

THE EXECUTION OF LOUIS RIEL.

SPEECH OF THE HON. JOHN S. D. THOMPSON,

MINISTER OF JUSTICE.

DELIVERED MARCH 22, 1886.

The House resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion of Mr. Landry (Montmagny): That this House feels it its duty to express its deep regret that the sentence of death passed upon Louis Riel, convicted of high treason, was allowed to be carried into execution; and the motion of Sir Hector Langevin: That this question be now put.

Mr. THOMPSON (Antigonish). Although so much has already been said in the course of this debate, as the hon. member for West Durham (Mr. Blake), on Friday evening, intimated that the time had come when the House should hear from the law officer of the Government, that the time had come when I should rise, if I intended to rise at all, it is becoming that I should accept the hon. member's challenge and make, at this stage of the debate, late though it may appear, and tedious though the debate has already been, such a statement of the facts immediately connected with the part that my Department has had in this transaction as it was proper to make before the debate should close. I regret, Sir, the more because I am a comparative stranger in this House, that my first duty in making such a statement is to express my regret at the manner in which this discussion has been carried on, and the way it has been brought before the House.

Some hon. MEMBERS. Hear, hear.

Mr. THOMPSON (Antigonish). It has been said, Sir, and the cheer that comes from hon. gentlemen opposite means a reaffirmation, I presume, of the statement, that the Government have chosen the mode and the time in which this question should be discussed and, as the hon. member stated, had framed the indictment. Even if that were true—as it is not, Mr. Speaker—I ask the hon. members who have just given that cheer, how they are to escape the responsibility for the manner in which they have carried on the discussion down to this moment? Mr. Speaker, it has been said from time to time in the course of this debate—it was generously admitted by the hon. member for Brockville (Mr. Wood) the other day—for the purpose of argument only, I presume,—but it was contended by the other side of the House most vehemently, that the right to discuss this matter at every step and every stage rested in Parliament precisely as if Parliament sat as a court of appeal.

Mr. MILLS. Hear, hear.

Mr. THOMPSON (Antigonish). I should like the hon. gentleman who says, "hear, hear," and those who follow him, and any hon. gentleman who has engaged in this discussion or takes any interest in it, to point to a precedent which justifies the opposition. I should like them to point to a case in any Parliament in the British Empire, in which any man incurring the responsibility of a member of Parliament would say, "hear, hear," to such a proposition as that. We have had, not only the contention that Parliament is to be the court of appeal before which the whole evidence is to be discussed, and before which the whole evidence is to be sifted by lawyers on both sides of the House, but we have been entertained day after day by speeches for the defence. We have not merely had such a discussion as would take place in a court of appeal, but gentlemen have been speaking with carefully prepared briefs, analyses of evidence, and authorities, upon all of which this House is to be expected to pass an opinion and decision. I have only to state the case as it is to bring the House to the consciousness that this is not a suitable tribunal, that the temper which prevails in a Legislature composed of two actively hostile parties is not a place in which the administration of justice in any particular case can suitably be discussed. We have not only been told that Parliament is a court of appeal to try a question like this, but that, if Parliament comes to a wrong conclusion, the people at the polls are to decide it. If we have heated controversy and partisan feeling in this House which prevent the House coming to a judicial conclusion such as a court of appeal would arrive at, I should like to ask hon. gentlemen opposite how will it be when we go to the polls? Is partisanship, for the first time in the history of the country, to be eradicated there? Is a calm and cool consideration of the merits of a particular case—of the fate of a particular convict—to be made