

*Motion Respecting House Vote*

• (5:30 p.m.)

We all know that a bill that is important to the government becomes a matter of confidence. That the passing of such a bill implies confidence is understood by the government and opposition alike. That has always been understood in regard to bills such as the one that was defeated last Monday night. That defeat implied lack of confidence. The Prime Minister misstated the position of the government and misrepresented what happened, since he tried to establish an entirely new basis under which our parliament ought to operate.

The hon. member for York East (Mr. Otto) said that the country is not ready for an election and that no election ought to be called. The Prime Minister, to give the nub of his argument, said that the outcome of the vote will determine if there shall be an election. I submit that our constitution, as we understand it, says that on the defeat of a government the Governor General may call on someone other than the Prime Minister to form a government if the defeated Prime Minister asks him to do so. If the new government fails to pass the test of its first vote of confidence the Prime Minister may not have the right to call an election, but there is no doubt that he has that right after he has passed his first test. Only the Prime Minister is entitled to advise His Excellency that there shall be an election, or the Prime Minister can advise, and I think His Excellency is bound to follow such advice, that someone else should head that government which has been defeated, or the Prime Minister can recommend that someone else head a government.

There is no doubt that this government has to resign, but for the Prime Minister to suggest that the resignation of his government would mean an automatic election is to distort the truth and to hide the facts. He tried to mislead certain members of the house into a panic vote to support his government. He did not tell them squarely that failure to support his government would not necessarily lead to an election. As I say, the Prime Minister can resign and call an election, or he can resign and recommend to His Excellency that someone else, one of his cabinet ministers or someone he likes, head the government. On that recommendation His Excellency would appoint a Prime Minister who could form a government and ask this house for a vote of confidence. If he got it he could carry on.

Another solution might be for the Prime Minister to prorogue the session. But the

Prime Minister has said: "No, we will have a vote of confidence; we will disregard the constitutional rights by which we have been governed and we will disregard what constitutes a vote of confidence. We will do the most violence that has been done to parliament in Canadian constitutional history, and all because I do not wish to resign." We are not being asked to consider this motion so as to avoid an election, as the Prime Minister says; we are doing this because the Prime Minister does not want to resign.

Many members have already demonstrated their concern about having an election. Having considered the grave step and heavy responsibility of fighting an election and having been told that the alternative to supporting the government is an election, some of them feel that they must go along with the government. But the alternative is simpler than that. The Prime Minister has already announced his retirement and his party is arranging for a leadership contest. It is not a case, therefore, of whether the Prime Minister remains in office with his administration but simply whether he goes a little earlier than he had originally anticipated. Looked at in that way the question becomes different.

The hon. member for York East says that he sees some ray of hope in the government's legislative program of the last three or four months and because he sees that ray of hope he thinks we ought not to fight an election. If the hon. member and some of his colleagues fear an election, as I suspect, they ought to remember that other alternatives remain open. The Prime Minister could resign a little earlier and one of his colleagues could take over and form a new administration. He could even start a new session almost at once, introduce his own taxation bill or a similar one and then prorogue. That solution is within the government's reach and it gives us an alternative to an election.

The Prime Minister argues that a vote of confidence is only a vote of confidence when the government says it is. He made the blanket assertion that the government decides when there is to be a vote of confidence. Actually he is saying that the government chooses what issues it deems to be issues of confidence. By asserting that an important money matter is not a matter of confidence he is saying in so many words that questions of confidence shall be chosen at the whim of the government, the consideration being whether the government can win the vote. That is what it amounts to and that is what he reduces it to.