

House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (FOPO)
April 3, 2008

Ms. Natalie Bull (Executive Director, Heritage Canada Foundation)

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of Bill S-215, an act to protect heritage lighthouses.

First I'll say a few words about the Heritage Canada Foundation. We are an independent charitable organization with a public mandate to promote the rehabilitation and sustainable reuse of Canada's built heritage.

I'd like to commend the many Members of Parliament, senators, organizations, and citizens who've worked tirelessly toward making protection for lighthouses a reality. In particular, I'd like to recognize the late Senator Forrestall, Senator Carney, Senator Murray, and members of Parliament Larry Miller, Gerald Keddy, and Peter Stoffer, among many others who've worked to make this a reality.

I think we can all agree on the landmark status many lighthouses have in their communities. Beyond their role as landmarks and icons, lighthouses have undeniable economic value. They are used extensively in marketing so many Canadian places as tourist destinations, and many are significant destinations in and of themselves. Today I'd like to emphasize why Bill S-215 is needed by clarifying how heritage conservation is regulated and legislated in this country. I think it would provide a useful context. I'd also like to share an example from a parallel universe.

All provincial and territorial jurisdictions, and by delegated authority all municipal governments in Canada, have binding heritage statutes and related legal measures they can use to protect heritage places. However, federal historic places—think of the post offices, the Government of Canada buildings and armouries in your own ridings, for example—have no such protection. This is an issue that needs to be addressed. Canada is the only G-8 nation without such protection for its own buildings. Indeed, we're a full 40 years behind the United States in establishing a national heritage act.

Since 1987 the federal government of Canada has dealt with heritage through the federal heritage buildings policy, but this policy framework is insufficient. Indeed, in November 2003 the Auditor General of Canada reported that built heritage under federal control “will be lost to future generations unless action to protect it is taken soon”.

The Auditor General's audit revealed a lack of accountability for heritage protection and called for strengthening the federal legal framework to protect heritage property. In the 1980s this lack of legal protection and lack of accountability reached a crisis point for a particular type of endangered federal heritage building: historic railway stations. Some were being dramatically altered to accommodate changes in railway technology, others were declared redundant and left to deteriorate, and too many were bulldozed into landfill sites while horrified citizens protested. Canadians discovered that no heritage railway

station had any form of protection and that they had no voice in determining the future of these iconic structures. Even railway stations that had already been declared national historic sites by the Government of Canada had no legal protection.

Canadians protested, and the government responded with the introduction of the Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act. An exact parallel now exists with heritage lighthouses. Like railway stations, they are at risk of becoming an endangered species. New technology and other forces have made many of them redundant, and their federal custodian does not have a heritage conservation mandate. Lighthouses are a special class of heritage facing unusual pressures, and there is a pressing need to get protection in place. Note that even in the U.S., where there is a national heritage act to protect historic places, the legislation that applies for heritage lighthouses exists as a separate amendment, and it's comparable to Bill S-215. So proceeding with Bill S-215 now, without further delay, is entirely appropriate and absolutely essential.

What are the strengths of Bill S-215? It's modelled on the Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act, and it basically provides a systematic and legally binding mechanism for the recognition, protection, maintenance, and potential disposal of heritage lighthouses. One of the key deficiencies of current federal heritage policy is that citizens are not consulted when a lighthouse is altered, transferred, or destroyed. This act would engage communities in the protection of their historic places by putting a clear process in place, and it would increase accountability by providing opportunities for public scrutiny.

Briefly, Bill S-215 provides a means for evaluating lighthouses and identifying those worthy of designation as heritage lighthouses. So it's not about all of them; it's about the special ones. It provides an opportunity for public consultation before alterations are made to those designated lighthouses. It requires public notice before transfer, sale, or demolition. It requires that a designated heritage lighthouse be reasonably maintained. And it facilitates ongoing protection and ensures use for a public purpose when heritage lighthouses are transferred out of federal ownership.

These measures will increase the chances of long-term protection for designated lighthouses, whether they stay in the federal inventory or whether they are transferred to other owners.

The amendments under discussion to better define the scope of the act—namely, the change to related buildings rather than related structures—should not deter this committee from supporting this bill and sending it back to the House for third reading.

In closing, thank you all very much for your work in refining this bill. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the discussion, and godspeed in your deliberations.

Thank you.