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DECLARATION ON THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF ARTISTS AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN CANADA BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE

Speech by:
The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Tuesday, April 5, 2022

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Hon. Diane Bellemare: I want to add, equally, my voice in favour of Bill S-208 because I believe the arts are necessary in our individual and collective lives.

[*Translation*]

Dear colleagues,

Artists . . . are indispensable for the survival of humanity in this electronic age, which, through technology, overloads the senses, creating a maelstrom. Art serves as radar, penetrating the indiscernible.

Unfortunately, this quote, which was reported by journalist Marie-Ève Charron in *Le Devoir*, does not come from me, but from Baruch Gottlieb, the guest curator of an exhibit being held at Montreal's Fonderie Darling, which brings artists and thinkers together on the subject of media theorist Marshall McLuhan.

This idea of art being vital to the survival of humanity gives us something to think about today, in the era of climate threats and international conflict.

It touches on the essence of the concerns expressed by our colleague, Senator Bovey, who has presented a very important bill to foster the artistic expression of Canadians in all forms.

I would like to thank Senator Bovey for all the work she has done on Bill S-208. The depth of the bill attests to the extensive consultations she undertook and her reflections over a professional lifetime dedicated to artistic expression.

I encourage you to carefully read her bill and the extraordinary speech that she gave in this place on December 9.

This bill deserves our full attention.

Art, in all its forms, is essential to humanity, and Senator Bovey's remarks addressed many different aspects of this truth, which some people tend to forget or overlook in favour of pragmatic concerns about effectiveness and efficiency.

I will not repeat her remarks, which were so beautifully presented. I invite you to go back and read her speech.

I rise today in support of this bill and urge you to pass it at second reading so that it can be studied in committee.

My speech will be brief. I simply want to share some reflections for consideration at second reading.

I encourage the committee to study this bill seriously and to invite witnesses from a variety of backgrounds. To use a theatre expression, this bill needs to have a spotlight shone on it. I am on the fence at the moment as to whether it needs to be amended. I am certain of one thing, however: The effectiveness of this bill depends in part on the light it receives in the public sphere.

Allow me to explain.

While many are aware of the importance of art in our lives on a personal, psychological, social, economic and political level, there is certainly no consensus on how to encourage artistic expression and give artists an economic status that allows them to devote themselves to their art.

At a time when our economy is much more focused on the individual, many people believe that art must have commercial value to exist. That was not true in the past and cannot be true today or tomorrow. If commercial transactions were behind all the forms of artistic expression around us, we would not be able to appreciate the many sculptures and works of art adorning our parks and cities. We would not be able to appreciate the songs, poems or even films and live shows that move us. Philanthropists have played a major role everywhere and at all times in helping art flourish. However, the sector cannot rely solely on philanthropy or on commercial transactions. Art is more than just a thing to be bought or sold. Art is also at the heart of our cultural identity. This is one more reason to support this bill, which explicitly recognizes that the status of art and artists must be a collective concern and that governments have a role to play.

Bill S-208 is very ingenious. It has three parts: a preamble, a declaration on the essential role of artists and creative expression in Canada, and an action plan for the Government of Canada's implementation of the declaration.

What is novel about this bill is the fact that adopting the action plan will help confer legal status on the Declaration on the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada.

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What is novel about this bill is the fact that adopting the action plan will help confer legal status on the Declaration on the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada.

The declaration, which is the culmination of our colleague Senator Bovey's work and consultations, is the cornerstone of this bill. The committee will have to take the time to carry out another round of consultations with individuals, groups and local and provincial governments to ensure they are aware of this declaration. The committee will have to find out whether there is consensus around the declaration and whether it can be improved.

It is important for the provinces to participate in the work of the committee that gets this bill in order to promote synergy and individual collaboration with each province.

Reading this bill raised a lot of questions. First, since the declaration in the schedule is integral to the bill and, to my knowledge, it can only change in the context of a review of the legislation, the committee will have to determine whether it is complete. The declaration mainly concerns aspects related to access to art and artistic expression, as well as the ability of artists to take full advantage of the value created by their art. Are there elements that should be added? I believe so, particularly when it comes to the economic status of the artist.

My second question is the following: Like my colleague Senator Cormier said, could the Canada Council for the Arts not play a more active role in articulating and implementing the action plan? Would it not be more effective to amend the legislation governing the Canada Council for the Arts in order to give it a direct role in promoting the declaration?

Third, since the declaration is mum on the economic status of the artist, would it be appropriate to tie the declaration to the content of the Status of the Artist Act? I do not have the answer to that question, and maybe there is no consensus on this.

Finally, I am particularly pleased about paragraph 4(3)(g) of the bill, which states that we must “encourage greater investment in all areas related to artists, the arts and creative expression in Canada.”

Quebec has set a great example for Canada to follow. For over 50 years, Quebec has had a policy on integrating art into the architecture and environment of government and public buildings and places.

In 1961, Quebec adopted a government policy stating that approximately 1% of the budget for the construction of a building or the development of public place must be reserved for the creation of works of art specifically designed for it.

More than 3,700 works have been created and placed in public spaces in Quebec under this policy of integrating art into architecture.

Honourable senators, I urge you to quickly pass this bill at second reading so it may be referred to a committee. Thank you.
