



CANADA

House of Commons Debates

THE HONOURABLE JOE VOLPE, P.C., M.P.

**THIRD READING SPEECH ON BILL C-302: AN ACT TO RECOGNIZE THE INJUSTICE THAT WAS DONE TO PERSONS OF ITALIAN ORIGIN THROUGH THEIR “ENEMY ALIEN” DESIGNATION AND INTERNMENT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, AND TO PROVIDE FOR RESTITUTION AND PROMOTE EDUCATION ON ITALIAN-CANADIAN HISTORY
THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2010**

Mr. Speaker, a serious topic like this one requires a much more thoughtful and methodical approach than what is normally given in debates.

Today, we are looking at a part of Canadian history. Contrary to what some of my colleagues opposite have been saying, this is about Canadian history, and the actions of a Canadian government against some of its own citizens. It is about remembering what we should not do against those who are for the moment much more vulnerable, when we have a position of responsibility.

For this, I want to give a special thanks to my colleagues who just spoke a moment or two ago.

The member for Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, who spoke in French, was able to recognize all the good, the harmony and the productivity of his fellow citizens, even at a young age.

I wish to thank my colleague, the member for Elmwood—Transcona, for giving us some of the historical events that related to a very serious part of Canadian history.

When a Canadian government, as we have seen happen at other times, issues the War Measures Act and under its cover determines to move against its own citizens by labelling them as enemy aliens, completely ignoring whatever history they have built up in this country prior to that, is not something that we should again allow to happen.

Regrettably, this happened again more recently. Some will always find a reason to justify it but we in this place should never tolerate it. I acknowledge that we live in a different time and we share different values. I also acknowledge that our society and our government have established a different infrastructure of law and rights than those that existed in the 1940s.

However one of the principles that we have established over the course of the last couple of generations is that governments are prepared and willing, notwithstanding the challenges, to look back, to reflect, to remember and to reconcile.

This is an issue that needs reconciliation. It does not require partisanship. Colleagues opposite have been talking about those people from a different party who did some things at another time and so on. I feel a little pained by that.

On a personal basis my grandfather and my great grandparents came here in the 1880s. My grandfather left this country after 35 years as a Canadian citizen and his children followed him back here immediately after World War II. There was an interruption of about 10 years. Many of us felt ourselves to be Canadian even though we did not live here at the time.

Therefore, when people say that we are being divisive, that my colleague from Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel is being divisive, by introducing legislation that calls on the government to remember and calls on all Canadians to reflect on those issues, and those actions that were very un-Canadian by today's standards that says that we have a model for reconciliation, let us reconcile, I feel disturbed by those who would suggest that that is somehow divisive.

I am not here to trumpet my own values or to beat my chest about the culture into which I was very fortunate to be born and which generated some of the values that I bring to this place. Good, bad, or indifferent, they are values that allow me to make a contribution as a Canadian.

Those Canadians who found themselves at the mercy of a government that was determined to vilify them during World War II deserve, at the very least, the thoughtful approaches of today's legislature, a Canadian Parliament that looks back and says, "That was wrong". We know it was wrong. No charges were ever laid against any of the individuals who were interned.

It matters not that the number might have been 700, 7,000 or whatever the number one wants to find historically accurate. What matters is that not one of them was charged with anything, let alone sedition and betrayal of Canada, the country that was theirs. This is not a bill that came out of the blue. It is a bill that talks about what happened in the past and how governments have taken a look at this. They have simply asked for some of those records to be expunged.

Maybe the people are not alive anymore, but their children and grandchildren are and they live with the stigma of having their family identified as enemy aliens, undesirables and a people whose lives as a result were separated away from the growth of the community, not for just those two to three years where it took place, but for virtually a generation afterwards and more.

They asked for that. They did not ask for money. They asked for a simple recognition and apology. It is fine and maybe it is fine to say that it was a particular party with prime ministers in power who were indifferent to these people. I remember talking to some of those prime ministers. They had a particular view of the way the world should have worked and might have worked, except that all of that changed.

Prime ministers from both parties changed all of the rationale for not doing anything and for not recognizing that they had slighted their own citizens, jailed and detained their own citizens,

disrupted family life, interrupted community and severed growth without saying so much as, “We apologize”. Today, we do that. It is done. In the government of which I was a part, there was a negotiation with all the representatives of that particular community. A foundation was put together, a coordination of all of those groups, and asked how we can reconcile. It was their decision on the processes that took place.

Today's government said no. I am sorry about that. I do not want to engage in partisanship, but as I said, I am sorry that the Government of Canada today hides behind two members whose parents fit the profile. The member for Peterborough and the member for Oak Ridges—Markham talk about dividing the Italian community. This is not about the Italian community.

This is about the Government of Canada reconciling itself with the citizens of Canada, citizens it valued and it values today, citizens who asked for nothing but respect and the opportunity to integrate and contribute. They asked for the records to be expunged and for an apology to be made in the House of Commons, because it was the House of Commons where the government of the day sought the authority to detain them.

They asked for an opportunity to build that into the history, not as those who have been vanquished, but as part of the victors of the new Canada so that their tale, their story and their history can be part and parcel of the history that we are building and that we all love. It is the history that we today call Canada and it starts with remembering, reconciling and vowing not to do it again. That is why this bill has to be supported.