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HELLENIC HERITAGE MONTH BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:
The Honourable Tony Loffreda

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Hon. Tony Loffreda: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to Bill S-259, An Act to designate the month of March as Hellenic Heritage Month. It is truly an honour to rise in this chamber to speak to my first Senate public bill. I want to thank Senator Housakos, who kindly seconded my bill and will serve as critic of the bill. I hope he will be a friendly critic.

In my remarks today, I wish to address four key points. First, I will briefly speak of my connection with the Hellenic community. This will clarify why I, a non-Greek, was asked to sponsor this bill. Second, I want to speak to how this bill came about, its genesis and its development. I will then provide a brief history of Canada's Greek heritage. Finally, I will end my remarks by sharing with you some of the positive feedback I have received from Hellenic organizations and community leaders who support the passage of Bill S-259.

My connection with the Hellenic community goes back many years. In fact, it goes back a few decades. In my former life, I had the honour of supporting various community organizations and ethnic groups by sponsoring, donating and chairing numerous events and fundraising activities. Montreal's Hellenic community was certainly one of the communities I had a deep connection with and close ties to.

Along with our colleague Senator Housakos, I am a patron and long-time supporter of the Montreal chapter of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, also known as AHEPA.

I also serve as a distinguished patron of the Hellenic Ladies Benevolent Society, a non-profit organization that celebrated its one hundredth anniversary last year, and that helps those in need within the Hellenic community and beyond. Over the years, I am proud to say we've helped the community raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for many worthy causes that have benefited various groups and individuals of Hellenic descent.

Professionally and personally, I have also built strong relationships with many leaders, entrepreneurs and advocates within the community. To this day, some of my closest friends in Montreal are from the Hellenic community.

A few years ago, I was deeply honoured to have been named "Philhellene of the Year" by the Hellenic Community of Greater Montreal for my advocacy and commitment to the community. This award, which is proudly displayed in my home, is only given on rare occasions to non-Greeks and pays tribute to those who are committed to Hellenism, so I was particularly touched by the honour.

Most recently, in April 2022, I was privileged to accompany our former Speaker, along with Senator Housakos and Senator Saint-Germain, for an official visit to the Hellenic Republic. How fitting that my first official international trip as a senator was to Greece. It was a trip I will never forget.

We met with several parliamentarians and politicians including the Prime Minister, the President of the Hellenic Parliament, the Archbishop of Athens and various ministers and other officials. Eighty years after we formally established relations with the Hellenic Republic, our relationship is stronger than ever. We share the same democratic values, and both countries are collaborating in meaningful ways to enhance bilateral trade and investments and encourage wider cooperation in various fields, including education and business.

In some ways, my trip to Greece reminded me of the strong ties that unite our two nations and provided me with additional motivation to introduce this bill.

As you might know, a similar bill was introduced in March 2021 during the Forty-third Parliament by our colleague Annie Koutrakis, Member of Parliament for Vimy, a riding in the Montreal area. Regrettably, Ms. Koutrakis's Bill C-276 died on the Order Paper with the dissolution of Parliament and the subsequent federal election. Ms. Koutrakis, along with other parliamentarians and members of Canada's Hellenic diaspora, were committed to reintroducing the bill in the Forty-fourth Parliament.

Last fall I was approached by Ms. Koutrakis and Senator Housakos and asked to reintroduce the bill in the Senate. In light of my long-standing commitment to the community and love for all things Greek, they felt I was a natural choice to introduce a new bill and shepherd it through Parliament. I was honoured to be asked, and I happily agreed to do this for a community for which I have the utmost respect and admiration.

I know MP Koutrakis did a lot of community outreach prior to tabling her bill in 2021. I had confidence in her work, but I also felt I needed to reach out to community organizations and individuals on my own to seek their feedback on the previous version of the bill, especially the wording of the preamble.

After conducting some research of my own, I launched consultations earlier this year. I reached out to different organizations and many individuals across the country from a wide spectrum of sectors, including non-profits, academics and scholars, legal experts, community advocates, religious leaders and individuals of Greek heritage. In total, my office contacted nearly 150 different groups and individuals.

The feedback we received was unanimous: everyone supported this initiative, encouraged me to introduce the bill as soon as possible and — not to put any pressure on us — urged parliamentarians to adopt the bill as soon as possible. I will share some of these comments with you a little later in my speech.

Most importantly, I was delighted that we received some constructive suggestions and minor editorial changes to the preamble of Bill C-276, the predecessor of Bill S-259. Working with a few of our fellow parliamentarians, including MP Koutrakis and Senator Housakos, I feel we have properly integrated these changes to the bill we now have before us.

I am hopeful and confident that Bill S-259, in its current form, will meet the needs and aspirations of the Hellenic community. I trust the committee to which this bill will be referred will invite members of the community to hear their views on it.

For the record, I would like to take a moment to read the text of the preamble of the bill:

Whereas over 260,000 Canadians are of Greek descent and numerous Greek communities exist across the country;

Whereas Greek Canadians have made meaningful and lasting contributions to Canada's political, economic, scientific, legal, medical, cultural and social fabric, and in numerous other areas of value and significance;

Whereas the origins of Canadian democracy can be traced back to the ancient Greek city-state of Athens;

Whereas the month of March is culturally and spiritually significant for the Greek community, as it was on March 25, 1821, on the Great Feast of the Annunciation, that Greece commenced its war of independence from the Ottoman Empire, leading to the creation of the modern state of Greece;

And whereas the celebration of Hellenic Heritage Month would encourage Greek Canadians to promote their culture and traditions and share them with their fellow Canadians

I want to publicly thank everyone who I think made the preamble better, along with MP Koutrakis who did a lot of the heavy lifting in the development of this bill.

Honourable senators, as you can see, Canadians and citizens from all over the world have many reasons to be appreciative of Hellenism, its legacy and impact on our democracies.

Canada, as you might know, established formal relations with the Hellenic Republic in 1942 at a time when the Greek government was in exile during the Second World War. Last year, we celebrated the eightieth anniversary of this partnership which also coincided with our Speaker's official visit. Of course, prior to this bilateral agreement, Canada was home to a small, yet strong and vibrant Hellenic community.

The history of Greek Canadians goes back nearly 200 years when some of the first immigrants settled in Montreal in the 1840s. According to archival records, by 1871 there were 39 persons of Greek origin known to be living in Canada. This modest number increased over the years thanks to two waves of emigration from Greece.

A first one occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century in response to the 1893 economic crisis in the republic. The second wave occurred after the Second World War. Of the more than 1 million Greeks who left their country during this second wave, nearly 120,000 chose Canada as their final destination. I have many family friends and acquaintances whose families arrived in Canada during this time.

Today, there are over 260,000 Canadians of Greek heritage in our nation. They are strong, they are proud and they are an integral part of Canada's cultural mosaic.

In a scholarly article published last year, the following account summarizes how Greek emigrants integrated into their new home country:

. . . Greeks in Canada tried to balance their efforts at integration in their new country and maintaining their Greek identity as many of them were hopeful that they would return to Greece within a decade. For this reason, they established churches, language schools, and many secular associations, where Greek is used to a larger or lesser degree. Of course, they also run Greek-related businesses, such as restaurants and grocery stores, where members of the community also congregate and socialize.

For various reasons . . . most of the Greek immigrant families stayed in Canada, and for the original immigrants and their descendants, integration became the main goal.

I think what is most telling about this statement is the fact that many Greeks who intended to return to Greece opted to stay in Canada. There are likely several reasons for this change of plan, but I like to think that many chose to stay in Canada because they felt welcomed, they felt right at home and knew Canada could offer them countless opportunities and a safe and caring environment to raise a family.

As The Canadian Encyclopedia explains:

Greek immigrants who were professionals typically worked as engineers, lawyers, doctors, university professors and civil servants. Canadian-born Greeks tended to enter higher professional and skilled occupations than their parents through higher academic attainment.

Naturally, as the Greek population increased in Canada, so did the number of Greek-centric associations, organizations and churches in communities across the nation.

I don't like to single out any one group or individual, but I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment to highlight the work of the Canadian Order of the American Hellenic Education and Progressive Association, which I referred to earlier. An important component of AHEPA's mission, which includes chapters in every major city in North America, is to create an awareness of the principles of Hellenism to society.

These principles include a commitment to humanity, freedom and democracy. I have firsthand account of the Montreal chapter's outstanding work in giving back the community, whether through fundraisers, scholarship programs, poverty-relief efforts and more.

The first Canadian chapter of AHEPA was opened almost 100 years ago in Toronto “to help immigrants to settle comfortably in their new country without sacrificing their Hellenic identity and heritage.” Not long after, the London chapter was opened, followed by the Montreal chapter in 1930. Montreal and Athens also have the distinction of being sister cities.

I would also like to say a brief word about the Hellenic Ladies Benevolent Society.

Since 1922 the HLBS has assisted thousands of families and individuals in need of financial support through the disbursement of funds generated through its various fundraising activities. In Montreal, this society is an important pillar in our community, helping some of the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

Beyond these two organizations, there are several other not-for-profit groups, associations and institutes that represent the Hellenic community, promote its values and safeguard its history. I will refer to some of them in the next section of my remarks. Naturally, and as stipulated in the preamble of the bill, Canadians of Greek descent have also made lasting contributions to our nation in various fields, and I know these organizations have played an integral part in those individual success stories.

Spiritually and religiously, the Greek-Canadian community is also supported and guided by the Greek Orthodox Church. Saint George’s Greek Orthodox Church, the first establishment of its kind in Canada, was founded in 1909 in Toronto.

The current archbishop is His Eminence Sotirios Athanassoulas, who has been serving Greek Canadians for six decades, and who recently wrote to me in support of Bill S-259. If you need any additional convincing that Greeks in Canada deserve a month-long celebration in their honour, no need to look any further than in Ontario where Queen’s Park became the first legislature in Canada to formally recognize March as Hellenic Heritage Month in 2020.

Since then, the Government of Ontario has also committed \$325,000 to support the planning and development of a new Greek-Canadian heritage museum to house a collection of artifacts in Toronto, which is where we can find the largest pool of Greek Canadians.

The feedback that the province received from stakeholders confirmed the need for a public space to connect generations to the legacy of Hellenic culture. The museum will be located at the archdiocesan headquarters. I know that Archbishop Sotirios welcomes this new project.

As I mentioned earlier, I worked with a few of our parliamentary colleagues over the course of several months in putting this bill together. Not only did Senator Housakos second the bill when I introduced it, but he is also serving as the friendly critic of the bill. I very much look forward to his remarks at second reading. If I have yet to convince you of the merits of this bill, I’m sure he will.

I am also happy to report that Emmanuella Lambropoulos, Liberal MP for Saint-Laurent in Montreal and a Canadian of Hellenic descent, will sponsor the bill in the other place.

The bill will be seconded by Dave Epp, Conservative MP for Chatham-Kent—Leamington. As you can see, we already have cross-party support, and I hope this bill will breeze through Parliament.

Through my consultations with the Hellenic community, I have amassed a great deal of support and formal endorsements from Canadians who welcome this legislative initiative. I think it’s important to share some of this positive feedback.

The Canadian Hellenic Congress, or CHC, a national institution that represents, advances, advocates and promotes the interests and concerns of Canadians of Hellenic descent, was very favourable to the bill.

Dr. Theodore Halatsis, the President of the Canadian Hellenic Congress, wrote that the CHC “proudly and wholeheartedly endorses” my initiative, and pointed out that “modern-day Canadians of Hellenic descent have proudly contributed to Canada’s wealth through various sectors.”

The Canadian Order of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, or AHEPA, also welcomed Bill S-259. As they pointed out, not only will this bill pay tribute to the contributions of Greek Canadians to the economic, social, political and scientific fabric of Canada over the past century, but it also pays homage to the contributions of Greek culture and civilization to Canadian values of liberty, democracy, education, civic responsibility and individual and family excellence.

The Socrates Educational Foundation wrote to me, indicating to what extent Bill S-259 “has elicited excitement and pride” with its members who reminded me of the fact that Hellenic ideas and concepts have been adopted around the world and form the basis of our Western civilization.

Vasilios Sioulas, President of the Ottawa Chapter of AHEPA, shared a touching story about his father who fought in the Second World War.

Like his father and countless others, Vasilios explained that:

Greek immigrants crossed the sea to seek better opportunities . . . and after a grueling ocean voyage, a “Welcome to Canada” sign appeared on the horizon at Halifax’s Pier 21.

As he wrote in his letter:

The history of Greeks in Canada is full of inspiring stories of accomplishment and success. It is a history of significant and important contributions to their adopted country.

Should Bill S-259 be adopted, he feels that:

. . . it will ignite the immortal spirit of our ancestors and fire our imagination to the beauty and mutual benefit of all concerned.

Vasilios's colleague at AHEPA, Nicolas Pantieras, also endorsed this initiative. He feels that:

By recognizing March as Greek heritage month, we acknowledge and celebrate the rich cultural and historical contributions of the Greek community to Canada and the world. This recognition fosters a sense of inclusivity and their respect for diversity, promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of Canada's multicultural society. It also provides an opportunity for Greeks to share their culture and heritage with the wider Canadian community, promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Tony Lourakis, President of the Hellenic Heritage Foundation — a highly respected and professionally managed foundation that encourages and provides higher education in Hellenic studies — reminded me that what isn't shared, studied or recognized is ultimately forgotten.

Therefore, as he put it:

Recognizing Hellenic culture and history is vital to preserving it and vital to understanding the roots of a culture that influences our society to this day.

He added:

Recognizing Hellenic heritage month, gives us the opportunity to highlight Greece's priceless history, both classical and modern, while emphasizing Canada's greatest strength, which is undoubtedly its diversity.

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Archbishop Sotirios, the head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada, offered his full support, both personally and on behalf of the archdiocese. He wrote:

This Act is not only important to the current Greek community of this country, but I believe it will be even more meaningful for future generations who are born and raised in this glorious country of Canada, but whose roots trace back to Greece and its unparalleled history.

Stanley Papulkas, President of ItoC Media Corporation, even suggested he would move the Greek International Film Festival Tour of Canada from the fall to March in order to build a nationwide celebration of Hellenic culture around Hellenic Heritage Month. As you can see, this bill is already getting the community excited.

Some have argued that bills to recognize special days, weeks or months are unnecessary. Obviously, I disagree with that opinion. Consider this testimony from Bill Molos, Program

Director and Research Lead of the Hellenic Heritage Foundation Greek Canadian Archives at York University, when he said:

Heritage months offer Canadians an opportunity to celebrate different cultural groups' contributions to our country. Empowering communities to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives helps to promote greater understanding and inclusion in Canadian society. And in learning about our differences, we nurture a sense of belonging to a shared Canada, blurring the contours of our vibrant mosaic.

National recognition of March as Hellenic Heritage Month will not only help educate Canadians about Hellenism and Greek Canadian history, it will enhance existing efforts to promote cultural understanding and inspire new initiatives throughout the country.

Scott Gallimore, President of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Institute in Greece, or CIG, shared his organization's full support for the bill, indicating that:

. . . the CIG believes this is an important initiative to further strengthen relationships between our two countries and to recognize the significant contributions that Greek citizens residing in Canada have made to our culture and way of life.

[Translation]

Professor Jacques Perreault from the Université de Montréal, who is also one of the directors of the CIG, endorsed my initiative, while reiterating that the Greek community is one of the most dynamic cultural communities in the country and that its contribution to the economic and cultural development of Canada and Quebec and the promotion of its cultural heritage have helped to build the Canada of today. Chris Adamopoulos and the staff of Montreal's École Socrates-Démosthène shared the following testimonial with me, and I quote:

We think this initiative should be supported, of course, especially in this time of younger generations with Greek origins. There is a great need to revitalize their Greek heritage and also honour the contribution of past generations of Greek people.

I believe that Bill S-259 will make it possible to achieve this objective. Colleagues, I'll stop here, but I could have shared many other testimonials from Canadians who welcome Bill S-259. As I have mentioned, I made it my duty to consult the community across the country before introducing my bill. It was important to me to get their support and their feedback. I sincerely believe I have truly incorporated their comments into the wording of the preamble, and I earnestly hope to win their support, and yours too, of course.

[English]

In conclusion, honourable senators — it's getting late; the conclusion is here, and I do apologize, but many were expecting me to put it on the record, so it's important to many in the community — it has been a personal honour for me to introduce Bill S-259, An Act to designate the month of March as Hellenic

Heritage Month, and to speak to you about the lasting achievements and immense contributions of the Greek community to our nation's social, cultural and economic fabric.

In my view, Canada's outstanding reputation on the global stage is attributed to our rich history of immigration and successful integration policies. Immigrants have helped build this country of ours and shape it into one of the most envied nations in the world. Arguably, our diversity may be Canada's greatest strength and most important asset, and we must be proud of this rich heritage. Our differences make us better. They unite us; they don't divide us.

The Honourable Andromache Karakatsanis, the first Greek Canadian to serve on the Supreme Court of Canada, once commented on how her name always marked her as "different." But she never allowed her name to be anglicized, and she was proud of its heritage. After all, Andromache was a strong woman in Greek mythology. Her parents always told her that ". . . different could be better."

As Madam Justice Karakatsanis once said:

. . . in Canada differences are strengths. It is a land of astonishing generosity and diversity. And the daughter of Greek immigrants can become a justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. This illustrates the opportunity of Canada.

Colleagues, Greek Canadians deserve this special recognition. They have helped make our country stronger, better and more vibrant. I hope you will join me in recognizing this lasting legacy by supporting this legislative initiative.

I think Parliament could send a clear, united and resounding message to Greek Canadians with the passage of this bill. Bill S-259 gives us that opportunity to thank them for all they have done, and to ensure that every March moving forward we take the time to celebrate Hellenism, honour Greek Canadians, past and present, educate Canadians on their many contributions to our society and indulge in all things Greek. Thank you, *efcharistò*.
