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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Statement by:

The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Tuesday, March 10, 2015

THE SENATE

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Hon. Diane Bellemare: Honourable senators, I rise today to draw attention to International Women's Day, which is held annually on March 8. This celebration dates back to 1909 in the United States.

[Translation]

It was made official in 1977 by the United Nations in order to encourage all countries to celebrate and advocate for women's rights and gender equality.

Although the status of women has improved over time, there is still a lot of work to be done, particularly when it comes to economic and social issues. Above all, we must be vigilant in maintaining the progress that has been made with regard to women's rights, including a woman's right to control her own body and choose what is best for her.

[English]

I have chosen to mark International Women's Day by highlighting the work and exceptional contribution to the defence of women's rights of one of our colleagues. I'm referring to the Honourable Janis Johnson, who will be celebrating her twenty-fifth anniversary in the Senate this upcoming September.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Bellemare: In my opinion, it is thanks to her leadership and through her speeches in chambers that she upheld the rights of women in contributing to defeat Bill C-43 concerning the recriminalization of abortion in 1991, for those who don't know it or those who arrived late, as I did.

[Translation]

Bill C-43 sought to once again criminalize abortion even after the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 1988 in the

Dr. Morgentaler case that prohibiting abortion was contrary to section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees women the right to life, liberty and security of the person.

In her speech in the Senate on January 31, 1991, Janis Johnson objected to Bill C-43 because the core problem was that it labelled, and I quote:

... as criminals women who seek abortions on the basis of their own priorities and aspirations if these priorities do not coincide with those of a doctor and the state.

She also said that Bill C-43, and I quote:

... takes us to pre-1969 days and the days when women had absolutely no control over their reproductive lives—we were so powerless that to have a tubal ligation required the husband's signature.

I share the opinion expressed by my colleague Senator Johnson that only the woman should decide what is best for her. Again according to Senator Johnson:

It implies that people ... who believe that women should choose on this matter, are somehow against life itself. It is absolutely crazy.

[English]

Dear Janis, I would like to thank you for having taken on the tremendous responsibility to fight this dossier for the thousands of women who cannot speak to the issue and be heard themselves. Thank you for expressing your conviction while being a newly appointed senator. Congratulations on your 25 years of service in the Senate. The Senate, in part thanks to you, has shown its utility and validity.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.