label "boat people" became familiar as Vietnamese began trying to escape from their homeland aboard small watercraft, seeking temporary refuge in neighbouring countries.

Private Members' Business

Many countries refused to allow them to land. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reported that while attempting to escape, at least 250,000 Vietnamese people lost their lives at sea due to drowning, illness, starvation, and sexual assault or violence from kidnapping or piracy.

In response to this humanitarian crisis, Canada responded by opening our doors. Between 1975 and 1976, Canada accepted some 6,500 political refugees who had left Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. In October 1976, Canada accepted 180 boat people. In August 1977, there was a further commitment for 450 people. In 1978, the government agreed to accept 50 boat families per month. By 1980, some 120,000 Vietnamese refugees were welcomed with open arms to Canada. Also, by demonstrating an ongoing concern, Canada aimed to encourage countries of first asylum to open their doors as well.

By 1986, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was so impressed by Canada's role in accepting so many refugees from South Vietnam that the people of Canada were awarded the Nansen Medal for their "major and sustained contribution to the cause of refugees".

This medal is the refugee equivalent to the Nobel Prize, and marks the only time in history that an entire country has been recognized in this fashion. That is why I am so proud to co-sponsor, along with Senator Thanh Hai Ngo, Bill S-219, or the journey to freedom day act, which will serve three purposes.

First, it would establish April 30 as a day to commemorate the exodus of refugees from South Vietnam.

Second, it would recognize the extraordinary humanitarian role played by the Canadian government as well as Canadian families, voluntary agencies, communities, synagogues and churches, and religious groups in welcoming so many Vietnamese so warmly into the Canadian family.

Third, it should also be noted that this period in Canadian history is one that is not well known among younger Canadians today. For that reason, April 30 should serve as a day of reflection and education. All Canadians should know the story of Vietnamese refugees who were forced to flee their native land, of the vast humanitarian effort that was undertaken by Canadians to welcome them, and of the triumph over adversity that the vibrant Vietnamese community in Canada represents.

Canada was among the first countries to welcome Vietnamese refugees with open arms. When the people of Vietnam were in need, Canadians from all walks of life answered the call without hesitation and opened their homes and hearts to over 60,000 Indochinese refugees who desperately needed a place to rebuild their lives.

This is the highest number of refugees per capita taken by any country in the world during this period. Canada's role in opening its doors to so many Vietnamese refugees is an example of the best of Canada. It is a true demonstration of Canadian values.

Here is a little bit of how it worked.

The federal government developed a private sponsorship program whereby institutions such as churches and groups of at least five adult citizens would take a refugee family into their care for a year.

● (1720)

For each person sponsored privately, the government accepted another refugee under its own care. It was Canada that pioneered the private sponsorship refugee program, enabling our country to accept a much larger number of refugees while also reducing the cost to the government coffers and providing an example to the rest of the world.

Without the warm and caring efforts of thousands of Canadians, and the leadership, support, and co-operation of the Canadian government, as well as refugee agencies, non-governmental organizations, and religious groups, the movement of such large numbers of people, under such urgent and difficult circumstances, would simply not have been possible.

It is written in scripture that he who saves a single life saves an entire generation. Today there are approximately 300,000 people of Vietnamese origin living in Canada. More than 100,000 of them live in the greater Toronto area.

On April 30, for the past 39 years, Vietnamese Canadians have gathered to remember a new beginning and to thank Canada. In 2015, the Vietnamese Canadian community will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the resettlement of the boat people to Canada.

This bill speaks to Canada's long-standing tradition as a beacon of freedom and democracy, a nation that generously embraced refugees who were forced to flee their homelands through no fault of their own.

One of the more remarkable developments in this story is that many of those who came to Canada as boat people are today sponsoring refugees themselves. They have partnered with the Government of Canada, under the leadership of our Prime Minister, to bring to Canada the last remaining Vietnamese refugees, who have been stranded, without status, in Southeast Asia, in places like Thailand and the Philippines, for nearly 40 years. What a proud legacy, and what an amazing way to mark their journey to freedom: by helping others.

This is an important bill, and today I ask for all members' support in moving it forward. National recognition of this day would serve as a point of pride for people of Vietnamese descent and for all Canadians, highlighting as it does the generous Canadian spirit and national respect for freedom. Our nation is one built by immigrants, and our communities are enriched by the vibrant mosaic of cultural heritage within them.

Never again shall Canada's refugee policy be as disgraceful and despicable as it was before and during the Second World War, a time when "none is too many" was the order of the day. Canada's warm, generous acceptance of immigrants and refugees is one of our nation's most sacred traditions. Our historic and continued commitment to diversity is one that we as a government must strive to recognize and honour whenever we can.

Private Members' Business

This bill would also provide an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our own commitment to a diverse and inclusive Canada, a place where we are all united in our values, regardless of race, religion, colour, or creed. It is so important for all Canadians to remember and reflect on our nation's history and how it has contributed to our current culture of pluralism, diversity, and acceptance.

This bill would also provide an excellent chance to reflect on the strengths and diversity the Vietnamese community has brought to our country and to thank them for their contribution to our cultural mosaic. We can all learn something from the refugees who were willing to risk everything to live in freedom, because a life lived without freedom is no life at all.

I am a first-generation Canadian, and this bill invites reflection on my own experience as a child of a Holocaust survivor, whose dad came to Canada with nothing more than the shirt on his back, a number tattooed on his arm, but most importantly, hope in his heart. For so many refugees who came to Canada, like the survivors of the Holocaust, the Vietnamese boat people, the persecuted Christians and Yazidis of northern Iraq and Syria, and so many others, each and every one of them had a right to turn their backs on humanity, yet they did not. They came to Canada in search of hope, hope for themselves, yes, but more importantly, hope for their children so that they would not be forced live under the yoke of oppression or persecution. They came to Canada because Canada is a beacon of light in the world, a country that stands tall and strong, adhering to the values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

• (1725)

The journey to freedom day act would offer an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to the very best of Canadian values. It would give us yet another reason to showcase Canada as the best country in the world to call home.

Today I ask for my colleagues' support to pass Bill S-219 and help us declare April 30 as journey to freedom day in this great country of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague opposite for his very compassionate speech.

I want to ask just one question so that we can really talk about reconciliation and the path toward democracy and freedom of expression. I would like to know if the member would argue in favour of his government giving all Vietnamese people the opportunity to express their opinion in committee.

We know that at the Senate committee, only testimony in favour of the bill was heard. I hope that in the spirit of genuine, open and frank dialogue, the parliamentary committee will hear from Vietnamese people from all walks of life so that we can finally talk about reconciliation and moving forward toward respect for human rights.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, this legislation is not about reconciliation. This legislation is first about remembrance and second about celebrating the great Canadian spirit of remembering, of knowing who we are, and celebrating Canadian values of

freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We are here in the House today as an example of that. We are debating the bill here in the House today.

I know what the hon. member is referring to. At the Senate committee a representative—I believe it was the Ambassador of Vietnam—submitted a letter on behalf of the communist regime of Vietnam to give its perspective on the journey to freedom day act, to which I understand it is vehemently opposed. He submitted his remarks in writing. Unfortunately they were not in French and could not be translated in time to be put into the record.

This is an important bill, and I really hope that, in the true spirit of our great Canadian values, all members will support it.

• (1730)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is based on the response to the previous question with regard to the Vietnamese ambassador. I think there is support for this legislation to go to committee. Is the member in a position to ensure those who might be listening or interested in presenting at committee on his bill that there will be fair representation at committee stage, so that all who want that input will be provided with the opportunity?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, I looked at the record of the debate in the Senate, and it appears that there were four votes against the bill by the Liberal Party and 14 abstentions. I am a little perplexed that the Liberals would be interested in hearing the communist views of the Vietnamese government, given that they seem to have already made up their minds that they will not be supporting this bill. Maybe I should not be surprised. I think it would surprise even members of the NDP that the Liberals would be interested in hearing that.

I would be shocked if the NDP were against such a bill that would celebrate our great Canadian values of freedom and democracy and yet, on the other hand, remember that those in their time of need were helped by Canadians. Their generosity and the great Canadian spirit of celebrating Canadian values brought so many refugees here to Canada who have made wonderful lives for themselves. We as a country have benefited by their presence.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak to Bill S-219, a very important bill, which was tabled in the Senate and which seeks to create a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada.

We sometimes forget what it really means to be here in a democratic society where citizens can elect their members of Parliament, and both citizens and elected officials can safely exercise their right to freedom of expression. Most of the world's population cannot exercise that fundamental right.

If I am able to rise today as a member of Parliament and speak in the House of Commons, it is because my parents had to flee Vietnam and were able to find refuge here in Canada, start a family, live in peace, work and support themselves.

Private Members' Business

I myself, Anne Minh-Thu Quach, was born in Canada and grew up in Canada, and it is because of my parents' courage and Canada's acceptance that today I can take part in Canada's democratic life.

I would like to take a few moments to recount how my parents fled Vietnam and arrived in Canada. In 1979, after the Vietnam War, my parents decided to flee their country because of the horrible living conditions imposed by the new political regime and in the hopes of finding a better quality of life elsewhere. They could no longer endure the restrictions, the violence and the injustices that happened after the war.

They jumped at the first opportunity to flee in the middle of the night, in secret, with my two brothers, who were one and three at the time. They made their way to a port and paid the smugglers with the last of their belongings, that is, whatever they could carry. They got on a boat, with the direction indicated by a compass, in other words, anywhere, wherever the captain would take them, not knowing whether or not he would bring them to a safe harbour.

They lived in a refugee camp in Indonesia for 18 months, before the Red Cross came to get them. They then arrived in Canada. They had no identification; they had no goods or belongings. They had only their own lives and my brothers' lives. Canada gave them papers and welcomed them as refugees with great generosity.

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Yes indeed.

When they arrived in Canada, my parents had to learn everything: how to survive winter, speak French, drive a car, look for work, cook Canadian food. In short, they had to learn how to live in their new country.

It is thanks to people like Captain Pierre Pellerin, Ginette Malenfant, Nicole Leduc and Estelle, who has now passed away, who welcomed my parents, but also other people, including Fred and Bonnie Cappuccino and many Canadians who opened their doors to my family and welcomed thousands of Vietnamese as if they were part of their own family. From that point on, many Vietnamese were able to begin integrating into Canadian life and making a contribution to Canada. Many thanks on behalf of all Vietnamese.

However, like more than 1.5 million people, my parents were boat people. Canada accepted 137,000 Vietnamese refugees at the time. The federal government also established a private sponsorship program that allowed agencies and Canadian citizens to welcome a family of refugees and provide them with support for one year. For each privately sponsored person, the government would sponsor another refugee. An entire movement of solidarity was created.

Here in Ottawa, at the corner of Preston and Somerset, there is a monument paying tribute to the boat people. Marion Dewar, the mayor of Ottawa at the time and the mother of our colleague from Ottawa Centre, worked hard to welcome thousands of Vietnamese refugees, so many in fact that Chinatown here in Ottawa is a primarily Vietnamese neighbourhood, where they serve the famous pho soup that is so warm and comforting, especially on a cold day like today.

The Vietnam War was the result of 50 years of cold war that divided the world in two. For ideological reasons, countries were at

war, families were divided, men and women were murdered. Today, we no longer live in that bipolar world where everyone tried to impose their own truth. It is high time we began a real dialogue.

Earlier, I spoke about openness and dialogue, because this is something we really need. The Vietnamese diaspora, here in Canada and throughout the world, is divided by economic, political and religious differences.

• (1735)

A round table must be set up where everyone has the right to express their own views. This is how we will move ahead and ensure that the world will change.

I think that Bill S-219 provides a perfect opportunity to establish this dialogue, in light of the fact that it adds a positive aspect to the usual commemorations by emphasizing Canada's acceptance of the refugees.

Out of respect for our refugees and in recognition of the Canadians who opened their arms to Vietnamese refugees starting in 1975, I think it would be worthwhile to at least allow a parliamentary committee to properly study the bill. It is up to us—the children of refugees, those in exile and immigrants—as well as all other Canadians who are open and interested in this dialogue, to help initiate discussion and debate about the Vietnamese commemorations.

I had the good fortune to go to Vietnam to see my family and get to know the land of my ancestors. It is a wonderful country where people are welcoming and very special. I still have many family members living there, and I want them and all Vietnamese still living in Vietnam to have the same opportunities as I did, so that they can live in peace and security and enjoy democracy and universal fundamental rights as I do.

Unfortunately, that is not yet the reality for everyone in Vietnam. Vietnam has signed or acceded to seven international conventions on human rights. It is a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Human rights are entrenched in the country's constitution. However, lawyers, journalists, bloggers and ordinary citizens continue to be arrested, tried and imprisoned merely for expressing their opinions.

Today, we must not be afraid to tell the truth. Every human being is entitled to life, liberty and equal opportunity. I therefore reach out to all Vietnamese, and all Canadians, who wish to undertake this dialogue with me and with parliamentarians.

Bill S-219 provides us with that opportunity for exchange, because the wounds have not all been dressed as yet. We must take the opportunity to sit down around the table, as I said, Vietnamese from all walks of life, so that the process of dialogue and healing can begin and we can at last look to the future.

As the member opposite said, the ambassador of Vietnam was not able to be heard. I have received many emails from other Vietnamese living in Canada who want to participate in this debate and were not able to participate in the debate held in the Senate.

Private Members' Business

This bill has to take its course in the Parliament of Canada, and I want it to be considered in committee and for all points of view to be taken into consideration when it is examined. Unfortunately, as has been said, the committee did not hear all the witnesses, but I believe that the House to which we have been elected, the House of Commons, can do better and can hear from everyone at the second stage. It not only can, I believe it must.

To demonstrate our values of open-mindedness, democracy, empathy and generosity as has already been done, we should allow the debate to continue. Let there be no doubt on this point: I am asking questions because I believe the process can be improved. I am in fact in agreement, and it is very important that this debate be allowed to continue.

On a somewhat more positive note, as the Asian new year, the lunar new year, will fall on February 18, I wish everyone a happy Têt. That is the Vietnamese word for the new year. To all Vietnamese everywhere in Canada and elsewhere,

[Member spoke in Vietnamese as follows:]

Chuc mung nam moi!

• (1740)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I truly appreciate the comments that the previous speaker has just put on the record.

She did a phenomenal job in expressing what I believe can be found throughout our country, families that have come to Canada through refugee status and do well. I am sure her parents and her community would be exceptionally proud of the speech she just delivered.

With respect to the member of Parliament who introduced this bill, Bill S-219, I must say I am somewhat disappointed by the manner he chose to answer the question.

It would be nice to see Bill S-219 go to committee. I am supporting Bill S-219 going to committee. I did not appreciate the insinuation that the Liberal Party does not support Bill S-219 going to committee. There is a great deal of value to it.

Much like the former speaker, I raised the issue of the importance of the committee hearing because it was something that was raised. I do think it is appropriate and I was somewhat disappointed with the member's implication that I might not be supporting the bill itself.

I do support the bill for a number of reasons, and I would like to point them out. However, before I do that, I would like to comment that just this last summer I travelled to Vietnam. I have had the opportunity to visit countries in Asia, and it was a very enjoyable experience.

I travelled with my daughter. One of the things that she really appreciated was the number of scooters, because she loves motorcycles. If members have the opportunity to travel in high-density areas, they will get a good sense of the mobility of so many people in some very small areas.

I personally enjoyed the marketplaces, the interaction. I had the opportunity to visit both small and medium-sized businesses. I can reflect on a candle store that assisted people with disabilities in being able to produce truly unique, 100% beeswax candles. As well, there were larger manufacturing plants, one in particular for wrappings. It is a beautiful country.

Maybe I can make reference to some key messages that I think we would like to emphasize.

At the end of the day, what the bill is proposing is that this day would recognize the journey, struggle, sacrifice, and survival of the Vietnamese boat people and remember the historical significance of their travel here to Canada.

Such a day would serve as an opportunity to raise awareness and enhance understanding of the plight of refugees around the world and of what it is to endure the status of refugee.

It is important to recognize that not only were the majority of refugees unable to communicate either in English or French, but it was also at a time when there were challenging economic issues. This complicated things for a number of refugees who landed here in Canada.

This day would commend Canadian families, charities, religious groups, and non-governmental organizations that sponsored an estimated 34,000 Vietnamese refugees to come to Canada and assisted them in their resettlement and adjustment between 1979 and 1980.

This day would also serve as an opportunity to recognize the ongoing contributions of Vietnamese-Canadian people in all aspects of Canadian life and society, including medicine, engineering, business, science, law, academia, arts, media, civil and community service, and, as demonstrated, politics.

• (1745)

These services to our community and so much more have been great contributions by the Vietnamese community, which Canadian society as a whole has grown to love and care for, and which has become a part of our multicultural fabric.

When I was first elected, I had the opportunity to serve as the multicultural critic in the province of Manitoba. What an enriching experience that was. One of my privileges was to visit what we call "Saigon centre", located in Winnipeg Centre. It is a housing complex and a Vietnamese individual there, Ba Tran, whom I have become very close to over the years, did a phenomenal job in educating not only individuals like me, but also others about what took place in Vietnam. We are also very proud in Winnipeg knowing that in virtually all major centres now and every region of our country, we see an enriched heritage because of the Vietnamese contributions over the last number of decades.

I can remember going from Saigon centre, which is a beautiful housing complex, down the block to a monument. A member referred to a monument here in Ottawa. There is a monument across the street from the University of Winnipeg that highlights a very important part of Canada's history.

Private Members' Business

A statement that my leader often refers to is that Canada's greatest strength is our diversity. It ultimately allows us the greatest potential around the world. We need to take a great deal of pride in who we are as a relatively young nation. I have had the opportunity to talk about Folklorama, in which Winnipeggers and people from around the world participate. Through 35 years we have seen the Vietnamese community get directly involved in different types of pavilions and the sharing of culture and heritage.

I have grown to appreciate this since I was first elected in 1988. For the first 20 years of my elected life, every day I would drive by the Saigon Manor, a beautiful eight-storey apartment complex. It has enriched my life.

There are other things I should quickly make reference to. It is important for us to recognize that journey to freedom day marks a significant day for the collective history of Vietnamese communities around the world. It recognizes the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the takeover of South Vietnam by the north, and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam government and the beginning of the mass exodus of millions of Vietnamese people from their homeland.

The vast majority of the Vietnamese migrants came to Canada as refugees on January 1, 1975, where 1,500 persons of Vietnamese ancestry were already living, predominantly in Quebec. After the boat people crisis between 1979 and 1982, some 69,000 individuals entered Canada. This group of wonderful people ultimately settled in all regions and has enriched the quality of life of all Canadians. I look forward to the bill ultimately going to committee.

• (1750)

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very honoured to speak today in favour of Bill S-219. In particular, I want to thank Senator Thanh Hai Ngo, the first Canadian senator of Vietnamese descent appointed as a suggestion of our government to the Senate. He does a very good job in representing the Vietnamese community across Canada.

I would also like to thank my hon. colleague, the member for York Centre, for sponsoring the bill in the House of Commons, and for the very eloquent speech he made a few minutes ago. He is a person who, through his family history, knows of pain, adversity and the struggle to come to Canada. He mentioned his father, who was a survivor of the Holocaust, a victim of Dr. Mengele. Just a little over a week ago, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp, he spoke about his father's struggles there and his journey to Canada.

For me, the bill tells the story of the Vietnamese Canadian community and their struggle to come to Canada, but it is a story we have heard over and over again, repeated throughout Canadian history. It is a Canadian story. It is a story that represents all of us. So many Canadians have come to Canada from places torn by war, from great adversity and oppression, and have struggled very hard through very difficult conditions to come to this country. They have found a place of refuge and freedom in Canada.

This is a country that we all love so much. It is incumbent upon all Canadians, regardless of their background, to learn these stories and to understand how these stories have contributed to our great country.

I appreciate the opportunity to voice my support for this important legislation. As I mentioned, it recognizes the lives lost and the suffering experienced by the exodus of Vietnamese people following the end of the Vietnam War on April 30, 1975, the day that Saigon fell to Communist forces. It was a war, as we all know, that raged for well over 10 years. It was bloody and violent, and people's lives were torn apart. So many innocent lives were lost.

That is not a happy anniversary, but it is one that we must remember. We have to remember these events in history and how they affect people around the world, especially those in Canada.

Canada has played a significant role in aiding tens of thousands of refugees after the fall of Saigon when, according to the United Nations commission for refugees, more than 1.5 million Vietnamese were forced to flee their homeland under the threat of deteriorating living conditions and, it should be noted, widespread human rights abuses.

During this humanitarian disaster that followed, Canadians rallied to offer whatever assistance they could. A crucial moment came in July, 1979, when a previous Conservative government, under the leadership of prime minister Joe Clark and his cabinet, at the recommendation of the then immigration minister, the Hon. Ron Atkey, recognized the plight of these Vietnamese people and agreed to accept 50,000 Vietnamese refugees over the following year. That was a very significant number for Canada to have absorbed in one year. The Hon. Ron Atkey is a personal friend of mine who I have known for over 30 years. He is a very fine lawyer in the Toronto area today. He exemplified the finest in Canadian government at the time.

This effort ultimately brought more than 60,000 boat people, as they were then called, to settle and build new lives across our great country. It is estimated that 34,000 were sponsored by Canadian families, Canadian charities, religious groups and non-governmental organizations, and another 26,000 were assisted directly by the Canadian government.

Throughout Canada, church groups and other community organizations sponsored families to come to Canada. I know that happened in significant numbers in my city of Mississauga and the city in which I grew up, Hamilton. I went to high school and university earlier in my life with some of the young people who came with their families. I saw first hand in their faces the pain they had experienced in leaving their homeland and coming to Canada.

The hon. member on the other side mentioned what a shock it must have been for people to come from a tropical place like Vietnam to a very cold place. Let us face it, here we are in early February in Ottawa, and any of us who have been outside today know it is very cold here. What a shock it must have been for these people who had been through so much in their lives already.

Private Members' Business

• (1755)

It was an unprecedented example of the compassion of Canadians toward a multitude of people in need. More than a quarter of a million Vietnamese refugees lost their lives at sea during the exodus from Vietnam. Just in travelling, 250,000 souls were lost. Things had to be very desperate in their homeland for them to take the enormous risk to journey to freedom. Some were beset with illness, while others drowned or were victimized by violence from piracy, kidnapping, and other forms of violence.

The arrival of the Vietnamese refugees in Canada and their settling into new lives in what was a foreign land to them stands as a shining example of how Canadians responded to a world catastrophe. Canada's compassionate response included many sectors, communities, and governments. Many Canadian families took the refugees into their homes and helped them find employment and schooling. It is considered an exemplary moment in Canada's history of humanitarian protection and, in fact, was a contributing factor to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarding its Nansen Refugee Award to the people of Canada in 1986. It was the first and only time that this prestigious medal was awarded to an entire nation.

Due to the overwhelming success of the private sponsorship of refugees program during this time, it became enshrined as a fundamental part of Canada's refugee resettlement program.

Contributing to the success story of the Vietnamese refugees who settled in Canada are the Vietnamese people themselves. Vietnamese Canadians are participating actively in public life in Canada, distinguishing themselves in business, politics, the arts, sports, and humanitarian endeavours.

Here are just a few examples. Kim Phuc, an internationally recognized survivor of the Vietnam war, has established a foundation to assist child victims of war here in Canada. Paul Nguyen, a second-generation Vietnamese Canadian whose parents fled to Canada, is a 2010 recipient of the Paul Yuzk Award for Multiculturalism. Kim Thuy, an internationally renowned author, received a Governor General's award for her book telling her story of her arrival as a refugee. These are just a few of the many stories of great Canadians of Vietnamese heritage who have told their stories and contributed to the development of our country.

Communities of displaced Vietnamese people around the world already refer to April 30th as black April day. Designating that day in Canada to honour our Vietnamese Canadian population would show our support to a community that has flourished in this country, economically, culturally, and socially. Bill S-219 proposes to designate April 30th as the journey to freedom day in Canada, as a day that would acknowledge the sacrifices made by the Vietnamese people during a very dark time in world history.

Last Sunday, February 1, I attended the annual Tet festival celebration in Mississauga at the International Centre near the Toronto airport. The Prime Minister, Senator Ngo, and many dignitaries spoke there. It was a room of 15,000 people. This is about the eighth time annually that I have had an opportunity to join with the Vietnamese people in celebrating Tet.

There were many speeches made there about Bill S-219. It was just astounding to me to see the overwhelming support of the Vietnamese community in Toronto for the bill. They know it tells their story.

I also want to mention the Tribute to Liberty organization, which is constructing the monument to the victims of communism. It is very close to the parliamentary precinct, near the Supreme Court. The government has donated \$1.5 million to that project. I would encourage all Canadians to go to the website, www.tributetoliberty.ca, and make a contribution. The Vietnamese Canadian people will be a very significant part of those honoured on that monument. They are an example of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who were victims of communism, who have struggled to come to Canada.

For all of these reasons, to honour the more than 300,000 Vietnamese Canadian people in Canada who contribute to Canada's prosperity and growth as hard-working members of our society, I want to encourage all of my colleagues here to support the passing of Bill S-219.

• (1800)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House to speak to the bill that is now before us.

First, while I do not want to reiterate what has been said in this debate so far, I nonetheless would like to say how proud I am that we can talk today about the contribution made by Canadians of Vietnamese origin. This bill once again gives us an opportunity to thank them for their contribution to our communities across Canada.

In the constituency of Pierrefonds—Dollard, there is a fine and dynamic Vietnamese-Canadian community, one that we do not necessarily see a lot of, but that is there nonetheless. It is so well integrated into all the fibres of the community that it sometimes goes unnoticed. Still, it is very much present and very well integrated, in the social, economic, community and recreational spheres.

This is all by way of saying that I could not talk about this bill without mentioning them. I thank them for being part of our community and for the invaluable contribution they bring to it.

I will also take this opportunity to say that this day of commemoration is possible because at a certain point in Canada's history, we opened our doors and we decided, as a country and as a society, to welcome people who were seeking refuge following a major crisis. When a war that caused much human tragedy ended, Canada opened its doors and took people in, and they are now an integral part of the social, economic and political fabric of Canada.

The reason I bring it up this way, and I cannot conceal it, is that as citizenship and immigration critic for the NDP, I have to say that things have changed in Canada since that time.

Consider one simple figure. After the war in Vietnam, about 60,000 Vietnamese were admitted to Canada. Sixty thousand people sought refuge and found it here in our country.

Private Members' Business

I cannot help but draw a parallel with the current Middle East crisis, particularly in Syria. The United Nations tells us that this crisis is unprecedented. Hundreds of thousands of people have sought refuge either inside or outside the country, and yet the minister tells us that to date, only 1,300 Syrian refugees have been admitted to Canada since the beginning of the crisis, unfortunately.

The commitment to admit 1,300 refugees that the minister put on the table and that he has had every imaginable difficulty meeting on time is rather shameful when we compare it to the openness we showed some 30 years ago, when we took in 60,000 people who were fleeing hardship in their country of origin. I think those figures speak for themselves.

Let us go a little farther and examine the measures implemented in recent years, which have meant so many changes in the way we admit people seeking refuge.

For example, we could mention the changes to the interim federal health program, a federal program that offered basic health care for refugee claimants in Canada. Because of the changes made by the Conservatives, we now deny basic health care to people living here, in Canada, such as pregnant women and children, who do not have the medications they need to live safely within our borders.

I could also mention the changes made in relation to how refugee claimants arrive in Canada. At present, for example, a group of people who arrive by boat after fleeing a crisis in their country and seek asylum in Canada would automatically be incarcerated and might very easily be sent back, simply because they arrived by boat.

• (1805)

It is as if, when fleeing a crisis situation, people can choose exactly how and when to do it. These individuals are usually victims or people who want to give their children a better future or perhaps even save their lives.

Lastly, I want to talk about the list of countries of origin. The simple fact that a refugee claimant in Canada comes from a country on the list of countries of origin, which are for the most part recognized as stable, democratic countries, means that they are much less likely to be accepted. Furthermore, such individuals have no appeal mechanism available to them. This is problematic when we know that in some countries on that list, people are definitely discriminated against for their sexual orientation, for example, or even their cultural and ethnic origin. Consider, for example, the Roma, a population that faces increased deportation since the Conservatives changed the procedures and added their country of origin to the list. Basically, Romas face discrimination and danger in their country of origin. Because these individuals come from certain countries, they do not have the opportunity to be heard and they do not have time to gather all the necessary documentation to file a claim, in the same way as someone from another country might.

I mentioned just two or three measures that the Conservatives changed over the past few years. As a result of these measures, we are not welcoming 60,000 people who are facing a crisis or a war in their country of origin. We are committing to accommodating a hundred or so people, or a thousand, when global needs are so much greater. Canada has proven that welcoming a larger number of people because of an international crisis does not necessarily lead to

a tragedy or an internal crisis in our country. On the contrary, this is a good opportunity to remember that these 60,000 Vietnamese who arrived after the war were welcomed by Canada. They integrated very well and are full-fledged Canadians. They are proof that Canadians are capable of welcoming people and that together, we can build a better country. Without these people from South Asia, Canada would not be the country it is today. We can be proud that we welcomed all those people.

It is important to remember that at the time, the United Nations recognized Canada's impressive role in taking in refugees. Sometimes it would be nice to go back and polish our image and say that we are still the Canadians we once were, that we are still the country that we once were, and that we want to take people in and do our part in times of crisis, and that the international community can turn to Canada knowing, as it did when Canada was a leader, what its role will be.

I would like to end on a positive note by reminding everyone that we are talking about Vietnamese Canadians and their contribution today. Hats off to them, not only for what they have contributed, but also for the challenges they have overcome so brilliantly. Anyone seeking asylum here in Canada faces those challenges. Nobody chooses to be a refugee. I can hardly imagine the challenge that individuals face when they have to leave the people they love, the places they love and the culture, country and climate they love, sometimes in great haste, but I can understand it. Seeing how successful these people are today inspires me to thank Canadians in general for opening their arms, for contributing through social programs, for being so open and for welcoming these people. I think that all of us here in the House should salute all refugees, including the Vietnamese refugees who arrived 30 years ago, and congratulate them on having overcome their obstacles and on becoming part of the big Canadian family.

• (1810)

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise enthusiastically in the few minutes left in debate to support Bill S-219, the journey to freedom day act.

I spent a significant amount of time in Vietnam in my previous life as a journalist in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and even into the 1990s. I had the dubious privilege of being in Saigon on that dark day, April 30, 1975, when I was lifted out of the American compound with the final Americans present, other third country nationals, and more than 7,000 South Vietnamese nationals. I watched with great concern during the dark years of re-education through the late 1970s and afterward, and followed with great concern the plight of those who were forced through circumstance to leave their country and seek a better life elsewhere.

Adjournment Proceedings

I can reassure my colleagues who expressed concern, the members for Beauharnois—Salaberry and Winnipeg North, that this bill will be going to committee. The committee will hear witnesses across the spectrum, and I look forward to seeing the Vietnamese ambassador during this coming committee study.

I would say to him that this bill is not a condemnation of the present government. We have close and good ties with the current government. This portrays a particularly dark period and the journey to freedom of hundreds of thousands of people. Of these, 60,000 came to Canada. In fact, greater freedoms came to Vietnam not through war but through the pressures of capitalism, free enterprise, and the will of the people for better lives in Vietnam.

Just to conclude, the significance of the commemoration of journey to freedom day is really threefold. It would mark the tragic events following the fall of Saigon and the exodus of the Vietnamese refugees. It would also pay tribute to all of those Canadians who rose to the challenge, welcomed the traumatized refugees, and helped them adjust to a new and better life in a new and unfamiliar land. Finally, it would celebrate the incredible contributions that the Vietnamese refugees have made to the building of our great country.

This was demonstrated just last week at this year's Tet celebration in Toronto, where members will recall that the Prime Minister addressed a crowd of over 10,000 grateful Canadians of Vietnamese origin.

All Canadians should know the story of the Vietnamese refugees who were forced to flee their native land, of the vast humanitarian effort undertaken by Canadians from coast to coast to coast, and of the triumph over adversity that the vibrant Vietnamese community in Canada represents today.

• (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

The hon. member for Thornhill will have six minutes when this matter returns before the House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 23, 2015

In March, barely 30 days before that fateful day of April 30, the Khmer Rouge forces had effectively surrounded Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. The American ambassador, Ambassador Dean, had begun preparations for the final pullout of embassy staff and Americans and third-country nationals, which took place on April 12, and which led to the eventual Cambodian genocide, the brutal murder of more than two million Cambodians, and a dark five years in that Southeast Asian country.

Barely three weeks later, the United States ambassador in Saigon, Ambassador Martin, decided it was time to end the American presence in that country. The musical strains of *White Christmas* were heard on April 29, and on armed forces radio in Saigon a voice said it is 110 degrees in Saigon and rising. This was the signal to all Americans, to all third-country nationals, to all Vietnamese who had worked in various ways for the United States over the previous three decades, to assemble at evacuation points and to leave the country.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

JOURNEY TO FREEDOM DAY ACT

The House resumed from February 5 consideration of the motion that Bill S-219, An Act respecting a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: There are six minutes left for the hon. member for Thornhill to finish his remarks.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again it is an honour to rise today and speak in strong support of the journey to freedom day act, Bill S-219, which is an important piece of legislation that comes to us from the other place.

As we approach the 40th anniversary of the effective end of the Vietnam War, one might reflect on the broader events that took place across Indochina 40 years ago this month. At that time there was an ominous shadow falling across the entire region, and the U.S. Congress had decided after great agonizing to end funding of the governments of Cambodia and of South Vietnam and to withdraw all further remaining U.S. military support and military advisors

As a journalist who was there and had evacuated from Phnom Penh on April 12 with the American ambassador, and again left Saigon on April 30 from the U.S. embassy in Saigon, my memory is saturated with images of the vast movement of humanity. More than 7,000 people were rescued from Saigon on that final day, in addition to some 50,000 people who had been lifted by fixed-wing aircraft in the weeks ahead of them. However, the greater tragedy lay ahead. It was not the two million-plus deaths of the Cambodian genocide, but the millions of Vietnamese who, when the country was partitioned in 1954 under the Geneva Accord, had fled the northern regime looking for a better life in the south. Many of these people had no option but to leave Vietnam. They did not have an aircraft or helicopter support nor connections with departing Americans, so they fled by all manner of marine watercraft

When Saigon did fall on April 30 and the North Vietnamese tanks burst through the gate to the presidential palace in Saigon, barely a few blocks from the American embassy, the beginning of an exodus of more than 1.5 million people began.

• (1105)

They set sail for the South China Sea in hopes that neighbouring countries would take them in. Many countries unfortunately turned them away, forcing them even further from their homeland to seek refuge in the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and the United States. As we know, and as we celebrate in the journey to freedom act before the House today, 60,000 made their way to Canada.

Private Members' Business

I am proud to say that Canadians from all walks of life stepped up to the challenge then, offering whatever help they could to the long-suffering Vietnamese boat people. Approximately 34,000 were sponsored by Canadian families, churches, synagogue groups, and other community organizations, while 26,000 were accepted into the country under a government sponsorship plan.

In 1986, Canada was honoured with the Nansen Medal, which is the refugee equivalent of the Nobel Prize, given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in recognition of major efforts on behalf of refugees. This was the first and the only time that the Nansen Medal has been presented to the entire population of a country.

I will conclude my remarks now in the hope that colleagues will support Bill S-219 and the journey to freedom act.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour and a pleasure for me to rise in the House today to speak to Bill S-219.

I will support this bill at second reading so that it can go to committee. However, I would like to start by explaining why I am so proud to rise today. My colleague from Beauharnois—Salaberry and I are the only two people of Vietnamese origin to be elected members of the House of Commons, of Parliament. For us, it is very important to remember what our parents, family members and ancestors lived through. Being able to talk about it in the House today is truly a privilege and an honour. It is a testament both to the great value we place on our origins and to Canada's openness and the fact that the Canadian people opened their arms to us by electing us and asking us to represent them.

It is therefore with great pride and gratitude that I rise today.

Bill S-219 is very short but has several aspects to it. I will read it because I want to talk about it. It has three clauses.

The first clause concerns the short title:

1. *This Act may be cited as the Journey to Freedom Day Act.*

The second clause, which is the core of this bill, reads as follows:

2. Throughout Canada, in each and every year, the thirtieth day of April shall be known as "Journey to Freedom Day".

The third and final clause simply says this:

3. For greater certainty, Journey to Freedom Day is not a legal holiday or a non-judicial day.

• (1110)

[*English*]

The bill before us is a very short and simple one. As I said in French and will repeat in English, there are three clauses in the bill. The main one says:

Throughout Canada, in each and every year, the thirtieth day of April shall be known as "Journey to Freedom Day".

Then the bill specifies:

For greater certainty, Journey to Freedom Day is not a legal holiday or a non-judicial day.

[*Translation*]

Why are we talking about April 30? Many people who had to leave their country attach considerable significance to that date.

For instance, my parents were fortunate to be here in Canada on April 30, 1975. They came here, they met here and they settled here, and I was lucky to be born here.

However, many people unfortunately had to leave their country. We all know this, thanks to the films and news reports that have been made about the Vietnam War, which left its mark not only on an entire generation of Vietnamese people, but also on the entire world.

Everyone is familiar with the Vietnam War. Everyone knows how much a war and the devastation it causes can affect the population and future generations. Still today, development in Vietnam lags behind because of the damage and destruction caused by the war.

I think remembering April 30 is extremely important because April 30 represents a day of commemoration. For many people in Canada and indeed around the world, April 30 is a day for people to come together. Ever since I was elected, for instance, I go to Montreal every year, which is an opportunity for me to remember my roots, my culture and the sacrifices made by many Vietnamese people.

I invite Canadians to watch the very moving speech made by my colleague from Beauharnois—Salaberry, who shared her personal experience and that of her parents. I think it is quite meaningful to many people.

To some, this day signifies the end of the Vietnam War, the end of a devastating war that had tremendous repercussions for the country. To others, this day also serves as a reminder that people had to leave their country.

What is more, many commemorative events are held around April 30 in recognition of the boat people. I invite those who have yet to watch a documentary on this, to do so.

This shows the direct impact that the war had on the population and the sacrifices that people had to make to leave their country in search of a better future. Today, we feel and see the results. New generations like mine and future generations reap the benefits from the fact that people had to leave their country and learn to live in a new society that was foreign to them. Even though Vietnam was a French colony, many Vietnamese did not speak French or English. Coming to Canada meant they had to adapt and integrate.

As an elected member, I am very proud to say that I am well integrated into Canadian society. The community is very proud of all the Vietnamese people who have achieved success at all levels, such as earning a living by becoming a doctor, for example. I am generalizing a bit. We also have writers, such as Kim Thúy, who is very famous in Quebec and around the world. A great number of people have made very significant contributions.

Private Members' Business

I read the bill and it is very simple. Unfortunately, it will not contribute anything new. We could have taken this opportunity to find solutions to current problems. I will come back to that later. I want to mention that there was lack of consultation and debate, and therefore transparency, in the other chamber's process. A great deal of attention was paid to what some people said, but not to what others had to say. I hope that the House of Commons committee will be more open-minded and that we will have a more fulsome debate, because it is important to have this debate.

As I mentioned, I received some 300 emails about this bill. Unfortunately, this bill is divisive at a time when we should be uniting the community. The bill has received criticism from all quarters. Some say that it does not go far enough and that it is not critical enough of the current government. Others, especially those in the business community who are dealing with Vietnam, say that it is not necessarily beneficial to negotiations and that it would be detrimental to discussions with the Government of Vietnam. As this is a Conservative bill from the other place, it is unfortunate that the approach used is not one that brings people together, not just Canadians, but also all Vietnamese Canadians, whether they are the children of boat people or those who were forced to leave their country. Why not unite all these people?

I am proud of the NDP position because we are talking about human rights. It is time to do so. I regret that the bill does not do enough to bring people together.

● (1115)

[*English*]

I look at what the younger generation has done. A friend of mine, Glenn Hoa has created "generation legacy". Last year thousands of dollars were raised in order to invest in the Vietnamese boat people museum in Ottawa. It was a way for the community to get together behind a project that was unifying, that looked at the heritage of Canadians of Vietnamese origin or even that of the Vietnamese people who came here. It was a way for us to get together; it was different generations coming together.

Unfortunately with the bill, we do not feel this. We feel it is divisive. As I said, I have received hundreds of emails, some supporting the bill and some denouncing the bill. There are many things that need to be done in order to help people in Vietnam. I think we could have done a better job.

[*Translation*]

Since it is time to negotiate with Vietnam as part of the trans-Pacific partnership, we need to advocate for human rights. Unfortunately, the government is not going in that direction. Nevertheless, I understand that the important thing is to commemorate what happened to the people who had to leave their country. That is why I am going to support the bill at this stage.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the Liberal critic for Canadian heritage, I would like to explain to the House why I will be supporting Bill S-219, An Act respecting a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, or the Journey to Freedom Day Act.

I would also like to explain why I am insisting that the government allow this bill to be extensively and thoroughly reviewed by the appropriate parliamentary committee. Everyone must have an opportunity to freely express their opinions, unlike what happened in the Senate.

Bill S-219 would designate April 30 as the Journey to Freedom Day and would commemorate Vietnamese refugees and their exodus to Canada. This day would not be a legal holiday or a day off. However, it would provide an opportunity to celebrate how lucky Canada is to have such a vibrant Vietnamese community. As the Liberal leader and member for Papineau always says, Canada's diversity is what makes our country strong. Vietnamese Canadians are a good example of that.

A number of my constituents of Vietnamese origin have shared a different perspective. They see this day as an opportunity to thank Canada for welcoming them with open arms and for giving them a chance at a new life. The Vietnamese are known for their generosity and modesty.

If Canada tells them that it wants to celebrate everything they have contributed, they respond that they would rather celebrate everything that Canada has given them. After all, we are looking at two sides of the same coin. Canada owes a lot to its Vietnamese community, which wants to thank Canada. Let us celebrate together.

● (1120)

[*English*]

The proposed new national day would commemorate a major historic event. On January 1, 1975, some 1,500 persons of Vietnamese ancestry were living in Canada, mostly in Quebec. Following the 1979 to 1982 boat people crisis, some 59,000 Vietnamese refugees entered Canada. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, after the United States, Canada is the country that welcomed the largest number of Vietnamese refugees from 1975 to 1996.

In 1986, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded the Nansen Refugee Award to the people of Canada for the "major and sustained contribution of the People of Canada to the cause of refugees". Canadians were the first and the only people to have been honoured collectively with this award.

[*Translation*]

The journey to freedom day will remind us that Canada welcomed tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees and that Canada must continue to be welcoming. There were millions of victims of the Vietnam War, and unimaginable atrocities were committed on all sides. Since we did not participate, our country could have chosen to ignore these victims. If we are being honest, there were some people in Canada who did not want to get involved in the aftermath and consequences of a conflict we had no part in.

Private Members' Business

However, Canada remembered that although it was not involved in the war, it played an active role in the peace efforts. Canada remembered that every time it has shown generosity, it has become even stronger. Canada listened to its heart and welcomed refugees not only from Vietnam, but also from Cambodia and Laos, saving many lives and transforming broken dreams into renewed hope.

We must never forget the pain of the exodus, those who lost their lives, the unspeakable horrors experienced by the boat people, or the generosity of the Canadian families, communities and religious groups who took them in, clothed and housed them. Nor must we forget the foresight of the Canadian governments of the day, how hard the newcomers worked to learn, in a matter of months, French, English and new customs or how very much Canada benefited from the contributions of these newcomers, their children and the generations that came after them.

That is what we must never forget. That is what we will all be able to celebrate together in harmony, as we bear in mind both the sacrifices people made and the promises of the future, the opportunities available in a Canada that is stronger because of its Vietnamese community. That is how I, as Liberal critic for Canadian heritage, see this commemoration. That is why I support this bill. There is no other reason. The goal is to bring people together, to leave nobody out. The goal is also to strengthen the bond between Canada and Vietnam, to strengthen the trade, cultural and scientific ties between our two countries. Canada must stand up for human rights and justice in Vietnam as it does all over the world.

• (1125)

[English]

In other words, the Liberal Party sees this bill as an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the great contributions of the Vietnamese Canadian people to Canada's diversity and multiculturalism, and to all the elements of Canadian life and society.

The proposed new national day would also celebrate the Canadian families, charities, religious groups and non-governmental organizations that sponsored tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees and assisted them in their resettlement and adjustment to their new country.

[Translation]

Some Vietnamese Canadians have written to us, their parliamentarians, to tell us that they do not like the date chosen for the commemoration, April 30; others do not like the title; still others are afraid this commemoration will lead to a historical interpretation that makes them uncomfortable. To that I say that it is important for the people of the Vietnamese community to talk to each other. This commemoration must not be a divisive issue. On the contrary, it should be a symbol of unity and the wonderful symbiosis that exists between the Canadian and Vietnamese identities. That is why I think the committee that looks at this bill must take the time needed to listen to all points of view. In the meantime, Vietnamese Canadians must continue talking to each other to reconcile their points of view.

[English]

The Liberal Party of Canada will insist that it is the government's responsibility to invite an inclusive and comprehensive list of witnesses and experts to discuss this bill at committee to ensure a

thorough discussion on the title, date, content and implications of the act.

[Translation]

We, as Canadian parliamentarians, need to clearly understand and send a message that, above all, our intention with this bill is not to dictate an official, unilateral version of the history of another country. We cannot even do that when it comes to Canada. It is not a question of siding with one side or the other after the fact, after a long and bloody war that our country consciously chose not to take part in. No, it is simply a matter of providing an opportunity for us to celebrate the contribution made by Vietnamese Canadians to Canada's rich social fabric, to remember where we come from in order to better understand where we want to go together.

[English]

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate on Bill S-219, journey to freedom day bill.

I very much believe that this is a very important piece of legislation regarding a period in history that was a great tragedy for the people of Vietnam, however it also serves as a recognition of an event in which all Canadians should be proud.

On April 30, 1975, when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army, it set off a mass exodus of people, many of whom—

[Disturbance in gallery]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Etobicoke Centre.

• (1130)

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Speaker, on April 30, 1979, when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese army, it set off a massive exodus of people, many of whom had only one means of escape, on the water. It was the beginning of a journey that would be fraught with peril and tragedy for millions

In the first few years that followed, a few thousand made their escape from the communist regime, but by 1978 to 1979, those Vietnamese refugees were fleeing from their homeland in the tens of thousands. They arrived in a number of neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Their plight created a massive humanitarian crisis across southeast Asia, as many refugees left in overcrowded boats that were, in many cases, unfit to withstand the harsh conditions of the stormy seas.

More than a quarter of a million perished. Some died from illness, some were victims of pirates and kidnappers. It was, by all accounts, a nightmare for all involved.

An influx of so many refugees to those countries was more than they could handle. The "boat people", as they became known at the time, were sometimes turned away. If they were allowed to land, they were not allowed to integrate into those countries, which led to the creation of several squalid refugee camps.

Private Members' Business

This vast humanitarian crisis required action on a global scale, and the world responded. With the aid of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, government officials in each country began the process of resettling the refugees in a number of developed countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, the United States and, of course, Canada.

Canada played a significant role in aiding tens of thousands of refugees after the fall of Saigon. During the humanitarian disaster that followed, Canadians rallied to offer whatever assistance they could. We ultimately brought more than 60,000 Vietnamese refugees here to settle and build new lives across our great country. It is estimated that 34,000 were sponsored by Canadian families, Canadian charities, religious groups and non-governmental organizations, while another 26,000 were assisted by the Canadian government.

The arrival and resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees in Canada is a shining example of how Canadians responded to a global calamity. Canada's compassionate response included families, church groups and community organizations that took the refugees into their homes, helped them find a place to live, to find employment and to get their kids into school.

This exemplary moment in Canada's history of humanitarian protection was a contributing factor in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' awarding its Nansen Refugee Award to the people of Canada in 1986. It was the first and only time that this prestigious medal was awarded to an entire nation.

Canada was forever changed and enhanced by the events following the fall of Saigon and the exodus of the Vietnamese refugees, not just demographically and culturally. In addition to the development of strong and vital Vietnamese-Canadian communities thriving in many cities across Canada, the Government of Canada enshrined its private sponsorship of refugees program as a fundamental part of Canada's refugee and humanitarian resettlement program. The community and church groups that sponsor refugees to come to Canada continue their compassionate work today, to the betterment of Canada, refugees and their families from around the world.

This bill would designate April 30 as "journey to freedom day" in Canada, and it would honour our Vietnamese-Canadian population by showing our support to a community that has flourished in our country economically, culturally and socially. The Vietnamese community in Canada has demonstrated its loyalty and love of Canada.

We are building on a tradition of commemoration well established in communities of displaced Vietnamese people from across the globe. It would also be a significant day for all Canadians, many of whom united in the mid to late 1970s in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe to welcome more than 60,000 Vietnamese refugees to a new land and a place to call home. It was an inspiring time as the Government of Canada and the people of Canada exhibited their humanitarian spirit to the world.

All Canadians deserve a day to remember, to show their considerable efforts and to show the world that we are a caring and compassionate nation. Journey to freedom day would not be a legal

holiday nor a judicial day, but a day that would solemnly acknowledge the events of that dark time in history with respect to the sorrows of those refugees who were lost to illness, malfeasance or the cruelty of the turbulent sea. It would also be a day with a deep sense of hope for those who became Canadian, and a strong sense of pride for those who helped make that happen. It would also serve as a fitting way to begin Asian heritage month, which would begin the following day, on May 1.

• (1135)

With the passage of Bill S-219, April 30 will be a special day of commemoration for the Vietnamese-Canadian community, followed directly by a full month of reflection and celebration of the contributions of all Canadians of Asian heritage.

Canada values its relationship with the country of Vietnam. Grounded in mutual respect and partnership, we look forward to building on this very key relationship into the future. We owe it to those who have become Vietnamese-Canadians, however, to also acknowledge their true journey to freedom.

Today, there are more than 220,000 Vietnamese-Canadians who have integrated into and enhanced our country, who contribute to our growth and prosperity as vibrant members of Canadian society. The bonds that they have forged here have been deep and enduring, and Canadians are rightfully proud of our role in their journey to freedom, which began almost 40 years ago.

I strongly encourage all members to join me in supporting Bill S-219.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP):

Mr. Speaker, this bill was introduced in the Senate, a place that is already undemocratic, where there are no elected officials and no real accountability. The bill comes from a place where there is no accountability for the work being done and, specifically, a very biased process.

I will start by giving a little background of the bill. The short title of the bill is the journey to freedom day act. It would establish April 30 as journey to freedom day to commemorate the capture of Saigon by North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975, which ended the Vietnam War and began the emigration of South Vietnamese refugees to Canada.

I started by speaking of what happened in the Senate. That is because people had requested to appear, to be witnesses and provide testimonials in front of the Senate committee but were refused. The ambassador for Vietnam was refused. Anybody who wished to voice dissent and not support the bill was not allowed to speak at the Senate committee, which is a very biased, unfair and undemocratic process.

The NDP proudly recognizes the important contributions of Canadians of Vietnamese heritage and their community in Canada, which includes the people who came to our country as refugees. Tens of thousands more came as economic migrants.

Private Members' Business

As a responsible official opposition, we want to ensure that any legislative attempt to recognize the contributions of Vietnamese Canadians to Canadian cultural heritage will actually unite Canadians of all backgrounds. It would unite Vietnamese Canadians in our country but also ensure that all members of the community would be included. To that extent, we will seek to include as many opinions as possible when the bill gets to committee and ensure that it is an inclusive process. As the deputy spokesperson for the New Democrats on Canadian heritage and as a member of the heritage committee, I look forward to ensuring that all voices and opinions are heard at committee.

I want to mention that when this bill was studied, there was a strong base of support for it and also voices of dissent. We need to ensure that as responsible legislators, we hear all sides of the story. There is a quote by Mr. Can Le, a former secretary general of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, who stated:

By approving this bill, Parliament will assure newcomers and future generations of their place in this country and will prove that Canada's inclusiveness is the foundation of its strength and prosperity.

It is great that there were positive comments about the bill and there were many more during the Senate hearings, but there were absolutely no voices heard that spoke against this bill. From what I am learning, there are quite a few, because my office has been inundated with emails and phone calls. I have met with members of the Vietnamese community in Toronto who do not support the bill and are very hurt that their voices are not allowed to be heard. They requested to appear before the Senate committee and were refused. They were not allowed to speak before the committee.

I sent a brief to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage that I was given by a member of the community in Toronto in the hope that it would be put before the committee. The brief points out that the bill offends and marginalizes most of the people it purports to honour by assuming that they would join former Saigon military officers in commemorating the fall of Saigon on April 30. The majority of Vietnamese Canadians will never join that commemoration. I read this directly from a brief I was given, which clearly shows there is a divide in the community. As responsible legislators, we need to ensure that all voices are heard, and that did not happen in the Senate. I hope that in the committee phase we will be able to ensure that all voices are heard.

● (1140)

The second main point identified in the brief is that the bill exploits the boat people and the Canadians who helped them by using them to justify having a national day to commemorate the fall of the Saigon military regime, a divisive, partisan, political event that most of them will not participate in. Once again, they outline that there is a divide and that they do not want a bill that commemorates the fall of the regime or commemorates something that only part of the community here wants to be part of. It is important that we hear all voices, and that has not happened at the Senate committee. If I seem a little repetitive, it is because I am purposely repeating the fact that the Senate was extremely biased and did not allow all voices to be heard.

The third main point outlined in the brief is that the bill slights the Canadian Forces by falsely claiming that they were involved in the

Vietnam War. The bill does not give credit to Canadian Forces for carrying nearly all of the refugees from Asian camps to Canada.

I tend to agree with that, because Canada was not involved in the war. Canada did not have a participatory role in the war, yet Canada was a country that was a safe haven. Our forces went in and helped people by removing them from the camps when they fled Vietnam and went to other countries. That is not being recognized in the bill.

What I am hearing from members of my community is that the bill is divisive. Why can we not move forward in a way that gives us something that all Vietnamese Canadians can come together around and make sure that it is inclusive for everyone, rather than just a small group of people from Vietnam who live in Canada now, or even many Canadian-born Canadians who are not naturalized Canadians? We are all Canadians, and they are saying they all want to be included.

Further on, the brief mentions that the problem is that there were waves of migrants who came to Canada from Vietnam. The first wave were people who were working for the Saigon regime at the time and fled after the end of the war, which ended on April 30. That date is tied very closely with the war, and many people were affected by it. Whenever a war happens, many people are affected. I know from personal experience. I was born in a war zone and know the personal, lived experience of being in a war. No matter how the idea is spun, life is impacted severely by a war. I am hearing that people do not want this day of commemoration to be about the war or the end of the war; they want it to be about showing gratitude to Canada. That date is not April 30, 1975. They would like to adopt July 27, 1979, because that was the first date that refugees were brought into Canada by the Canadian Forces. Why can we not consider that option?

I wish I had more time to go further into this. I have had petitions sent to my office, and the one I am holding has more than 222 signatures from people all across the country who say that the process was severely biased and seriously flawed because it was undemocratically put forward and there is no transparency in the bill. People suggest that another date, any time in July, be set aside as the date, because that would help the community come together and not be further divided. The community wants to stand together to commemorate and to show their gratitude for Canada.

The bill says it is about giving gratitude, but it is called the journey to freedom day bill. Which journey to freedom does the bill actually talk about? That is the real question.

● (1145)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC):
Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to take part in this debate on Bill S-219.

Before I read my notes, I would like to comment on some issues that were raised by the previous speaker. I do not think that she has a full understanding of the issues surrounding that journey to freedom.

Private Members' Business

I will speak on more of a personal note, because I came to Canada from a Communist country and regime. The many people who came before me were escaping or trying to escape a regime that they did not want to live under.

The same thing happened with those poor boat people. They were escaping because they did not want to live in a Communist regime and face oppression. A quarter of a million people died trying to escape from that Communist regime in unsafe boats. Does that not speak for itself? I do not know who would need an explanation.

The comment that was made was that the ambassador of Vietnam was not invited. The ambassador of Vietnam represents the current Government of Vietnam. It is not a democratic government. Let us make that clear. Therefore, I would not be surprised if the ambassador of Vietnam would not be in support of this bill or of creating a day to commemorate those brave people who were trying to escape to find a safe haven here, as many others have.

After the war, Canada opened its arms to a lot of people who came from Polish territories, people who took a terrible journey. They were sent by the Russians to Siberia. Hundreds of thousands of them died. No one ever knew the real number. They joined the army and fought alongside Canadians. After the war they had no country to go back to, so many of them came to Canada. We are very grateful for this. People of our generation, in the 1980s, were able to leave Communist Poland. They were stranded in refugee camps across Europe and other countries in the world. They found a safe refuge here.

We can repeat these stories with many groups from many places in the world. Canada has always been strong in supporting those who are oppressed and denied basic human and democratic rights. That is what this bill is about. Let us not confuse anyone. This is not a bill to divide communities; we have to fully understand who is a part of the community and who is not.

On April 30, Canada's Vietnamese community commemorates the end of the Vietnam War, a day that this legislation would recognize as "journey to freedom day". It was on this day in 1975 that the fall of Saigon led to the exodus of over 840,000 Vietnamese citizens. They were prepared to take great risks. Many were even prepared to die, rather than suffer at the hands of the Communist regime. Many of those who fled the brutal regime had to resort to extreme measures. They fled on crowded, unseaworthy boats in the hope of escaping to their freedom.

Tragically, many of the Vietnamese boat people did not survive the perilous journey. More than a quarter million of them drowned, starved, or were attacked by pirates. Miraculously, more than 60,000 Vietnamese refugees did succeed in making their way to Canada. Canadians welcomed these refugees with open arms and even invited the refugees to stay with them in their homes. More than half of the refugees were privately sponsored by generous individuals and groups of Canadians from all walks of life.

• (1150)

Thanks to the overwhelming generosity and support of Canadians, entire refugee families were able to resettle here and build a new and peaceful life.

Resettlement of such a large number of refugees in such a short amount of time was a tremendous achievement, and Canada's humanitarian efforts and compassion were recognized internationally. In response to these efforts in 1986, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded the Canadian people the Nansen Medal, which is the refugee equivalent of the Nobel Prize. This is the only time an entire country has been recognized with this honour, and for this we should all be proud.

Bill S-219 aims to designate April 30 as the journey to freedom day. Not only would it commemorate the perilous journey 40 years ago of Vietnamese refugees to Canada, but it would also pay tribute to an incredible humanitarian role played by thousands of Canadians in community and church groups, who opened up their hearts and found ways to welcome Vietnamese refugees here in our great country.

As April 30 is already recognized by our Vietnamese community, it is appropriate to designate this day as a national day of remembrance. It would serve to commemorate the lives lost and the suffering experienced by people during the exodus. It would also mark their arrival to freedom and the gratitude of the Vietnamese people to Canadians for their generosity.

It is a Canadian tradition to commemorate tragic lessons in history so that they are never repeated. We believe we must not ignore the past, and this includes the shameful past of our country's history. Indeed, perhaps it is the memory of one of our own darkest moments that contributed to such an outpouring of generosity from Canadians toward the Vietnamese refugees.

It is with great shame that Canadians recall the tragic decision to turn away the MS *St. Louis* in 1939. The outcome of that disturbing decision should not be forgotten. After being turned away by Cuba, the United States, and finally by Canada, the ship was forced to return to Europe, where almost one-third of its passengers ultimately perished in the Holocaust.

To memorize and educate Canadians about the MS *St. Louis* incident, a powerful memorial is now located at Pier 21 in Halifax, where the ship should have landed. On this day we would mark a tragic period in history, but we would also commemorate a very important part of our country's proud humanitarian tradition.

The outpouring of support from Canadian people during this time underscores our country's commitment to providing protection to the world's most vulnerable. A memorial would also serve to remind all Canadians of how fortunate we are to live in one of the most free and democratic countries in the world, and that we are proud to stand up for our values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

It should also be noted that this period in Canadian history is one that is not as well known among younger Canadians today. Unlike the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, and the Cold War, the Canadian connection to the Vietnam War is often overlooked.

Government Orders

In conclusion, I would say that the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees is a very important part in our Canadian history. That is why so many Canadians have voiced their support for the bill and are enthusiastic about the national day of commemoration. For this reason I urge all my colleagues to support the bill. It is a great bill, and we all, as Canadians, will be proud of it.

• (1155)

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am humbled to be speaking after my colleague for Mississauga East—Cooksville, who spoke from the heart of his personal experience living under the regime of a communist government and who knows of what he speaks.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, when the forces from the north invaded the south, breaking the Paris agreement negotiated in 1973, and took over South Vietnam with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

We put forward this bill, which originated in the other place, and I am honoured to be the co-sponsor of it in this House.

This bill would serve three purposes. First, the bill would mark April 30 as a day to commemorate the fall of Saigon, when the communist forces of the north invaded the south and took over the country.

Second, it would serve as a celebration of who we are as Canadians. We took in 60,000 boat people, refugees, who under extreme circumstances, made their way to Canada. We made them Canadian citizens, and they are now proud Canadians.

That is the story of Canada. Canada is made up of people from all over the world. We are all immigrants. We are all from some other place. We come here for hope and opportunity. That is what Canada represents to so many people around the world. People come here to escape persecution and hatred. They come here for a better life for themselves, and more importantly, for their children so that they can realize all of their dreams. That is why this bill is so important.

Third, this bill would serve a pedagogical purpose. Canadians, whether they are Vietnamese, Jewish, or Polish does not matter, should all know the history of each other.

April 30 is a significant day for the Vietnamese people. It is also a significant day because it marks a time when freedom ended for a group of people around the world, and our young people need to know that. They need to know that living in Canada bears a certain responsibility. Because we live in such a great country, because we live in the democracy we do, we have responsibilities. We have a responsibility to remember all of the past atrocities that have occurred around the world, from the Holocaust to the Holodomor to the Armenian genocide. These are all important facts of global history, and yes, of Canadian history.

This is why it is so important that all members of this House support Bill S-219. It is because April 30 is a significant day in global history, but more importantly, the symbolic nature of this bill stands tall so that we as Canadians remember and do not forget. That is why when the time comes to show our support in this House, we must all stand in unanimity to support the journey to freedom day act, Bill S-219. I ask all members to join me in supporting this bill.

• (1200)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, March 25, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

* * *

[Translation]

JOURNEY TO FREEDOM DAY ACT

The House resumed from March 23 consideration of the motion that Bill S-219, An Act respecting a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at second reading stage of Bill S-219, under private members' business.

- (1825)

[English]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(Division No. 365)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Albas
Albrecht	Alexander
Allen (Welland)	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	Andrews
Angus	Armstrong
Ashton	Aspin
Atamanenko	Aubin
Barlow	Bateman
Bélangier	Bellavance
Bennett	Benskin
Bevington	Bezan
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Blaney	Block
Boivin	Borg
Boughen	Boulerice
Boutin-Sweet	Braid
Brison	Brosseau
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	Butt
Byrne	Calandra
Caron	Carrie
Casey	Charlton
Chisholm	Chisu
Chong	Choquette
Christopherson	Clarke
Cleary	Clement
Comartin	Côté
Cotler	Crockatt
Crowder	Cullen

Private Members' Business

Cuzner	Daniel	Stanton	St-Denis
Davidson	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	Stewart	Storseth
Day	Dechert	Strahl	Sullivan
Devolin	Dewar	Sweet	Tilson
Dion Dionne	Labelle	Toet	Toone
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre	Tremblay	Trost
Dreeshen	Dubé	Trottier	Trudeau
Dubourg	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)	Truppe	Turmel
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)	Uppal	Valcourt
Dykstra	Easter	Valerioté	Van Kesteren
Eglinski	Eyking	Van Loan	Vaughan
Falk	Fantino	Vellacott	Wallace
Fast	Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)	Warawa	Warkentin
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Fletcher	Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea
Foote	Freeland	to	
Freeman	Fry	Sky Country)	
Galipeau	Gallant	Weston (Saint John)	Wilks
Garneau	Garrison	Williamson	Wong
Genest	Genest-Jourdain	Woodworth	Yelich
Giguère	Gill	Young (Oakville)	Young (Vancouver South)
Godin	Goguen	Yurdiga	Zimmer— 266
Goldring	Goodale		
Goodyear	Gosal		
Gourde	Gravelle		
Grewal	Groguhé	Nil	NAYS
Harper	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)		
Harris (St. John's East)	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)		
Hawn	Hayes	Nil	PAIRED
Hiebert	Hoback		
Holder	Hsu		
Hughes	James		
Jones	Julian		
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)		The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill
Kellway	Kennedy (Calgary Southeast)		stands referred to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.
Kent	Kerr		
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)		
Lake	Lamoureux		(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)
Lapointe	Latendresse		
Lauzon	Laverdière		
Lebel	LeBlanc (Beauséjour)		* * *
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)	Leaf		
Leitch	Lemieux		
Leslie	Leung		
Liu	Lizon		
Lobb	Lukiwski		
Lunney	MacAulay		
MacKay (Central Nova)	MacKenzie		
Maguire	Mai		
Marston	Martin		
Mathysen	May		
Mayes	McCallum		
McColeman	McLeod		
Menegakis	Michaud		
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port		
Coquitlam)			
Moore (Fundy Royal)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)		
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)	Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)		
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)	Mourani		
Murray	Nash		
Nicholls	Nicholson		
Norlock	Nunez-Melo		
Oliver	O'Neill Gordon		
Opitz	O'Toole		
Pacetti	Paradis		
Patry	Payne		
Péclet	Perkins		
Pilon	Plamondon		
Poillievre	Preston		
Quach	Rafferty		
Raitt	Rajotte		
Rankin	Rathgeber		
Ravignat	Raynault		
Reid	Rempel		
Richards	Rickford		
Ritz	Rousseau		
Saganash	Sandhu		
Saxton	Scarpaleggia		
Schellenberger	Scott		
Seeback	Sellah		
Sgro	Shea		
Shipley	Shory		
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)			
Sims (Newton—North Delta)			
Sitsabaiesan	Smith		
Sopuck	Sorenson		