

Canadian Flag

Mr. Pearson: Mr. Speaker, if I may continue, as I said a moment ago, this is a serious, a solemn and historic occasion and I venture to hope, as I also mentioned a moment ago, that the debate will be worthy of the occasion.

This is the first time in our history that parliamentary action has ever been requested by a Canadian government to decide on a national flag.

Mr. Diefenbaker: In that regard would the Prime Minister allow a question? Is it not a fact that the order in council of 1949 said that the red ensign shall continue to be the flag until parliament otherwise renders a decision?

Mr. Pearson: If my right hon. friend will conceal his impatience he will find I am dealing with this as I go along. I may say the order in council was not made in 1949. It was in 1945. But, Mr. Speaker, that is just what I was going to say. There was an order in council passed on September 5, 1945 and part of it read—and I shall return to it later:

Until such time as action is taken by parliament for the formal adoption of a national flag... the red ensign may be flown.

Those are the words of the order in council.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Read all the words. You left some out.

Mr. Pearson: No such action has been taken by parliament. Until now no government has asked parliament to take such action. I know, as do all hon. members, that in 1945 a flag committee of the house was set up which made a report with a recommendation in regard to a flag.

Mr. Diefenbaker: That was in 1946—the report.

Mr. Pearson: The committee, I said, was set up in 1945, which is correct. The report was made in 1946, I think in June or July. That report was made but no action was taken by parliament at that time, nor was any action asked by the government of Canada at that time. Someone says on the other side that if it had been asked for it would have been taken.

Mr. Nowlan: That is right.

Mr. Pearson: I am not here to dispute or agree with that, but it was not taken and therefore this is the first occasion on which parliamentary action has been asked for.

In order to meet the point that we as a government are rushing into this matter, that

[Mr. Speaker.]

what we are asking parliament to do now has come in some way as a surprise to parliament and the people of Canada, it is desirable for me to put on the record the commitments I have made, as the leader of my party and now as the leader of the government, in regard to this matter. Back in January, 1960, following a broadcast I made, I issued a statement—and the broadcast dealt with this matter too. I made my position clear. This was as far back as 1960. And I proposed in that statement on January 27, 1960, the submission by government to parliament of a measure which, if accepted by representatives of the people in parliament would, I hoped, settle the problem of a national flag by agreement on a distinctive design which, unlike the red ensign—a flag never given formal sanction by parliament—could not be confused with certain United Kingdom or colonial flags and which was easily identifiable as Canadian. This was the position I took at that time, and it is the position I have taken consistently since that time. Indeed, in the letters which I have received over the years—and I have received a great many, especially in the last six weeks on the flag question—I have written as follows—and I am quoting now from a letter I have been sending out for a good many years to people complaining about action which might be proposed to change the red ensign. My replies have included these words:

I assure you that I respect the union jack or the red ensign and all that they stand for in our history and traditions; and as a symbol of freedom and democracy. I have been proud to have served under the union jack in war and to have lived under it in England in peace and war. I hope that it can be kept, and flown on appropriate occasions as a flag symbolizing Canada's association with the other nations of the commonwealth and our monarchical connection. I do feel, however, that there should be a Canadian national flag which could not be mistaken for the emblem of any other country and which, by its acceptance, would be a strong unifying force in our country.

At our party rally in 1961 which laid down the policy to be followed by our party, the statement of policy included these words:

A Liberal government will establish a distinctive Canadian flag within two years of taking office.

We are carrying out that policy laid down at the party rally. It was in the election platform of 1962 and, in 1963, the undertaking was repeated in exactly the same words:

A new Liberal government will submit to parliament a design for a flag which cannot be mistaken for the emblem of any other country.

Our party's commitment to ask for a parliamentary decision on the flag extends over