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NATIONAL ANTHEM ACT

Second Reading of Bill S-3

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Wednesday, October 23, 2002

THE SENATE

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NATIONAL ANTHEM ACT

BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—
DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy moved the second reading of Bill S-3, to amend the National Anthem Act to include all Canadians.—(*Honourable Senator Poy*).

She said: Honourable senators, I would like to begin by thanking all the senators who have spoken in support of this amendment, senators who have indicated their support privately, as well as the many Canadians who have written to me on this issue.

I would also like to express my thanks to Frances Wright and Jeanne d'Arc Sharp and the ad hoc committee of the Famous 5 Foundation for launching the petition to amend the national anthem over a year ago on Parliament Hill.

It is my pleasure now to speak on Bill S-3, entitled "An Act to Amend the National Anthem Act to include all Canadians," which was Bill S-39 in the last session of Parliament.

I shall begin by outlining the specific amendment to the wording of the national anthem that I am proposing in this bill. I will then address some of the concerns that have been expressed in this chamber. Finally, I will explain why I believe this change to be an appropriate one.

The amendment I am proposing to the national anthem is a minor one. The words "thy sons" will be replaced by the words "of us," and the verse then will read as "true patriot love in all of us command." Two words will change, that is all.

The decision to choose "of us" was not my own, but based on the public response, discussions with linguists and music historians. According to most of the letters I received, and to the experts, these two words retain the fundamental meaning of the lyric, the poetry of the line as well as fitting well with the music. They are also in keeping with historical tradition.

Over a year ago, a constituent, Nancy MacLeod, brought to my attention the original version of *O Canada* as it was penned in 1908 by Sir Robert Stanley Weir, which read "true patriot love thou dost in us command" on the same verse, in the same line, as I am proposing to make this amendment. The song was amended to read as "thy sons" shortly before World War I, likely as part of a national effort to recruit men to the war effort. It was never returned to its original wording. However, there can be no doubt that Sir Robert Stanley Weir's intent in writing the song *O Canada* was to include both men and women.

Some concerns have been expressed about the intention of this amendment in this chamber, in the media and among the public. For the benefit of honourable senators and the public, I would like to clarify that Bill S-3 will not affect the French version of the national anthem, and it will not remove the reference to God in the anthem. The intent of this bill is simply to update the anthem so that it is more reflective of our society today as well as inclusive of more than 50 per cent of our population. Therefore, the

amendment only affects two words in the anthem, "thy sons," which would be amended to read "of us."

The question has been asked in this chamber: Why should we not amend the national anthem to take in other concerns beyond gender, for example, those of fishermen, bankers, and software engineers? Such an argument is at best facetious, at worst intellectual sophistry. Women are not just any other group. We comprise more than 50 per cent of the population of Canada and we deserve to be recognized.

It has also been argued that because this is an anthem, it is not necessary that it represent our fundamental values. After all, many national anthems in many other countries do not represent their present-day values. This, I would argue, is beside the point. Canadians are leaders, not followers. Many countries have not adopted as comprehensive a set of rights legislation as Canada. However, has that stopped us from moving forward? Are we to follow only what other countries have done? Do we model ourselves after the Americans, the French or other countries in all things? No. This is Canada. We are a young, innovative and progressive nation.

In many ways, we are like Australia, but the Australian government quite wisely adopted inclusive language in its national anthem. The committee that examined the words of their national song in the early 1980s replaced "Australian sons, let us rejoice" with "Australians all, let us rejoice" before *Advance Australia Fair* was proclaimed officially as the national anthem in 1984. Admittedly *Advance Australia Fair* is not a perfect anthem. When *O Canada* is amended it will not be perfect either. However, *O Canada* will be much improved because it will include everyone in this country, and Canada will command its sons as well as its daughters.

I would like to address the issue of whether *O Canada* can be changed. Sir Robert Stanley Weir amended his song twice, taking into account the times in which he lived. The federal government amended the song once again in response to the recommendations of a committee in the late 1960s. There were also, for many years, competing versions of *O Canada* — no less than 26 different versions in fact. This song that we sing as our anthem has never been set in stone. The act of 1980 indicated that there was to be no copyright on the melody or the words of the national anthem, declaring them to be in the public domain. Therefore, the anthem belongs to the people of Canada and it should reflect Canadian society.

I should note that I am not the first to introduce such a bill. Many bills calling for the same amendment have been introduced in the other place. These bills were in response to very real concerns expressed in 1980 when Bill C-36, the National Anthem Act, was discussed in Parliament. At that time, it was noted in the debates that the wording did not accurately reflect the reality of Canadian society.

On June 27, 1980 when Bill C-36 passed through the other place and the Senate, and received Royal Assent on the same day, there were misgivings expressed about its passage. While it was widely felt that there was a need for an official anthem, assent for the

National Anthem Act was obtained only with the understanding that the lyrics would be subject to further scrutiny and modification by a committee. The debates indicated that the members of Parliament and senators shelved whatever amendments and concerns they may have had about the bill on the assumption that changes would follow shortly after its passage.

If there were concerns expressed in 1980, how much more concerned should we be today that the anthem does not reflect the society in which we now live? More than 20 years after the passage of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees women's equality in section 28, with the monument of the Famous 5 now on the Hill, and with women working outside of the home in unprecedented numbers, this amendment is not only appropriate but also necessary.

Words are important. After all, it is the words of the national anthem that make us glow with pride as we stand at attention when it is being played. However, many women have told me that they feel excluded and men felt offended that their mothers, wives and daughters are not included in our national anthem. Just imagine the reaction in our society if the anthem was written to read "in all thy daughters command."

In the letters I have received, many people have said they already substitute their own words for "thy sons" when they sing the anthem. Ms. Carolyn Emerson of the NSERC/Petro-Canada Chair for Women in Science and Engineering wrote, "I support your proposed change to 'true patriot love in all of us command.' I sing those words all the time, anyway."

• (1600)

This year, a member in the other place led the singing of *O Canada* substituting the words "thy sons" with "of us." Marcelle Mersereau, an MLA in the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, last year wrote, "I feel strongly that in 2001 our National Anthem should have language which is inclusive."

Sharon, Lois and Bram, the well-known children's entertainers, have opted for "of us" on their latest CD released this fall. This version was played at a Blue Jays game in Toronto this summer. The new words are catching on.

In churches, such the United Church of Canada and the Presbyterian Church, parishioners are offered an alternative inclusive wording to "in all thy sons command" in their hymnals. The New International Version of the Bible was updated last year so all parishioners feel included. The word "sons" has been replaced by the word "children," and the word "man" has been replaced by the word "person," so it came as no surprise when I received a letter from Dr. Marion Parady, the Moderator of the United Church of Canada, stating that the United Church endorses this amendment.

You may ask why change it at all? The best answer is found in the voices of Canadians who have asked me to bring this bill forward. Mitchell Sharp wrote to congratulate me on my presentation of this bill. Last summer, Mary Lou Stirling of the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women endorsed this amendment by saying, "It is a very patriotic song. I love it, but I would like to be part of it." Progressive institutions such as the YWCA, the Association of Canadian Clubs and the National Council of Women of Canada, all argue for the necessity of this amendment.

Four heads of universities have thrown their support behind this bill, no doubt because they recognize the increasingly visible presence of women on their campuses. Dr. Bernard Shapiro, Principal of McGill University; Dr. Robert Birgeneau, President of the University of Toronto; Dr. Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Principal of Renison College at the University of Waterloo; and Dr. Lorna Marsden, President of York University, have all written to me with their unequivocal support. Dr. Marsden, a former member of this chamber, wrote:

Congratulations on your Bill to change the wording of the National Anthem back to its original non-sexist form...your arguments based on the original 1908 version of the wording are indisputable.

Dr. Robert Birgeneau wrote:

I congratulate you on taking the initiative in this very important matter of equity in one of the most powerful expressions of our Canadian identity — our national anthem.

Our national anthem is one of the most important symbols of Canada, and it represents our fundamental ideals. Although we do not often reflect on the nature of our symbols and their importance in our lives, they represent our beliefs as a society. Of course, women's studies programs in Canada have long sought changes such as these. Dr. Margrit Eichler, Director of the Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto, noted that their board endorsed the amendment to the anthem and considered it an important issue.

There has also been considerable support in the media for this change, reflecting the understanding that the language we use has an impact on the way we think. Consider that the Canadian Press stylebook notes that, "...words like spokesman and chairman cause resentment, understandably when applied to women."

Sherri Graydon, former president of Media Watch, Stephanie MacKendrick, President of Canadian Women in Communications, and Peter Trueman, former Global Television network anchor, have all come forward in favour of this change. In the arts community, Dr. Matthew Teitelbaum, Director of the Art Gallery of Ontario wrote, "Canada will benefit from the inclusiveness of the proposed bill."

Many other writers, linguists, editors, or educators who are sensitive to the impact of language have also written. One writer noted that we have eliminated many racist terms over the years because we recognize that language reflects and shapes the way we think. Nevertheless, some seem to be reluctant to amend the national anthem to include women.

Individuals who support this amendment understand that this is not about political correctness, nor does it take anything away from anyone. The argument that it diminishes the recognition of soldiers' accomplishments in the past is not valid because women contributed, and continue to contribute, equally to the war effort. This perspective is supported by veterans of World War II, men like Mr. Stuart Lindop, a former member of the South Alberta Regiment, who contends that:

The women who are members of our Canadian Armed Forces must find a certain irony when they sing our national anthem, especially the fourth sentence, true patriot love in

all thy sons command. Women are implicitly excluded from recognition.

Given women's involvement in the military, in peacekeeping missions all over the world, and in the conflict in Afghanistan, I would agree with Mr. Lindop that women deserve recognition in our national anthem. The contribution of women to Canada, whether in civilian or military life, should be acknowledged.

There are those who denigrate this amendment as insignificant, unnecessary and trite. This begs the following question: If the change is so insignificant, why oppose it?

Let us pass this bill quickly with little debate. This is a minor change that is in keeping with today's non-sexist language, with Canada's image as a leader in human rights, as well as in keeping with the original historic meaning of the song as set out by Justice Robert Stanley Weir in 1908.

The rights of women are already enshrined in Section 28 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Equal rights are espoused by all levels of government, private corporations, and increasingly in the

home. Today's young women, who are entering non-traditional occupations in increasing numbers, expect to be included in our national anthem.

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

Honourable senators, it is clear to me that we all have a stake in ensuring equal opportunities for our future generations. We need to show Canadians that parliamentarians have the will to give real meaning to the word "equality." Our institution has shown itself to be progressive and senators to be leaders in our country. Honourable senators, we need to take the lead once again as champions of equal rights for all Canadians.

On motion of Senator Oliver, for Senator Spivak, debate adjourned.
