



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**

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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 30<sup>th</sup> 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 30<sup>th</sup>, 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;



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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



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 30<sup>th</sup> 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.