

As a member coming from Manitoba I wish to express our great admiration for those chaps who went to Hong Kong. As members of this unit they have done a fine job for Canada. I want also to express our deepest sympathies with the relatives of these men and also with the minister who is responsible at this particular time.

Mr. RALSTON: May I say just a word in reply to the hon. member for Lethbridge (Mr. Blackmore)? I did not intend to start a discussion on this occasion, but I thought that a statement should be made now. I assumed that hon. members might want to discuss it in connection with estimates or at any other appropriate time. However, I do not want to let what my hon. friend said with regard to the troopship and the ship bearing munitions pass without comment.

The ship bearing munitions was an eight and a half knot ship, whereas the troopship was a seventeen knot ship. For reasons which I cannot give now to the house and which I indicated in the statement, the original arrangement by the Admiralty was that the troopship had to sail between the twentieth and the thirtieth. That was absolutely necessary; had it not been done then, there would have been no opportunity for sailing for some very considerable time after that. The result was that the troopship had to go. You could not have a convoy, that is, two ships, one a seventeen knot ship and the other an eight and a half knot ship, unless you slowed up the seventeen knot ship. Had that been done the convoy would have been somewhere out in the China sea at the time war with Japan broke. As it was, the troopship and its naval escort got there in twenty days, whereas the cargo ship took over a month. It was not feasible, having regard to the conditions, to hold the troopship back for the munitions ship.

Mr. POULIOT: The minister should resign on account of the Hong Kong affair.

Right Hon. W. L. MACKENZIE KING (Prime Minister): I might say to my hon. friend the leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (Mr. Coldwell) that some of the reasons which the government had in mind earlier in this session and in previous sessions for not holding a secret session do not have the same force at the present time. I think I can assure him and other hon. members of the house that if it is desired to have a secret session, it will be arranged.

[Mr. Ralston.]

There is one point, however, that should be kept in mind with respect to a secret session. The government would wish to have here the officials who would be in a position to give information, and before the session itself was arranged it would be desirable that the government should be made aware of at least some of the matters hon. members might wish to bring up for discussion at that time.

Mr. HANSON (York-Sunbury): I ask the Prime Minister to keep this in mind. If there is to be a secret session at which criticism is to be levelled at, we will say, the heads of the permanent staff of the Department of National Defence, I do not think those men should be here. The minister is their spokesman, and the members of this house should be free and untrammelled to say exactly what they want to say. I have nothing in mind about this matter. So far as I am concerned, this afternoon I have shown a disposition to support the department, and I have tried to support it in days gone by. I supported the department in 1922 when the present Minister of National Defence for Air (Mr. Power) was attacking it. I do not say that to stir up any controversy at the moment, but I do say that if there is to be a secret session, hon. members should be free and untrammelled and not confined by the presence of members of the general staff of the Canadian army. I should like the Prime Minister to take that into consideration.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: It was precisely that sort of thing that I had in mind when I suggested that it would be helpful to the ministry to know in advance what matters it was desired to discuss at a secret session. My hon. friend will realize that questions related to supplies and the like are matters of detail which no minister could possibly hope to answer unless he had his officials present. If it were desired for example to discuss the personnel and qualifications of members of the headquarters' staff, there would be no desire on the part of the government to have them present at the time.

I move that the sitting of the house be suspended until eight o'clock this day.

Motion agreed to.

SITTING SUSPENDED

At 5.20 p.m. the sitting was suspended until 8.00 p.m. this day.