



Statement

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Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to speak in support of Bill C-42, An Act to amend the Quarantine Act, as it has recently been the focus for the health committee, of which I am the vice-chair. I believe that this bill, as amended in committee, warrants our support and passage in the House today. This important legislation is invaluable to the health and safety of Canadians, our top priority.

Only four short years ago this country was devastated by a SARS epidemic that led to 45 deaths in Canada, not to mention the enormous impact on our health care system and economy. One of the most serious consequences of the violent spread of a life-threatening disease is the fear and panic that it causes for Canadians.

The fear that plagued Canadians during the SARS outbreak was enormous. A deadly virus was spreading in our largest city and it seemed as though it could not be stopped or contained. The fortunate critical lesson we learned, and it was unfortunate as well, with the devastating tragedy and the loss of innocent lives, is that Canada is not immune to communicable diseases.

As a result of this catastrophic situation, Canada received a serious wake-up call and moved quickly to establish the needed tools in the management of disease, virus prevention and containment. The Quarantine Act, along with the passage of Bill C-42 as amended, is vital in protecting the health, wellness and lives of Canadians.

Prior to the new Quarantine Act, which had been given royal assent on May 13, 2005, legislation had not been modernized since 1872, five years after Confederation. In a globalized 21st century world that has come to know about the very detrimental rapid effects of the spread of influenza, the West Nile virus, et cetera, the original legislation in 1872 was greatly outdated and ill-equipped to deal with a SARS pandemic. In our increasingly smaller modern world where we move across borders within the global community,

we must be ever vigilant and aggressive in taking preventive and protective measures to safeguard the health of Canadians.

The Quarantine Act was born in the wake of the SARS disaster and was introduced by our previous Liberal government in October 2004. As I mentioned, the Quarantine Act received royal assent in May 2005, though without this proposed section 34. Section 34 of the Quarantine Act requires advanced reporting from conveyance operators. Bill C-42 has ironed out the areas of concern that have been raised which originally held back this portion of the legislation and brings the Quarantine Act to completion.

I fully support Bill C-42 as amended. Bill C-42 was presented to the health committee with the government proposing to omit land conveyances from the act. After careful review and examination, my colleagues and I were in favour of ensuring that land conveyances are included in the mandatory reporting by conveyance operators in proposed section 34. This is paramount, as the legislation as amended and combined adds enhanced protection to Canada's public health system, and I truly believe that including land conveyances in the list of air and water transportation is an essential element of the act and will further enhance the safety of all Canadians.

Bill C-42 also streamlines the process of reporting by conveyance operators as the legislation requires that these individuals report directly to quarantine officers "as soon as possible" before a conveyance arrives at a destination if there is any suspicion whatsoever that any person, cargo or other thing on board the conveyance could cause the spread of communicable disease listed in the schedule, or a person on board the conveyance has died, or any prescribed circumstances exist.

The process of reporting these outlined instances to a centralized system of special quarantine officers "as soon as possible" closes up any holes by emphasizing the parties who must be in communication with one another and by eliminating any potential discrepancy of timing, as the legislation currently states that conveyance operators must report any suspicious incidents immediately, which was not good enough.

Finally, the bill, as amended, also adds the words "as soon as possible before" in proposed section 34; where a conveyance departs from Canada through a departure point, the operator must disclose any circumstances of

concern. Once again, this emphasizes the urgency of reporting before the conveyance departs from the country of origin and crosses the border.

I would like to acknowledge that there is no time more appropriate than the present to pass Bill C-42 in the House. Only a few weeks ago, an Atlanta man with a rare strain of highly contagious tuberculosis boarded an aircraft from Europe to Montreal. He rented a car in Canada and drove back to his home in the United States. In the final step of his journey to the U.S., this individual used ground transportation to cross the Canada-U.S. border.

This case highlights several reasons why Bill C-42, as amended, must be supported and why this act is so critical to the health of Canadians and others, those in the United States as well. Although we hope people will self-report communicable diseases, it is clear that we cannot rely on this. We must have measures firmly in place.

While studying this bill in committee and upon debating whether or not land conveyances should be listed in section 34--as it was proposed by the government to delete them--one witness remarked that the exemption of land conveyances was justified as the risk of disease spreading from Canada's only land crossing to the U.S. was minimal. With the new information resulting from this recent TB case, we are now aware of the reality. There is enough of a risk between Canada and the U.S. to have firm, clear measures in place. We cannot take the chance with Canadians' health.

This recent incident of travel from Canada to the United States by land is a clear example reflecting how important this act is. If one individual can go from Canada to the U.S. with a communicable disease, then in fact there is a threat of disease spreading by land both ways. Again, it only takes one such person or incident to put people in both nations at risk.

As we have seen with the case of TB, sometimes that one person will not be willing or cooperative enough to self-report. Therefore, we must have mechanisms in place to prevent the spread of disease, and we need the strongest legislation possible.

Even more telling of the urgency to make sure that the Quarantine Act errs on the side of caution and covers all modes of transportation is that in Canada alone 266,000 travellers a day are coming in through 119 border

crossing stations and international airports. The sheer quantity of travel activity is impossible to contain completely, and we all know that when we are dealing with such high volumes on a daily basis nothing can be guaranteed.

That being said, we must do everything possible to avert this type of catastrophe. This was one of the reasons why I, along with others, strongly advocated for land conveyances to be listed and included, as we had it originally, in addition to air and water travel. Given the daily activity of entry into Canada, we should have as many mechanisms in place within our control as possible, not fewer but more. When it comes to the public health of Canadians, it simply would be irresponsible on our part to settle for anything less.

The TB case also disproves another testimony that was presented by a witness at the health committee on the issue of self-reporting. The witness placed particular emphasis on individuals' ability to self-report, saying that we could rely on that, negating any need for land conveyances to be listed in the proposed section. As we have seen, we cannot merely count on individuals to self-disclose, rely entirely on the goodwill of people and put all Canadians' health in their hands alone. As we have seen, we cannot afford to take this route. It is far too risky. We must never leave the health and safety of Canadians to chance. Prevention is paramount.

Bill C-42, as amended, provides more protection for Canadians and allows us to better manage public health threats. Canadians look to their government for protection. They expect us to be ready to deal with health risks and they look to us to look out for their interests.

When Bill C-42 was first introduced in the House, I was surprised that it proposed that land conveyances be removed from section 34. I was very concerned that we had forgotten the steep price that we had to pay as a result of the SARS epidemic only a few years ago, in both human lives and economic fallout. I had constituents whose lives were tragically affected by the SARS crisis. The impacts were devastating.

Where possible, I stressed at the committee my views about strengthening the act, not diluting it. Accurate and timely information is a key element to the successful management of health issues and risks. We learned our lesson from SARS. We do not want to have to learn it again. We established the

Public Health Agency of Canada. We appointed Canada's first Chief Public Health Officer to coordinate efforts in managing public health concerns.

We can never afford to be complacent when it comes to the safety of Canadians. It cannot be emphasized enough that Canada is not immune to outbreaks of disease and infection. Germs and communicable diseases do not respect borders.

I spoke vigorously, along with other members of committee, at those hearings to put land conveyances back in the legislation because the extra layer of protection that it adds for Canadians is essential to providing comprehensive coverage. It is illogical to list two modes of cross-border transportation while leaving out the third. I believe that when it comes to the safety of Canadians they would agree that this is in their best interests. The more mechanisms we have in place to deal with health risks in this day and age, the better chance we have to protect them.

This additional protection also serves to provide Canadians more assurances that the federal government is covering all the bases. The SARS outbreak caused a sense of panic in Canadians that I hope we will never know again. I want Canadians to have faith that their federal government is doing everything in its power to strengthen public health care safety, because panic and fear can spread even faster than a virus. We must be responsible leaders in doing our utmost to protect Canadians. I support Bill C-42 in realizing that central objective.

Of course, it is impossible to guarantee complete prevention. We do not live in isolation. The world has become smaller and travel has skyrocketed. Globalization and multinational and transnational corporations have made intercontinental travel seamless and a commonplace form of everyday business.

While little in this world, with the multitude of countries, can be 100% foolproof, it is our absolute responsibility to make sure that all parts of our quarantine provisions are tight and coordinated. Canadians need to know that, no matter what, as a federal government we have maximized our ability to protect our citizens. First and foremost, the federal government is accountable to Canadians.

We want to assure Canadians that we are doing our very best to minimize their risk and safeguard their health and well-being. I support Bill C-42 as amended. I believe that it seeks to accomplish this goal.