

Routine Proceedings

tightening and the reduced commitment of the Canadian government to the Commonwealth against the increased needs that many of the Commonwealth countries are facing, indeed that the Commonwealth organization should be supplying. There was one lesson to be drawn out of the Harare declaration.

• (1520)

The Commonwealth must now begin to target specifically a number of key areas of support in the development of democratic governments and in the promotion of human rights.

I was dismayed in reading a report from Amnesty International just last week pointing out the frequent incidents of forceful abuse of women by governments—torture, rape, interment—included among its several Commonwealth countries.

We, as a member of the Commonwealth, have been less than active in bringing that very serious and very specific issue to the forefront. Perhaps it was most clearly demonstrated in the events in Kenya in the past three or four weeks when the leader of the opposition, one of the outstanding women in the Commonwealth organization, was beaten, tortured, put in prison and only finally let loose after there was some protest.

It does demonstrate clearly that the Harare declaration has a long way to go before it becomes reality. It would seem to me that the responsibility of Canada in many of these cases, as the secretary himself stated, is to put forward the equality of women, to use one example, as a priority for discussion within Commonwealth circles to see how we can begin to respond to that very serious issue.

I think Amnesty International is not an organization known for excesses in its assessment or analysis. Here is an area in which we can do some very specific good. It may not be as dramatic as fighting apartheid was back in the days when that scourge was on the world stage and which is now we ameliorating, we believe.

Certainly as we move into a period in which more and more people at the grassroots are reaching out to build a new foundation of human rights and democratic institutions, there is a crying need for us to support them. That is purely, if you want to put it in the crassest terms, enlightened self-interest.

The more democracies there are, the less trouble we will have in the world. There will be fewer possibilities of invasion, transgression, conquest and forcible use of arms. It is a good investment.

I know I do not have much time to respond to the hon. minister's statement, but for all the reasons that were enunciated in the original statement about the value of the Commonwealth, its history, its experience, its ability to bring countries together from diverse cultures and diverse regional areas, now is the time to be giving it a new set of activities, a new set of missions.

It is not the time for grand declarations of heads of state at photo opportunities once a year, but rather the time for using the Commonwealth to bring to the fore very specific initiatives, such as the kind I mentioned. There can be many others.

I say to the members of the government that it would be valuable to our Commonwealth partners if Canada became a far more active advocate on the world stage as we go to G-7, OECD or IMF meetings to tackle the problem of Third World debt, which is crippling many of our Commonwealth nations and bringing them to their needs.

I might point out that because of the austerity measures being imposed by international financial institutions, the victims again are women, children, schools. Again, we are not on the forefront. We have not taken leadership at the IMF or the G-7 saying: "Do something about it".

The most important way we can celebrate Commonwealth Day is to give the Commonwealth organization something real, valuable and meaningful to do. Members of the Commonwealth look to this country to take that initiative.

Mr. Svend J. Robinson (Burnaby—Kingsway): Mr. Speaker, I too am pleased to rise today on the occasion of Commonwealth Day to recognize the challenges that face us as a nation and that face the Commonwealth at this very important time in global history.

Today we in Canada join with some 49 other countries in the Commonwealth in marking Commonwealth Day. Many of us were particularly pleased that in 1990 the 50th member state of the Commonwealth, the free nation of Namibia, joined the Commonwealth.