

Business of the House

When I became Prime Minister in November of last year certain developments were in process which could not be interrupted without serious prejudice to the interests of our own country, and perhaps to wider interests still. I refer to the negotiations then in progress with the delegation from Newfoundland, and to the discussions being carried on at that time in Washington respecting the North Atlantic security pact. Once the agreement with Newfoundland was signed on December 11, it provided that the union should be concluded on March 31, and it was essential to hold a session of parliament in order to approve the agreement. In the opinion of the government it was also essential to deal with certain emergency legislation which otherwise would have expired within two months after the opening of the session or on March 31 last, whichever date was the earlier. It was also felt that the people of Canada would expect to have the budget presented at an early date; and it was the desire of the government, before authorizing the signature of Canada to the North Atlantic treaty, to secure the approval of parliament to the principles underlying that treaty.

All these essential steps have been taken. The union with Newfoundland has been completed. The North Atlantic treaty has been signed. The budget has been presented, and the estimates for the current fiscal year have been before parliament and the public for several weeks. My colleagues and I have reached the conclusion that no important public interest would suffer if the rest of the business forecast for the present session of parliament should be postponed until later this year. It is pretty evident that until a general election is held it will be difficult for hon. members on both sides of the house not to give a good deal of attention to the forthcoming election; and probably it would not be an exaggeration to say that already some of the debates in the house have become tinged by the approach of an election campaign.

General elections, of course, are the most important institution in our whole constitution, since it is through a general election that the public maintains control over the government. But it is also true that a general election campaign is necessarily disturbing to much of the ordinary activity of the community, and there seems to be a widespread feeling that there is no great advantage in prolonging such campaigns. Moreover it is perfectly clear that the holding of an election in the summer months would result in the virtual disfranchisement of a large portion of

the electorate who do not spend the summer in their habitual place of residence.

Mr. MacNicol: Call it in June.

Mr. St. Laurent: The hon. member will see in a moment what I am proposing. There are many others whose seasonal activities make it very difficult for them to attend meetings or even exercise their franchise during the midsummer or harvest season.

Therefore in fairness to the people the government feels that the forthcoming election should be held either at the beginning of the summer or that it should be delayed until after the harvest season, which in many parts of Canada extends even into October.

Without wishing to reflect on anyone in the house, my colleagues and I feel that more rapid progress would be made—except such as was made today—in a session held after a general election than would be possible if the present session were continued even for two or three months. Moreover, by holding an election at an early date the people will be given an opportunity to decide to whom they wish to entrust the responsibilities of government, and to give some indication of the policies they wish to see implemented.

In view of the very considerable changes in the membership of the administration, that in itself might be thought a sufficient reason for holding an early election. But there is a much more important reason still. It is that about one-third of a million people have been added to the population of our country. There is no doubt that one of the principal reasons why the people of Newfoundland voted for union with Canada was that they wished once more to be self-governing. Since every measure adopted by the present parliament applies to Newfoundland as much as it does to the older provinces, it is desirable to take the earliest possible means of ensuring that the people of Newfoundland are represented in parliament and share, through their representatives, in making its decisions.

Of course it would have been possible to arrange for by-elections in Newfoundland immediately after March 31, but even after that had been done the newly elected members could not have taken their seats before about the end of June, and it is not probable that if we were sitting at the end of June we would continue to sit very much beyond that date. As I think there is a general desire throughout the country that there should be a general election before another session of parliament, they would have had their by-elections, there would have been dissolution, and they would have had to undergo two elections in order to send their representatives here to take part in the conduct