

Mr. Speaker,

This House has already had an opportunity for a preliminary exchange of views between party spokesmen before the departure from Canada of the first group of observers to the new Commission in Viet-Nam.

Despite the shortness of time, personnel from External Affairs and from our Defence Forces are already in the field. On behalf of the international community, they will observe and report on the implementation of the Agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Viet-Nam.

When the moment of decision came the Parties to the cease-fire had radically compressed the expected time-table. Consequently the Government was faced with the need to decide in time to have the Canadian delegation take off from Montreal on Saturday of last week if we were to comply with the terms of the agreements. Indeed, the Parties asked us to do so on the basis of complex documents, some of which we saw for the first time on Wednesday of last week.

Our participation, I think, was perceived by all sides in this House as necessary. I believe it was seen by the great majority of Canadians as necessary. It was so because all Canadians, and indeed people the world over, so ardently desired that the fighting should stop in Viet-Nam. As I explained to the House on January 24, the day of the Government's decision, Canada had a choice to make that day. On the face of it, it was a dilemma: we could, on one hand, accept membership in the new Commission with whatever reservations we saw fit. This is what the Parties to the agreement were asking us to do. But it would have meant committing Canada to an important step to which there are Canadian preconditions; and it would have meant doing so well before we could possibly know whether those preconditions were met or -- in view of the complexity of the agreements involved -- whether they were even likely to be met. The Government would have regarded that as an abdication of responsibility. I am sure all Honourable Members would have so regarded it. On the other hand, we could have declined to participate in the new Commission. By doing so, we could have stood in the way of ending the fighting in Viet-Nam. No Canadian would have wished his country to do that.

We therefore decided to take part initially, and make available to the new Commission the number of Canadian observers required by the agreements, to meet the time-table set up by the Parties -- in short, during that initial period, do all that we could to discharge the obligations of membership. But we were not prepared to commit Canada to open-ended membership before we were satisfied that Canada's preconditions for membership had been reasonably met. Our participation, which will be for the first sixty days, will enable us to evaluate the arrangements for international observation and reporting and to learn what scope there is for mediation. I must make it clear that Canada's preconditions were not mere gestures of reluctance; they were the product of long and sometimes bitter experience, and they were an effort to point the way toward effective international observation and reporting.

We shall see, in the first sixty days, whether the arrangements can be improved. In particular, we shall see whether a continuing political authority is provided. We shall see whether the contracting Parties are determined to make the agreements work. We shall see how our associates in the new Commission view the responsibilities of our collective role. If we conclude that Canada's conditions are adequately met and that Canada's continued participation would be effective, we may decide to accept full continued membership, with or without reservations. If we conclude that Canada's conditions are inadequately met or that we are likely to be drawn again into an exercise in futility and frustration, as the previous Commission had become,