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LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT

Freedom of Speech—Response to Allegations Levelled by University of Ottawa Professors

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

THE SENATE

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LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT

FREEDOM OF SPEECH—RESPONSE TO ALLEGATIONS
LEVELLED BY UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA PROFESSORS

[Translation]

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, as we all know, freedom of expression is a fundamental right that is dear to all Canadians.

Here in the Senate, we are proud to say that we enjoy greater freedom and independence than the other place. Moreover, in a democracy, we recognize that it is essential that our universities allow for the free exchange, development and circulation of ideas. This is why university professors enjoy academic freedom.

As a former university professor and administrator, I was troubled to read that a member of the government and a senator had tried to interfere in the internal affairs of the University of Ottawa, by denouncing the perspectives defended by a recognized, veteran professor of constitutional history at the university.

Can the minister assure us that the federal government will not try to muzzle our country's scholars, one by one, and that it will defend the academic freedom of our universities?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government and Secretary of State (Seniors)): I thank the honourable senator for her question. It will give me a chance to tell the real story, as opposed to what Lawrence Martin wrote in a column in *The Globe and Mail*, which seems to suggest that I do not support freedom of expression and speech, particularly for people who teach in our universities.

Someone asked me if I was upset about what Mr. Martin wrote and I said I thought it was a great article. They said that I must not have read it. I replied that I did not care what Mr. Martin said, the picture was terrific.

In any event, with regard to the story here, a professor at the University of Ottawa made false statements about me and Mr. Mulroney. I sought to have those removed. They appeared in an article in the *Ottawa Citizen*, and the *Ottawa Citizen* apologized.

I wrote to the University of Ottawa and copied the professor in question. I stated in the letter that I had every respect for people's right to their own opinions, but they did not have the right to tell a falsehood. I was simply asking for an apology for a falsehood.