

*Lack of Confidence Vote*

The next incident to which I shall refer arose in 1905. John Redmond moved in supply that certain estimates be reduced and his motion carried. Mr. A. J. Balfour, who was then leader of the government, used these words some few days afterwards as indicating the position which his government proposed to take:

Now I think it is evident from this brief, and perhaps too rapid, survey of recent constitutional history that the only divisions which, taken by themselves, and in isolation from the general circumstances of the time, from the feeling of the parties in the House, form the question of union in the cabinet—the only parliamentary issues which, taken in isolation from these attendant circumstances, have always been regarded as conclusive are those in which there has been a trial of strength between the parties with all the circumstances of notice and other attendant incidents required to make it clear that the issue to be decided is one of "confidence" or "no confidence".

Further on he says:

I think that is the whole truth with regard to votes taken in this House considered in their isolation. But I quite admit that there are circumstances in which you cannot take a vote in its isolation. You have to take it with all its attendant circumstances, and a government if it is conscious that it cannot carry on the business of the House, may be perfectly justified in taking a vote which, under different circumstances, it would regard with relative indifference as the formal occasion of its termination of office.

With all respect, I suggest that this last statement of Mr. Balfour indicates, perhaps, the status of this matter at the present time. There have been incidents subsequent to that, but they are of more or less minor importance. Now, having ascertained, in the words of Mr. Balfour, the generally accepted rule, what is the effect of the proposed resolution before the House. It seems to me it may be put shortly in this way: that it simply transfers, from the Cabinet to parliament, the responsibility of determining whether or not an adverse vote, together with the attendant circumstances, is such as to justify the government in resigning or in seeking dissolution. I think it simply means the transference of responsibility, and the question for the House to determine, then, would be whether or not such a transference of responsibility is desirable. Is not the House of Commons as a body in a better position to determine a question of that character? Not only do its members come from all parts of the country, not only are they larger in number than the government, but they have a better idea of the public pulse than the Cabinet could have; and it seems to me that in the last analysis they would give, generally speaking, a truer verdict than the government could give on a matter of that kind.

Mr. MACLEAN (Halifax): Would not the fear of an election put them in a less independent position than the government?

[Mr. Shaw.]

Mr. SHAW: I think not. I see no reason why the prospect of an election should act as my hon. friend suggests.

Mr. MACLEAN (Halifax): It is very powerful sometimes.

Mr. SHAW: I defer to the judgment of my hon. friend in that regard. In the second place, so far as the membership of the House itself is concerned, the member is now very frequently placed in a position where he cannot disagree with a government measure without imperilling the life of the government. He knows not what particular measure may be considered as vital and important and a vote against which will be considered by the government as a vote of want of confidence. The adoption of the resolution proposed by the hon. member for Calgary East (Mr. Irvine) will, it seems to me, allow members to escape that embarrassing situation where frequently they vote against their convictions and, perhaps, in many cases, against the interests of their constituents.

Under our present system private members lose much of their independence of thought and much of their freedom of action. Not only will this suggested change be beneficial in so far as the membership of the House is concerned, but it seems to me that oppositions whose real function is that of constructive criticism will realize that it is useless to seek to embarrass a government by any snap decision. Further, I think the ministry itself will benefit as the result of this proposed change. The constant fear of defeat of a government measure, with the resultant loss of prestige, tends to timidity on the part of the Cabinet both as to its administrative acts and its legislative proposals, with the inevitable consequence of governmental inaction, and particularly is this so where a government holds office by a slim majority.

It seems to me therefore, Mr. Speaker, in view of our constitutional practice, that the proposed resolution is in harmony with our developing political institutions, and will assist in an increasing release from partisanship in the consideration of our national affairs.

Right Hon. W. L. MACKENZIE KING (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, may I first of all express to the hon. member who has moved this resolution (Mr. Irvine) my appreciation not only of the thoughtful manner in which he has dealt with this important subject, but also of his generous reference to the government in its relation to the House. I wish to assure him that so far as this government is concerned he will, I believe, always have reason to feel that the consideration