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CURRENT STATE OF FIRST NATIONS SELF-GOVERNMENT

Inquiry—Debate Adjourned
(Tribute to Hon. Gerry St. Germain)

Speech by:

The Honourable Mobina S. B. Jaffer

Tuesday, October 30, 2012

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INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Mobina S. B. Jaffer: Honourable senators, the fact that Senator St. Germain chose for his final inquiry in this place the current state of First Nations self-government in Canada should come as no surprise. It reminds me of the values of mutual understanding, mutual respect and human rights recognition — values that our colleague has championed throughout his career. Senator St. Germain's career and life have spanned decades in industry, the provinces and vocations. He served as a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, a police officer in Winnipeg and Vancouver, a building contractor, a businessman, a poultry farmer, a parliamentarian and, most notably, a humanitarian. Parliamentarians, Canadians, British Columbians, First Nations peoples are all blessed to have been touched by the sublime humanity of Senator Gerry St. Germain.

Humanity is a quality that his friend and fellow British Columbian, Bob Ransford, highlighted in a recent tribute in Vancouver to our colleague. That tribute evoked the essence of Senator St. Germain's character and passion, which I so deeply respect and admire. Mr. Ransford told a story about a drive that Senator St. Germain and he took 20 years ago to Mount Currie Reserve, home of the Lil'wat people. He said they drove down a gravel road to an old part of the reserve that Gerry called Dodge.

It was a collection of very old shacks along a short, dusty road. Half the shacks were built literally with a rough-hewn lumber. There were gaps between the boards and half the shacks were mostly tar paper and plywood boxes. People lived there. I saw a few small kids running about. I cannot tell you what a depressing place it was. As we drove slowly through the settlement, Gerry did not say much, but I saw the look on his face. I could see a determination in his eyes. It was a deep concern that I had seen before. I didn't really understand that concern then — where it came from, how important it was, and where it would take him.

Honourable senators know how important that concern is and where it could take Senator St. Germain. I will share with you further Mr. Ransford's account. He said:

A few months ago when I read the report on Aboriginal education that Gerry signed as Chair of the Aboriginal Peoples' Committee, it dawned on me that the greatest contribution that Gerry had made as a servant of the people for over 30 years wasn't uniting Conservatives, wasn't setting up the Vancouver International Airport Authority, wasn't helping to secure a commitment to build a gas pipeline to Vancouver Island, and wasn't fighting for a

softwood lumber agreement to secure B.C.'s jobs. No, Gerry's biggest contribution has been a commitment to his humanity, exposing to us the opportunity we have in this great country to be a country of one people, to truly unite our country, to do that finally by recognizing that our first peoples define our Canada, a country enriched further by those who came later from all parts of the globe.

Honourable senators, that is Senator St. Germain's vision of Canada. As he retires from this place, it is a vision that we must recommit to preserving and promoting with all that we are.

Honourable senators, in 1974, my father was a new refugee to Canada with no friends in B.C., and he wanted a job to feed his large family. Minister Whalen met my father at an event and gave him some ideas of what he could do. After that conversation, my dad applied to become an egg farmer. He applied for egg quotas through the Egg Marketing Board. Senator St. Germain was the chair of the board. The farmers in the area did not want my father to be one of them. My father was different. My father was sitting outside the room when the decision was to be made. My dad was sure he would not succeed in obtaining the quotas.

Little did my father know that a complete stranger was fighting for my father's rights. Senator St. Germain, who did not know my father or his circumstances, stood up for my dad. Senator St. Germain would not accept the prejudices of the farmers. My father obtained the licence. My father has been an egg farmer for 38 years in the Fraser Valley because of our colleague Senator St. Germain.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Senator Jaffer: Honourable senators, this is who our friend is. He stands up for all of us regardless of race, religion or creed — even people he does not know. Gerry treats all people equally. He opens the door of opportunity for all.

Senator St. Germain, thank you for your service, friendship, example and commitment to all Canadians. We will miss you. I will especially miss the long plane rides from Vancouver to Ottawa and from Ottawa to Vancouver when you gave me a lot of sage advice. Some of it I have followed and some of it I have parked.

We wish you a happy time with your great family and your great-grandson, Tanner, who is sitting in the gallery and who never leaves your side.

[*Translation*]

Gerry, I will miss you.