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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're going to call meeting number 28 of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to order.

The orders of the day are pursuant to the orders of reference of Wednesday, September 24, 2014, Bill S-213 an act respecting Lincoln Alexander Day. This is what we're going to deal with today.

Before we start I was going to propose that we have a one-hour meeting in order to hear from our witness, Senator Meredith, as well as have questioning and deal with the clause-by-clause of the bill, that we have one seven-minute round of questioning, if the committee is happy with that. We should be able to get everything in within the hour.

At this point I'd like to turn the meeting over to Senator Meredith for 10 minutes.

Hon. Don Meredith (Senator, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable colleagues, it's indeed a pleasure for me to be here this afternoon to speak about a great Canadian hero, the Honourable Lincoln MacCauley Alexander. He loved this country. He was one of the most outstanding and accomplished citizens of our time. With hard work and strength of character, he rose above the prejudice of his era and embraced public education, committed himself to service, and became a master of his own destiny.

Honourable colleagues, it is thus with this deep appreciation that I speak to you to earn your support for this celebratory Bill S-213 that recognizes January 21, the day of his birth, as Lincoln Alexander Day across this magnificent country that we love so dearly.

Lincoln Alexander is known to us for his outstanding service to Canada and to the province of Ontario. He made history as the first African Canadian elected to the Parliament of Canada, the first African Canadian federal cabinet minister in Canada, and—as the 24th lieutenant-governor of Ontario—the first African Canadian vice-regal representative in Canada. He is also a role model for many. He remains a role model for me.

Today I ask not only for your support, but also for your good partnership in moving this bill forward. It does not call for a national holiday, but it does offer recognition not only to the outstanding example of a life of service, but equally to the greater dominion of aspiration that Canada offers all its citizens. The bill is good not only because of the great Canadian after whom it is named, but also

because it is grounded in three model Canadian values: civic duty, education, and diversity.

First, Lincoln Alexander Day would offer us an opportunity to reflect on and strengthen our commitment to civic duty, giving selflessly of ourselves in support of communities, our friends, and our families.

Second, Lincoln Alexander Day would offer us an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to education and life-long learning and how it is vital to both the success of the individual and to Canada in a globally connected and competitive world.

And last, Lincoln Alexander Day would offer us an opportunity to reflect on our own commitment to a diverse Canada, a place where we all sense ownership and the belief that we can achieve all that this country offers regardless of race, colour, or creed. Civic duty, education, and diversity—these are good themes. A Lincoln Alexander Day would be good for Canada.

Like some of you, I had the privilege of meeting Mr. Alexander on several occasions. He was a man who was very warm, open, and welcoming, and he told you what was on his mind. He was born in Toronto to hard-working and religious West Indian immigrants. When I first met him as a young man, he left me with a lingering sense of inspiration about the good to which we can all aspire as individuals.

Just anecdotally, while I was working as a member of my community in Toronto in 2002 stopping youth violence in the city of Toronto, Lincoln Alexander was called upon as a leader to sit with Julian Fantino, now Minister of Veterans Affairs, who was then police commissioner, and all the leaders of my community to look at violence and look at the solutions around violence.

I was a young man sitting at that table. Everybody else was clamouring, and Linc, as he was affectionately known, said, “Shut up. Let that young man speak.” It gave me an opportunity to voice my concerns around the table of seasoned leaders in my community. Linc provided me that opportunity. We then became close and saw each other at several other events. I looked at him as a role model. I was inspired by his embrace of the value of a good education and the graceful manner in which he excelled at all levels.

I was inspired by his courage and response to the call to serve during World War II. He was well decorated for his contribution in the Royal Canadian Forces.

•(1535)

I was inspired by his pursuit of a law career, and how he overcame racism to graduate among the top of his class at the prestigious Osgoode law school. He soon after became Queen's Counsel. On that note, he also stood up to his professor, indicating to him when the professor made a racial slur. He put the professor in his place, almost losing his opportunity to graduate. But that's the kind of character that we're talking about, this great Canadian.

Many Canadians, regardless of race, were inspired by his service, including as Canada's first black member of Parliament, first black cabinet minister in Canada, and as Ontario's 24th lieutenant-governor, the first member of a visible minority to hold this office.

Honourable colleagues, strength and resilience were the hallmarks of his approach. But in true Canadian style, he took on otherwise sensitive circumstances with measured grace and quiet strength.

So honourable colleagues, what would Lincoln Alexander Day mean to Canada? What would such a day mean to mothers and fathers, seniors and youth, community leaders and stakeholders, military service men and women, public servants and volunteers, and everyone in between?

I will briefly speak to the three themes I mentioned earlier.

First, a Lincoln Alexander Day would offer us an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to public service. Lincoln Alexander believed in public service. It is an essential part of our evolving and maturing democracy. Through his lifelong contribution to community in so many different roles, from grassroots engagement to military service to the highest office in the land, Lincoln Alexander set a very high standard of good citizenship. Today there are millions from coast to coast, whether paid or by volunteering, already walking in his example. They're making a difference. Lincoln Alexander Day would help to celebrate all those who give of themselves. Likely it will inspire others, including our youth, to step forward in selfless contribution to the greater good. I've often said this, that our young people are not just a percentage of our population. They're 100% of our future. To have individuals like Lincoln who have paved the way for a young man like me—some of you might not think I'm young, but he certainly made an impression on my life....

Second, Lincoln Alexander Day would offer us an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to education. Lincoln understood the strong and direct relationship between investments in education, educational attainment, and economic growth, especially in the age of global economy. His mother continually exhorted him about the value and power of a good education. He listened, he acted, and he succeeded. Every child deserves to acquire the best tools for a successful life. A good education offers that. Lincoln Alexander's story speaks to how, through our world-class public education system, one can become well-equipped to make a difference for all Canadians.

Colleagues, you will agree that it will be a more enlightening understanding of Canadian history when our students learn about the service of this great Canadian hero in their schools. They'll learn not only about his passion for service to this country, but they will also see an example that with hard work, good character, and strength of

purpose, anything is truly possible in this country. I am also a living example of that in coming to this country 38 years ago from the tiny island of Jamaica, not knowing what my future would hold, but embracing a good education that afforded me the opportunity to now serve in the highest boardroom of the land. That's what Lincoln Alexander represents to this country.

Honourable colleagues, lastly a Lincoln Alexander Day would offer an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to a diverse society. Lincoln Alexander understood the power of Canada, where all citizens sensed that if they put in work, they would be assured their fair access to work, an opportunity to contribute to Canada. He's a role model for young people of every colour and race.

•(1540)

Over his lifetime, he noted the notion of equality had evolved for the better. He saw the evolution of a forceful collection of laws and policies from the 1982 Charter of Rights to the Canadian Human Rights Act, all working to ensure equality under the law.

Lincoln Alexander Day would give us another reason to highlight Canada as one of the best countries in the world. We recognize that Canada is still progressing as a nation, but we can rally around that which unites us, as opposed to that which divides us. Colleagues, our society's appreciation for the service of Lincoln Alexander can perhaps be seen in the number of buildings and schools, transit routes, and public spaces that bear his name. He received numerous honorary degrees and many dozens of other honours.

It is clear his life remains a glowing example of service, determination, humility. Without malice he fought the good fight and made this country a better place for all of us. It is against this background that I appear before you to ask for your support for this Bill S-213 of the Senate of Canada, to declare January 21 each year as Lincoln Alexander Day across this great country of Canada.

I thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Senator Meredith.

We will now move to a round of questioning.

For seven minutes we will go to Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity to be here at your committee.

Chair, first, before I go to a small statement and then a question that I have for the senator, I'd like to say thank you to Senator Meredith for this bill, and for having the honour to hold carriage of it in the House of Commons.

I've been in communication with Linc's widow, Marni Alexander, and she had a concern regarding all of the recognition that Linc was afforded over his life. In fact, there are 10 pages of it. I was wondering if I could table this, Chair, and have it as evidence, and then have it translated so it would be in both official languages, and distributed to the members of the committee.

The Chair: Is there consent to accept that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right, carry on, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, colleagues.

Lincoln Alexander served our country in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. After the war, and in spite of all social barriers that discouraged black Canadians from doing the same things as white Canadians, Linc graduated from McMaster University and then went to law school at Osgoode Hall. He was named Queen's Counsel in 1965, and later became Canada's first black MP, cabinet minister, and lieutenant-governor, among other things.

Linc was the son of a maid and a railway porter. While he respected their jobs, he didn't want to be limited to those jobs, and he didn't want anyone else to be limited to those jobs because of their skin colour either. He listened to the advice of his mother and he worked hard to get an education, and then to represent his community in Parliament. Linc was elected to the House of Commons as a Progressive Conservative in the 1968 election in Hamilton West. Before Hamilton West was redistributed into three other ridings, including the riding I represent, Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Hamilton West was also the seat held by Ellen Fairclough, who was appointed by Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker as the first woman cabinet minister. As Diefenbaker's immigration minister, Ellen Fairclough reformed our immigration system and dismantled the “white Canada” policy, which is exactly what it sounds like. Diefenbaker was also one of the people who worked hard to convince Linc that he should run for Parliament in Hamilton West. We have a very inclusive community and I'm proud that we are able to be part of Lincoln Alexander's story in Hamilton.

Senator Meredith, again, thank you very much.

I wanted to begin with a question. After Linc retired from politics, he served as the chair of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, and also as the chancellor at the University of Guelph from 1991 to 2007. He was the longest-serving chancellor in that school's history. It was an appropriate job because Linc understood the value of education, which was why he titled his biography, *Go to School, You're a Little Black Boy*, repeating the words his mother had said to him when he was a child.

When his party formed government in 1979, Lincoln became Canada's first black cabinet minister. What impact has that had on Canada since then, to this date?

• (1545)

Hon. Don Meredith: Mr. Sweet, when I think of Lincoln Alexander and the great role model that he was to Canada, his achievement of breaking down barriers despite the challenges that he faced is a testament to the life that he lived. Irrespective of where he journeyed in society, he contributed. I believe it is for this reason that we sit around this table to deliberate this bill: because of his great example, not only for his peers at the time, but for the example that he set for young people like myself, when I was growing up. I listened to his stories and heard the things that he overcame, and had the opportunity to meet him. His breaking down these barriers made great contributions to this great country. For that, I was delighted to put forward this bill to recognize him. He is truly an inspirational hero to all Canadians, especially our young people.

Mr. David Sweet: After Prime Minister Mulroney appointed Linc as lieutenant-governor, Nelson Mandela decided to visit Canada. It was primarily because of the work that had been done in the fight against apartheid from Prime Minister Diefenbaker to Mulroney. As lieutenant-governor, Linc had the opportunity to greet Mandela at Pearson Airport.

You've done a lot of work in your community. What impact did that have on the greater black community in Canada?

Hon. Don Meredith: When you have role models like Lincoln Alexander, there is a sense of belonging to a community irrespective of where you've come from. We see a lot of marginalized young people today, Mr. Sweet, and we have been working hard. I can take examples from what Linc has done to strengthen our African Canadian community. That resonates. We have over a million blacks in this country.

I was just in Montreal this weekend for the 107th year of the Union United Church. There is a rich history of individuals like Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones, musicians who touch our hearts, individuals that we can look to. Lincoln Alexander was that kind of individual in terms of his contribution. I think it's high time; I think it's the right time to do it. We have Martin Luther King Day in the United States. We do not have an African Canadian hero like Lincoln Alexander that our young people can look up to and that the African diaspora can truly embrace—and that all Canadians, for that matter, can embrace. But, more importantly, he's an example for us to be able to work together, to show that we can overcome challenges in this country.

As we grow into this 150th year of this country in 2017, I believe that we'll be doing a great service to this country by recognizing a man who has made great contributions to this country.

Mr. David Sweet: Lastly, I would like to give you an opportunity to share a personal story, if you have another one that you didn't already include in your first remarks. One of the things that always amazed me about Lincoln Alexander is he could be up on stage with the most elite of people and look very comfortable and speak very eloquently. Yet, he could be down with the average grassroots person and treat them just like he knew them all of his life, like a buddy. I remember one time after I had lost an election, he grabbed me by my tie, because at that time he had just first gotten into a wheelchair. He pulled me down and he said, “Do you plan on running again?” I said, “Yeah”, and he said, “Well, make sure that you remember this one lesson. You know, work your tail off.” He was a little bit more frank than that, but I'll keep that to these remarks.

• (1550)

The Chair: I'm sorry to end this, but you are over time. Thank you very much.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Nantel, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank you, Senator Meredith.

This is a very unifying bill. You probably know that we are favourable to it. We have actually tried many times to pay tribute to Mr. Alexander. However, we have felt that, for the Conservative Party, putting this forward at all costs was personal.

I hope this bill will be passed in a highly congenial setting, and that the Conservatives won't brag about it as if it was only about their business and their hero. That would be unfortunate. I do not think this would be a good way to pay tribute to the man you refer to as Linc, at least based on everything I have heard about him.

We often talk about young people, about youth, and the example Mr. Alexander set for them. Beyond instituting an official day, how could we provide.... I am biting my tongue so I don't say roll out. My concern is that this day will be partisan in nature.

I would like this to be based on "wikipediism" and neutrality. I would like us to describe Mr. Alexander's achievements in order to inspire young people.

Do you have an idea of how this will be done? I hope it will be in the least partisan way possible.

[English]

Hon. Don Meredith: I think it's important that we recognize that this is for all Canadians. It's not about politics here. There is the Conservative government and I represent the Conservative government in the Senate. This is about a Canadian we can celebrate, his accomplishments, and the impacts that he has had on the lives of Canadians and especially our young people.

I believe that going forward as this bill is passed and we celebrate... I have mentioned to a couple of my colleagues that I'd like to have something on the Hill that brings the family here and we can all celebrate it and look at how we can ensure that his contributions are written about and placed into our books and into our libraries across this country, so he's not forgotten. A monument of some sort that Canadians can celebrate in a non-partisan way.

This for me is not about partisanship, it's about us coming together as Canadians and being united around a Canadian who has been transformative, an individual who has touched my life, touched your life, and touched all of the lives of our colleagues around this table. Again, it is a prime example of how we can come together as Canadians irrespective of where we've come from and what our backgrounds are. We've come together to celebrate a man who's brought us together and overcome certain odds in his life. He has also shown us a great example of what you can be in this country given the opportunity, embracing education, our young people... Don't get me started on dropout rates among our at-risk youth across this country. That's why I'm working so hard on a national youth strategy to ensure that we don't miss our marginalized youth across this country. I believe, as I indicated earlier in my statement, they are 100% of our future, they are not just a percentage of our population.

Mr. Pierre Nantel: That's a very strong statement that they are our future. You are absolutely right.

[Translation]

It will be very natural for us to support this bill. I hope the camaraderie you are showing now will still be there when the bill is

introduced in the House of Commons. I also hope that all the parties will be invited to the press conference, if one is held.

Thank you. I have no other questions.

• (1555)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move on

[Translation]

Mr. Dion, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have no questions. I just want to congratulate Senator Meredith. I think he explained why we need to support it with the speech he delivered. Senator, you may be sure that the Liberal caucus and the leader, the MP for Papineau, are congratulating you. It is a great achievement and we are proud to support it.

Hon. Don Meredith: Thank you so much, Stéphane, I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Now we will move to Mr. Young for up to seven minutes.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

And thank you, Senator, for this initiative, which is most appropriate and thank you for the eloquent case you made for the reasons you introduced it, which I found genuinely touching.

I did know Lincoln Alexander. We met a number of times throughout my life. I just wanted to tell you a little bit about that because I think it might be helpful.

I met him in his role as lieutenant-governor. He was a truly dignified person and a man of generous spirit. He smiled a lot. I can still feel his warm, dry hand in mine and remember his big smile. He really engaged you. He would treat a prime minister and a child the same. He would lean down and talk to them with the same big smile and the same manner of respect. Everybody he met liked him and enjoyed meeting him and remembered him. It was really a little bit of greatness in this nice man. I can see why he was asked to take on increasingly important roles and he provided this wonderful service as a role model to our young people.

I sat beside him on stage once at Guelph University for a convocation. I was parliamentary assistant in charge of colleges and universities and the president asked me. The students came across the stage and he took time to speak to every one of them quietly, privately, and he didn't say the same thing to everyone. You would think that after 10 or 20 times you'd say the same thing, good luck. Everyone was different. He had a little conversation with them to make them feel important. I will never forget that as well. He was a modest man and he would chat with royalty, the Queen, graciously, just as he would with a school child or a cab driver.

I really thank you for bringing this forward. As I say, it's most appropriate to show this kind of respect for Linc Alexander who was liked by everybody he met. They had affection and respect for him. This is a great way to make him better known to Canadians and to get especially our young children and minorities to see that this guy did all this; he is an ordinary guy from Hamilton who did great things with his education.

Hon. Don Meredith: Mr. Young, I think it's so important that we recognize this man, his significance, and his contributions to Canada so our young people have a role model, have somebody they can look up to and say, if Lincoln overcame all these obstacles and odds and racism and discrimination...by his own professor when he was in law school....

He stood up against a professor because he felt he made a derogatory comment that he shouldn't have made. It gives encouragement to our young people by saying, listen, you're going to face obstacles but you're going to also have to stand up for yourself. Lincoln did that and that's why, increasingly, as you indicated in your comments, he was given more roles. He was called out of sort of retirement to come and deal with issues within our community. He was like the glue. If Lincoln said so, you ought to act upon it. That was the kind of messaging that I believe we need more of in this country as we move forward in this diverse mosaic that we live in. It's so important that we pull out these heroes, just like yesterday we recognized Elisapee, who started the Angel Street project with respect to women and violence in Nunavut. There are great Canadians across this country who are doing some incredible work that is inspirational to our young people. For me, that is why I'm so passionate about moving this bill forward.

Again, colleagues, I want to thank you for your support. I know that this will be great for all of our youth and great for all Canadians.

●(1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Young.

Thank you, Senator Meredith.

We will now, finally, move to clause-by-clause.

The Chair: Shall clause 2 carry?

(Clause 2 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall clause 3 carry?

(Clause 3 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the short title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the preamble carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Chair, maybe it would be helpful if we did have a recorded vote on this to show unanimity and the fact that we're all agreeing on this. I think a recorded vote would stand us all well.

The Chair: Is there agreement that we'll have a recorded vote?

Some hon members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The bill has passed unanimously.

Shall the Chair report the bill to the House?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much. Thank you to Senator Meredith, and thank you to the committee.

This meeting is adjourned.

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