

Private Members' Business

For me, and for the people of the constituency of Verchères, this motion is especially meaningful. Indeed, I have the honour of representing the constituency that was, in large part, the theatre of the events we are discussing today.

According to popular history, first of all, most of the 92 resolutions adopted by the House in 1834 were written during meetings held in the LeNoblet-Duplessis house in Contrecoeur, and probably at Mr. Masse's inn in Saint-Denis, now the Maison nationale des Patriotes.

In 1837, several assemblies to protest the Russells resolutions took place in Saint-Charles, Verchères, Saint-Marc, Boucherville and Varennes. The famous assembly of the six constituencies, in which Papineau participated, took place in Saint-Charles on October 23 and 24, 1837, bringing together 6,000 persons, including 12 MPs and one legislative advisor.

On the eve of the wave of arrests decided on by Governor Gosford, Papineau and 30 other Patriote leaders decided to take refuge in Saint-Denis.

That is also the reason the first battles between the Patriotes and British troops took place there. On the morning of November 23, the British army, 500 strong, was stopped by 250 Patriotes at Saint-Denis. In the afternoon, 200 more Patriotes arrived from the west bank of the Richelieu—from Saint-Antoine, Verchères and Contrecoeur—led by none other than George-Étienne Cartier, future father of the Canadian Confederation. Twelve Patriotes died during the encounter, including the member for Vaudreuil, Ovide Perreault. The British troops retreated, conceding victory.

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Two days later, following a series of mistakes, the Patriotes were brutally squashed in Saint-Charles and lost 35 men. The village itself was looted and burned down. More than 30 Patriotes were taken back to Montreal as prisoners.

That same year, on December 4, a huge meeting of delegates from all constituencies was due to be held in Saint-Charles to form an «assembly», such as the one held in Philadelphia in 1776, to solemnly proclaim Lower Canada's independence. As the story goes, on December 2 or 3, the British troops were back in the area and plundered and set fire once more to the town of Saint-Denis.

Each year, Saint-Denis and Saint-Charles host the most important event held in honour of the Patriotes. That is also where the Quebec government has established a national Patriotes museum, in Mr. Masse's old inn. Finally, it is where the greatest number of monuments honouring the Patriotes are to be found.

Route 133 between Sorel and Iberville, along the eastern shore of the Richelieu River, has also been known, since 1979, as Patriotes Road.

But beyond monuments and with historical hindsight, the goals of the Patriotes and the Reformers are easier to discern. It cannot be concluded from these events that they simply rebelled against the Establishment. The Patriote movement was far from a spontaneous blaze ignited by a handful of individuals. It was indeed the logical outcome of a long process characterized by a strong rallying of the people.

The Canadian Parliament must look at this period of our history with new eyes. It must put into perspective, according to our society's present values, the significance of the 1837 and 1838 events. Thanks to these rebellions, we have inherited a system of responsible government and democratic institutions and traditions admired the world over.

If the national liberation movement started by the Patriotes and inherited by the present sovereignty movement has not yet come to its logical conclusion, the same cannot be said of our civil and political rights and of our democratic and representative institutions. Yet, democracy is a fragile treasure to be cherished and protected, namely by honouring the memory of these heroes and promoters.

This House is the heir to and the embodiment of the ideals fought for by the Patriotes and the Reformers. It is therefore up to this House to give them, today, the legitimate recognition history has always denied them.

[English]

Mr. Robert Bertrand (Pontiac—Gatineau—Labelle): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for presenting this motion and welcome the opportunity to give my views on the question of establishing a new national holiday.

[Translation]

Since the early seventies, this House has been asked several times to consider proposals for the creation of a new national holiday. The date most often suggested is the third Monday in February since there is a long period without a national holiday between New Year's Day and Easter Sunday. It is argued that a holiday in this long winter period would do a great deal of good to Canadians.

[English]

Proposals for the name of the new day have been wide ranging. Some have suggested the celebration of common elements of our heritage. Examples include proposals for a heritage day, a communities day or a multicultural day. Others, like my hon. friend, have proposed that the contributions of specific Canadians be celebrated. Examples here include MacDonald—Cartier day, Baldwin—LaFontaine day, prime minister day and national heroes day.