



CANADA

House of Commons Debates

**THE HONOURABLE JOE VOLPE, P.C., M.P.
SECOND 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, MAY 28, 2009

I would like to begin in French, because I wish to thank some of the members who spoke before me, particularly, the hon. member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, a Bloc member. He talked about this bill a few weeks ago. He said it was the fair thing to do and that this bill needed the support of all members of this House. How incredible that a member of the Bloc, a self-described sovereignist party, and some might say one that is less Canadian—although I would disagree—but someone who defines his Canadian identity by the fact that he lives in Quebec. He defines himself as a Quebecker, and he believes that this bill should be supported by all Quebeckers and all Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

Why? Because Canada wronged its citizens, not others, but its own citizens. One needs to read the bill in French in order to grasp what the hon. member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie was trying to get across. My colleague from Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel deserves congratulations from all hon. members for introducing this bill. In English, we talk about Italian Canadians having been victims of the War Measures Act, while references to this in French make it clear that the Canadian government of the day felt that Italian Canadians should be treated as enemy aliens. They were Canadians. What does it mean to be Canadian? To be considered as subjects of another country, an enemy country? They had been here for over a hundred years, they were here as Canadians, as subjects of Canada.

My colleague from Oak Ridges—Markham spoke of wrongs that need to be forgotten. I know all about forgetting and putting things aside, but we need to keep in mind the rights that individuals acquired by birth or residence, their identity as Canadians. They were British subjects, they were Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, I spoke in French and I may have made some mistakes, but I said nothing that was seriously wrong. I spoke of the wrongs done by the Canadian government to its citizens, not citizens of another country, but its own citizens.

They are citizens. One becomes a Canadian to become a Canadian. One is either born here, like many of my cousins and aunts and uncles, or they acquire citizenship by virtue of their residence, their responsibility and their civic duty toward this country. That is how one becomes a Canadian. One does not then become a subject of an enemy nation.

When my colleague from Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel proposes this legislation, my compliments go to him. My compliments also go to my colleague from Vancouver Kingsway who also stood on behalf of the NDP and said that he and his party supported the legislation because they understood the basic concept behind it and that they applaud the initiative of the member from Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel”.

I had the privilege of being around the cabinet table when this proposal, enunciated in Bill C-302, was put on the table. What the member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel says is that the Government of Canada should honour the commitment that it made to the four representative institutions of the Italian Canadian community in the country. There was the Canadian Italian Business and Professional Association and the Congress of Italian Canadians.

There was also the Italian-Canadian Community Foundation in Quebec.

Finally, there was the Order Sons of Italy. All four organizations negotiated for the better part of 10 months in order to come up with what is called the ACE program.

The Government of Canada fell in 2006 and the current government took up this and said that it would not give them what they signed on to. It was not going to respect the contract the Government of Canada signed with the representatives of the community, the contract that called for a sum that was considerably higher than what has been proposed by the government, and, by the way, it would flow through this organization in order to establish a foundation to achieve the educational objectives, to achieve the commemorative programs and to gauge awareness for all of the country.

However, it did not close the door to individual considerations by the estates of the 632 individuals who were unjustly interned. They were never charged and no laws were broken. They were never given any indication as to why they were there except that they were citizens of an enemy nation. They were Canadian citizens.

I ask to be forgiven if I get excited about this but it is because we are talking about the human rights and the citizenship rights of everyone.

[Member spoke in Italian]

The Government of Canada has made excuses to others and has apologized. It is not a novel thing. We are not leaving ourselves open to any kind of legal liabilities by making an apology.

[Member spoke in Italian]

If a person is a Canadian citizen, it is of little importance where one came from or what political party one belongs to. One is a citizen, and that is all. So if apologies have already been given to other citizens, there is a need to apologize to the Italians as well. Why?

We should think about this for a moment. Six hundred and thirty-two families were disrupted during the war because the political situation in the world at the time dictated a circumstance that nobody here wanted, and yet the people of Italian origin who were here were automatically put on guard as subjects of an enemy nation.

A cousin of mine was in the Royal Navy and yet the entire family was under police surveillance for the duration of the war.

A former member of this House, whom we know well, had a brother enlisted in the RCAF and a family under police surveillance.

Nobody said, "Sorry, we made an error". Nobody said that we were enemies of Canada. Nobody ever said that the Italian community committed an injustice toward the people, the country and the Government of Canada but they were interned and jobs were lost.

[Member spoke in Italian]

It is right that this legislation calls, at the very least, on the Government of Canada to respect the agreement signed by the Government of Canada in 2005 with the four institutions that represent the Italian community in Canada. That is the starting point. It is not the closing point.

I compliment the member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel for having brought this legislation to this point in the House. He deserves compliments and he deserves support, not negative criticism.