

Government Orders

At a time when citizens are increasingly concerned about domestic issues, it is pertinent to ask a fundamental question about our involvement in expensive and potentially dangerous peacekeeping missions abroad. Why are we there? Why indeed are we taking an interventionist approach to problems and conflicts which ostensibly lie thousands of miles away in places most Canadians have never even seen?

Why, with the magnitude of economic and social problems facing all Canadians, are we giving the issue of international peacekeeping even a cursory glance? Why, of course, is a valid question.

I propose to offer some very compelling answers. I would encourage fellow members on all sides of the House to share these answers with their constituents.

First, to those who would question what benefits our peacekeeping missions abroad hold for Canada, we must reinforce the idea that Canada is not an island. Rather, we hold a privileged position as a world leader in international diplomacy. We carry the torch of Lester B. Pearson's legacy, a legacy which poses no ultimatum but patience in the search for peace.

If we fail to settle conflicts and unrest abroad, those problems by extension become our own. Conflicts overseas could, if left unchecked over time, expand to engulf our own nation. Indeed, it is in our national interest to be involved in peacekeeping missions abroad. However, national self-interest alone represents only one aspect of the need for our continued involvement in peacekeeping.

• (2345)

I submit to my fellow members that there is a noble interest at stake here. Our humanitarian mission in the former Yugoslavia alone directly benefits 2,750,000 residents of that war torn nation who would have no other means of survival in the face of such appalling conditions. These invaluable relief efforts are best pursued by a team of nations, which is why a renewal of our participation in the United Nations forces in that part of the world and elsewhere is essential, to my mind.

Other nations may waver, but I believe Canada should continue to reassert its commitment to independent foreign policy. I am confident that this government will not waver.

Allow me to call to the attention of fellow members what I feel may be a vital omission in our peacekeeping policy. It is the failure to communicate to citizens the many benefits of these operations particularly at a time when domestic issues threaten to consume us. Successful efforts seldom make headlines the way disasters do. Perhaps that is why an Angus Reid poll released this week indicates that six in ten Canadians support a withdrawal of Canadian troops from Bosnia. I cannot help but wonder whether the figure would be different if citizens were given a different look at the humanitarian function our overseas troops are performing.

Recently we saw on TV and in the print media the photo of an empty wooden sled on a patch of blood-covered snow in Sarajevo, a symbol of the horror and futility of war. We witness by way of the media the slaughter of civilians in their homes, the massacre of women, the senseless killing of children in the playgrounds, the bombing of hospitals and photos of entire village populations deprived of food and clothing. When we witness these human indignities we agonize and our hearts are torn. When this happens these horrors of war assume immediate proximity.

In conclusion, peacekeeping missions are the ultimate challenge to our nation's soul and how we respond to this challenge will reflect our national conscience. The lives of these people in that part of the world are in our hands.

The Deputy Speaker: There are three speakers left. They are the members for Waterloo, Scarborough West and Victoria—Haliburton. I wonder if they would agree to divide their time since it is so late. Would five minutes each be all right? You can blame the whip if you do not like the order you have on the list. The member for Victoria—Haliburton is first.

Mr. John O'Reilly (Victoria—Haliburton): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I will keep my comments as brief as I can.

It is with great pleasure that I rise tonight and for the first time speak in the greatest forum of our country. I further wish to express my thanks to the people of Victoria—Haliburton who sent me here and instilled confidence in me to do my best.

The matter we are discussing today is one that is of concern to all Canadians. This discussion is long overdue and I thank the Prime Minister for this opportunity.

Peacekeeping has long been viewed as a made in Canada concept, which is understandable since former Prime Minister Lester Pearson developed the program and subsequently was awarded the Nobel peace prize for his efforts. Canada has long been a vocal and active supporter of organizations for international stability and order and now has in the area of 2,300 troops stationed around the world in various peacekeeping operations.

For the most part, these operations have been peaceful. However, more and more often violent encounters are occurring in day to day peacekeeping. The role of peacekeeping is changing.

• (2350)

In today's debate we must be careful about what is being discussed. We can easily dismiss peacekeeping by saying that we must get our troops out of dangerous peacekeeping areas. However this sort of thinking is short-sighted.

We must expand our discussions and ask what we want our peacekeepers to do. We must develop a clear and concise mandate for our peacekeepers. Are we committing troops to a