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NATIONAL DAY OF SERVICE BILL

Second Reading of Bill S-209—
Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Pamela Wallin

Thursday, March 11, 2010

THE SENATE

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NATIONAL DAY OF SERVICE BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Pamela Wallin moved second reading of Bill S-209, An Act respecting a national day of service to honour the courage and sacrifice of Canadians in the face of terrorism, particularly the events of September 11, 2001.

She said: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak in support of Bill S-209, an act that will designate September 11 each year as a national day of service. I support this bill because I believe we must always remember what happened on 9/11 and remember those from 90 countries who lost their lives, including 24 Canadians who perished. We should also mark this day because it changed all of us forever, but we must turn the mourning into memory and the anger into action — acts of kindness between strangers, hands reaching out to those in need.

Inspired by the American 9/11 families, Canadian families have asked us to consider a national day of service. Bill S-209 answers their call. I believe it is a unifying, non-partisan bill that I hope everyone can support and embrace.

I will give a little history, just for the record. In March of last year the United States passed a similar bipartisan bill called the Serve America Act co-sponsored by 42 senators who worked together to construct a compassionate way for generations to remember, to pay honour and to maintain that spirit that played out in many moments of spontaneous humanity around the world.

• (1510)

Since the passage of the Serve America Act, thousands of organizations — non-profit, faith-based and employer-based — have mobilized hundreds of thousands of Americans; people such as young Tiffany Bohm in Chicago and her classmates, who launched a project to collect 2,974 pairs of shoes, representing each person lost in the 9/11 attacks, and then to donate them to a homeless shelter; or in Atlanta, Lilli Love and her friends, who delivered their homemade goody baskets to fire and police stations as a way of paying tribute to the first responders of 9/11.

This is the sort of volunteerism we hope Bill S-209 will recognize and inspire in this country. It can be a constructive and uplifting way to commemorate 9/11.

This bill is a simple one. There are no complicated clauses or tricky legal language. It does not oblige us or our governments to participate in or to fund any ceremony, and there are absolutely no mandatory provisions within it. It is simply about the spirit of giving back, or perhaps of paying it forward. What better day than September 11 of each year, going forward, to do just that.

Several weeks after September 11, 2001, I was honoured to host the “Canada Loves New York” event at the behest of former Senator Jerry Grafstein and others. The event took place on a beautiful warm, sunny afternoon in December. Nearly 25,000 Canadians filled the famous Roseland Ballroom in New York City and spilled out on that city’s streets to show their support for their American friends. The then Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, came, as did Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Our singers and artists reached out with their voices and their words and the images of our flags entwined. Canadian firemen and police honoured their American colleagues and brought equipment, spirit, hope and money to help.

At the end of this amazing day, a nurse who had worked all night before getting in her car to drive ten long hours south had taken up a collection in her hospital coffee room. She sought me out and almost apologetically handed me the envelope with about \$60 that she had collected. She asked only that it go to a family, a widow or a child in need, and entrusted me with the task. The tears streamed down our cheeks.

It was that simple yet extraordinary act that today motivates me to ask all honourable senators to support this bill so that we might always find reason in our hearts to make kindness a part of our life and always to act to counter the hatred that inspired the heinous acts of 9/11.

With Bill S-209, a national day of service bill, the families hope to ensure that the lessons so painfully learned continue to resonate within our nation’s heart. Bill S-209 will ensure that the passage of time or the ill will of others will never somehow combine to diminish this tragedy. The day will honour the victims of terrorism. It will pay tribute to all those who would not stand aside but who stood up in the face of terrorism, particularly the men and women of our military.

To those who have fallen in the fight and to their families, we can never repay your sacrifice, but we are grateful for the willingness of your loved ones to risk their lives to protect ours. To those who still stand and fight so that this tragedy will never happen again, we honour them by understanding the true meaning of their mission: to create hope and to ensure that their acts of kindness continue to change lives.

This bill honours the selfless service of our civilian and military volunteers, which is far more persuasive and far more powerful than the hate they battle every day. This bill recognizes the spirit of our citizens who, through their acts of generosity to strangers, are a powerful inspiration to our children and, through them, to the future.

(On motion of Senator Segal, debate adjourned.)