

Legislation Respecting Railway Matters

of Quebec and of French Canadians resided in Quebec independence.

I conclude by saying, Mr. Speaker, that it is the first time that this is said in the house: Quebec will have its independence, and soon.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Pursuant to the request of the hon. member for Lapointe, he can, if he wants, take seat No. 53 or No. 54 as he wishes.

[English]

● (2:40 p.m.)

HOUSE OF COMMONS**CONSIDERATION OF LEGISLATION RESPECTING RAILWAY MATTERS**

Right Hon. L. B. Pearson (Prime Minister):

Mr. Speaker, I am sure the house would expect a statement from the government on the reasons which led us to request you to alter the order adopted by the house on July 14, which you have just read. I regret, Mr. Speaker, that the government felt obliged to ask Your Honour one week ago today to alter this order. My regret is, of course, much greater because of the grave national problem which brought us here; the national railway strike.

A general railway strike is a national emergency and if prolonged, as I hope it will not be, could become a national disaster. That, Mr. Speaker, is not exaggeration or dramatization; it is merely a statement of fact, for Canada's economy is dependent on railway transportation.

There are those, Mr. Speaker, who say that parliament should have been called before this strike was called.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Pearson: To have recalled parliament before the decision to strike was made would have been taken, of course, as a proclamation by the government that there was no hope of any kind of a settlement between the parties, and it would have represented an interference in an unprecedented way with the collective bargaining process laid down by our law.

Once the strike date was set the government lost no time in calling parliament. We acted on the same day. We knew, of course, that in doing this we were making further bargaining and mediation more difficult, but we knew also that there were only four days for mediation before the date that was set for the strike.

[Mr. Grégoire.]

There are also those, Mr. Speaker, who say we should have had parliament meet on Thursday of last week so we could ask parliament to prevent the strike by legislation. Naturally that course was considered. It has been followed in the past. Apart from the fact that the time was so short between the calling of the strike and the date for the strike, to attempt to legislate last week in the circumstances of that week, to attempt to legislate before Friday noon in our view was not likely to have been an effective course for achieving the objective in mind.

We should not forget and I am sure we do not forget, Mr. Speaker, that under our laws the union leaders have an undoubted right to call a strike and the employees have an undoubted right to go on strike. They are acting, in doing so within the law, as I am confident they will continue to act. We should not forget and we do not forget that the right to strike is a cherished and integral part of our system of free collective bargaining, and neither government nor parliament should abridge, or would want to abridge, that right without the strongest reasons of national interest and public welfare, and not until every effort of persuasion and mediation has failed. This is why we felt that a final attempt at mediation even after a strike date had been set, under the auspices of the Minister of Labour, was not merely justified but was necessary in the public interest. That final mediation did not, unfortunately, avert the strike; it is continuing as we sit in this chamber.

Two alternatives faced the government, as they faced the country. We as a government could have abided by the ordinary law and allowed the strike to continue until the parties finally came to an agreement on their own with all the assistance the government could give them. Or parliament could be asked to intervene on the ground that a promulgation of the strike would do such great harm to the public interest, including the interest of the parties to the dispute, as to constitute a national emergency which justified a departure from ordinary practice and law.

We had no difficulty in deciding that it was our duty as a government to follow the latter course as now being necessary to restore an essential public service with the least possible delay and to get the railways moving again with the least possible interference with the process of free collective bargaining. For this