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THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Statement in the House of Commons, November 26,
1968, by the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable
Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

One of the strengths of Canada, Mr. Speaker, one of the qualities of the Canadian people that makes me proud to be a Canadian, is the interest which Canadians take in the welfare of others less fortunate than themselves. We are, I think it is fair to say, human beings first and citizens second. Successive Canadian Governments have received full public support for measures which have been designed to relieve the suffering of persons elsewhere. In addition to our programmed external aid, Canada has again and again provided emergency food and relief supplies in generous measure to victims of famine and natural disasters. We have on several occasions welcomed to our midst in large numbers the unfortunate victims of wars and disruption.

We all stand taller as a result of our sympathies for human beings and our efforts to assist them. We stand taller not because we are seeking to mollify our own consciences, nor because we need to boast to others of our humanitarian motivation; we stand taller because we have chosen the right path of conduct and have been effective in the help we have tendered.

And this to me, Mr. Speaker, is what this entire debate today is about. It is unnecessary to discuss whether Canadians actively wish to assist the unfortunate victims of the civil war in Nigeria. They do. It is irrelevant to discuss whether a Canadian Government can properly involve itself in a relief effort abroad. It can. The single point at issue is whether this Government has acted correctly and wisely in doing what it has done.

In this respect correctness is not measured in red tape or technicalities and I shall not therefore make any attempt to suggest these considerations as an explanation for Canadian policies. But in this same respect, Mr. Speaker, neither is wisdom measured in the volume of our own voices raised in international arenas.

If we are truly and honestly committed to assisting the peoples of Nigeria, both correctness and wisdom must be measured in terms of the effectiveness of our efforts to help. Victims of war are not helped by grandiose speeches in the General Assembly; starving children are not nourished by acts which prolong hostilities.