

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 14, 1966

The house met at 2.30 p.m.

ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

MUNSINGER CASE—ANNOUNCEMENT OF JUDICIAL INQUIRY AND STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Right Hon. L. B. Pearson (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, on Thursday and Friday last, during the discussion on certain aspects of what has come to be known as the Munsinger case, I announced the willingness, indeed the desire of the government to set up a judicial inquiry which would go into this case, into the statements that had been made concerning it, into the allegations that had been made.

I did so believing this would be the best way to deal with this matter, and the house will recall that there was a good deal of support for this idea in principle. There was also strong opposition advanced to it in certain quarters. Those, Mr. Speaker, who supported this procedure as the best way to deal with this matter made as a qualification or a reservation to their support that the terms of reference of any order in council setting up a judicial inquiry should be wide enough to deal with all relevant aspects of the situation.

• (2:40 p.m.)

It also was urged that we should proceed as quickly as possible to deal with this matter, if the commission was to be set up. I can say, Mr. Speaker, that we have dealt with this matter as quickly as possible, that an order in council has been agreed on and I hope it can be tabled during the afternoon. We shall institute a judicial inquiry into the statements that have been made, and they are given in considerable detail in the order in council. I think they cover all the relevant facts, and I believe they meet the points which have been made by hon. gentlemen opposite, that the inquiry must be comprehensive. The inquiry, Mr. Speaker, will be conducted by Mr. Justice Spence of the Supreme Court of Canada.

Mr. Speaker, if I may say one word more, that we are in an unhappy and distressing situation was made apparent by some of the very moving speeches made last Thursday and Friday. Indeed I think it is accurate to

say we are in a frightening position so far as parliament is concerned.

Mr. Speaker, this is no sudden development; it is the culmination, I believe, of a long period of sessions of this house carried on in an atmosphere of extreme partisanship, and at times of bitterness and tension or suspicion. This has been all the more difficult to change for the better because of a parliamentary situation where no party has had majority after three elections in four years—

An hon. Member: That has nothing to do with it.

Mr. Pearson: —and because of a national situation where forces of regionalism, nationalism and division, which were bound to make more difficult the position of any central government, have been strong in this country. Mr. Speaker, I make no attempt to assess the blame for this situation; but I state as solemnly as I can that if we cannot in this house do something effective, and do it well, to change an atmosphere and attitude which disgraces parliament and demeans democracy, we all will have betrayed the trust and hopes of those who sent us here.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Pearson: This parliamentary deterioration over the years has taken place at a time when our country, as it approaches the centennial anniversary which should be a time for pride and thanksgiving, is faced with less of confidence than anxiety, with social, constitutional, racial and economic problems of a difficulty and complexity unequalled in our history.

Mr. Speaker, I can only plead that we show our awareness of this by a new resolve to face up to our duties as parliamentarians and as Canadians, constructively and generously, by dealing now with the important matters that must be decided in this session of parliament, so we can serve the people of our country who have sent us here for that purpose, and for that purpose alone.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Hon. George Hees (Northumberland): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of personal privilege. On several occasions in the last ten days I have publicly stated that I did not