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NATIONAL ANTHEM ACT

Bill to Amend—Second Reading—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Thursday, February 21, 2002

THE SENATE

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BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy moved the second reading of Bill S-39, to amend the National Anthem Act to include all Canadians.

She said: Honourable senators, I thank all of you who spoke in support of this amendment during the inquiry last year, senators who have indicated their support privately, as well as the many Canadians who have written to me on this issue, some of whom are assembled in the gallery today. I express my sincere thanks to Frances Wright, Jeanne d’Arc Sharp and the ad hoc committee of the Famous 5 Foundation for launching the petition to amend the national anthem last July on Parliament Hill. It is my pleasure now to speak to Bill S-39, to amend the National Anthem Act to include all Canadians.

I shall begin by outlining the specific amendment to the wording of the national anthem that I am proposing in this bill. I will then explain why I believe this change to be an appropriate one socially, linguistically and ideologically. Finally, I will address some of the critics who argue that change is not necessary or justified.

The amendment I am proposing to the national anthem is a minor one. The words “thy sons” will be replaced by the words “of us.” The verse will then read: “True patriot love in all of us command.” Two words will change. That is all.

I should point out that the decision to choose “of us” was not mine but was based on the public’s response, discussions with linguists and music historians. According to most of the letters I received and to the experts, these two words retain the fundamental meaning of the lyric, the poetry of the line, and fit well with the music. They are also in keeping with historic tradition. I will elaborate more on this later.

There has been some confusion since I began the inquiry on this issue, so I will explain what the bill is not intended to do. It is not my intention to propose changes to the French version of the national anthem. As well, I am not proposing that a reference to God be deleted from the anthem, and I am not proposing that other seldom-sung verses of the anthem be changed. The intent of this bill is simply to update the anthem so that it is more reflective of our society today as well as inclusive of more than 50 per cent of the population.

Honourable senators may ask: Why change the anthem at all? Perhaps the best answer can be found in many letters I have received from women, and men, who have asked me to bring this bill forward.

I should like to share with honourable senators the text of a letter I received from Dr. Marguerite Ritchie in response to my inquiry on the national anthem. She reflected back to the time when she first learned the national anthem in elementary school. She wrote:

I remember vividly my reaction on my first day of school when “O Canada!” was sung, and I knew immediately that, as a girl, I did not count for anything in Canada.

Similarly, as an impressionable teenager of 14, Catherine Clark realized the national anthem left her out. She wrote in *The Toronto Star*:

What struck my young mind that particular Canada Day was the lyric “in all thy sons command,” and the fact that our anthem didn’t refer to me, or anyone of my gender.

This amendment to the anthem is not only for our generation but also for future generations of girls and boys. It was because of these children that Judith Olson, a music teacher, launched the *O Canada* Fairness Committee to change the national anthem in 1993. In her music classes, Ms Olson said that students, especially the girls, would ask her, “What about the daughters? Don’t we count?”

John Goldie wrote in a similar vein, urging me to continue with this campaign, because he “has long felt embarrassed that our national anthem did not include his wife and daughter.”

Another man, Donald Jackson, wrote:

I am in my 80th year and I am a veteran of World War 2. It has bothered me for some time that the words of our national anthem: “true patriot love in all thy sons command” would seem to exclude women. I feel that this part of the anthem should read: “true patriot love in all of us command.” A simple change, but it would include all Canadians, not just the men of Canada.

In the letters I have received, many people say they already substitute their own words for “thy sons” when they sing the anthem. I know a number of the members of this chamber, including Senator Pearson and myself, already substitute our own words for “thy sons.”

In churches such as the United Church of Canada and the Presbyterian Church, parishioners are offered an alternative inclusive wording to “in all thy sons command” in their hymnals. The best-selling modern Bible, the New International Version, has just been updated so that all parishioners feel included. For example, the word “sons” in Matthew 5:9 has been replaced by the word “children” to read “children of God,” and the word “man” in Romans 3:28 has been replaced by “person” to read “a person is justified by faith.” Even *Time* magazine, which only a few years ago referred to “Man of the Year” now refers to “Person of the Year.” The Canadian Press stylebook notes that words such as “spokesman” and “chairman” cause resentment, understandably, when applied to women.

If our churches and media can take the lead in changing their use of language in order to make everyone feel that they belong in the community, should we not as a national community amend the language of our national anthem to include all Canadian women so that everyone can feel a sense of belonging?

Our national anthem is one of the most important symbols of Canada, and as a symbol, it represents our fundamental ideals. Although we do not often reflect on the nature of our symbols and their importance in our lives, they represent our beliefs as a society. As Dr. Robert Birgeneau, President of the University of Toronto, wrote, the anthem is recognized as “one of our most powerful expressions of our Canadian identity.”

The anthem takes on a particularly poignant meaning during international events, events such as the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah. We have many great women athletes in our country. Should we not acknowledge them in our anthem? Last week, when Catriona Le May Doan stood on the podium after winning the first gold medal for Canada, in the 500-metre speed-skating race, should she not have been celebrated in the words of the anthem as it played for all the world to hear?

How do we define Canada as a nation on the world stage? We only have to observe the path Canada has taken since World War II and consider the last two decades since the passage, in 1982, of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to conclude that Canada is defined by its rights culture. Michael Ignatieff wrote the following in *The Rights Revolution*:

Rights are not just instruments of the law, they are expressions of our moral identity as a people.

That this form of a rights revolution has allowed for inclusiveness is to Canada's credit. Women's rights are enshrined in the Charter, as Senator Beaudoin noted in this chamber last spring. Why then should women be excluded by omission in our anthem?

Should women in Canada have less recognition than the women of Australia? The committee that examined the words of their national song in the early 1980s replaced “Australian sons let us rejoice” with “Australians all let us rejoice” before “*Advance Australia Fair*” was proclaimed officially as the national anthem in 1984.

The truth is, this simple change should have been made in the anthem before it became official in 1980. As the well-known children's entertainers Sharon, Bram and Friends wrote to me:

One might have hoped that this issue would have been recognized and addressed when the lyrics were opened up for revision in 1980.

Let us not dig in our heels on this issue now, just because we missed the boat the last time. Let us consider the words of the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, who is with us today in the gallery, who wrote to me in support of this amendment:

I was in the Pearson government that approved our national anthem and our Maple Leaf flag. I support your effort because I think it will add to the acceptability among Canadians of the words of our anthem. They will sing it with greater enthusiasm.

Many of the letters I have received are from writers, linguists, editors or educators who are sensitive to the impact of language. One writer noted that we are constantly changing our language to incorporate new words as a result of scientific, technical and social advances and that we have eliminated many racist terms over the years because we recognize that language both reflects and shapes the way we think. Nevertheless, we seem to be reluctant to acknowledge language that excludes women.

I should like to consider briefly some of the objections to this amendment.

Almost without exception, those who are opposed to an amendment to the anthem all raise the issue of tradition. Someone was reported in the media to have compared the Honourable Robert Stanley Weir's 1908 version of *O Canada!* to Shakespeare, saying it should not be changed. I agree that the 1908 version of *O Canada!* should never have been changed. According to the original text, which was first brought to my attention by Nancy MacLeod of Toronto, the lyrics of the 1908 version read as follows:

O Canada!
Our home, our native land
True patriot love thou dost in us command.
We see thee rising fair, dear land,
The True North strong and free;
And stand on guard,
O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.

As you can see, if we return to the original lyrics of *O Canada!*, our tradition as Canadians, even in 1908, was one of inclusiveness. Ironically, the original version of 1908 was a better reflection of our times than the anthem we sing today.

You may well ask why “us” was rewritten as “sons.” The earliest printed version of the anthem with “in all thy sons command” was in a song entitled, “*O Canada! Our Father's Land of Old!*” for the Common School Book published in 1913. The change was then copyrighted by Weir in 1914.

We can only speculate on the reason for the rewording. Perhaps, judging by the date, it was deemed necessary to give special recognition to the sons of Canada because Canada faced the prospect of war.

Throughout the last century, Weir's version of “*O Canada!*” grew in popularity, but it was not without its competitors. At least 26 versions of “*O Canada!*” have been circulated. Ironically, the title of the 1913 schoolbook version “*Our Father's Land of Old!*” was borrowed from the Richardson version of “*O Canada!*” published in 1906. Other versions began with “O Canada! Our heritage our love,” “O Canada! Our fair ancestral land,” and “O Canada, our country fair and free.”

Weir himself changed his version of “*O Canada!*” twice, once in 1914, as I have already mentioned, and again, shortly before his death in 1926, to add a fourth verse of a religious nature to *O Canada!*

At about the same time, the Association of Canadian Clubs was one of the first groups to adopt *O Canada!* as its official song. Please note that this group, with its venerable tradition in Canada, has declared its support for the amendment I am proposing.

In 1968, the words of the Weir version were altered once again in response to the recommendations of a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons. It is evident, therefore, that the lyrics of *O Canada!* have never been set in stone. Changes were made.

You will all agree, the traditions of today are not the traditions of yesteryear. A little more than 80 years ago, women did not have the right to vote. Just 30 years ago, it was traditional for women to stay at home, and very few were in the professions. Twenty years ago, there were few women in non-traditional occupations or in government. It was also traditional to use racist and sexist language in a hurtful manner that would be unacceptable today. Things have changed a great deal, and I think most of you would agree with me that they have changed for the better.

Nevertheless, for those who argue that we should not diverge from the original intent of the anthem out of respect for tradition, I would agree that we should return to Justice Robert Stanley Weir's original inclusive version of *O Canada!* of 1908 and reinstate the word "us" in the lyrics of the national anthem. By so doing, we will honour the spirit of Weir's anthem.

My proposal for an amendment has also been denigrated as being a matter of political correctness. "True patriot love in all thy sons command," it is argued, refers to those who died in wartime, and an amendment would somehow diminish our recognition of men's contributions.

According to Stuart Lindop of Alberta, just the opposite is true. I should like to share with honourable senators the text of a letter written by Mr. Lindop. He writes of his proposal in 1993 to his Member of Parliament, David Kilgour, to amend the national anthem to include women:

As a veteran, a volunteer, wounded in action liberating Holland, I am very well aware of the tremendous contribution made by women to Canada's war effort in the Armed Forces, in industry, and on the home front.

He goes on to say:

My motivation was not based on prissy, political correctness but rather to see that women, who had earned the right to be recognized, were not implicitly excluded.

I would challenge anyone to accuse Stuart Lindop, an 82-year-old veteran of World War II and a former member of the South Alberta Regiment, the only regiment to garner a Victoria Cross, of political correctness. Mr. Lindop wrote to me recently to assure me that this issue is of the utmost importance to the morale of women in the Armed Forces. He wrote:

Subtly, one might say subliminally, doubt about one's worthiness can have a tremendous impact upon one's behaviour in a crisis situation. How about women in our various units? Their national anthem doesn't consider them worthy of mention or recognition! Perhaps the government doesn't care.

Given women's involvement in the military, in peacekeeping operations all over the world and in the conflict in Afghanistan, I would agree with Mr. Lindop that women deserve recognition in our anthem. Women's contributions to Canada, whether in the military or in civilian life, should be recognized.

Honourable senators with sons and daughters will be amused to learn that I have been told that the word "sons" in the national anthem is generic and therefore also means daughters. If that were the case, why would the word "daughter" need to exist in the English language? I certainly know that I am not a son. I suspect that it is unlikely that our daughters and granddaughters would appreciate being referred to as "sons" and "grandsons."

There are also those who denigrate this amendment as insignificant, unnecessary and a waste of time. These people are often the most vocal and long-winded in their opposition. This begs the question: If the change is so insignificant, why oppose it? Let us not waste any time in passing this bill. It is, after all, a minor change that is in keeping with today's language as well as the original historic meaning of the anthem as set out by Justice Robert Stanley Weir in 1908, so why amend the anthem? Well, why not?

The rights of women are already enshrined in section 28 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Equal rights are espoused at all levels of government, in private corporations and increasingly in the home. Today's young women, who are entering so-called non-traditional occupations in record numbers, expect to be included in our national anthem.

Admittedly, there are still many injustices, inequities and barriers to overcome. This amendment will not right these wrongs, but it will signal a change that reflects the value we as a society place on equal rights for all, to everyone in Canada and to the world.

Changes in women's status in Canada have not occurred overnight. Each woman who has taken the first step across an invisible barrier has paved the way for those who follow her. In this sense, this change is just another small step that moves women forward on our long journey toward equality.

As Maureen McTeer stated succinctly:

I believe this change will reconfirm our positive role in our country's past, and our commitment to participate at all levels in the future.

Honourable senators, it is clear to me that we all have a stake in ensuring the equality of opportunity for our future generations. We need to show Canadians that parliamentarians have the will to give real meaning to equality for all Canadians.

The Honourable Sheila Finestone is in the gallery with us today. When she was Secretary of State for the Status of Women, she said:

Equality rights are human rights — a basic principle that shapes the way we live, in good times and hard times. There is no one answer, no one action, no one player that can make equality happen. In the new century, the nations considered the leaders of the world will be those who have achieved gender equality.

Let us take one more step in the right direction, honourable senators. Let us join the leading nations of the world. I would ask that you support this amendment in the name of fairness, historic tradition, and because it is the right thing to do for all Canadians.

Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate, I wish to table letters that I have received from across Canada in support of this amendment, as well as a number of other documents relevant to this debate.

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: Honourable senators, is leave granted for Senator Poy to table these documents?

Hon. Anne C. Cools: Honourable senators, before we put this question to the senators, Senator Corbin suggested that the proper place to bring such documentation forward is in committee.

Senator Poy knows that I disagree with her on the substance of these issues, but to the extent that she has indicated that she wishes to table certain papers, I believe unanimous consent of the chamber is required. If Senator Corbin sees otherwise, he should speak for himself.

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: Honourable senators, is leave granted for Senator Poy to table these documents?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.
