

CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS

THE VIMY AWARD

Vimy Dinner Speech by the Honourable John A. Fraser 15 November 2002

Minister McCallum, General McNamara, invitées distinguées, mesdames et messieurs :

Vous m'avez fait un grand honneur, j'ai servi humblement dans l'Armée canadienne – certainement humblement en comparaison avec plusieurs d'entre vous des Forces armées qui sont présents ce soir. And when I consider the distinguished persons you have recognized, I cannot help but be conscious that I join a company of nominees who, in peace and war, made an exceptional contribution to our country.

My own support for the Armed Forces started early, and has continued for many years, both in my public and private capacity. But I am not alone in this:

There are many thousands of Canadians who recognize the importance of our Armed Forces, and have a profound appreciation for the men and women who have committed their lives to the profession of arms.

Among those thousands are former members of the Regular Forces, former and continuing members of the Reserve Forces and all their families; and some (and they are not inconsequential) who, without any service, Regular or Reserve, are making a significant effort to support, and to persuade others to support, our military.

I note, especially, members of the Royal Canadian Legion; and also, for example, the thousands of participants in the Canadian Forces Liaison Council, some of whom are here tonight, who make it possible for Reservists in their employ to serve both in Canada and on deployment overseas.

It is also significant that there are a growing number of first-rate academics who are determined to teach the strategic importance of an effective and respected Canadian military. And with this, they are teaching history – real history. They are starting to put to rout that dreary, tiresome cabal of so-called educators whose ideologically-selective revisionism has done much damage by attempting to erase all things military from our national consciousness.

However, the wide, and I believe growing support for our Armed forces is not just quiet support. It also takes the form of pointed and public questioning. And in recent years, there has been a lot of it, and I think it will continue. Intelligent analysis, publicly stated, can be discomfiting or irritating or worse. But it should not be misunderstood. It is not an attack on the men and women of the Armed Forces and it is not anti-military.

Now, I am not expecting public affairs personnel to like some of what is being pointed out. After all, they are not paid to be suffused with occasional visible surges of frankness by issuing a press release saying: “Most of what you say is true!” But they, and others, need to accept that shortages of personnel, equipment, weaponry and funding are a reality, and, in the national interest, ought not to be hidden from Canadians or, importantly, from those we elect. The increased support and informed concern for our Armed Forces invites public comment. But these people are not the enemy: some of them are critics, but they are patriotic critics and therein lies the difference. They seek to revitalize our military, not to diminish it.

This evening celebrates the great Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge in April 1917. We remember it as a magnificent feat of arms, an unparalleled example of courage, and we are still saddened by the cost in killed and wounded. Our soldiers may not have, as individuals, thought of themselves as heroes, but they did heroic things. And they did something else: ten days after Canadians attacked – and won – at Vimy, the Imperial War Conference passed Resolution 9 formally recognizing Canada as “an autonomous nation ... of an Imperial Commonwealth” with a “right ... to an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations”. Some have said Vimy secured Canada’s place as a nation; that is debatable – my grandparents had no doubt we were a nation – neither did John A. MacDonald nor Wilfrid Laurier. But what it did do is establish us as a sovereign nation in the eyes of others.

We would do well today to remember that sovereignty “in the eyes of others” is very much related to our willingness to meet our obligations, support our friends and allies, and, when necessary, to do it by military means. Churchill said: “Every country has an army – it’s own or somebody else’s.”

You have done me a great honour. Whatever I have done of value was done with the help and support of many.

Especially, I am indebted to the Honourable Art Eggleton, who asked me to serve on, and then supported the Monitoring Committee, and who was always honest with us.

To you, Minister McCallum, we hope our work, which you are continuing, will be helpful to you and to our country. We admire your stated intention to do everything possible to obtain adequate additional funding. We believe most Canadians commend your efforts.

À la Conférence des associations de la Défense et à ses membres, you are a worthy and much needed organization, et je vous transmets mon respect, admiration et appréciation les plus sincères. Merci pour votre attention. Thank you.