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The Abolition of Parliamentary Independence

SHOULD a member of the Canadian House of Commons be free to speak and vote according to his honest convictions? "A strange question," most readers will say; "surely everybody will reply in the affirmative."—Yet, strange to say, Sir Robert Borden, the Premier of the Dominion, has very emphatically answered "No," and a large number of members, before they had time to recover from the shock of the Premier's attitude, found themselves voting "No."

A little while ago it seemed that one good result of the new political situation at Ottawa would be the development in Parliament, under Union Government, of more independent thought and action than had been found under the party system. Unfortunately this pleasing expectation has not been realized. Union Government, as exemplified in the last days of the session, has been productive, not of freedom of thought and action, but of the very opposite qualities.

Several weeks ago we commented on a thoughtful article that had appeared in a Western journal, respecting the effect of one of our forms of Parliamentary practice. The Western writer held that the independent thinking and voting that ought to mark the conduct of members of our legislative bodies were often restricted, or totally suppressed, by the action of Government leaders in treating certain motions as questions of confidence or no confidence in the Government of the day. Thus, where a member held strong opinions on a question, and desired to vote against a particular motion concerning it, he found his action paralysed by the Government leader declaring that the fate of the Government depended on the adoption of the motion. Not desiring the defeat of the Government the member was thus forced to vote for a measure with which he had no sympathy, a measure which he believed to be, on its merits, entirely unjustified. The Western journal (the Calgary Albertan) held that a procedure that created such a condition should not continue; that every member should be free to speak and vote on a question, regardless of what the Government thought of it, and that no decision of the House should be deemed a vote of non-confidence in the Government unless it was so declared in express terms.

The close of the debate on the question of titles, in our House of Commons on Tuesday night, gave a very striking illustration of the practice to which our Western contemporary had called attention. Mr. Nickle, the member for Kingston, a Government supporter, had moved, a month before, a resolution in the form of an address to the King, disapproving of the conferring of hereditary titles on citi-

zens domiciled in Canada. Mr. Richardson, of Springfield, Manitoba, also a Government supporter, had moved an amendment, to strike out the word "hereditary" and thus express disapproval of all titles. In the course of the first discussion, the Premier brought down an Order-in-Council that had been passed, disapproving of hereditary titles, and stipulating that any other titles should be conferred only on the recommendation of the Premier.—The debate was adjourned, at the request of the Government, the Premier giving assurance that it would be resumed at a later day.

A month having passed without further action, Mr. Nickle pressed for a resumption of the debate and the question was taken up again on Tuesday night. The Premier, who had not before offered any objection to the treatment of the subject as an open one, now moved an amendment which was an endorsement of the Order-in-Council, and astonished the House by declaring that he made the passing of his amendment a question of confidence or non-confidence. Many of the members, supporters of the Government, had spoken freely concerning the whole question, publicly and privately, declaring their intention to support either the motion of Mr. Nickle or the amendment of Mr. Richardson. They were suddenly called on to abandon their attitude or turn out a Government which they desired to support. It was a very hard position to place these members in. Those who, in the confusion of the moment, accepted it did so with much reluctance, protesting, that though, in view of the Premier's statement, they would support his motion, they did not agree with him, and that they would on another occasion act differently.

The incident deserves consideration, since it goes to show that there is need of some such change in the practice of the House of Commons, as the Western journal advocated. There does not seem to have been any good reason why the free voice of the House should have been strangled as it was. If members are not to be free to think and act independently—if they are to be called upon to recede from positions publicly taken and to vote against their known convictions whenever it suits the whim of a party leader to say that the question is one of non-confidence—of what use can they be to their constituents or to the Dominion? Such a method of dealing with the business of Parliament makes the member who desires to support the Government a mere voting machine.

Party government has been much condemned of late. Union Government has been expected to make for greater liberty; but in this case its fruit was a demand for a slavishness of support not excelled in the days of the party system. There was no reason for treating the