

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, June 20, 1994

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[Translation]

NATIONAL PATRIOTS' DAY

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Verchères) moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government should officially recognize the historical contribution of the Patriotes of Lower Canada and the Reformers of Upper Canada to the establishment of a system of responsible democratic government in Canada and in Quebec, as did the government of Quebec in 1982, by proclaiming by order a National Patriots' Day.

He said: Madam Speaker, in the Canadian history course I took when I was in my fourth year at high school, we had to write a paper on the theme, "Louis-Joseph Papineau: Traitor or Hero"? This provocative theme eloquently illustrated the equivocal perception and the historical ambiguity that surrounded, and still surround, Louis-Joseph Papineau and the thousands of men and women who answered to the name of "Patriote" and "Reformer".

The dramatic events known as the Rebellion of 1837-38 have often been depicted in textbooks and tourist pamphlets as the feat of a band of criminals—what today we would call terrorists—who challenged the established order.

The aim of the motion I have just respectfully submitted for the consideration of this House today is to rectify this perception and to achieve, at long last, recognition of the historic contribution of the Patriotes of Lower Canada and the Reformers of Upper Canada to the establishment of truly responsible and truly democratic government in Canada and in Quebec.

It is important to make clear that the motion does not request a pardon for the Patriotes: they were pardoned by Queen Victoria in 1849. I think it is high time the federal government recognized that the Rebellion was part of a historic current of social and political unrest that affected not just the colonies but their motherlands, starting in the 18th century and stretching into the first half of the 19th.

The rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada were not the work of a restricted segment of the population. Merchants, manufacturers, professionals, farmers, colonists, all shared the goal of freeing themselves economically and politically from Great Britain's colonial grip.

• (1105)

The Patriotes in Lower Canada and the Reformers in Upper Canada were fighting essentially for civil and political rights, for the establishment of truly democratic and responsible institutions, and for a certain degree of national emancipation. How can it be that the role of the Patriotes has been denigrated for so long? Everyone knows that our perception of history evolves according to the values and ideologies prevalent in a particular society, and according to ambient social and political interaction. The best example of this phenomenon is certainly the French Revolution, whose main protagonists came to be viewed over time as visionaries, then as pariahs, and finally as heroes. The Revolution has been described as the best thing that ever happened to France and even to mankind and as a bloody period in history that should have been avoided.

I contend that the time has come for the federal government to make up for lost time and recognize the undeniable contribution to history made by the Patriotes and the Reformers. Previous Canadian governments should be ashamed and embarrassed that the Bloc Québécois had to be elected before this issue was raised in this House.

Some citizens' groups, primarily from Quebec and Ontario, have been working hard for a number of years to ensure that the Patriotes in Lower Canada and the Reformers in Upper Canada receive their due recognition and find their place in Canada's history. The ultimately violent nature of this political movement must never obscure the inestimable importance of the democratic institutions and representatives that were bequeathed to us.

What we must in fact remember are the basic ideas for which the Patriotes fought. Basically, these people were fighting for three goals. The first was the recognition of the people of Lower and Upper Canada as nations capable of taking control of their own future. Even then, the Patriotes showed their openmindedness and that sense of nationalism that did not rest on ethnicity but rather on their strong sense of belonging to the area. I submit as evidence the wording of a Patriote resolution adopted in Saint-Marc on May 15, 1837 and which reads as follows: "—(the delegates) adhere and will adhere under this agreement