

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.