



CANADA

Debates of the Senate

2nd SESSION

•

40th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 146

•

NUMBER 52

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Consular Services

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, September 16, 2009

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

CONSULAR SERVICES

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Before the Conservative government came to power, Canadian citizenship meant that all Canadians were entitled to the protection of their government while abroad. But now the government is deciding case by case whether to help Canadians in distress abroad, thereby failing in its duty to help all Canadians.

Can the Leader of the Government tell us what has changed? Why help some and not others? What are the current criteria for deciding whether to help a Canadian in distress abroad or to abandon that person to the mercy of foreign authorities?

• (1410)

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government and Minister of State (Seniors)): Honourable senators, I listened to the statement of Senator Jaffer. This government does not pick and choose which Canadians it helps. This allegation is totally irresponsible.

Consular assistance is offered twenty-four/seven to all Canadians by trained, knowledgeable and resourceful officers of the Canadian government and Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. The emergency centre handles more than 500 calls per day. Each consular official provides services to Canadians, ranging from helping citizens in cases of arrest or detention, medical emergencies and loss of belongings. Consular offices also assist victims of crime and help citizens who are unexpectedly caught up in civil disasters.

I remind all honourable senators — and I am sure this is of no surprise to anyone from Canada who travels outside the country — that travelling abroad comes with responsibilities. The government does not control the affairs of other countries. The government stands up for Canadians. We are committed to delivering effective consular services to all Canadians throughout the world. It is irresponsible and reprehensible to suggest that this government — or any government, for that matter — would decide on its course of action based on a person's racial background, their religion, or any other matter. It is an allegation that I think most Canadians do not believe; they know that the government conducts its work properly.

Senator Tardif: As the Leader of the Government in the Senate knows, there are Canadians who are currently being held in other countries. What are the criteria for their being held and for others who have been released? The question has not been answered. What are the criteria that are used to determine which Canadians will be granted access to leave and which Canadians will stay in the hands of the authorities?

Senator LeBreton: As the honourable senator knows, and as anyone knows who has had any dealings with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and our excellent employees in that department, there are 500 emergency calls per day, so each case has its unique challenges.

For example, the government is dealing with Maziar Bahari, who has been detained in Iran. Today, in Washington, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lawrence Cannon, spoke directly to Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, about this matter.

It is impossible to give the honourable senator a blanket answer, because each of these cases is complex. One cannot apply a general rule.

Senator Carstairs: A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.

Senator LeBreton: There are responsibilities, Senator Carstairs. A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian, but the Government of Canada must respect the jurisdiction in which detainees are held. There are various jurisdictions, some with whom we have better relations than others.

To make an allegation such as the one made by a former minister of the honourable senator's government, and one made by a former premier of British Columbia the other day on television, that this government is racist, is outrageous in the extreme. Our consular and Department of Foreign Affairs officials work hard on these cases. Obviously, some cases are more complex and difficult, and of course those cases receive the attention. Thousands of Canadians have been assisted by the Department of Foreign Affairs, by this government and by the previous government, but we do not hear about those cases.

People working in the Department of Foreign Affairs on these cases, because of privacy reasons, are not able to tell their side of the story. I assure all senators and all Canadians that the government does everything possible to assist all Canadians who are in difficulty abroad, bearing in mind that Canadians travelling abroad have responsibilities. Canadians travelling abroad must be mindful of the fact that their actions while travelling abroad may be impacted by the rules and laws of the countries in which they are travelling.