

Canadian Flag

when speaking in the flag debate on August 31st last: A plebiscite should be held. It is the only answer I can see for such an important issue involving a moral and personal choice, an issue which 265 people out of 20 million cannot decide. This has been proven over and over again.

It is quite evident, Mr. Speaker, that public opinion is snowballing in favour of a plebiscite. People realize it is the only answer and the only way to settle this great problem. People are even expressing their great gratitude now to Her Majesty's loyal opposition for saving Canada from adopting the three maple leaf flag which this Liberal government intended should be thrust upon us. That same flag was turned down by the Liberal members of the committee. Yet that was the flag that the government would have had Canada adopt. To my mind this illustrates what a difficult problem is involved in settling this issue and how easily it might be settled by means of a plebiscite. We want an opportunity for self-determination. In my opinion it is the only way out. I say again that I will vote for a plebiscite. I will vote for self-determination. I should like to close by quoting a paraphrase of an ancient Nordic policy to this effect:

On minor affairs the few decide; on great affairs the many.

Mr. Gene Rhéaume (Northwest Territories): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to have an opportunity, along with many other members, to put on the record my beliefs and the beliefs of my constituents on this issue. There are many members on all sides of the chamber who will not be speaking on either the amendment or the motion itself. Whether this course has been chosen either because they feel that the issue can best be handled by not speaking at all, or they feel that others have already adequately expressed their own feelings, I commend those members for their self-restraint. If, however, there are members in this chamber whose silence has been prompted solely by partisan considerations or, even worse, implicit or explicit threats, I pass on to those members of parliament my sympathy for their situation and my scorn for their cowardice. For my own part, I intend to speak now but not again on this subject. I apologize to no one for this decision which I arrived at fully and freely after a soul-searching consideration of my duties to the people of the Northwest Territories whom I represent, in so far as I am able to understand those duties.

The house is about to vote on an amendment to instruct the special flag committee to change the recommendation which that committee arrived at by a majority vote of its members. This committee was, as we know, an all party committee, and numerically speaking its decision was absolutely clear. Why then, it is asked, should the matter be sent back? The answer to this question, Mr. Speaker, is absolutely clear also. At no time has a case been made in this house as to why we should have a new flag at all. In the absence of such instructions from the Canadian people, none of us as individuals and no political party in this house, has either a mandate or even the right to tamper with the symbols and the feelings of the Canadian people.

Who was it, I want to know, who took it upon himself to decide that a change was not only necessary but that it must be made now? What evidence did the government have that had been accumulated to cause it to forsake other social and economic national goals to pursue this matter now? This afternoon, as I walked over to this chamber and looked up at the peace tower with the Canadian red ensign flying from it, as I do quite often, I had to ask myself again, what is all this about? I for one am not dedicated to the retention of this particular flag. However, I do not find it offensive, nor am I in the throes of some demoniac obsession to tear it down from the flagstaffs all over this nation. Before I can support a vote that would change this flag, someone is going to have to convince me that not only is such a change warranted now but that that change would somehow or other make better Canadians out of all of us.

I have serious doubts also, Mr. Speaker, if most Canadians, given a choice through a plebiscite, would insist on the urgency of the change at this time or perhaps even a change at all. So far, the only argument I have heard is the claim by some, but not all, of the government supporters that this flag is a commitment of the Prime Minister (Mr. Pearson) to the Canadian people. Well, I for one have to have a more serious reason than that for the removal of a traditional flag and its replacement by another. Surely the need for a flag must be based on reasons that we can see here and now, and that historians will be able to see in the future, and that are more serious than the suggestion that we must now change the flag solely as an attempt to placate an insecure and accident prone Prime Minister who may otherwise not achieve a place in Canadian history.