

Statement

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOE CLARK,

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,

ON A MOTION BY THE OPPOSITION CONCERNING A LETTER
SENT TO PROVINCIAL PREMIERS ON SIKH ORGANIZATIONS

OTTAWA

March 10, 1988.

Secretary of State
for
External Affairs

Secrétaire d'État
aux
Affaires extérieures

Canada

Mr. Speaker, to begin with, I might caution Honourable Members of the House about drawing parallels between the situation in India respecting Khalistan and other events in the world. I think before they begin to make those statements in the name of their Party, which there is some temptation to do by both my friend from Kamloops-Shuswap and the Hon. Member who introduced the motion, they would want to carefully consider the implications of what they are saying.

Sir, I intend to be as dispassionate as I can be in this debate. I think it would be helpful if I began by reading the letter which the Official Opposition wants to make an issue. The letter was tabled in the House the other day and it states:

"I am writing to you concerning possible invitations to you or members of your government to attend functions organized by members of the Canadian Sikh community. The majority of these invitations are valuable in ensuring that your government is kept informed of developments in the Sikh community and that the community is encouraged to participate fully in Canadian life.

There are, however, three Sikh organizations which exist largely to advocate the creation of an independent Sikh state, known as "Khalistan". These three organizations are the Babbar Khalsa, the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), and the World Sikh Organization. Some members of these organizations have also engaged in or promote violent activities aimed at Indian interests in Canada and elsewhere. The activities of these organizations have been a significant irritant in our relations with India. The government of India has taken particular exception when elected officials attend functions sponsored by these organizations.

I fully understand the dilemma that elected officials face in making decisions as to which functions to attend. In some instances the sponsoring organization may not be readily apparent. Despite these difficulties, I would appreciate your cooperation in avoiding events and activities which could be perceived as supporting the Sikh organizations mentioned above or their objective in the creation of an independent Sikh state.

I would also request that you consider circulating a copy of this letter to members of your Cabinet and caucus. Should you require any additional information on this matter, please contact me."

That was the content of the letter which the Liberal Party is seeking to generate a debate over. I had hoped this sensitive issue would not be exploited for partisan purposes but the Liberal Party has chosen to put a motion forward in this House and therefore we will reply.

Sir, no one in this House should need reminding that modern societies are complex, and they are becoming more complex. Unhappily, one element of that complexity, one phase of modern international and national life, is that there is an increasing recourse to violence, not simply in the world apart from Canada but also in Canada. All civilized societies wish to work to overcome those tendencies toward violence, to deal with the root causes, to not participate innocently in the encouraging of activities which might have a violent consequence. Certainly that is a deep commitment of this country and this Government.

Sir, we must not forget that Canadians have been victims of terrorism both at home and abroad. The pervasive fear that affected all Canadians as a result of the terrorism of the October crisis in Canada in 1970 can never be far from our minds. Even more recently, Canadians have experienced the tragic consequences of terrorism. Canadians narrowly escaped death in the hijacking at Karachi in 1986. Canadians were aboard the Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, which was hijacked in September, 1985, which was the scene of the murder of one of the passengers by terrorists. Three hundred and twenty-nine people, most of them Canadians, died in the Air India tragedy in 1985. A Canadian was killed in the attack on the Turkish Embassy in 1985 and in the same year Toronto's subway system was held hostage by terrorists. In November of that year a Canadian mother and her infant son lost their lives in terrorist attack on an Egyptian airliner in Malta. In 1986 there was an assassination attempt against a visiting Indian state Cabinet Minister on Vancouver Island.

In the course of my responsibilities I have stood at the graveside in Beiseker, Alberta, when the Canadian woman and her infant son, victims of terrorism abroad, were laid to rest in Canada. In carrying out of my functions I have been representing Canada and this Parliament on the peninsula near Cork in Ireland where a memorial is established to the Canadian victims of the Air India crash. Sir, I have been to too many funerals to take this question lightly. Yet I am acutely aware that other of my colleagues in other countries less orderly and less free than ours have been to more funerals.

We have an obligation in this House to the nature, the freedom and the multicultural reality of Canada, to ensure that we do everything that we can to allow Canadians to pursue their goals and live their lives in peace and freedom.

As I said in the House on the occasion of the death of Valinda Leonard and her infant son in the Egypt Air incident, no nation is immune to the scourge of terrorism. It is for this reason that it is essential that we pursue with our allies the development of concrete measures to combat terrorism. Similarly, we must put in place protective measures at home and be vigilant in ensuring the prevention of occasions and opportunities for terrorism to incubate or to strike.

That, Sir, if I may say so, is particularly important in a country like Canada precisely because we are a multicultural nation that encourages people to come here from every corner and every colour of the world and to follow their goals, their religions, and their views here in Canada in accordance with Canadian law. There is more opportunity for more people to come here to express their traditions, to live their lives, than is the case in many other countries. As we provide more opportunity, that imposes upon us a greater obligation of care and imposes upon public officials a greater sense of responsibility.

The obligation is greater for us also because we are a free nation and we take our freedom seriously. It is protected in the courts, it is enshrined in the Charter, it is part of the practice of life in Canada. Sir, we all know the elemental reality that there can be no freedom for a society if there are not restraints accepted by individuals. Some of those restraints are set out in law and in policy.

Surely, Sir, we who hold the trust as public office holders have a particular obligation to ensure that laws are respected in Canada, to ensure that this country and its officials do not inadvertently become instruments of organizations or of interests which might seek the dismemberment of friendly states or which might promote or encourage the violence which could be so destructive to the freedom and the multicultural reality that we know here.

Separatism has a particular meaning for Canada. It reminds us of a very difficult period in our history. I think that most Canadians would strongly object to any other country giving support to anyone who promoted separatism in Canada, particularly through violent means. We would certainly press to have that country's government not give, or even be seen to give, any kind of support to such activities.

Mr. Speaker, the Sikh community has a long history in Canada. It has made an outstanding contribution to Canadian society, and as I said in the House on March 3: "This House knows that the vast majority of Canadians of Sikh origin are first-class Canadian citizens trying to raise their families in peace and trying to raise their families in freedom". The Government has a duty to help them do so.

I have been privileged to visit Sikh temples in Toronto. I have met with representatives of the Sikh community across the country. I have also celebrated with them the richness of Sikh traditions which are enhanced so much when the adherents of Sikh traditions are free to practise their religion in peace. I also had the sad duty, as I told the House earlier, in June, 1986, of dedicating a memorial in Dunmanus Bay, Ireland, to the victims of the Air India tragedy, many of whom were Canadian Sikhs.

However, let us face the facts. The activities of a small, militant minority in the Sikh community represent the most serious internal security threat that Canada faces today. Undeniably this minority seeks to dismember a friendly country, either through peaceful means or violent means. My friend, the Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona (Mr. Kilgour), asked the other day whether there was not a difference between the World Sikh Organization and the other two. Indeed, Sir, there is a difference, but the constitution of the World Sikh Organization clearly states that one of its objectives is "to strive through peaceful means for the establishment of a Sikh nation, Khalistan". At the time that constitution was adopted there was a vigorous debate within the World Sikh Organization. They know then that their decision would be controversial and the consequence of their decision is that their objectives are incompatible with Canadian policy.

Let me give you, Sir, some background on the other two organizations mentioned in my letter. The Babbar Khalsa is an India-based international organization comprising Sikhs whose objectives are the eradication of Sikh apostasy and the establishment of an independent state of Khalistan. In India the Babbar Khalsa has been involved in numerous acts of terror against moderate Sikhs, Hindus and official representatives of the Government of India and its composite states. The Canadian branch is relatively small, but its total devotion to Sikh independence and its willingness to undertake acts of violence make it a serious source of concern.

In May, 1986, members of the Montreal area Canadian Babbar Khalsa were involved in a plot to place a bomb on an Air India flight from New York. Two were convicted and given life sentences. On May 25, 1986, four members of the ISYF attempted to assassinate a visiting Punjab state Minister in British Columbia. They were each sentenced to 20 years for this offence. As a Government, Sir, we cannot ignore these facts, nor can we ignore other cases of terrorism that we have encountered.

The International Sikh Youth Federation has its roots in the All India Sikh Student Federation, the largest and best organized Sikh extremist organization in India. The All India Sikh Student Federation activities and programs are directed

toward disrupting and subverting the civil and political process in India for the express purpose of establishing an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. Members of that organization have been involved in aircraft hijackings, political assassinations, and the random, indiscriminate killings of both Sikh moderates and Hindus.

Moreover, these two organizations have occasionally attempted to dupe Members of Parliament or public figures in Canada into supporting their cause, for example, by having them photographed under the Khalistan flag or wearing buttons indicating support for Khalistan.

These groups exist largely to promote the creation of an independent Sikh state known as Khalistan based on the Indian state of Punjab. In pursuit of that objective some members of that organization have used, counselled or promoted the use of violence.

The Canadian government cannot remain silent when individuals or organizations advocate the use of violence for political ends, namely, the dismemberment of another country with which we have a longstanding and friendly relationship. My letter, therefore, asked our provincial premiers to avoid appearing at organized events or activities which could inadvertently lend their endorsement to the separatist objectives of these groups.

My letter did not ask premiers to avoid receiving or meeting with any particular individuals, whatever views they may espouse. Even though this Government rejects their separatist cause, we fully recognize all Canadians right to freedom of expression. It is the attendance or participation by representatives of the Canadian people in events or functions sponsored by these three organizations about which I am concerned.

When political leaders openly associate with such groups, whether they intend to do so or not, they lend credence and support to the objectives for which those organizations stand. These organizations have in the past taken advantage of politicians attending their functions. I believe most Canadians would very strongly object and would want its government to object to another country's leaders giving support of any kind to anyone who promoted separatism in Canada, particularly through violent means. This Government would certainly press to have that country's government not give or even be seen to give any kind of support of such activities.

Naturally enough, such activities invite representations to the Government of Canada from the Government of India, just as Canada made representations to other countries in 1970 during the period of the FLQ. As the

Secretary of State for External Affairs, I would be delinquent if I did not take account of the foreign policy implications, particularly for our relations with a friendly government on an issue which they regard as vital to their national integrity.

These activities also created deep concerns in Canada, particularly because the actions of a small minority are tearing the Canadian Sikh community apart. The point of concern and the reasons for sending my letter were activities within Canada. I act as a Canadian Minister in the interest of all Canadians.

As I said earlier, the activities of small group of Sikhs in Canada constitutes one of the most serious internal security threats which Canada faces today. A militant minority in Canada has, through violence and intimidation, been able to exert a disproportionate influence in the community of Sikh origin in Canada.

A number of initiatives have been taken by the Canadian Government to deal with the present situation so as to avoid any possibility of Canada becoming a centre of Sikh extremism.

Our most important initiative has been our attempt to express encouragement and support for moderate Sikhs who have decided to oppose the excesses of a militant minority that wants to wage, within our borders, a war that has its origins in another country.

Some have asked whether the Government has exercised its responsibility to warn public figures about other organizations in Canada. The answer is clearly yes, respecting the activities of groups which themselves, or through their members, are associated with violence or with the purpose of dismantling other friendly countries in Europe and elsewhere. I and my officials have received many inquiries from Members of Parliament and provincial governments about the nature and the objectives of groups which have requested meetings with public figures. We have provided the appropriate advice and have received cooperation in these instances.

The principle is the same. This is not a new policy. Other Canadian governments have adopted similar positions. I note the presence in the House of the Members for York Centre (Mr. Kaplan), the former Solicitor General. In addressing a comparable problem in 1984, he argued that acts of violence or terrorism in support of a free Armenia would not be tolerated in Canada and that this country should not become a surrogate battleground for alien causes. Rightly, he said that this would invite anarchy. He also said at the time that the efforts of the government of the day, the Liberal government in

which he was a Minister, were directed only at those who violate the laws of Canada. I would add that they should also be directed at those who counsel violation of our laws, directly or indirectly.

I said that the Government would be willing to provide briefings to Members of Parliament in camera. In that non-partisan spirit, I must say that the External Affairs critic of the New Democratic Party has approached us. We have agreed to provide him with such a briefing. That option is open to other interested Members.

The real problem here is that whatever we might wish, Canada is not immune to violence and to terrorism. There have been too many instances of terrorism in this country. We, as the Government, have the responsibility to respond with firmness, within the bounds and the laws of a free and multicultural society. We owe that to all Canadians, but we owe it particularly to the great majority of Canadians of Sikh origin who are not, in a situation in which excessive pressures exist, free to pursue their goals in accordance with the traditions which drew them and so many to this country.

Where we are not doing enough as Members of the House of Commons is in reaching out to encourage the moderate majority of the Sikh community in Canada to stand strong against the tiny minority who practice or counsel terrorism or violence. We are having a debate today. I suggest to all Members of the House that the best next step for all Members would be to ensure and encourage the freedom of Canadians of Sikh origin in this country to pursue their goals in Canada in accordance with their tradition and laws of this country.