Gazette Montreal Mar. 18/24

MAINTAIN FABRIC OF CONFEDERATION, URGES MR. MEIGHEN

Declares Sectional Difficulties No Reason for Abandoning Struggle Altogether

GEOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

Plea for National Solidarity is Made by Ex-Premier at Canadian Club Luncheon

While, like Sir Henry Thornton last week, Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen at the Canadian Club luncheon yesterday at the Windsor Hotel gave a speech the underlying motive of which was courage and optimism, he combined with that a strong plea for the dropping of sectional cries, and especially whispers against Confederation in the far east or west. These things, he said, only occurred during times of depression, and vanished as soon as that depression ended, but he strongly deprecated anything that might tend to weaken the fabric of Confederation, and made an eloquent plea that Canadians should unite from east to west, with full courage to meet the future, and to carry on the traditions of British liberty and British institutions, not only for the benefit of Canada, but that the Dominion might continue to take its present place in the councils of the nations for the general good of humanity.

It was noticed that throughout an address, necessarily given without any great preparation, owing to his heavy parliamentary duties, Mr. Meighen had been able to come direct from the political hurly-burly at Ottawa and so completely dissociate himself from politics that even the many Liberals in the audience could find nothing to criticize.

The ball room at the Windsor was crowded to overflowing for the luncheon, the gallery being well filled with ladies and others, and Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen was greeted with cheers by the audience.

The non-political aspect of the occasion was emphasized by the presence at the head table of a number of prominent Liberals. Mr. Z. Hebert presided, and he was supported by Senator Thibaudeau, Senator Smeaton White, Rt. Hon. C. J. Doherty, Hon. C. C. Ballantyne, Hon. Rodolphe Monty, H.M. Marler, M.P., Fred. W. Stewart, Col. Ibbotson, Major E. Molson, Major F. W. MacDowell, Lt.-Col. G. R. Hooper, E. W. Sayer, M.L.A., Walter Molson, J. Lalanne, A. Fleming and W. Marshall.

Dealing with his subject, "The Why and Wherefore of Canada," Rt. Hon. Mr. Meighen opened with an historic sketch of earlier days, and the events that led the Fathers of Confederation to persist in their course, in face of every kind of obstacle and discouragement. That same struggle of our forefathers undertook for the preservation of British institutions on this part of North America, he said, is the same struggle in which we are now engaged with little change of aspect.

GIFT OF AUTONOMY.

After pointing out the struggles, and even rebellion, that ultimately led to self-government in Canada, Mr. Meighen said we should not wonder so much at its delays, but at the cheerfulness with which Great Britain, after bearing all the cost of developing and guarding this country, which was still being paid for in British taxation, so cheerfully gave us free self-government, several years before Confederation. Even at that time we had as great freedom of our Parliament as appertains today at Westminster itself, and more ample liberty than is now enjoyed by the Congress of the United States.

He sketched the union of Upper and Lower Canada, with the Maritime Provinces staying out, and the west yet unborn, but both east and west geographically closer to the United States than to Canada, as it then was.

Growing difficulties led the leaders of Canada to the conviction that in union alone lay the solution of her difficulties if the British institutions they loved were to be conserved. This feeling grew as it was realized that only by such an union could geographical difficulties be overcome and the eastern and western parts of the country saved from the inevitable influences drawing them toward the American Republic, and that was the spirit that animated George Brown, Sir Alexander Galt and Sir Georges Etienne Cartier, the latter of whom never tried to conceal his dislike for American institutions. It was also emphasized in the historic Confederation memorial to the British Government, which set forth the necessity of "removing the fear that these colonies may serve ultimately to add to the strength of another nation."

With some irony Mr. Meighen pointed out that the 33 Fathers of Confederation gathered at Quebec in 1864, drew up the basis of the British North America Act so completely and so well that it was adopted by the British Parliament, and in the more than fifty years since, only six additions had been made, most of them for matters of more recent date. "That is a very illuminating example to our parliaments of today," he commented, amid laughter.

So wide was the courageous vision of these men, said Mr. Meighen, that with all the changes of more than half a century, but six additions had been made to the B.N.A. Act. These were—the right to control our own coastwise traffic, or freedom from the old navigation laws; the right to veto the appointment of a Governor-General, which had been acknowledged as far back as 1873; the right to Canadian representation in the Imperial Privy Council, granted in 1904; the right to accede to or decline to accede to treaties made by Great Britain; the right to control our own immigration, even as against people from Great Britain itself; and the right to appoint our own plenipotentiaries for the conduct of negotiations looking toward the negotiating of treaties of our own.

This latter clause, said Mr. Meighen, had been much discussed of late, but as a matter of fact it had been acknowledged even prior to 1882. The whole series of events leading to Canada's present position dated as far back as 1840, when Great Britain showed it had really learned the lesson of the American Revolution.

COMBAT GEOGRAPHY.

Ever since Confederation the fight of the successive governments had been to combat the natural geographical tendencies, so as, by union, to preserve British institutions here.

"It is worth while to reflect on what would have happened had Confederation not been achieved," said Mr. Meighen. "Because in my judgment if anything today is allowed to weaken the structure of Confederation, the very same thing would occur today. Had it not taken place we should today find Nova Scotia, in the language of a Quebec member of Parliament only last Saturday, 'with her two arms stretched into the Atlantic as if in appeal to the United States'."

It would be the same with New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, depending upon the U. S. for such measure of prosperity as they might be permitted to enjoy. The western provinces, then 1,500 miles beyond civilization, and geographically close to the United States, would have been in similar position, wholly subservient to the United States. But today they were bound, not only by sentiment, but by steel rails, to an united Canada.

During that half century, Canada had grown greatly in population and wealth, but at every periodic cycle of depression the old initial sectional struggles reappeared in all their naked deformity, with people of various sections pleading that they were bearing too great a share of the burden of the Dominion, reopening the very perils Confederation was formed to combat.

"Since 1921 we have had a period of comparative depression, and the force of sectional appeal has reached a degree greater and more perilous than for some decades. The Maritimes complain of high cost to get their products to eastern markets, and see their population oozing out. They are entitled to our sympathy and earnest co-operation for their relief. They are discouraged; they think of what might have been without Confederation, and stand at the door of parliament with their stringent demands.

The western provinces had their complaints also, that the burdens of Confederation were disproportionately heavy on them, while they got too meagre a portion of the reward, and British Columbia had its own complaint as to the cost of scaling the mountains with its products.

"I am not here to dispute or minimize these complaints. But assuming there is merit in them, and that unfairness exists in the Maritimes and the prairie provinces, surely the fact that they have too great a share in the struggle is no reason why we should give up the struggle altogether." (Applause). It is rather a reason that we should set our course so as to be able to hold our own with our big southern neighbor and other countries, and to divide the burden equally upon all.

SOME READJUSTMENT.

"The only conclusion from these sectional appeals is that having steered our course aright, we must make some readjustment along lines fair to the whole Dominion. There is no question that this can be done. What I am arguing is that because unfairness may exist in some sections is no reason for giving up the whole struggle on which our Confederation is built." (Applause).

Mr. Meighen proceeded to show the increasing influence of Canada in the League of Nations, which enhanced its standing in the world, and increased its opportunities not only for itself, but for humanity, and concluded:

"What Canada needs today more than anything, is courage. There is no cause for discouragement today. I am not one of those who paint everything rosy when it is not, but whatever is not going well in Canada it is in the power of the Canadian people to correct. If there is any injustice, it is in our power to remove it. All we have to do is to show the same perseverance and courage as animated those great men who made our Dominion what it is today."

Rt. Hon. Mr. Meighen was given another burst of cheering at the conclusion of his address. He left again last evening for Ottawa, to resume his duties in parliament.

186
3

PUBLIC ARCHIVES
ARCHIVES PUBLIQUES
CANADA