

PRIVILEGE

MR. COATES—RESIDENCE OF LATE RIGHT HON. J. G. DIEFENBAKER

Mr. Robert C. Coates (Cumberland-Colchester): Madam Speaker, I will not take a lot of time of the House, but I have to bring a matter of privilege to the attention of the House that I feel affects every member of this chamber, since we represent the people of Canada. It relates to the request by the former prime minister of Canada, the Right Hon. John Diefenbaker, to the people of Canada that his home in Rockcliffe be used specifically as a museum in association with his contributions as a prime minister and as a Canadian of great significance.

In recent days, the Minister of the Environment (Mr. Roberts) has announced a decision of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board in Canada in relation to Mr. Diefenbaker's home in Rockcliffe. As far as I am concerned, the decision rests with the people of Canada and should not be sloughed off to a board of any kind. The decision is the responsibility of the Government of Canada and, more particularly, the Prime Minister of Canada (Mr. Trudeau) as to whether we accept the gift which the Canadian people have been notified by the executors of the estate of the late Right Hon. John Diefenbaker is available to them.

● (1510)

I have been in communication with the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Environment and the Secretary of State (Mr. Fox), and I have indicated to all three that the John G. Diefenbaker Memorial Foundation would be willing to enter into discussions with the Government of Canada with the objective that that Foundation assume the responsibilities as outlined in Mr. Diefenbaker's will as far as any—

Madam Speaker: Order, please. I would like the hon. member to try to let me know exactly where his question of privilege stands. I can see the hon. member is pressing a point. He has a complaint about a situation with which he does not agree, but that does not in itself constitute privilege. I would like him to restrict himself to indicating to me where his question of privilege lies.

Mr. Coates: Madam Speaker, I will get to that quite quickly. What I am endeavouring to indicate is that a board established by the Government of Canada to carry out certain responsibilities on behalf of Canadians has made an announcement through the Minister of the Environment which reflects on the role played by Mr. Diefenbaker during his lifetime. Certain actions this board anticipates taking relate to some aspects of his distinguished career. As I read the announcement, this board has at the same time proposed that this gift which is part of Mr. Diefenbaker's estate should be rejected. The gift made through Mr. Diefenbaker's will was not to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. It was to the people of Canada, to the Parliament of Canada and to the Government of Canada which naturally must act on behalf of the people of Canada.

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What has happened is that a board has taken a decision which leads one to believe that the government will not accept the gift which has been made to the people of Canada.

I believe the people of Canada have the right to expect that the bequest made in Mr. Diefenbaker's will will in fact be acted upon. I have no doubt at all that the people of Canada and the members of this House who represent the people of Canada would want to see that happen. I do not believe that, by the use of a vehicle such as a board of one sort or another, we can eliminate the bequest which has been made.

The solicitors for the executors of the estate of Mr. Diefenbaker have made certain statements to the effect that, if this gift made to the people of Canada by the late John G. Diefenbaker is not accepted, it will become a part of the residue of Mr. Diefenbaker's estate and be disposed of as the executors perceive it should be disposed of. It would be a terrible travesty and tragedy for the people of Canada if the Government of Canada failed to indicate whether it would accept the gift made in the will. This House and the people of Canada have the right to know where the government stands. I do not believe the government should use a vehicle such as a board to eliminate its obligation to the people of Canada.

Just to clarify this matter for members of the government, the Diefenbaker Foundation has indicated in correspondence with the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Environment and the Secretary of State that it would be willing to assume the responsibility set out in that bequest if the Government of Canada accepts the gift, so the taxpayers of this nation should have no fear that they will be asked through their tax dollars to assume the responsibility of maintaining and operating the Diefenbaker home.

What I really find reprehensible and unacceptable is the suggestion that, because Mr. Diefenbaker did not live in the home when he was prime minister or leader of the opposition, it is not a home of significance. The Prime Minister of this nation lives at 24 Sussex Drive. The Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) lives at Stornoway. Private Members of Parliament live at wherever their residences are. For many years Mr. Diefenbaker lived in his home in Rockcliffe. That is the home where he wrote his memoirs. That is the home where his wife died. That is the home where he died. It is unbelievable to me that a board charged with responsibility for historic sites and monuments in Canada would reject out of hand the suggestion that the home in which Mr. Diefenbaker died is a significant place to be a museum for future Canadians to see.

As far as I am concerned, it is facetious to suggest that the Canadian government, through the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, would build a monument in Prince Albert as a substitute for accepting the gift from Mr. Diefenbaker's estate. All members of this House realize that few people get the opportunity to go to Prince Albert, but we should also realize that almost one million people visited this capital as tourists last year. This is the place where we have Laurier House and Kingsmere.

What the government, through this board, is suggesting is that we should not accept a gift and have a museum to the