



CANADA

# Debates of the Senate

---

1st SESSION

•

39th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 143

•

NUMBER 7

---

## SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

**Motion for Address in Reply**

**Speech by:**

**The Honourable Norman K. Atkins**

**Thursday, April 27, 2006**

## THE SENATE

Thursday, April 27, 2006

[English]

### SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

MOTION FOR ADDRESS IN REPLY—  
DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Champagne, P.C., seconded by the Honourable Senator Segal, for an Address to Her Excellency the Governor General in reply to her Speech from the Throne at the Opening of the First Session of the Thirty-Ninth Parliament.—(4th day of resuming debate)

**Hon. Norman K. Atkins:** Honourable senators, I would also like to begin by congratulating the Honourable Senator Kinsella on his new role as Speaker of the Senate. I think members of this chamber would agree that he has a hard act to follow. I do not know if this is the first time it has happened, but it was certainly highly unusual when our present Speaker, who was formerly the Leader of the Opposition, replaced the previous Speaker, the Honourable Dan Hays, who became the Leader of the Opposition. This is a complete reversal of roles.

I also congratulate the new leadership in the house on both sides and express my sincere hope that as time goes on, for the good of Canadians, negotiations will be amicable and successful.

I also congratulate the new Conservatives for winning the largest number of seats in the House of Commons in the last election and becoming the new government. It is clear that Canadians want a change; however, the question now is how to interpret those changes. Did change occur because Canadians want to remove a Liberal government, or did change occur because Canadians were attracted by the platform of the new Conservatives?

• (1620)

The difficulty for the government is to determine to what extent their mandate is, in fact, an endorsement of what Canadians really want and whether it is the best thing for the country. The government must avoid the pitfalls of assuming that Canadians have fully bought into their program and truly examine what Canadians find acceptable. The fact that the new Conservatives could not form a majority government is the best indicator that their mandate should be tempered. This is not 1984 or 1988, when the Progressive Conservatives formed a majority government with a clear mandate.

We now know what the government has in mind with regard to the proposed Accountability Act. It would appear in some instances that they are, to coin a phrase, “using a hammer to kill a fly.” They are currently establishing a whole new layer of bureaucracy in their efforts to do things differently. How much will this oversight cost taxpayers? Likewise, the unintended price of this proposed legislation is that it could potentially taint

innocent people and create an air of paranoia and gridlock within the public service.

One thing that I believe is good about the proposed act is that it expands the role of the Auditor General and, hopefully, will provide the resources to do a more effective job. I believe that the broadening of the Auditor General’s mandate to include Crown corporations is the right thing to do. That said, in creating positions such as the director of public prosecutions, we are again seeing a move by the new Conservatives to the Americanization of our Canadian parliamentary system of government. I am not convinced that this type of role is really necessary in view of the present safeguards that we already have in place, and the fact that criminal prosecutions fall mostly under the authority of provincial attorneys general anyway.

We know from experience that our institutions are strong when our parliamentary traditions are respected. Current dissatisfaction has found its root because of individuals who disregarded traditions and a proper code of ethical conduct. Individuals who circumvented the rules failed our institutions; our institutions did not fail Canadians.

It is ironic that over the last year there was a significant amount of debate in this place about the role of the Ethics Commissioner. A principal point was whether the Senate should have its own authority and autonomy. The new act is proposing to combine the two positions under one authority, which once again raises the debate of the role of the Senate in our parliamentary system. I wonder what our Fathers of Confederation would think. The Senate, as outlined in the Constitution, must remain independent of the House of Commons and its executive and act as the chamber of sober second thought.

We have recently seen the outline of what the government’s position will be on the question of law and order. I give them full credit for moving in the right direction, but I would urge them not to make changes too quickly. In any case, the three bills promised by the Minister of Justice should be closely studied by our Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, where there is a most impressive array of legal experience and talent. The announcement that the government will raise the age of sexual consent from 14 to 16 may seem like a good idea; however, reservations have been expressed by many people, including the Premier of Quebec. This is an example of an issue that will benefit from careful study by our bipartisan committee.

The Prime Minister has given some indication that he is prepared to crackdown on crime by rescinding the faint hope clause which allows criminals to apply for parole after 15 years. I understand the desire to review this process and I also support the crackdown on sexual offenders, predators and murderers. I agree with the necessity to expand the present registry of all sex offenders to include everyone convicted of such crimes. However, the committee should study whether it is necessary for this list to be retroactive.

The government must consider the financial and societal implications of a justice system increasingly focused on incarceration. Once again, this is potentially yet another

American-style encroachment. If the government focuses on incarceration, the questions must be asked: Will we need new prisons? How much is the true cost of this justice strategy to taxpayers? Can we find a Canadian solution?

As many know, the United States, one of the world's greatest democracies, also, unfortunately, lays claim to one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. I do not believe Canadians want our government to tread this path. Our goal should be to find a truly Canadian justice solution. Perhaps a review of the penalties relative to the seriousness of the crime should be launched so that, for example, someone found guilty of fraud does not receive a sentence similar to someone convicted of murder. This might allow for the punishment to be more in line with the crime and alleviate overcrowding. It might be that these issues will be reviewed under the umbrella of the government's current commitment to stiffen mandatory jail terms. If so, it will go a long way to addressing the problem. I look forward to seeing further details in the creative approach which strengthens our justice system.

Another issue that is being discussed is the gun registry. According to various police organizations and lobby groups, there are undoubtedly some advantages being gained from our long gun registry. There has been a registry for short guns in Canada since the 1960s. However, the long gun registry has cost the taxpayers of this country more than \$1 billion to date and the experts are at different ends of the spectrum in terms of value for dollar. I remember when the bill was first introduced and indicated that it would cost the taxpayers \$80 million in total. I hope that the government will conduct an overall review of this program to determine which areas are advantageous and which are not working. Perhaps the government can launch a more cohesive and effective program which will work in conjunction with the crackdown on crime and reduce the massive expenditures we are currently witnessing.

To totally scrap the program for political expedience, and not to extract what has been beneficial, would be unwise. The government should not confuse anger at the mismanagement of the gun registry with rejection of the intent of the gun registry. If our police — those whom we rely on to keep our neighbourhoods safe — support the gun registry, then this government should listen.

The next point I should like to address is the issue of wait times within this country's health care system. It is commendable that the government commits to shortening wait periods for medical procedures, but this, unfortunately, is not all in the hands of the federal government. The federal government will have to rely heavily on the provincial governments to implement any programs or incentives. The provinces will only be able to do that if the federal government provides the resources to make it happen.

This brings me to the next area that I would like to comment on, namely, the reduction of the GST. The experts predict that the 1 per cent immediate reduction to which the government is committed will cost in tax dollars somewhere in the range of \$4 billion to \$5 billion annually. Ultimately, a further reduction of 1 per cent will cost an additional \$4 to \$5 billion, for a possible total of \$9 billion to \$12 billion annually. The optics of this commitment is obviously popular with the public, but the question really is, is it good economic policy?

• (1630)

The rationale for the reduction in the GST does not seem to anticipate the potential unforeseen demands on the national treasury. What happens if Canada faces an economic downturn, a natural disaster or a health threat?

The Speech from the Throne says this government believes that Canadians pay too much in tax. I am sure not many Canadians would argue that fact, and most appear to applaud the reduction in the goods and services tax.

The problem is, on the one hand, Canadians feel that they are overtaxed; but on the other hand, they are looking for all levels of government to provide the services and programs that are important in our society. I ask the question: Can we have it both ways?

The government is bringing in a new program for child care, which will require several billion dollars to finance. For those who are lucky enough to be able to stay at home with their children, the \$1,200 per child per year will no doubt be most welcome. However, for those who truly endure the burden of child care expenses, an annual income of \$1,200 per child per year is but a drop in the bucket compared to the actual costs of child care. Also, are sufficient child care spaces being created with this initiative? Indeed, every dollar helps, but if personal income taxes become higher, the program will not be terribly helpful.

The government has announced that they will implement much needed changes in support to our military, which will require significantly more money. These announcements appear to be in line with what Canadians accept as necessary to sustain our role in world affairs and the protection of our country. However, these commitments do not come at bargain prices. We need more personnel, and we must replace antiquated equipment — for example, our helicopters, cargo planes and ships, all of which will need major additional funding.

Health care improvements will need more money if we expect the provinces to sustain the changes, as I have already noted. Our agricultural sector is in desperate need of improved financial support. The government has outlined a sustained economic commitment, which is long overdue and money well spent, but it will cost. There is a great demand for the financing of infrastructure in the transportation sector within our cities, which cannot be ignored.

This country needs long-term sustainable funding for a major commitment to environmental programs that will protect the future for our children. This issue should, in my view, have been one of the top five priorities, or added as a sixth. Even former Prime Minister Mulroney has expressed his worry that this issue is not high enough on the priority list.

There is a critical situation unfolding in relation to students and student debt for post-secondary education. Add to that the fact that our universities need additional money for capital projects, along with increases for research and development, to allow them to remain competitive worldwide and to attract the best and the brightest.

When you add all this up, while the idea of reducing the GST on the surface seems like a good idea and the optics are very appealing, my concern is that, when push comes to shove, the

government will have to find other ways to make up the shortfall created by any such reductions.

If all of these initiatives are now perceived and accepted as what Canadians want for this country, then Canadians must be aware that they will have to pay for them. We cannot continue to expect to pay less for more.

We have been told that the previous government was running a large surplus; but we have seen throughout history that a surplus can disappear very quickly by governments that are unable to prioritize their spending against their revenues.

The question is, can the government reduce the GST and not raise personal income taxes or implement other tax measures without destroying the social benefits that exist within this country?

I suggest to the government that, rather than continuing to create costly new layers of government bureaucracy, that they usher in a new way of dealing with a very fine public service. Rather than continue to emphasize that they will eradicate an attitude of entitlement, perhaps they could indicate that while there were a few of that ilk, they will nurture those who display the right character and values and reward them. Perhaps more expansion of oversight and review offices, such as the Auditor General's in consultation with senior bureaucrats, would be more cost-efficient.

**The Hon. the Speaker:** I regret to inform the honourable senator that his time has expired. Perhaps honourable senators would agree to grant Senator Atkins a five-minute extension? Is it agreed, honourable senators?

**Hon. Senators:** Agreed.

**Senator Atkins:** This leads to the suggestion that I have long made, that there is an opportunity for this government to utilize the Senate much more rather than to continue to criticize and attack it. There is an untapped wealth of knowledge and experience that could be very beneficial in the role of commissions or inquiries and the study of various issues that the government deems important.

Incidentally, a perfect example of my line of reasoning presents itself in a motion recently moved by Senator Segal for television coverage in the Senate. In fact, I would expand his suggestion for coverage. I strongly support this motion and would hope that

Senator Fraser would follow through on her suggestion of referring it to committee for discussion and examination.

It will come as no surprise to most members in this chamber that I am opposed to an elected Senate because we run the risk of legislative gridlock similar to that in the United States. I also believe that we cannot reform the Senate without examining all the institutions of government, which may eventually require amendments to the Constitution.

I believe it would be more prudent for the government to re-examine the formula that almost received unanimity with the Meech Lake Accord. This allowed each province to submit a list of five names for consideration for any regional vacancies within the Senate.

A perfect example of where this type of formula would work is evident now. We recently lost the Honourable John Buchanan to retirement, which created a vacancy in Nova Scotia. If the government had not taken the position it has, there would perhaps be an opportunity to have someone like the former premier, John Hamm, with his wealth of knowledge and experience, available to serve all Canadians.

I strongly suggest that the Prime Minister should not relinquish any of his autonomy in relation to the selection of Canadians who might offer their services to the betterment of the country regardless of their political stripe.

This government has focused on five priorities which they believe are not only important, but politically expedient. The question I have is, do these five priorities work to put Canada in a better position in the global market and enhance our position worldwide?

Canada is at a critical crossroad. Whether the country has a minority or a majority government is not of ultimate importance; leadership and good government are. Good government is good politics.

Our Fathers of Confederation rightly founded our nation on the principle of peace, order and good government. To that end, I stand here today, and will stand here tomorrow, proud of the institutions that they created and ready to work to make our Canada stronger.

On motion of Senator Comeau, debate adjourned.

---