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Mr. Gordon Brown

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gordon Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC)):

Good afternoon, everyone. We are going to call to order meeting number 39 of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. Today the orders of the day have our studying 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.

In this first session we have two different groups with us. We have Senator Ngo, who is the sponsor of this bill in the Senate. Then we have some folks from the Canada–Vietnam Trade Council. Each of the two groups will have up to eight minutes.

We are going to start with Senator Ngo. You have the floor. I think you're going to share that time with Mr. Nguyen. You have up to eight minutes.

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo (Senator, CPC, Senate): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues, I understand votes are expected today. With the committee's agreement, I will keep my opening testimony short and concise. However, I would like my full remarks, which have been distributed in both official languages, to be registered in the record.

[See appendix]

It is with great appreciation that I appear before the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to talk about the journey to freedom day act, which seeks to recognize April 30 of every year as the day marking the end of the fall of Saigon; commemorating the Vietnamese refugees' exodus; and recognizing the fundamental role played by the Canadian people, who welcomed thousands and thousands of the Vietnamese refugees with open arms. For Canadians of Vietnamese origin, April 30 depicts a dark day when they lost their country, their home, their families, and their friends; when they began their exodus as refugees and embarked on that perilous journey to freedom.

Quite simply said, the significance of the journey to freedom day act on April 30 is threefold.

First, it marks the tragic event of the exodus of the Vietnamese refugees who fled their homeland after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

Second, it pays tribute to all Canadians and the Government of Canada, who rose to the challenge and welcomed thousands of refugees with open arms.

Third, it celebrates the incredible contributions of the Vietnamese refugees, who have contributed to the building of our great country Canada.

The events that followed the fall of Saigon marked the beginning of the refugees' crisis and the start of the exodus of millions of people fleeing Vietnam. Canada's experience with the Vietnamese refugees' exodus began during the fall of Saigon. In fact, after the fall of Saigon on May 1, 1975, Canada immediately recognized the plight of the Vietnamese people trying to escape, and declared it would sponsor refugees with relatives already in Canada.

[Translation]

Canada became an international leader through its creation of a private refugee sponsorship program. Without the kindness and generosity of thousands of Canadians, and the dedication, support and cooperation of the Canadian government, refugee agencies, non-governmental organizations and religious groups, it would simply have been impossible to welcome so many people in such dire straits.

[English]

For the last 39 years, Vietnamese communities across Canada have gathered on April 30 in a ceremony to commemorate memories of loss and grief, to collectively remember their perilous journey, to share their heritage, and to express their gratitude for Canada's historic role.

It is with this brief comment that I humbly ask for your support as we move Bill S-219 forward and recognize our shared heritage.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Thank you very much for giving me your attention.

[English]

It is my pleasure to answer your questions afterwards.

The Chair: We'll continue. In this eight minutes, we'll move over to Mr. Nguyen, from the Vietnamese Association of Toronto.

Mr. James Lam Nguyen (President, Vietnamese Association Toronto): Good afternoon, committee members and Chair. *Merci beaucoup.*

I also understand that votes are expected today. With the committee's agreement, I will keep my opening statement very short and concise. I agree, however, with the senator. I would like my remarks, which have been distributed in both official languages, to be registered in the record.

[See appendix—Remarks by James Lam Nguyen]

My name is James Nguyen. I am the current president of the Vietnamese Association Toronto, or VAT, one of the oldest Vietnamese organizations and biggest in Canada. I am honoured to be before you to provide my unwavering support for Bill S-219 and to explain why this act, recognizing April 30 of every year, is meaningful for the Vietnamese Canadian community.

I left Vietnam, like many of my fellow Vietnamese Canadians, in the events that followed the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. My journey to freedom started in the fall of 1980 by boat, with my older sister and three older brothers. We stayed in a Malaysian refugee camp by the name of Pulau Bidong for approximately six months before Canada generously accepted us in March 1981. We stayed briefly in Quebec and eventually resided in Edmonton, Alberta.

Our journey lasted about six days and five nights before we disembarked in Malaysia. On the boat journey—as some of you may know, it is a perilous journey—we encountered Thai pirates. There was a story that was recounted to me by several people who were on the boat. I was only six years old, so I didn't know much. When the Thai pirates come onto your boat, they generally steal things or loot things, and they generally take the women with them. My sister was almost taken.

A man whose wife and daughter were taken onto the Thai pirates' boat tried to commit suicide by jumping overboard. He thought that because his wife and daughter had been taken, his life was hopeless, so he wanted to kill himself. When the Thai pirates saw this, they ordered all the women back to our boat. I guess they have some honour among thieves and were afraid that this man would come back to haunt them. That is one story that I can relate to you from my experience.

My story is not unique, as there are many refugee stories similar to mine. The country I left behind is just a distant memory, almost 35 years old now, and all of my good memories are of Canada. I remember playing street hockey in the cold winter months in Edmonton and pretending I was Wayne Gretzky or Mark Messier and using an empty beer bottle with aluminum foil as the Stanley Cup in the back streets of Edmonton.

As a leader of the biggest Vietnamese community in Canada, I attend many events on a weekly basis. There is overwhelming support for this bill whenever the conversation comes up. This bill is important to me and to those I encounter in the community, because it acknowledges our heritage.

Let me state clearly that I do not believe this bill is anti-Vietnam or anti-Vietnamese government. I genuinely believe that the people of Vietnam are a beautiful people, with so much culture and history. This bill is a testimony of my and the rest of the Vietnamese Canadians' journey as refugees to Canada and of the journey of others after April 30, 1975, to our newly adopted homeland of Canada. I think that remembering April 30 is extremely important, because April 30 represents a day of commemoration for many people in Canada. April 30 is a day for Vietnamese Canadians to come together to express our gratitude to Canadians for welcoming us with open arms.

I'm Catholic by background. I remember a nun who was very helpful in the Vietnamese Canadian community by the name of Sister Angeline. God bless her; she departed from us a few years ago.

In closing, I just want to say thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

[Applause]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

In the interests of fairness, we are now going to move over to hearing, from the Canada-Vietnam Trade Council, Julie Nguyen and Elizabeth McIninch.

You have up to eight minutes. Thank you.

• (1540)

Dr. Dai Trang H. (Julie) Nguyen (Co-Founder and Director, Toronto, Canada-Vietnam Trade Council): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

My name is Dai Trang Nguyen, and I'm from the Canada-Vietnam Trade Council. I'm also a representative of the Canada-Vietnam Association. I'm a college professor in international business and international development in Toronto.

I'm here today with two objectives. My first objective is to bring the Vietnamese Canadian community together, and my second is to restore fundamental freedoms for many community members.

The first objective depends on the second one. In this presentation I seek to make three recommendations to amend Bill S-219. The first is to change the date of commemoration to July 27; the second is to change the title of the bill to "appreciation of Canada by Vietnamese refugees"; and the third is to remove war-related content from the bill.

In this presentation I will discuss three main points: first, what's wrong with this bill; second, what the negative impacts of this bill on the community are; and third, what amendments are necessary to bring the community together.

What's wrong with this bill is that it appears to be about three positive things but in reality is about two negative things. The bill creates a good impression that it is about the commemoration of Vietnamese refugees, the community's appreciation of Canada for accepting them, and Canada's recognition of the community's contribution. In reality, what it is about is imposing another version of Vietnamese history and war history that favours the old Saigon regime and, based on that, criticizing the current government of Vietnam.

The three positive things bring the community together and all Canadians together; the two negative things divide the community. There are disagreements not just from those who oppose the bill, thinking that it has gone too far, but also from those who support it, thinking that it doesn't go far enough.

For the last 40 years, there has been only one accepted political voice in the Vietnamese Canadian community, and all other voices are suppressed. The first wave of Vietnamese, who arrived in 1975 and 1976, were a few thousand associated with the old Saigon regime. They have since imposed an anti-communist stance on community members who came later, including 60,000 refugees who arrived in 1979 and 1980, at least 100,000 economic migrants who came after 1972, and those who were born in Canada.

Community members are not supposed to have anything to do with “back home”, including research and education, trade and investment, music, cultural events, and so on. No one has ever come out to declare an alternative stance, mainly because of the necessity of making a living and taking care of family. The official flag of Vietnam has never been shown in community events, and the old Saigon flag is still being used.

Bill S-219 set off a movement in the community that had never happened before. In early February, 22 representatives courageously signed an open letter to oppose this bill, and you have a copy of it in both languages. This prompted hundreds of others to follow suit to sign it, and hundreds more started to speak out. The division between the anti-communist old Saigon regime and their followers and members who seek an alternative stance is now in the open.

I'm here to call for fundamental freedoms for many if not the majority of Vietnamese Canadians, specifically freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression according to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The focus of this bill should be about three positive things that help bring the community together. It should not be about the war or the current situation of Vietnam, because that will cause emotion and disagreement and further divide the community.

We therefore have three recommendations.

The first is to change the date. The date, April 30, is not appropriate, because this is the date that the Vietnam War ended.

• (1545)

This bill is not about the Vietnam War. This bill is about the Vietnamese refugees. Therefore, if you choose July 27, the date when the first flight of Vietnamese refugees landed in Canada, the bill will remind the community from all sides of what Canada has done for us and of the effort we need to make to contribute to Canadian society.

The second recommendation is to change the title. The title now, the “journey to freedom day act”, is not appropriate considering the need to restore fundamental freedoms for many members and the claims by many members that they did not come to Canada to search for freedom. We need a new title that is agreeable to all members, such as, for example, “appreciation of Canada by Vietnamese refugees”.

The third recommendation is to remove war-related content. In order to have consensus among all community members, we need to remove from the bill the content about the war, especially the words “black April”.

At the same time, Mr. Chair, I would like to mention that we need to rebuild the community. Many members lack access to English or

French, young people are still struggling to find good jobs, and domestic violence is still not addressed properly in the community.

In conclusion, although the bill has had some divisive impacts so far in the community, I believe that it can be an opportunity to open a dialogue for all. It can be an opportunity to rebuild our community and to give everyone a voice in an inclusive process if it focuses on the three positive points above.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have had some testimony that we received in written copy, but we did not hear it from the witnesses, so in order for us to accept that, we do need a motion to that effect.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): I will move that motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to move to questions.

For up to seven minutes, we have have Mr. Adler.

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for being here.

I have one question that I want to preface by saying, Senator Ngo, that it's an honour to co-sponsor this bill with you. As you know, I'm doing so in the House of Commons. Last week I presented a petition in the House that contained 2,619 signatures from people in the Vietnamese community who are supporting Bill S-219.

There's a question I want to address to you, Senator Ngo. Last week, on March 23 specifically, the deputy critic for Canadian Heritage suggested that we should consider adopting July 27 as the new commemoration date for the bill, on the grounds that this was when the first Vietnamese refugees were brought into Canada by the Canadian Forces on Operation Magnet II. Can you let us know what this proposed option means to you and the people of the Vietnamese Canadian community, who clearly commemorate their grief and thank Canada every year on April 30?

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: Thank you, Mr. Adler.

I wish to respectfully clarify that important point because it has been stated in the chamber, as you say, and was just recently introduced by Ms. Nguyen on the other side.

With regard to changing the date to July 27 as the date to recognize the refugees brought into Canada by the Canadian Forces in the summer 1979, I must strongly advise and warn you against this option. Changing the date of the journey to freedom day to July 27 would disregard the complete genesis of the Canadian resettlement experience with the Vietnamese refugees' exodus which began with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

I don't know how many of you know what the date of July 27, 1979 means. You should know that July 27, 1979 is the Vietnam Communist regime's remembrance day, a national public holiday in Vietnam honouring the heroism of the soldiers and the war heroes of the same regime for conducting re-education camps, perpetrating atrocity, and forcing refugees to flee their homes. Now, imagine how offensive this new proposed date would be to the Vietnamese Canadians who left everything behind as refugees to escape the same regime that they found intolerable. This proposal is an insult to the intelligence of the Vietnamese Canadians and the Canadian people. To me, this date is irrelevant.

The exodus, April 30, is the day that marked the beginning of the refugee crisis when their homeland ceased to exist. This day makes sure that everyone's experience as a refugee is recognized.

We have support from all Vietnamese communities across Canada. We have the Vietnamese community in Halifax, Moncton, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec, Sherbrooke, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver. All Vietnamese community associations support the bill and support that day.

For those who oppose the bill—maybe those who came to Canada before 1975, are students in the Colombo plan, or for their personal interest of doing business with Vietnam—their personal interest compared to millions of Vietnamese who fled Vietnam on April 30, 1975 is unacceptable. To compare that day with the 300,000 Vietnamese refugees who left Vietnam—and Canada accepted them for that day—is not acceptable.

Also, to say July 27 and force Vietnamese Canadian refugees who were accepted by Canada to accept that day, honouring the remembrance day of the Vietnamese communist soldiers who killed them or tortured them or whatever, is insulting. Basically, that date is irrelevant to us and all of the Vietnamese communities across Canada who are supporting us. As the MP said, he tabled a petition of thousands and thousands who support the bill.

Basically the bill is not divisive of the Vietnamese community, but in fact this bill united the Vietnamese community who left Vietnam.

• (1550)

I'm talking about the refugees. I'm not talking about Vietnam. I'm not talking about the Vietnamese Communist regime. I'm not talking about the Vietnamese Communist government. The bill has nothing to do with the Vietnamese Communist regime or the government. This bill is concentrating on and focused on the exodus of the Vietnamese people. More than two million people left Vietnam on that day.

This bill is recognized by 300,000 Vietnamese who came to Canada. Canada accepted them with open arms. This bill also shows the vibrant contribution of the Vietnamese community in Canada.

Basically, that's the bill. The focus of the bill has nothing to do with trade. It has nothing to do with the Vietnamese government. It has nothing to do with the Vietnamese soldiers.

• (1555)

The Chair: Senator, we're going to have to move on now.

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Sitsabaiesan, you have up to seven minutes.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here.

We heard from Senator Ngo that the date you proposed was April 30. I think Mr. Adler misquoted me from my speech in the House, which is nothing new. We heard Ms. Nguyen mention that April 30 is contentious for some people.

I am a child of war myself, so I understand your passion when you speak, because I lived in a war. I escaped a war zone, fled to Canada, live in Canada as a Canadian citizen, and have the privilege of being here, so I understand the journey and the importance of many of our collective journeys to freedom.

However, my question is with respect to the date. We've heard Senator Ngo's passionate comment about why July 27 is not a good date. We've heard Ms. Nguyen's passionate comments about why April 30 is not a good date. Clearly, there is some sort of friction.

I'm not a Vietnamese Canadian. In hearing from Vietnamese Canadians, I'm hearing passion from them in saying that both dates are not good. Is there a date that can be good? Is there anything that can actually be a unifier?

Senator Ngo, you said that you want this to be a unifying bill. I want that, too, because I'm a mediator by trade. I want people to be making consensus. What can we do to make it so the community is coming together? What date or possible dates are there so you can make a friendly amendment through Mr. Adler and make that change, so that everybody in the Vietnamese community can be 100% behind this to say thank you to Canada? Because that's what it's about, from what I've heard. What is that date?

That's for anybody.

Go ahead, Mr. Nguyen.

Mr. James Lam Nguyen: Thank you for the question.

With any legislation, there's going to be disagreement—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I'm going to interrupt you for two seconds. I know we only have seven minutes, so no preamble, please. Just go.

Mr. James Lam Nguyen: Okay.

For any legislation, there's going to be disagreement, but what I can tell you is what my personal experience is. I attend events on a weekly basis in the biggest Vietnamese community in Canada. We have close to 100,000 people, which is one third of the Canadian community. This date is accepted by 99.9% of the Vietnamese community.

Ms. Julie Nguyen mentioned that this is a divider. I would love to have her come to any of our events and see our passion. For the last three years, I've organized the biggest lunar new year festival. For two of the three, Mr. Harper attended. The yellow heritage flag is part of our heritage, and it was all over the place.

When we talk about this bill, Madam Committee Member, there is overwhelming support. It's not a dispute between 50% and 50% of the community. This is 99.9%. I would happily invite Ms. Julie Nguyen to any of our events. I'll host her—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: If I may, I'm going to ask Julie Nguyen to comment, because I see her looking like she wants to speak.

Go ahead.

Mr. James Lam Nguyen: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Dr. Dai Trang H. (Julie) Nguyen: I just want to mention that when community members go to these events, these lunar new year events, they go there for the fun. They don't go there for the politics. When they go there, it doesn't mean that they agree to the old flag. It doesn't mean that they agree with that view of the old Saigon regime. It would be a huge mistake to think that all of them who go there accept this view.

Thank you.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I know that there are passion and politics involved, and I really want to make this work for everybody, because I'm thinking that many communities that have gone through a similar process may want this one day.

Is September 24 a good date for everybody? Is there any date that's not the remembrance day and not the end of the war, because war will always leave a raw wound. I left my country when I was a five-year-old child, and still, when I go back to Sri Lanka.... I went back once, 27 years later, and it was raw for me. War is always going to be raw. Can we not have the war date and not have the remembrance day date and have something else?

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: Thank you.

You want me to answer that one? Thank you very much, but April 30, 1975, is not the war date.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: It is the war.

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: It was the end of the war, so basically the war was over. We just think, "Okay, that's the day I left the country".

Did you see the bill? We didn't talk about the war. We didn't talk about the atrocities, so basically—

• (1600)

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I know. I've read the preamble and I've read the short bill very many times.

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: I agree with you 100%. I agree with you that the passion is there after you come from the war. So basically that's the date when almost two million Vietnamese left the country.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I'm going to throw in one quick question. I'll change topics, because clearly we're going nowhere with the date business.

What happened in the Senate when you changed the name from "black April" to "journey to freedom"? What was the thinking or the process behind that?

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: When we talk about "black April day", nobody understands this. A few people would know it, but "journey to freedom day" is more relevant.

Beginning in 1975 Canada started accepting refugees. The orphans arrived in Canada. On April 24 the Canadian embassy accepted refugees. On April 30 they accepted refugees. I came to

Canada in 1975 on May 27. I remember that date. Canada accepted me and I don't know how many others.

Basically, that's the date after the war. We changed the name to "journey to freedom day" to reflect the amazing human rights role Canadians played in welcoming thousands and thousands and thousands. During 1979 and 1980, Canada accepted 60,000 Vietnamese refugee boat people, so we think this name is better than something more negative.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Why are we counting the commemoration starting in 1975, then, instead of 1979 or 1980?

Mr. Nguyen, you said you came in 1980, I think.

Mr. James Lam Nguyen: I came in 1981.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: It was 1981, and you said that's when the 60,000, the vast majority of Vietnamese refugees were accepted in Canada. So why are we counting from 1975 instead of 1979 or 1980 or whenever?

The Chair: Answer all that within 15 seconds, please.

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo: In May 1975, 3,000 were accepted into Canada. In May 1975, more than 7,000 were told they were accepted, and then 450 were accepted in August. From then on, Canada started to accept 200 families each month, starting on that date, so basically that's the reason why.

Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Dion, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the four witnesses.

I had hoped that this meeting would reconcile the Vietnamese community. It is a tall order, but let me try.

Ms. Nguyen, Ms. McNinch, I propose the following.

Once this bill comes into effect in Canada, the commemoration will take shape. When we come together for this commemoration in my riding, Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, I can assure you that everyone will be welcome.

As a Canadian member of Parliament, I do not want to provide an official version of the history of another country. I want to do two things: first, commemorate every Vietnamese refugee, the boat people and all the others, and second, commemorate the extraordinary contribution of Canada's Vietnamese community.

With characteristic generosity, the Vietnamese community wants to add a third reason to celebrate: it wants to express its thanks to Canada. Very well, let's stop there. What is there left to discuss?

There are some things in the section of the bill that begins, “Whereas”, that you may not be so happy about, but that will be quickly forgotten. The only thing we'll remember is that we're together and that we will work together. It is not the role of Parliament to deal with disagreements over interpretations of the past. As a parliamentarian, I am not going to provide an official version of the history of another country. That is not my job.

Can we all celebrate together? That is my question.

[English]

Ms. Elizabeth McNinch (Director, Montreal, Canada-Vietnam Trade Council): I very much agree that on the points you've made about honouring refugees and the contributions they've made and no doubt the senator is sincere in his efforts to do this. The unfortunate thing is that if you've read the bill from the preamble on, it is a very malevolent attack on the creation of Vietnam and the Government of Vietnam as it stands today. My position...look, I'm of Irish origin, I know all about this stuff. I know everything about flags from the old regime, marching parades, and the whole thing.

In this case look at ASEAN as a trade group; one of the biggest trading organizations in the world. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines are all dropping. Who's rising to the ascendency in ASEAN right now? Everybody knows it's Vietnam.

It looks to me that.... Why go and poke your finger in the eye of a vital and influential trade partner who right now is the ascending power?

• (1605)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: With all due respect, we are not doing that. I would not do that in supporting this bill—

Ms. Elizabeth McNinch: You're not doing that, but if you read the bill carefully—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: No, not at all. I'm giving the opportunity every year to celebrate the contribution of the Vietnamese community to Canada.

Ms. Elizabeth McNinch: That's a different thing.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If some people have their interpretation of the Vietnam War, or any event in the history of Vietnam, they are entitled to do so in a free country. It's not what we will commemorate at this moment. We'll commemorate the saga of the refugees and the contribution of Vietnamese to Canada.

Ms. Elizabeth McNinch: With respect, sir, the bill is all about the history of the war. That's what it's based on, winners and losers—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, I understand you might dislike the whereas, but my experience with that is that the whereas are forgotten almost always. The only thing that will remain is we'll celebrate the April 30 date. You may not like the date, but it will be April 30 anyway and we'll give the significance to this celebration in Saint-Laurent—Cartierville in my riding with my friends. We'll do it in a very consensual way in welcoming everyone.

Madam Nguyen, do you want to react?

Dr. Dai Trang H. (Julie) Nguyen: Yes. Honourable Stéphane Dion, I thank you very much for your point. I totally agree that this bill should be about two things: to commemorate the Vietnam refugees and to celebrate their contribution to the Canadian society.

If we focus on these two positive things there should be no disagreement.

The disagreement comes from the fact that the bill is about the war. It's about the ending of a war that was one of the most controversial and bloodiest wars in the 20th century. When it's about war it will always create disagreement and emotion. In order to build consensus about this bill we should focus on the two points that you just mentioned. The bill is about 60,000 refugees who came in 1979 and 1980. This bill is not about those who came in 1975. In this bill we have to refocus and focus on the 60,000 refugees who were accepted to land in Canada. The first day they landed in Canada was July 27, 1979. This date is relevant.

I have no idea what's happening in Vietnam. I have no idea what July 27 means in Vietnam. I'm here, I'm a Canadian citizen, and I care about what it means for my fellow Vietnamese Canadians in the community. When they come here, they are accepted, they contribute, and this is what I celebrate with them.

I want to clarify that not all of the 300,000 Vietnamese Canadians are refugees. This bill is only about the 60,000 refugees who came in 1979 and 1980. I don't belong to that group. I came as an economic immigrant and there are many economic immigrants like myself. We need to have consensus for the whole community.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I understand your view.

The bill will pass. Even though I'm opposing it, the bill will pass. I cannot accept having a divided society, a divided community, so I will do my best—I know I won't be alone on that, as I think all my colleagues will do their best—to be sure that the way we commemorate will include you and everyone. That's where we are now.

It's very sad, because usually when you have a commemoration for a community it's unanimous, and it's a great moment. I'm very sad that for you it will be a sad moment. I will do everything to be sure that the people who have the same feelings as you—I'm sure they exist, as they came to speak with me in my riding—will be celebrated with as brothers and sisters, as great Canadians, all together.

• (1610)

Dr. Dai Trang H. (Julie) Nguyen: Thank you.

The Chair: *Merci, monsieur Dion.*

We will now briefly suspend as we bring in our next group of panellists.

• (1610)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1610)

The Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. I call meeting 39 back to order.

Today we are studying 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.

On our second panel today we have Mr. Trac Do and Mr. Nguyen from the Canada–Vietnam Friendship Association. From the Communauté vietnamienne au Canada we have Mr. Dao, who's the president of the Montreal region.

Both groups will have up to eight minutes.

Mr. Do, you have the floor for up to eight minutes.

• (1615)

Mr. Trac Bang Do (President, Toronto Section, Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association): Honourable Gordon Brown, chair of the House committee on heritage, honourable members for the House committee on heritage, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted and excited to be called as a witness regarding Bill S-219.

My name is Do Trac Bang. My Canadian friends call me Chuck, because I have been in Canada for 35 years.

I am the president of the Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association, and the friendship ambassador for the City of Toronto in Vietnam. I tell you this to show that I have a long experience of serving the community. From 1986 to 1992, for three consecutive terms, I was the appointment in council for the Ontario government on multiculturalism.

I am here to be a witness for Bill S-219, because I think the bill expresses our support for the recognition of the Vietnamese community in Canada.

As a Vietnamese refugee who came to Canada in January 1980, I am one of the members of the Vietnamese boat people. I don't want to talk about the bill for long, but every member around the table has a letter written by me in which I express my point of view on behalf of the Vietnamese community.

I would like to make the point to the committee today, with regard to the wording of this bill, that I believe up to 90% of the Vietnamese community would support choosing July 27 to commemorate the Vietnamese boat people's first exodus to Canada. In this spirit and with due respect, I am calling on the honourable Senator Ngo Thanh Hai to adopt July 27 as the commemoration day to be proposed in Bill S-219 as this day is perfectly meaningful and realistically acceptable to our community.

I represent the older generation, those who first arrived in Canada. However, with me is Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen, who is from the younger generation, those who have also come from Vietnam but who were born after the war ended in 1975. He represents the younger generation and can express the will of the community before the members of the parliamentary committee today.

I would like to ask Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen to take the floor, please.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen (Member, Toronto Section, Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association): Hello, everyone.

My name is Hoang. I represent a younger generation of Vietnamese in Toronto and also a part of Canada.

I'm here today to make only one point, which is the date of this bill.

When I came to the Hill today, I came across an article in *Embassy* news that came out this morning, April 1. I'm going to quote a sentence written in this article about Bill S-219, and the quote comes from the Conservative member, Mark Adler. The quote says, "This is a historical fact that we're talking about here..". He went on to say that "the historical fact is there was an invasion. There were two separate countries in 1975, and there was an invasion."

As I said, I was born after the war, and, of course, I didn't witness the war. For me, the history comes from history books. I was taught by some of the well-known professors here, for example, Professor Gabriel Kolko, from York University in Canada, who has written a book about the Vietnamese war called *Anatomy of a War*. It's about the Vietnamese war, from 1940 to 1975.

I'm going to read one sentence that I learned from this book: "South Vietnam is a geographic expression only for the sake of convenience" because legally Vietnam, south of the 17th parallel, under the Geneva Accords of 1954, was an integral part of one nation, transitionally divided prior to reunification.

The key word here is "reunification", ladies and gentlemen. April 30, 1975 is the day that reunited Vietnam. April 30, 1975 is not the day that commemorates refugees from Vietnam coming to Canada. That is one thing I want to make clear. This is what I learned from university, from textbooks. My point today is very clear: The day to commemorate the Vietnamese refugees in Canada should be July 27, 1979. April 30 is the day that reunited Vietnam, my country.

Thank you very much for your time.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move over to Mr. Dao.

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao (President, Montreal Region, Communauté Vietnamienne au Canada): Honourable Members, Chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao, and I have been the president of the Vietnamese community in Canada for the greater Montreal area for four years. I was the president of the association of Vietnamese physicians of Canada from 2005 to 2009.

It is a great honour for me to represent the approximately 30,000 members of the Vietnamese community in Canada in the greater Montreal area—there are 42,500 in Quebec—and to speak to Bill S-219.

We will never forget the participation of the Canadian Forces in the International Commission of Control and Supervision of the armistice and the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Despite the armistice, South Vietnam was invaded by communist troops from the north. The war ended on April 30, 1975, and from that day onward, the increased terror, repression and atrocities carried out by the new regime against the South Vietnamese led to many more refugees.

We will never forget the words broadcast on the BBC or the VOA, sometime around 1980–1983, of a 75- to 80-year-old Vietnamese man: "If these electric rods and sticks could walk they too would flee the country."

I invite you to listen to the story of a prisoner of war who witnessed the situation from 1975 to 1985.

Before April 30, 1975, this man was a medical officer in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. We can all agree that the role of the doctor is to alleviate human suffering, no matter the politics, location, time or the patient's race. It is a noble and fine profession.

With the takeover by the communist regime, he had to report to brainwashing concentration camps like so many other soldiers, officers and government workers. Almost all southerners were found guilty, and many were considered to have blood debts to public. Doctors were especially guilty because they healed and relieved the suffering of members of the People's Army. The doctor in this story made a very big mistake. He saved the lives of members of the People's Army, who were very moved, quit the army and sought political asylum in the south.

In the concentration camps, he performed forced labour: planting food crops, cutting down trees for wood to be sold for frames, writing self-critical texts, and attending lectures steeped with revenge and jealousy. Camp changes were frequent. After two and a half years in the brainwashing camps, he was released, but continued to be closely watched by managers, police and local authorities.

He was forced to work in a hospital for sick children under the control of poorly educated, non-professional administrative staff or go to the new economic zones, which were deserted regions with little or no resources. He had to stay with friends. At the slightest suspicions, the local authorities would often knock down doors at night to take people away to undisclosed locations.

Faced with this dangerous situation, he had no choice. He had to leave the country at any cost. He tried to seek freedom and flee with his wife and his 10-year-old and 11-month-old sons as boat people. He tried 13 times but never succeeded.

• (1625)

Finally, through some dealings involving the black market for gold bullion, his family caught a plane in March 1985, and fulfilled a promise that his brother-in-law, a student in New Brunswick and Montreal, made in February 1975.

He is but one—

[English]

The Chair: Dr. Dao, I'm going to have to stop you for one moment.

The bells are ringing now. If a member of the committee was prepared to ask for unanimous consent to continue, we could do that.

Do we have consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, continue.

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Thank you.

He is but one of 840,000 individuals called "refugees". It is estimated that during this exodus, more than 250,000 Vietnamese

lost their lives at sea and roughly 100,000 in the forests at the borders, due to drowning, disease, starvation, violence and acts of piracy.

The Vietnamese diaspora designates April 30 as Black April Day or Journey to Freedom Day to commemorate the lives lost and the suffering experienced during the exodus of the Vietnamese people. This day also acknowledges the warm welcome by Canadians and the Government of Canada of the Vietnamese refugees and the gratitude of the Vietnamese people overseas for that welcome.

It was not just Canada but many others who extended this extraordinary gesture to the Vietnamese refugees: so did the United States, Australia, France, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, and others. In 1986, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded the Nansen Medal to Canada, an honour on par with the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet how many Canadians are aware of this honour? That was the impetus for Bill S-219. We Canadians, whatever our background, are proud to be recognized by other countries, by citizens around the world through this legislation.

Now let's continue the story of the former prisoner. After arriving in Montreal, in March 1985, the family immediately found work. The mother worked in a furniture factory, and then in a factory that made car brakes. The father studied for an equivalency exam.

In November 1985, after passing the exam, he worked at St. Luke's Hospital as an orderly for more than three years. During that time, thanks to the generosity of the department heads, he worked in the mornings as a trainee and in the evenings as an orderly. Between 1991 and 1993, he had his rotating internship and has been a practising family doctor since 1994. He was awarded the Prix des médecins de coeur et d'action.

• (1630)

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Dr. Dao.

We're now going to go to questions, and to Mr. Dykstra, for up to seven minutes.

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Could I have one more minute?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, you can ask him to continue.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Go ahead, you can finish. It's only going to be a minute.

The Chair: You can finish, but you're using up Mr. Dykstra's time now.

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: I will sum up.

The Vietnamese community in Montreal has significantly contributed to the development of Canadian and Quebec society: every year it organizes a Health Day around September or October for 400 to 500 people from various ethnic backgrounds with presentations and advice on modern medical problems for and by Vietnamese health professionals; it offers English, French and Vietnamese courses, computer courses, martial arts courses, citizenship courses, meals for the homeless, courses to combat domestic violence, courses to protect seniors, fundraisers for victims of the storms and disasters in Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Lac-Mégantic as well.

There are many other activities that the Vietnamese community contributes to with Canadians of Vietnamese origin.

Once enacted, the Journey to Freedom Day is a day for Canada, its people, its elected officials, and its government. This law is for the Canadian people only and their ideals of peace and freedom.

Honourable chair, honourable members of the committee, by voting for this bill, you are enhancing the values of peace, freedom and human dignity which are truly the pillars of Canada. By voting for this bill, you are helping us to finally express the gratitude of Vietnamese Canadians to their host country and recognizing their commitment and contributions to this society of theirs. You are encouraging them to defend our values and exercise our rights, including the right to vote, which, by the way, exists in name only for the Vietnamese who remained in their country.

On April 30, Canadians of Vietnamese origin will attend a grand ceremony for the unveiling of the "Tribute to Liberty" monument to commemorate the 100 million victims of communism around the world. The monument will be erected near Parliament.

Honorable chair, honourable members of the committee, we sincerely thank you for your attention. Please accept the thanks of the entire Vietnamese community in Canada in the greater Montreal area.

Lastly, let's not forget that the Journey to Freedom Day is not a legal holiday or a non-judicial day.

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, you now have about four minutes and fifteen seconds.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Every once in a while it's not bad for a politician to give up his speaking time.

Mr. Nguyen and Mr. Bang Do, one of the pieces in terms of preparing for this is that concerns, at least from my perspective and some of the same arguments that you're presenting today, were also raised during the honouring of the story of the boat people in 1995. At that time the Vietnamese embassy warned the Canadian government that there would be negative effects, similar to what has been expressed this afternoon, on trade and a bilateral relationship between the two countries. When the monument was erected at Somerset and Preston streets right here in Ottawa, it also commemorated the contribution of the Vietnamese community to the city and the Vietnamese community who fled or were expelled from their country in April 1975.

I wondered if any of you could identify any negative repercussions with respect to trade that happened between Vietnam and Canada.

Mr. Trac Bang Do: I think in terms of the trade with Canada it took about 40 years to be built. If we're saying bad things about the country, it doesn't just jeopardize the opportunity for the Canadian government and people to deal with the Vietnamese trade opportunity, but it also jeopardizes the friendship very much for a long time to come. We don't know how many years it will take, maybe another 40 to 50 years. That would be a very very long time.

• (1635)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: One of the other pieces in all of this, from my perspective, is how we, as a country, have identified several events that have happened in other countries, including, for example, the Holodomor, the Armenian genocide. These are all significant tragic events in our world history that we, as a country, were prepared to recognize. We did recognize those events in the House of Commons and by the federal government. I don't understand, or I guess I'm a little bit unsure as to why there is anything different about recognizing Canada's role in accepting all of the displaced Vietnamese who came here in 1975 and on. Commemorating that journey to freedom made by thousands of Vietnamese Canadians, based on the fact that it happened, based on the fact that this is consistent with the Canadian model of how we recognize what these incidents and these tragic events mean to the lives of so many, why is it so difficult to accept this as something we should do as a country?

Mr. Trac Bang Do: Today, as a witness, I am saying that I'm not opposed to the bill itself. I support the dates that should be changed. I arrived in Canada in January 1980. But April 30, 1975, is not the date a single Vietnamese came to Canada. As my partner here says, that day was the unification day. I hope that the House committee members would recognize July 27 as the day that recognizes the first Vietnamese boat people's arrival in Canada. As the person who serves the Vietnamese community at large, I think July 27 is more of an opportunity for our people to recognize and to have in the bill.

The Chair: All right, thank you very much.

We're now going to move to Ms. Sitsabaiesan, for up to seven minutes.

Then we're going to suspend after that.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I'm not sure if all of you were here in the first half when I was asking about clear controversy with the date. As well, you've clearly articulated, Mr. Dao, you support April 30. Mr. Do and Mr. Nguyen, you both have said that you don't support the April 30 date.

Mr. Do, you mentioned something interesting. In your mind April 30 is the reunification date, when North and South Vietnam were put together.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: That is correct.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Clearly, there is a divide. I don't know if it's 90% of the population like one date and 10% don't, or 99% or 50% or 70%. I don't know what the percentages are, and I don't know if there's any math to support it.

Is there, in your minds, a date that is not April 30, that is not July 27, that can work?

Mr. Trac Bang Do: I think that there is no other date that can classify so high an expectation for us to recognize than July 27 which is the Vietnamese boat people's first arrival in Canada.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: Rathika, I would say June 20. Where is June 20 coming from? From my understanding of the Nansen Award that was awarded to the people of Canada from the United Nations. Now it's not to Canada, but to the people of Canada, who have welcomed a lot of refugees to this country, not only Vietnamese, but people from a lot of other nations.

Now to directly answer your question of what date, what comes to my mind right now would be June 20, 1986, where Canada, as a nation—

• (1640)

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: —received the commendation.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: —received the commendation, and that recognizes all Canadians for accepting the Vietnamese refugees in particular, and the refugees from all other countries.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

Dr. Dao, do you have a comment about that?

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Thank you very much.

Keep in mind, all the tragedy, lives lost, much of the terror and atrocities occurred as of April 30, 1975. That is the only date to remember. We must preserve that date otherwise it will be forgotten and we won't be able to explain, especially to future generations, why we are here in Canada instead of in Vietnam. It is because of April 30, 1975.

There was unspeakable tragedy and that is why we must try to commemorate that day. It is not about rekindling hatred or vengeance, but about making this an historic fact for humanity. We must absolutely bear that in mind. We are certainly not talking here about hatred or vengeance, but about the pain and misfortune suffered by the Vietnamese people overseas.

Let's not forget that we are talking about the suffering and all that happened at the start or the middle of April. The opposition is going to Vietnam to celebrate the Great Spring Victory, but what is that about? It is absurd because that was a sad day. In our country, we attend ceremonies that celebrate the great victory, but it reminds us that we were chased out of the country. It is sad for us.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

I understand that the purpose of the bill is really to express your gratitude to Canada and Canadians for welcoming the Vietnamese refugees with open arms.

Could you tell me, which day, to your knowledge, the first Vietnamese refugee arrived in Canada?

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Again, all this tragedy, between 1975 and now, began on April 30, after the Fall of Saigon.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Yes, I understand.

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: We cannot choose any other date because future generations, Canada, and the world needs to know that it was a day never to forget.

[English]

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I'm going to change gears.

This is a question that came from the analysts also. Do you feel that the presentation of the events or the timeline as outlined in the preamble of the bill is a fair or accurate reflection of historical facts? Yes or no? Why or why not? Anybody.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: That is a very interesting question.

As I mentioned earlier, the preamble mentioned that on April 30, 1975, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. I should mention that this is what I learned from university. This is a historical fact I said here. I don't bring the long story. I don't mention anything. I just take from the book that I learned from at university. This is where the well-known, respected university history professor mentioned that this is a country that was divided before unification. There was no invasion. The country was one before. It was just temporarily separated.

What I would suggest, if I may, is that some of the wording in the preamble should be removed because it wrongly defines the historical fact of invading. As well the Vietnam War didn't start in 1973 and end in 1975. It was a long war starting all the way back in 1940 and 1954. Those are the facts. As Mr. Dao was saying, I was born after the war. All of this I learned from books and historical facts. Those are things that I wish the committees would consider, the historical facts that you can read from any textbook. You should review the preamble—

• (1645)

The Chair: I have to cut you off there, because members do have to go and vote.

We will suspend, and when we come back, Monsieur Dion will have seven minutes. Then we will move to clause-by-clause consideration.

Could members come back right after the vote, please.

We will briefly suspend.

• (1645)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: Good afternoon once again.

We will call the meeting back to order. We are studying Bill S-219.

Monsieur Dion, sept minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to thank the three witnesses.

[English]

We'll try again to reconcile everyone. I'm determined to try.

As you may know, the Monday before May 25 every year there is a statutory holiday in Canada. Which one is it? Do you know?

You don't know. Most Quebecers don't know, but they are pleased that on Monday, May 18, of this year, they will not have to work. It will be a free day. It will be a holiday. Many Quebecers will know that it is the day of the Queen, but they don't know which Queen. They may think it's Elizabeth II. In fact it's Victoria. But most of them don't know that.

Other Quebecers will want to commemorate Dollard des Ormeaux, a warrior who protected New France against the Mohawks when they were attacking Ville Marie, which is the ancestor of Montreal. Others will want to commemorate *les Patriotes*, the ones who fought in the 1837 rebellion against the British system of the time. Others will celebrate whatever you want: they are pleased to celebrate.

My point is that Canada is a free country. April 30 will be the date of commemoration for Canadians of Vietnamese background. You will be free to give to this commemoration the definition you want. Just commemorate with us; it will be great. That's my point.

I have a second point I would like you to react to. Canada is a free country. If in addition to that you want to commemorate a day in July, choose your date. Invite me, please. There are not enough days on the calendar to commemorate enough what Canadians of Vietnamese background are giving to Canada.

Those are my two arguments: commemorate what you want, as long as we do it together, and if it's not enough, choose another date and invite me, please.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: Honourable Stéphane Dion, I fully agree with you on having a day to commemorate or to celebrate the fact that we are all here in Canada. The young generation like mine also wants to have a day. Take the statue like the one in downtown Ottawa to memorialize the sacrifice of a lot of people who came here to the country. I have absolutely no problem with that. We absolutely agree with that. Me, my family, all my friends, my colleagues, my partner, we all agree with that.

However, when a bill like this one is put forward, one that's based on historical fact, we should choose a day that's based on fact and based on concrete evidence. The bill mentions the day when the Nansen Refugee Award was given to Canada. My understanding of the bill is that it's really to commemorate and to celebrate Vietnamese refugees in Canada. However, it's also a thank you to the people of Canada. If you want to say thank you to someone, though, you don't come on July 1 if their birthday was June 28. You come on June 28. You don't come on July 1, do you?

My point here is that you'd better choose a day that is meaningful. For all the refugees, including the Vietnamese, what better day to thank Canada than June 20? The bill itself states that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded the Nansen Refugee Award to the people of Canada in 1986.

• (1715)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I have no problem commemorating this day as well.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: Perfect, and I'm sure I'm going to invite you to my party. I have no problem with that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I'm pleased by that. I hope you will come to Saint-Laurent—Cartierville on April 30 when we will celebrate Canadians of Vietnamese background.

Another example is June 24. It used to be *la fête des Canadiens français*, French Canadians. Now the God of Quebec one day decided it would be the national day of Quebec for all Quebecers: anglophones, francophones, and allophones together. In my experience, we are now celebrating both. We don't choose. We may celebrate Quebec or all French Canadians from coast to coast to coast; who cares? We celebrate together and we have fun. I hope it will be the case.

[Translation]

Doctor, I know that as president, you are a good man and extremely devoted to your community.

What can we all do together in Montreal to ensure that people like Mr. Trac Bang Do and Mr. Nguyen feel included and celebrate with us?

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

I am here to represent the Vietnamese community in Canada, specifically, the 20,000 plus people in the Vietnamese community in the Montreal region. We are here to deliver our community's message.

We want to keep that day for several reasons. First of all, how can we otherwise explain to future generations why they are here? We have to tell them that it is because North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam on April 30, and we have to tell them about all the terror that ensued as a result. You are all familiar with all of that. We cannot live with just theories. That is why we are here. Future generations need to know this.

The current Vietnamese Canadian community makes significant contributions to social development in so many areas, and future generations will do the same. This is important. If we change the date, younger generations will not know why they are here. It is hard to explain. We have to be sure that the date chosen will always commemorate the date of the mass exodus of Vietnamese people who rejected the doctrine. That is the first reason.

Second, for us, it is not a day of hatred, but rather a day of sadness. I'm sure you would agree that although our homeland is very poor—we have nothing to eat—it is still very beautiful, for sure. For us, staying here is not a gift. We stay here and we are very comfortable, but that does not mean we should forget about our homeland. We are here because of April 30, 1975. We must accept that. That is why that date must not change.

• (1720)

[English]

The Chair: That is going to have to be the last word.

[Translation]

Dr. Ba Ngoc Dao: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will now move to clause-by-clause consideration.

Pursuant to Standing Order 75(1) both the preamble and the short title will be postponed.

(Clauses 2 and 3 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall the preamble carry?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Mr. Chair, debate.

The Chair: Did you ask for debate on the preamble?

Ms. Sitsabaiesan, you have the floor.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Do you want to excuse our guests, so they don't have to sit at the table here while we're going through the perfunctory...?

The Chair: Okay, thank you, Mr. Dykstra.

To our witnesses, thank you very much. You are excused, if you wish.

Mr. Van Hoang Nguyen: Thank you all.

Mr. Trac Bang Do: Thank you very much, members of the committee.

The Chair: Ms. Sitsabaiesan, you have the floor. You're debating the preamble.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Mr. Chair, I want to enter the debate at some point. I can debate on the short title if you want or whatever, it doesn't really matter.

The Chair: You have the floor.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Mr. Chair, I want to make clear that the New Democrats are very disappointed with this process. We're disappointed that the committee wasn't able to hear from more witnesses and consider the bill more thoroughly. The preamble might be a good place for me to talk about this, because there's clearly a lot of division and contention within the community where there's a lot of passion. I think—and I'm certain that my NDP colleagues will support me in this—that it merits more study than this rushed process we've had today, and what we've learned about what happened in the Senate.

We think it's important to recognize the contributions of Canada in addressing the refugee crisis that resulted from the Vietnam War. That's what we heard from so many of our witnesses today, and the many contributions of the Vietnamese Canadians who have made this country their home. We've heard today, and statistics have shown, that more than 300,000 people made Canada their home, and Canada has welcomed them here. It's also a personal thing for me because my people have had to come to Canada and around the world as refugees. Canada has been a country that accepted my people whether they came as refugees or migrants in other forms.

Canada is a beautiful country. It's sad in that the bill was an opportunity for the community to say thank you to Canada, and there's clearly contention and division, and I wish there were more time for us to thoroughly study and hear more from the community, and possibly make meaningful changes for the community.

It's important to note that clearly there are diverse views on the bill within the Vietnamese Canadian community. As I said, we wish we were able to speak more about the bill here at committee. We learned the Senate process showed a lack of consultation also, and there were

witnesses who requested to appear and weren't given permission. Only witnesses who supported the bill were able to testify in the Senate.

It's our role as parliamentarians, Mr. Chair, to make sure that equity and democracy prevail, and to consider the diversity of all views on the issues and then take them into account to make sure we're being responsible in decisions we're making.

We, and when I say "we" I'm talking for the NDP, support the efforts to commemorate Canada's acceptance of tens of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. We heard from witnesses today that it was more than 60,000. We do wish though that this legislative process had been more inclusive, and allowed for thorough study and thorough analysis by the committee members.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Is there any further debate on the preamble?

Mr. Dion.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I just want to say that indeed I would have preferred if more time had been allowed to hear the different views, and to try to reconcile a community that should not be divided at a time when we want to commemorate the community. I think it's our duty as parliamentarians to try to do more than what we did. I'm pleased that at least we had one opportunity to do so, but more time would have been preferable.

I want that to be clear, and also to be clear that the support I will give on behalf of my party is about the contribution of the Vietnamese community to Canada, the refugees that we need, to commemorate their history. It's not about giving an official interpretation of the history of another country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any further debate on the preamble?

Shall the preamble carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Shall the short title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Shall the title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Shall I report the bill to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all of the folks who have come to see our process in action today. Thank you for attending. Thank you to all of the committee members.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I don't mean to interrupt, Mr. Chair, but there are a lot of people here who probably have never seen the process that we move through to get a bill through committee and send it back to the House. Perhaps you could explain to the senator and to his guests what just transpired in terms of this vote.

The Chair: Thank you.

I appreciate the opportunity to explain our process here. To everyone in attendance we have now passed this bill through the

committee, which we will report back to the House of Commons. It will then be debated once again in the House of Commons at third reading. As this bill originated in the Senate, it has already passed the Senate. If the House of Commons passes it at third reading, it will then go to the Governor General to receive royal assent and then it will be law.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: May I invite you, Mr. Chair, to explain what on division means, because otherwise it could be misunderstood.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

On division means that it passed, but in fact members may or may not have supported it. It was not unanimous, but it did pass.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

Bill S219 Hearing – Opening Statement

Thank you Chair, Dear committee members and guests, good afternoon.

My name is James Nguyen and I am the current President of the Vietnamese Association, Toronto (VAT), one of the oldest Vietnamese organizations in Canada. I am honoured to be before of you to provide my unwavering support for Bill S219 and to explain why this Act recognizing April 30 of every year is meaningful for the Vietnamese-Canadian community.

I left Vietnam like many of my fellow Vietnamese-Canadians in the events that followed the fall of Saigon on April 30 1975. My journey to freedom started in the fall of 1980 by boat with my oldest sister and 3 older brothers. We stayed in a Malaysian refugee camp Pulau Bidong for approximately 6 months before Canada generously accepted us in March of 1981. I remembered we first flew into Quebec for a few days before arriving in Edmonton, Alberta on a cold, wintry day. For those of you who know, Edmonton in March is still quite cold, and all I remember was facing this foreign freezing season with a blue jacket with white stripes on them (show picture with Santa Claus at Bonnie Doon Mall). For a 6 year-old kid who knew nothing about the circumstances of why I left Vietnam without my parents, you can imagine that it was a pretty daunting experience.

My escape from Vietnam is similar to many other Vietnamese-Canadians. My oldest sister, who was 20 at the time, had tried escaping by boat times by herself but every time she was caught and jailed briefly and then sent packing home. However, the one time that I escaped with her she was successful, thus I always consider myself to be her good luck charm. Our journey lasted about 5 days and 4 nights before we embarked upon Malaysia. On the boat journey, we encountered Thai pirates. For those of you who may not be aware of stories of Thai pirates, many times they embark on the refugees' boats to loot things or take the women away. There's a story that was told to me by a few people that were on my boat. Apparently, when they took all the women from my boat onto the pirates' boat, one of the refugee men whose wife and daughter had been abducted jumped overboard to commit suicide. This desperate refugee said that he'd rather die than live without his daughter and wife. When the pirates saw this they ordered all the women to get back onto the boat. Apparently, they feared that if this man had died, he would come back to haunt them for the rest of their lives. It's true of the old adage "honour amongst thieves."

My story is not unique, as there are many refugee stories similar to mine. The country I left behind is just a distant memory and all of my good memories are of Canada. I remembered playing street hockey in the cold months of

Edmonton and pretending I was Wayne Gretzky or Mark Messier and using a beer bottle wrapped in aluminum foil as the Stanley Cup. My love of the game of street hockey gave me a case of frost bite on my ears and to this day every time I go outside my ears get so sensitive that it becomes red after a couple of minutes of exposure.

The Vietnamese Canadian community now amounts to more than 300 thousand proud Vietnamese Canadians who contribute to the prosperity of this country. As a leader of the biggest Vietnamese community in Canada, I attend many events and whenever the conversation of this Bill comes up, there is overwhelming support for it. This Bill is important to me and those that I encounter in the community because it acknowledges our heritage. Let me state clearly that I DO NOT believe that this bill is anti-Vietnam or anti-Vietnamese government. I genuinely believe that the people of Vietnam are a beautiful people with so much culture and history. This Bill is a testimony of my journey as a refugee to Canada and the journey of others after April 30, 1975 to our newly-adopted homeland of Canada. I think remembering April 30 is extremely important because April 30 represents a day of commemoration. For many people in Canada, April 30 is a day for Vietnamese-Canadians to come together and express our gratitude to Canada for welcoming us with open arms. Thanks to the overwhelming generosity and support of Canadians,

entire refugee families were able to resettle here and build a new and peaceful life.

Recently, my organization hosted the Lunar New Year Festival in Mississauga whereby the Prime Minister of Canada attended. I was honoured not only to be the President of the organization that hosted the event, but also the co-chair of the event. I recall being in the backstage area with the Prime Minister as he was preparing to enter the hall and he said something very remarkable “You know what this will probably be the biggest event I will attend this year.” After hearing that, I paused for a second and said to myself “Wow, we really did something big here.” After the event, the security officers who had the counter devices told me we had over 11,000 walk through our event. Can you imagine that, refugees who came to Canada with nothing in their pockets were able to host the leader of the country at the biggest Vietnamese festival in Canada. At the event, I gave my speech in front of the audience and I would like to read a short except from my speech.

“The world knows the story of the Vietnamese boat refugees because they see the lasting images of desperate people out in dangerous waters in small boats. Unfortunately, many of these boat refugees perished on the open seas due to starvation, drownings and sickness, and for that we honour their souls and wish them eternal peace. Although we have

been away from our motherland for 40 years now, we have found a loving and caring new home that has been so hospitable to us. In Canada, we started with humble beginnings as dishwashers, janitors and general laborers. Well, we have strived to become doctors, lawyers, accountants, members of the armed forces, professors, teachers and business owners. I think we all can agree that every time Canada has asked the Vietnamese-Canadian community to contribute, we have stepped up and have given so much."

I truly believe that this Bill encompasses what I have just read to you. We as a community love this country and I for one will always speak highly of this great nation as a proud citizen. In Canada, we are provided with so many opportunities to succeed, and to even disagree with one another without fear of reprisals or retributions.

I would like to conclude my remarks by mentioning that this Bill is a timely one, as this year, the Vietnamese-Canadian Community will be honouring the 40th anniversary of the boat people refugee's journey to freedom and their resettlement to Canada on April 30, 2015.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify , merci beaucoup.

Speaking notes - McIninch

Bill S219 Threatens an Excellent Relationship

2013 was a momentous year for Canadian-Vietnamese relations as the two nations marked four decades of official bilateral ties. It was a great honour for me to be asked to edit the anniversary book entitled *Friendship Beyond Borders: Celebrating 40 Years of Vietnamese-Canadian Diplomatic Relations*. The Prime Minister of Vietnam, contributed an article about the increasing friendship and cooperation between our two countries in trade, education, cultural exchanges and the like, as well as the partnership we share in maintaining peace in the APEC region. Prime Minister Stephen Harper wrote equally enthusiastically about our excellent relationship in both bilateral and multilateral fora.

As indeed this relationship is.

In fact, Canada's relations with Vietnam go back to 1954 when the country was one of three official observers of the International Commission of Supervision and Control for the implementation of the Geneva Accords of that time. For nearly 20 years Canada was actively engaged in the truce supervision arrangements in Indochina marking the end of the war between France and her former colonies in the region.

We did so again as a by-product of the Paris Agreement signed in January 1973 which aimed at ending the lengthy war with the United States. I Canada has always punched well beyond its weight in Vietnam and courageous Canadians have helped change the course of history in the region.

Over 40 years we have worked together with shared values in peace, cooperation, and friendship. Canada now ranks 13th among countries investing in Vietnam and a large number of companies that are household names work effectively there. Two way trade is over 2 billion. Consumer products in Canada, over 3000 foreign students, Vietnam still one of 20 priority countries development assistance although this is being reduced. Huge potential for cooperation lies ahead as we are on a multilateral basis negotiating the Trans Pacific Partnership which will open cooperation in so many areas, infrastructure, science and technology, oil and gas and the like.

Until a seemingly inconsequential private members bill has threatened to blow the roof off of decades of carefully built bilateral ties between our two countries, infuriating Vietnam – as well as substantial segments of the Vietnamese-Canadian community.

Bill S-219 was first introduced in the Senate of Canada as a private members bill by Conservative Senator Thanh Hai Ngo, a former supporter of the Saigon regime. As any correct reading of history tells us, the regime was defeated on April 30 1975 at the same time as the airlift of US forces took place.

The Honorable Senator views the fall of Saigon as a great personal tragedy and has now used his position on the government benches to enshrine his views into a calamitous piece of legislation.

His position as part of the ancient regime of Saigonists who gather every April to commemorate the fall of Saigon. Along with senior ministers including the prime minister who attend such occasions, in some cases wrapped in flag of Saigon. In fact, the private member's bill was first entitled 'Black April' Day, then mutated into the 'Journey to Freedom Day'. What Canadian doesn't warm up to words like freedom and democracy, one may ask. And so, the seeds were sown and the present unseemly hybrid –Bill S219- was created.

The bill was passed in the Senate December 8 2014 in what was clearly a dark day for democracy in Canada.

The Senator has cloaked the legislative installation of the legacy of the Saigon regime and its followers into the history of this country by a manipulative plunge into the murky waters of division and hatred. And no country is more susceptible to pious rhetoric and misuse of the fine traditions of our land for personal gain.

Make no mistake about it. April 30 is not about refugees or boatpeople or landings on the welcoming soil of Canada. Bill 219 states that this date is 'Black April' as a result of what was an 'invasion' of South Vietnam (seemingly unlawfully accomplished even though this was a war to reunite the country and evict the American forces allied with the Saigon regime).

Historically this is the date in which an awful war was concluded and the foundations of the country entrenched. A public holiday in Vietnam, it is celebrated as Liberation Day in remembrance of the Fall of Saigon and the Reunification of the country in 1975. To equate it with a 'Journey to Freedom' is not, while rhetorically attractive to some, in any way accurate. And to call it 'Black April' **is in fact an act of great disrespect to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.** Would most Canadians not be infuriated to hear an unhappy minority call Canada Day 'Black July'?

Canada has, as the Prime Minister has said, an excellent relationship with Vietnam, a country we have been there for since the nationalist wars against French occupation. Why sacrifice the hopes and dreams – the substantial amounts of good will we have in the bank- over a private member's bill which has infuriated -and rightfully so –a major power in South-east Asia with whom we share an important partnership in the region.



The Honourable Thanh Hai Ngo, Senator

Committee Testimony
The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

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

Wednesday, April 1st, 2015
3:30 pm

Check against delivery

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dear colleagues,

It is with great appreciation that I appear before the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to talk about for the Journey to Freedom Day Act which seeks to recognize April 30 of every year as the day marking the end of the Fall of Saigon, commemorating the Vietnamese refugee exodus, and recognizing the fundamental role played by Canadians who welcomed thousands of Vietnamese refugees with open arms.

I sincerely hope this day of commemoration will focus the attention of all Canadians on the events and suffering that followed the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and the end of the Vietnam War.



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It will also highlight the vital role Canadians played in rescuing thousands of Vietnamese refugees who now proudly celebrate their heritage and their freedom in Canada.

For Canadians of Vietnamese origins, and even for the wide Vietnamese Diaspora living abroad, April 30th depicts a dark day when they lost their country, when they began their exodus as refugees, and embarked on their perilous journey to freedom.

This is why the Journey to Freedom Day Act is inspired by the Vietnamese-Canadian community, and their own journey to Canada, beginning back 40 years ago in 1975.

Quite simply, the significance of Journey to Freedom Day on April 30 is threefold:

First, it marks the tragic events of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees who fled their homeland after the fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975.

Secondly, it pays tribute to all Canadians and the Government of Canada who rose to the challenge



and welcomed thousands of refugees with open arms.

And finally; it celebrates the incredible contributions that Vietnamese refugees have made to the building of our great country.

The events that followed the fall of Saigon mark the beginning of the refugee crisis and the start of the exodus of millions of people fleeing Vietnam.

The years from 1975 to 1996 were known to be the largest mass migration in modern history, with more than 2 million people fleeing their war torn country, in search for freedom.

Refugees were fleeing the harsh treatment and suppression of human rights by an authoritarian government.

They escaped ethnic, religious, and political persecutions in order to avoid ongoing systemic political executions.

They fled from forced resettlement in remote areas; escaped forced re-education camps;



Most forced migrations are often displaced through mountains, and deserts. But the main escape route for Vietnamese refugees fleeing their country was by navigating stormy seas. This is why this group of refugees has become known to the world as the “boat people”.

Many Vietnamese refugees had to set sail in rickety broken boats for the South China Sea, where they faced constant, unimaginable peril.

They had to navigate not only through deadly storms but also through diseases and starvation.

The main causes of death of the boat people were drowning, attacks by pirates, murder or even sold into slavery and prostitution.

According to the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, over 250 thousand perished in the seas in search for freedom.

Bill S-219 is not only about commemorating the perilous Vietnamese refugee exodus, it is also an expression of gratitude for Canada’s acclaimed



humanitarian response to the refugee crisis that followed the fall of Saigon.

Even if Canada was not directly involved in the Vietnam War, it played an active role in the peace efforts.

Canada had a respected supervisory role under the International Control Commission to support the aim of establishing peace.

However, Canada's role in helping refugees has often been forgotten and should be a subject of reflection and education.

All Canadians should remember the outpouring generosity and compassionate role the Canadian people showed towards Vietnamese refugees who fled their native land.

Canada's experience with the Vietnamese refugee exodus began during the fall of Saigon, when it announced it would resettle approximately 4,500 refugees to Canada.

In fact, the day after the fall of Saigon, on May 1, 1975, Canada immediately recognized the plight



of the Vietnamese people trying to escape and declared it would sponsor refugees with relatives already in Canada.

As the Vietnamese refugee crisis developed and worsened, Canada continued to accept wave after wave of boat people refugees.

By April 1980, Canadians from all walks of life answered the call without hesitation and opened their homes and hearts to over 60 thousand refugees who desperately needed a place to rebuild their lives.

Canada became an international leader through its creation of a private refugee sponsorship program.

This program enabled us to accept a greater number of refugees and it served as a model for other countries.

Without the kindness and generosity of thousands of Canadians, and the dedication, support and cooperation of the Canadian government, refugee agencies, non-governmental organizations and religious groups, it would simply have been



impossible to welcome so many people in such dire straits.

This bill highlights the historic role Canada played in opening its doors to so many refugees.

The scriptures say that “he who saves one life, saves a generation.” Today, Canada’s population includes 300 thousand people of Vietnamese origin.

In 1986, impressed by Canada’s acceptance of so many Vietnamese refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded Canadians the Nansen Medal in recognition of “their essential and constant contribution to the cause of refugees.”

This medal is the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for assisting refugees, and it is the only time in the history of the award that a country — in fact, an entire people — has received this honour. I am proud to announce that the medal will be presented in Parliament on April 30, 2015.

In recognition of this country’s compassion and humanitarian assistance, Canadians of Vietnamese



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origin have gathered every April 30 for 39 years to commemorate their journey, to thank Canada and to celebrate a common heritage.

On Wednesday, April 1, 2015, these Canadians will begin to mark the 40th anniversary of the resettlement of the boat people in Canada.

Bill S-219, Journey to Freedom Day would provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on the strengths and diversity the Vietnamese community has brought to our country and to celebrate their contribution to the Canadian cultural mosaic.

In 2015, the Vietnamese-Canadian community will celebrate the 40 Year Anniversary of the Boat People Resettlement to Canada. It is my hope to have this Bill passed in time to acknowledge their milestone event.

For the last 39 years, Vietnamese communities across Canada have gathered on April 30 in a ceremony to commemorate memories of loss and grief, to collectively remember their perilous



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journey; to share their heritage and express their gratitude to Canada's historic role.

Dear colleagues, the Vietnamese-Canadians' journey and arrival to Canada are part of our national heritage.

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

This Bill officially recognizing April 30th would provide all Canadians with an opportunity to remember the Vietnamese refugee exodus, to celebrate Vietnamese-Canadian heritage and most importantly to recall what makes Canada's Immigration reputation so great: *compassion*.

Compassion is what makes Canada a welcoming land for immigrants. Canada's compassion towards refugees is what drove the humanitarian



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response in helping resettle hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees.

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to thank you for the careful attention and wide support you have demonstrated while considering and debating this important commemorative Bill.

It is with these brief comments that I humbly ask for your support as we move Bill S-219 forward and recognize a shared heritage.

Thank you very much for giving me your attention. It will be my pleasure to answer your questions.

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