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Speaker: The Honourable Geoff Regan

Business of Supply

Opposition Motion—Systemic racism and religious discrimination

Ms. Dianne L. Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House to speak to this opposition motion, which states:

That the House: (a) recognize that Canadian society is not immune to the climate of hate and fear exemplified by the recent and senseless violent acts at a Quebec City mosque; (b) condemn all forms of systemic racism, religious intolerance, and discrimination of Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious communities; and (c) instruct the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to undertake a study on how the government could (i) develop a whole-of-government approach to reducing or eliminating all types of discrimination in Canada, while ensuring a community-centered focus with a holistic response through evidence-based policy-making, (ii) collect data to contextualize hate crime reports and to conduct needs assessments for impacted communities; and that the Committee report its findings and recommendations to the House no later than 240 calendar days from the adoption of this motion, provided that in its report, the Committee should make recommendations that the government may use to better reflect the enshrined rights and freedoms in the Constitution Acts, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I believe that every member of Parliament, on all sides of the House, recognizes and would agree that attacks on people based on religious belief, such as the recent attack on Muslims at the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City, have absolutely no place in Canadian society or any society around the world. Places of worship are meant to be safe havens for peaceful personal reflection and faith. They are meant to be places where individuals can practise their faith of choice without fear of harm or discrimination or repercussions.

As parliamentarians, we must do everything to safeguard the right of all Canadians to this vital freedom of expression and faith. Violence against any religious group is a direct attack on the rights and values that all Canadians enjoy and respect and that we as parliamentarians strive to uphold. We must protect these rights for all Canadians. It is important to highlight this, because there is a perception by many that Canada is immune, or has been immune, to the kinds of hate crimes and violence against religious groups that have been witnessed around the world. We saw tragically, only a few weeks ago in Quebec City, an act of violence that has changed us forever.

I believe that Canada must always stand firmly behind the principles of religious freedom, be it the Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu faith, or whatever faith or non-faith one chooses to follow. Violence against any religious group is an attack on the universal values all Canadians cherish and protect. We must continue to do all we can to safeguard the expression and practice of faith in Canada and around the world.

This issue is not new to the House. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion have been a priority for the Conservatives. Under our government, there were 15 different motions tabled before the House of Commons that related to religious identity and religious issues by all parties in the House. Several of these bills and motions passed unanimously over the years.

To help, assist, and support all religions and religious communities in Canada, in 2012 the office of religious freedom was established by the Conservative government to monitor religious persecution and to protect freedom of religion internationally. The mandate of this office was to protect and advocate on behalf of religious minorities that were under threat, to oppose religious hatred and intolerance, and to promote Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance abroad.

In fact, in June 2015, the international contact group on freedom of religion was initiated by Canada, and the inaugural meeting was chaired by the ambassador of religious freedom, Andrew Bennett, in Brussels.

Unfortunately, in the 2016 budget, the Liberals chose to shut down the office of religious freedom, and I would encourage them to rethink this decision.

As Conservatives, we have never hesitated to denounce religious discrimination in all its forms. We have always been a party of freedom of expression, of human rights, of equality, and of freedom of religion. In fact, the precursor to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was the original Canadian Bill of Rights that was enshrined in Canadian law by Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker in 1960. This piece of legislation cemented the definition of freedom of speech, expression, association, and religion in Canadian law and in Canadian society.

I could go on about the great work that has been done by all parties in this House. However, as members of Parliament, it is our first responsibility to represent each and every one of our constituents, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation. We need to ensure that all Canadians of all ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultures feel welcome and included in our communities, where they can live in peace and raise their families, free from acts of hatred and discrimination.

Today's motion underlines our duty as parliamentarians to develop legislation to guard against hate-motivated crime and discrimination against race and religious beliefs. As legislators, we need to ensure that our policies protect the most vulnerable and protect those who are targeted because of their race or religion.

Throughout history, and even in the world today, we have seen genocide and atrocities perpetrated on our fellow human beings. As Canadians who value peace and freedom and embrace tolerance, there is no place for such acts in our Canada, and we should do everything in our power to protect the innocent from these atrocities as they occur, whether it is within our own country or abroad.

I encourage all members of the House, from all sides, to join me and my colleagues in voting in favour of the motion.

As I conclude, I just want to say this, as a Buddhist for over 20 years: remember to have reverence for all sentient beings, and do no harm.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, I will start by saying that contrary to what we might hear in today's debate, I do not think this side of the House, or even that end of the House, has any monopoly on care and concern for human rights and justice for all people.

I want to begin by acknowledging that I actually find myself in a difficult position on this motion, because as I read the motion, I would find it very easy to support. My question is about the timing of the motion. The difficulty I have in supporting it has to do with the fact that it could usurp another motion that is being considered by the House, which we also consider important.

Would it perhaps not be better to deal with one motion and then consider a broader motion at another time, because two studies would then not collide with each other?

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the studies are symbiotic. Coming out with something all Canadians can support is the genesis of what we should be doing, bringing everyone together and making sure that no one, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation is discriminated against. We see that far too much.

As parliamentarians, I believe it is our duty to make sure that in our communities, everyone is safe. If there is something going on, if people are being anti-Muslim or anti-Jewish, we have to protect people. I think we are all in agreement.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):

Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed previously spending time on a committee with the hon. member.

I am becoming very puzzled by these motions, today's opposition motion and the Liberals' motion, Motion No. 103.

We are already missing out some religions, and I thank her for mentioning Buddhism. What troubles me is that some of my colleagues are mentioning indigenous faith, yet both motions deal only with religions not faiths. It is becoming now so broad as to become almost senseless. Are we proposing that the committee study this for the next five years in order to cover everything that is supposed to be in there?

It is important for us to keep in mind what Islamophobia means to some, and that is a severe fear of the Islamic faith and it is that level of severe fear that is driving people to do not just hateful but very dangerous and life-endangering activities. That is what is spurring the need for a discussion. It may be when we talk about those kinds of incidents against those in the Islamic faith, and in my city also a history of actions toward those of the Jewish faith, we need to look at whether our institutions are capable of responding appropriately and preventing these measures. However, I am worried about this becoming a partisan debate between parties about who has the best motion.

Surely, as many have said, can we not come together and amend this motion so we can just move forward with both and get down to the crux of this? That is for people in all of our communities who are fearful for their lives because of this hate-mongering activity.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Mr. Speaker, the member's comments and question are exactly what I was saying. If there is an issue in any of our communities, if there is hatred perpetrated upon the Islamic population, or

if there is hatred perpetrated upon the Jewish population, it is incumbent upon all of us to deal with those issues. We look at our first nations, and it is absolutely correct.

From a holistic perspective, we have to look at our communities in context and really have measures in place where we can assist those people who are vulnerable. In my community, 95 languages are spoken. My community has had discrimination that has been perpetrated upon the Sikh population. We need measures in place to assist those people.

It is not about one or the other. It is about all of us in the context of dealing with the issues and their root causes of hatred and discrimination. That is what our job is and that is what we should do.