

Special Debate

Our real issue today is that Canada entered into operations, engaged our forces, engaged our word as a nation and we are bound by that commitment in terms of consequences. We cannot lightly walk away. In other words, a new political situation is created by our act however much the present government and opposition parties might wish to question the original political premises on which the predecessor government engaged Canada.

I have some suggestions to make in terms of the continued operation of the Canadian peace forces in Croatia. It is clear if we ought to be there it is to be in a classic peacekeeping sense. We are not there as a chapter seven of the charter, a peacemaking operation in which we have a defined political goal that involves the application of military force for its achievement.

This was never our role. It is not our role today. It may well be the objective of some of the people presently engaged in the same operation. One of the problems here is the problem of state succession to the former communist republic of Yugoslavia. It was about to break up, as Turkey was in the 19th century. It created the predecessor of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro. It was a situation of state succession in which European powers met together and realized that one cannot have recognition of new states without a precise and equitable definition of frontiers.

● (2025)

That was not done here and in a very real sense it is a mistake to attempt it under the guise of a peacekeeping operation. Therefore our message to the government should be that the predecessor government engaged Canada in the operation. We cannot in good faith walk away. We are responsible in measure for what has happened since. We should limit our responsibility to the UN mandate, the maintenance of a political military situation created by the parties, agreed on by the parties as a cease fire and no more.

If there is to be an issue of political goals to be established, we should call for another congress of Berlin. The treaty of Versailles to which we are signatory, our first international act, establishes just such a machinery.

If it is to be a matter of defining frontiers, let us have a larger European conference of which we are part. Let us get those frontiers defined. Do not try to do this under cover of a military peacekeeping operation. Do not charge our soldiers with the responsibility of making political decisions. It is beyond their special competence. It is beyond their mandate. It is manifestly unfair to them.

I say congratulations to the government for establishing what I hope will become a precedent that before Canadian forces are committed we will bring the matter to Parliament. Second, we will insist on maintaining respect for the UN charter and respect for UN peacekeeping operations as defined in chapter six.

Mr. Bob Ringma (Nanaimo—Cowichan, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by reiterating the motion:

That this House, in light of the UN Security Council consideration of renewed mandates for UN forces in the former Yugoslavia, take note of the rotation of Canadian forces serving with UNPROFOR in Bosnia—Hercegovina and Croatia.

We are taking note and Canadians are taking note. Canadians are generally proud of the role of the Canadian forces in peacekeeping. They very much respect the humanitarian role that can be played. I do not think they are totally aware of both sides of the equation from a military point of view.

On a very basic level if the troops are told, as they have been recently in Valcartier, they are next in the slot, the morale of the troops increases and they say: "Good. We have a job to do, let us do it". If they have been trained for it, as most of them have, they can do a very creditable job.

The problem is that this has gone on for too long. While there is a momentary surge in morale, the piper must be paid after that. If the troops get rotated with too great a frequency, we have a problem. If the troops do not have the wherewithal in equipment to carry things out, there is a problem. If defects are perceived in leadership in the Department of National Defence or within the Canadian forces, there is a problem. If the terms of reference in the first place are inadequate, there is another problem.

While it is good for the Canadian public to support its peacekeepers, as I do, I nevertheless have to sound a note of caution that all is not that well. There are many impediments, many problems to overcome. The longer we are in this business the more those problems are evident. I would like to agree to some extent with my colleague from Vancouver Quadra who was extolling the virtues of the government by saying that it was doing the right thing by consulting Parliament. I agree, it is a good thing to do.

● (2030)

The government made a start on this a year or more ago when this Parliament began. However, I have to question its sincerity when looking at the events of today. Although the mandate for our troops expires in two days' time, the government only yesterday announced the special debate of today. That is totally inadequate. However the intent may be correct. To put it in general terms, as the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra did, it is a good thing to consult Parliament. I wholeheartedly agree with that. It is a good thing to consult Parliament, but let us do it effectively, not in a cursory way.

A good part of the reason for the Reform members' position is that we established in discussion among ourselves what we consider should be the conditions for sending troops on peacekeeping operations. One was that peacekeepers should be left alone to do their job in the Bosnia area. The second was that the Sarajevo airport should remain open. The third was that convoys