

National Anthem

● (1230)

[English]

What we might call its first formal or official exposure in a purely English-speaking situation seems to have occurred at the military camp at Niagara in 1900 during a tattoo.

Five years later a Toronto company published the music with Sir Adolphe Basile Routhier's original French words and an English version by a Toronto physician, Dr. Thomas Bedford Richardson.

In fact, during those early years, a whole catalogue of English lyrics was proposed to accompany Lavalée's music. The height of this flurry of poetic activity was related to the 1908 celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of Quebec City. It was around that time that the English version by Judge Weir was written and it is this version that generations of Canadians have adopted as our national anthem.

To me the Hon. Stanley Weir is representative of the culture of this country: born and raised in Ontario, he obtained his higher education in Quebec. During his career he served both as minister and speaker of the Quebec legislature and also as a judge of the Exchequer court.

"Lavalée's splendid melody", was the way Stanley Weir spoke of the music. Weir's lyrics and Lavalée's music struck a responsive chord in the hearts of a rapidly expanding cross-section of English-speaking Canadians. By the time our country entered the First World War, "O Canada" had become our best known patriotic song, even surpassing "The Maple Leaf Forever" in popularity.

During the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of confederation, in 1927, the committee co-ordinating the national celebration published the music together with the words of Stanley Weir and Sir Adolphe Routhier. Again in 1938, "O Canada" was published and distributed for use at public functions and in the schools on the occasion of the visit of Their Highnesses, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

[Translation]

The words of our national anthem, Madam Speaker, are important in both languages, and the bill before the House recognizes that importance. However, we know that an anthem is more than the sum total of its words. Does the feeling that grips us in the midst of a crowd as it starts to sing the national anthem stem only from the words? For my part, I feel it is rooted in a universal phenomenon: the manifestation of a need, as well as the will to belong to a group that is larger than the family cell or particular groups. It is also the manifestation of personal belief in values that are held as fundamental, such as our homes and our rights.

What is being asked of Parliament today is that it give a symbolic affirmation of national importance. Certain values are the very cornerstone of societies; they are expressed through signs and symbols that prove their everlastingness. The symbol doubtless does not give birth to the sense of belonging to a country, but it does contribute in no small

measure to its collective demonstration and gives us a means of expressing very simply our shared beliefs and emotions.

The question of a Canadian identity lies at the centre of our debate. To some, it is but a myth. To others, it is an indisputable fact.

As I said, Madam Speaker, Canadians already consider "O Canada" their national anthem. By giving force of law to that fact through a unanimous vote, the House of Commons will show, unequivocally, that certain values stand above current dissensions and political allegiances. In so doing, the House will set the example by enshrining one of the most unifying realities of our young collective history, "O Canada".

Constitutional reform will probably keep us busy in the next few months by requiring us once again to go beyond our daily concerns, since while having to see to the difficult job of governing a vast country, we shall also have to meet the urgent need to redefine this country so that it may reflect a reality which is already more than 100 years old.

Madam Speaker, I believe that the greatest temptation would be to take Canada for granted, to suppose that this great ship berthed on three oceans has lowered anchor for all times, to consider our privileged situation in the world as owed to us, and to allow our immediate problems to take precedence over our ideals.

[English]

As the historian Arthur Lower wrote more than 30 years ago:

In every generation Canadians have had to rework the miracle of their political existence. Canada has been created because there has existed within the hearts of its people, a determination to build for themselves an enduring home. Canada is a supreme act of faith.

[Translation]

Madam Speaker, beyond the simplicity of the melody, and in the inspiration which carries it, the anthem "O Canada" can be for the majority of Canadians the symbolic confirmation of this determination.

[English]

Mr. Knowles: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Before the minister sits down, I wonder if he would accept one question for clarification. In the course of his statement he referred to the commitment which the government has made to the effect that in the next session any private members' public bills having to do with the wording of "O Canada" would be permitted to go to a committee for study. That commitment, of course, was part of the agreement arrived at this morning by the House leaders.

This is my question for clarification: Is it clear that that applies to any and all private members' bills put down in the next session, whether or not they are among those that are drawn at the top of the list?