



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

---

1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 150 • NUMBER 67

---

## **NATIONAL ANTHEM ACT**

**BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—  
DEBATE CONTINUED**

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, October 27, 2016

## THE SENATE

Thursday, October 27, 2016

### NATIONAL ANTHEM ACT

BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—  
DEBATE CONTINUED

**Hon. Claudette Tardif:** Honourable senators, I seek leave that after I speak, the adjournment remain in the name of Senator McCoy.

**The Hon. the Speaker:** Is leave granted, honourable senators?

**Hon. Senators:** Agreed.

[*Translation*]

**Senator Tardif:** Honourable senators, I am very pleased to talk about Bill C-210, An Act to amend the National Anthem Act.

I would like to begin by expressing my great admiration for the person who sponsored this bill in the other place, the late Honourable Mauril Bélanger, a courageous man who inspired us all this past year.

Mauril strongly believed that the English version of our national anthem should be gender-neutral. I admire his passion and his commitment to this cause and to the many others to which he contributed during his productive but all too short career.

[*English*]

I would also like to recognize the work of our colleague Senator Nancy Ruth, who has worked tirelessly over a number of years to change the English version of our national anthem to make it more inclusive.

Bill C-210 proponents have argued that two words in our national anthem — “thy sons” — ought to change as they are not inclusive. Indeed, there is an obvious omission: women, who represent a little more than 50 per cent — in fact, 52 per cent — of the Canadian population.

Honourable senators, our current national anthem — the English version, that is — was actually modified at least once before. The original iteration was, in fact, gender neutral, as was — and still is — the French version.

Indeed, *O Canada* was originally a French song based on a French poem, and first performed on Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day in Quebec City in 1880. Its lyrics included women from the outset, as demonstrated in the use of gender-neutral language.

[*Translation*]

Ô Canada! Terre de nos aïeux,  
Ton front est ceint de fleurons glorieux!  
Car ton bras sait porter l'épée,  
Il sait porter la croix!

[*English*]

The original English version of 1908 read “true patriot love, thou dost in us command.” It was in 1913 that a change in the English version was made from “thou dost in us command” to “in all thy sons command.”

The change proposed in Bill C-210 is not really a change but more of a rectification, or a return to the original meaning of this particular line in the anthem. It also happens to be more gender inclusive and representative of 21st-century Canada, recognizing that Canadians come from all around the world. It also puts the English version on par with its French counterpart.

[*Translation*]

If we were to compose a national anthem now, in 2016, it would most certainly be gender-neutral. I doubt it would even occur to anyone to ask whether “all of us command” would be a better choice than “all thy sons command”.

Our English national anthem was written over a hundred years ago and changed shortly thereafter, perhaps in reference to the young men sent to the front during the First World War. The way I see it, our national anthem speaks not only of our history as a nation, but also of its own history. For veterans and their families, this is a poem freighted with personal meaning.

That being said, I do believe words carry meaning, and the expression “thy sons” clearly makes a gender distinction. Those two words no longer work in 2016.

We have since modernized our way of thinking and writing in order to make our language more inclusive. Times change. Here in Parliament, our way of seeing things also changes with time. We are making legislative amendments today that we would have defeated or refused to consider outright 50, 30, even 10 years ago.

Just look at the recent bill on medical assistance in dying. With that in mind, I believe the change proposed in Bill C-210 is rather appropriate.

[*English*]

I believe that a majority of parliamentarians and Canadians would agree that as a society we should be as inclusive as possible. I hear this not just in Ottawa but also in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada, and most people, I believe, would agree that this should be reflected in our national anthem. Singing our national anthem is more than a patriotic endeavour. It is a way to reflect on our past, present and future. It is a reflection of our identity as Canadians.

The fact is that we as Canadians have not done enough to celebrate women's contributions to our society until our recent past. This includes women of great talent and leadership whose contributions to Canada have been immeasurable. In the words of the late Mauril Bélanger:

On the eve of the 150th anniversary of our federation, it is important that one of our most recognized and appreciated national symbols reflect the progress made by our country in terms of gender equality.

Our national anthem, written a century ago, is a case in point. Celebrating the contributions of only half of Canadians to our

well-being may have been an accepted practice 100 years ago, but this is now the 21st century, and our national anthem should better reflect who we are today and who we aspire to be as Canadians in the future.

Honourable senators, I truly do not believe that this small change alters our national anthem in a way that diminishes our shared history and sense of identity. Indeed, I'm inclined to believe that it will actually strengthen it.

Honourable senators, I therefore am fully in favour of amending our national anthem as proposed in Bill C-210.

---