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BLACK APRIL DAY BILL

Third Reading of Bill S-219—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Thanh Hai Ngo

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

THE SENATE

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THIRD READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo moved third reading of 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, as amended.

He said: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to third reading of 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, as amended.

I envision journey to freedom day as a day of remembrance of suffering that followed the fall of Saigon, as a day to pay tribute to Canada's humanitarian role in welcoming refugees during and after the Vietnam War, and as a commemoration of the achievements of the Vietnamese Canadians concurrently to highlight a new chapter in Canada.

I am thankful for and touched by the level of support that will ensure that journey to freedom day reflects Canada's humanitarian role in welcoming thousands of Vietnamese refugees as part of the boat people exodus following the fall of Saigon. What took place in the years after the fall of Saigon from 1975 to 1996 was the largest known mass migration in modern history, with more than 1.5 million people leaving their wartorn country in search of freedom. As honourable senators know, many Vietnamese people had to set sail in rickety, broken boats for the South China Sea, where they faced constant unimaginable peril. Not only did they have to navigate through deadly storms, but also they had to face disease, starvation and even pirate threats.

[Translation]

It became very clear to the world and to Canada that the Vietnamese refugee problem had become an international humanitarian crisis, and that the only compassionate way to fix it was to take decisive and immediate action.

[English]

The Honourable Ron Atkey, Immigration Minister at the time, approached former Prime Minister Joe Clark's cabinet to raise this mass migration issue and ask his fellow colleagues: How do we want to be remembered? Then, the citizens of Canada did something that was truly amazing. In July 1979, the Canadian government made its historic announcement that a target of 50,000 Vietnamese refugees would be admitted to Canada by the end of 1980. In February 1980, the government announced that the number of refugees admitted would be increased from 50,000 to 60,000.

[Translation]

Out of the 60,000 Vietnamese refugees that were admitted to Canada between 1979 and 1980, nearly 26,000 were sponsored by the government, while 34,000 others were sponsored by private citizens and by members of their families. In the decade that

followed, from 1982 to 1991, roughly 80,000 more Vietnamese were admitted to Canada.

[English]

Canada became known for its private sponsorship program, whereby it sought the assistance of voluntary organizations, churches and groups of at least five adult citizens who could sponsor and provide for a refugee family for a year. For each person thus sponsored, the government accepted another refugee under its own care. Individuals, families, volunteer agencies, communities, religious organizations and Canadians from all walks of life came forward to sponsor thousands of refugees, helping close to 120,000 to resettle in Canada.

[Translation]

This extraordinary feat was accomplished thanks to the exceptional leadership shown at every level of government, from mayors and municipal councillors to federal and provincial cabinet ministers, not to mention extraordinary officials. Welcoming that many refugees in such a short time is not easy. Canadians accomplished something quite unique.

[English]

Mike Molloy, President of the Canadian Immigration Historical Society, who was on site as an immigration agent for Canada, testified at the Senate Human Rights Committee last week that the sponsorship of so many boat people was something amazing, an unusual moment in our history and that it remains by far the largest resettlement operation Canada has ever undertaken.

The success of the boat people resettlement to Canada rested on the acclaimed private refugee sponsorship program. However, the real heroes of the Vietnamese resettlement and integration into the Canadian fabric were literally the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who sponsored refugees through their churches, synagogues, service clubs, unions and the ad hoc groups of friends and neighbours who got together to sponsor families privately and even to provide them with housing.

In 1986, the Right Honourable Jeanne Sauvé, then Governor General, accepted on behalf of the people of Canada the Nansen Medal, the refugee equivalent to the Nobel prize and a prestigious international humanitarian award given in recognition of major and sustained efforts made on behalf of refugees. This was the first time since the medal's inception in 1954 that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees presented it to an entire population.

Since coming to Canada, members of the Vietnamese community have consistently shown that they are hardworking Canadians capable of becoming an integral part of Canadian society. There was not a village in this country that didn't hear about or take in refugees from the boat people exodus. Some Vietnamese refugees even landed all the way up in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories. Now mind you, we don't know how long they stayed there after winter surprised them, but we know for

sure that there are Vietnamese Canadians running successful businesses in Yellowknife today.

• (1500)

The boat people establishment was, for so many Canadians, the first time they were ever in a position to bring people from other parts of the world other than Europe into their churches and homes.

Last week in committee, Mr. Molloy said it best. Canadians regard the settlement of Vietnamese refugees, “. . . as a positive experience because it opened their eyes to a common humanity.”

Canada is now home to more than 300,000 Vietnamese Canadians, with three proud generations who celebrate an important heritage in a great nation.

Were it not for Canada’s generosity and humanity, neither I nor thousands of Vietnamese refugees could ever have achieved what we have today. We are now allowed to live in a beautiful country where we enjoy freedom and democracy as proud Canadians.

Honourable senators, this was a humanizing event, and Canada did something spectacular. We must ensure that this truly remarkable period in Canadian history is recorded, preserved and remembered.

April 30 is a day to commemorate those Canadians from all walks of life who, with open arms, welcomed 120,000 Vietnamese refugees who lived through a devastating war, suffered in refugee camps and endured long boat trips to escape a place they could no longer call home.

Every year 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 fortieth anniversary of the boat people resettlement to Canada.

I envision Bill S-219 as establishing a day to honour Canada’s humanitarian tradition of accepting refugees during and after the Vietnam War as a way to mark this milestone.

I also envision April 30 as “Journey to Freedom Day” to thank Canada for saving our lives and to commemorate the Vietnamese refugees’ new-found freedom because freedom isn’t free, and the boat people paid for their freedom with their perilous journey.

(On motion of Senator Fraser, for Senator Jaffer, debate adjourned.)
