

Viet Nam

Mr. Sharp: The task is difficult: it can also be dangerous. Some Canadians have lost their lives trying to accomplish it. Others may yet do so. We bear a heavy responsibility to them: it is to ensure that their dedication and courage serve to contribute effectively to the maintenance of peace. We must do all we can to ensure their role is effective, and we must withdraw them if, despite their best efforts, their role seems doomed to ineffectiveness.

That is the purpose of the government's policy and of its recent decision. I know it is also the purpose of all Canadians and of this House which represents them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Wagner (Saint-Hyacinthe): Mr. Speaker, earlier while listening to the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp), I almost reached the point of asking myself this: Why are we holding this debate? To ratify a decision already taken unilaterally? To discuss a situation that is already settled? After all, we know that the government, strong in its omniscience, did not feel the need to consult parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it seems to me the present government has a rather strange concept of the role of this House. Still, at close range, one no longer wonders about the need for a debate, especially after having heard the Secretary of State for External Affairs, after touching upon the main aspects of the situation, tell us off-handedly: Some time later, after the 60 days, we will make a decision and advise the House. In fact, here is what he was saying:

[*English*]

Whichever decision is made the House will be informed.

[*Translation*]

We may wonder, Mr. Speaker, if we shall be advised of this important decision by a press release or by a cabinet statement. In the government's opinion this does not appear to be any more serious than that. This is why it is important to have such a debate. It is precisely this strange behaviour on the government's part which justifies holding a debate in the hope that there will not be any more repetition of this. The government will learn in the next few hours, and in no uncertain terms, that parliamentary sovereignty should not be scoffed at in such a way.

[*English*]

There are, Mr. Speaker, certain principles that we in this party feel should and must be affirmed with regard to our participation in the truce supervisory role in Viet Nam. It is our view that parliament and the people of Canada should have a clear understanding of the dangers and difficulties arising out of our country's present situation and, even more important, of what we can do in the days ahead to rectify many of these problems.

• (1600)

It is sad, but true, that our present situation in Viet Nam is precarious, and in many respects a direct contradiction of the conditions that our own minister established for any possible involvement on our part. It is interesting to trace our minister's approach to the conditions of our potential participation in any truce operation in Viet Nam. On December 18 the minister intimated:

[Mr. Sharp.]

We would consider participating in the Viet Nam truce, when, in our opinion, based on the lessons of the past and the circumstances of the request, an operation held the promise of success.

The lesson of the past, Mr. Speaker, was simple and fairly clear. There can be no success when a truce force is unclear as to its procedures, dependent for its supplies and logistics, and based more on an effort of representing opposing interests than any true international presence. It is precisely that type of situation the minister has committed us to, and despite his own conditions.

Our eagerness to participate when the basic conditions were simply unacceptable is even more surprising in view of the previous experience we have already had as members of the ICC in Viet Nam. The documented cases of absolute irrelevance and impotence on the part of the previous ICC should dictate to any sane government to never let this sort of thing happen again.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wagner: Indeed, the old ICC had, in many respects, a task far easier and more clearly defined. Although it never had logistical support to do the job or, for that matter, legal freedom to undertake its responsibilities effectively, it at least had a geographical and political frame of reference. The 17th parallel served as a demarcation line. The old ICC had at least a frontier to patrol. But the present group does not even have that much.

At the time of the cease-fire, troops from the north were scattered in hundreds of enclaves in South Viet Nam, and estimates run as high as 145,000 troops. I ask you, Mr. Speaker, how does one patrol this type of cease-fire if, indeed, the firing ever stops? Does one report the movement of a soldier from one enclave to another? Indeed, this proposition is sad, yet despite the difficulties with the task and the indirect nature of our function, Canadians are there.

We had expressed the hope in this Chamber sometime ago that if we were to do a job in Viet Nam this government would ensure that we were given the tools to do that job. This has not happened. Not even the 60-day caveat established by the government has any true meaning. If after the period of 60 days the government is thinking of withdrawing our forces, and if there is not a similar approach on the part of the other members of the truce commission, what then will be Canada's posture? Once we are sure we have in some respects made a commitment, while that commitment was hastier than it had to be and completely out of tune with our sorry experience in Viet Nam, it is a commitment that we in this House must consider positively. While any threat to the safety of our troops should in our estimation be met with a swift contingency operation to withdraw our forces, it is now the role of this parliament to consider carefully the positive steps we can take to rectify the unfortunate circumstances in which our forces now must find themselves.

You will note that I have said "this parliament". I believe, as do my colleagues, that the initiative must be wrested from the Cabinet and from the Department of External Affairs in this matter. Canadian troops as well as civilians have been sent overseas by this government on a poorly contrived and planned mission fraught with uncertainty and political difficulty. The Cabinet preroga-