

Alleged Lack of Government Leadership

this vital matter of life, death and survival, could have given leadership, but what happened?

Over the years when we on this side of the house, supported by the other opposition groups, tried to persuade the government to set up that kind of committee and give that kind of leadership, we were repeatedly turned down. We tried and we have failed. We had hoped that if the government had accepted our proposal on this matter it might have produced, and I think would have produced, non-partisan consideration of such a vital matter. But since February 20, 1959, when I made the first proposal to the house for such a committee, until the other day when the Prime Minister finally turned down my proposal for a national defence committee, we have been balked in our efforts to bring this matter before the House of Commons through a committee.

Mr. Green: May I ask the Leader of the Opposition a question?

Mr. Pearson: Yes, of course.

Mr. Green: Why was it when your party formed the government of the country it declined, year after year, to set up a committee on national defence?

Mr. Pearson: That is a perfectly proper question and I expected it. The answer to that is twofold. In the first place it is quite true that the opposition of that time, including my hon. friend and including the Prime Minister, did their very best to get a defence policy committee set up, and they produced various impressive arguments for such a committee, even at that time when we were not in the confused mess we are now in about national defence. The government of that day, of which I was a member, although it produced a great deal more information before the house than this government has ever produced on national defence, although it encouraged the widest and deepest discussion on the estimates for the Department of National Defence, and although it produced blue books explaining what our national defence policy was, decided that was enough and that a defence committee should not be set up. The hon. gentleman thought that was wrong then. I ask him now, why will he not agree to the very proposition he put forward in those days?

Mr. Green: Now perhaps the Leader of the Opposition will answer the question.

Mr. Pearson: But perhaps my hon. friend will also remember that defence committees have been set up in the past.

Mr. Green: No.

[Mr. Pearson.]

Mr. Pearson: They have indeed been set up on defence.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): Not on policy.

Mr. Pearson: Perhaps my hon. friend will remember a few commissions on defence policy set up by Liberal governments. Perhaps my hon. friend will remember that when there was a controversy going on concerning Petawawa the government of the day allowed a commission to investigate that—a royal commission and a committee of the house. Both of these were set up; but now, Mr. Speaker, these hon. gentlemen opposite, who fought so hard for that kind of inquiry in those days, have for five years resisted any attempt to find out anything about national defence policy, through a small committee before which witnesses could be heard and experts called, at a time and in a situation when there is much more confusion and much more difficulty in understanding the policy of the government than there ever was in the days and years before 1957. However there it is; we have not been permitted to investigate this matter in any effective way.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, it is the duty of the opposition to do what it can to find out the facts, to find out the truth about national defence policy, and we shall continue to do our best to do that. Indeed it is all the more necessary now because we have another example of lack of leadership and of confusion and indecision. There have been contradictions, and they are now in the open, between the minister of national defence, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for External Affairs. There have been contradictions as to what the facts are between the government of Canada and the government of the United States.

Surely, Mr. Speaker, it would have been possible, with a government that had any idea or sense of leadership and decision, to have avoided a situation where we have this open dispute, or had, between the United States government and the Canadian government on what were the facts of national defence and joint continental defence policy? This is perhaps the most deplorable and most dangerous illustration we have had of lack of leadership and confusion in the five years in which the government has been in office, a confusion and indecision which has led to this situation, where however, wrong it may have been—and it was wrong—it led to the state department of our ally in continental defence issue a statement taking exception to the facts put forward in this house by the Prime Minister of this country.

A government that was conducting our relations with our neighbour in the right way