

*Private Members' Business*

Why has this government and this minister not spoken out on the serious violations of human rights affecting the Sikh community in the Punjab and affecting Canadians of Sikh origin in the Punjab? Why has the Secretary of State for External Affairs been silent on that? Why no effort to improve the very difficult problems of immigration, for example, with an additional consulate in the Punjab? Why no grants to the community for over three years? Why no amendment to the Human Rights Act to include the provision for reasonable accommodation which is so important to make that a reality?

• (1410 )

I suggest that instead of listening to the narrow-minded and intolerant voices of the minister's Conservative colleagues from Calgary, he should be listening to the Commissioner of the RCMP. The Commissioner of the RCMP, when he was questioned in the justice committee earlier this year, strongly supported this change. He said that the face of Canada is changing and he felt that the RCMP, because it has always had representatives of the country it has served in its ranks, needed to attract people from visible minorities and aboriginal peoples.

We have much work to do in that regard. In fact, of the 14,843 members of the RCMP, 14,418 are caucasian and only a little over 400 out of 14,843 are non-caucasian, including aboriginal peoples. That is a record which has to be changed. That was one of the reasons why the Commissioner of the RCMP made this important recommendation. The Commissioner of the RCMP went on to say that there are other more pragmatic reasons. He pointed out that when the Air India investigation led to certain questions there were only two members of the RCMP who even spoke Punjabi. Even for those practical reasons the RCMP must welcome into its ranks and encourage the hiring of Sikh Canadians.

The Commissioner says as well that we need members who can bridge the psychological gap that sometimes exists between new Canadians and police and how we view police in this country. We need to be able to help them with their problems, to carry out our investigations in an effective way and to deliver to them a police service to which they are entitled. He goes on to note that to deny Sikhs the right to wear turbans would in fact be in

breach both of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the bona fide occupational provisions of the Canadian Human Rights Act.

Why does the minister not listen to the Commissioner of the RCMP who has made this very important recommendation? Why did he not accept that recommendation some time ago, before the flames of intolerance could be fanned by a number of hon. members opposite?

I want to say a couple of words about the significance of the turban in the Sikh religion because some people say this is just a question of tradition. This is not a question of tradition, it is not a question of a particular cultural artefact. This is a fundamental article of faith, an essential element of the Sikh religious faith. Indeed, there are five articles of faith: the kes, the kanga, the kirpan, the kara and the kachha. Each of these is a fundamental article of faith.

One of my correspondents has written to me with some background. He says that the turban is known in the Punjabi language as the pag. He said if we study Punjabi culture and Sikh religion, the folk songs, the proverbs and the sayings, we see that the word "turban" is used as a synonym with the words "honour of a person". So a turban is not just a head cover or protection of the hair and head, it is also regarded as a fundamental part of the honour of the Sikh that he must guard at all times at any cost. In fact, removing the turban from a Sikh's head is seen as dishonouring him. It is a fundamental part of the religious tradition and surely we must recognize that and respect it.

Indeed, I care far more about what is inside the head of a member of the RCMP than what is on top of it. If I am in a situation in which I have to call upon the RCMP for assistance, I do not care if they have a turban on their head or a stetson or anything else. I want someone there who is sensitive and able to do the job, as members are in these circumstances.

We are talking of a turban, in the case of members of the RCMP, of a particular nature. In fact, the RCMP turban is made of navy blue cloth and it has a strip of yellow cloth which is wrapped around it. There is a metal brooch of the RCMP emblem similar to the pin worn in the standard uniform cap which is attached to the front of the turban. It is a dignified and appropriate way to accommodate this very important request.