

*Lack of Confidence Vote*

tion, unless an adverse vote were followed by another vote declaring want of confidence. I am not prepared to subscribe to that declaration. I do not think such a declaration would have any appreciable effect on the action of a government at all, but I am not prepared to subscribe to an assertion that a government would be wrong in exercising its undoubted right of resignation and determining for itself when a vote in parliament was such that it made it in the public interest not wise for the government to continue. Why do I say so? Hon. members to my left argue that this suggestion is merely an expansion of democratic principles, merely an elaboration of democratic right, namely for parliament to declare when a government is morally right in exercising its liberty of resignation and when it is morally wrong. Is that really an expansion of democratic right? I am inclined to think the contrary.

In this regard, I come to the similar conclusion to that of the Prime Minister (Mr. Mackenzie King), though I must say that I did not understand the process by which he arrived at his conclusion. I come to my opinion, I think, by a much more direct method, not quite the same opinion either, because if the conclusion that a government's right of resignation should be ample, unrestrained by any declaration of parliament; if the conclusion is that a government should always exercise that right, and resign as stated by the Prime Minister (Mr. Mackenzie King), when it is defeated on its own measure in this House, if that is to be the invariable course, and if such a conclusion is Toryism, then really I must be allowed to subtract from the Toryism of the Prime Minister in expressing my own. I think this an extreme statement of the situation.

The history of the British parliament is illuminating. It has been well reviewed by the hon. member for Calgary West (Mr. Shaw); but I wondered, as he spoke, if he did not realize that the tendency of the last century and a quarter had been entirely away from the conclusion embodied in this resolution, rather than approximating to it. A century and a quarter ago, this theory much more resembled the practice of Parliament than it does to-day. Then, that is to say, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was considered quite the constitutional right of a government to continue in office year after year, although on vital measures it met repeatedly with an adverse vote of the people's representatives. But that was in days when the direct answerability of the House of Com-

mons and of the government to the people of the country was in no way as well established, in no way as perfected as that answerability is to-day.

Such a course could never be tolerated in a British parliament at this time. I do not say that it would not be tolerated in a British parliament that a government may suffer defeat and still judge that that defeat is not of a character to warrant its resignation. Even yet that is possible; but the ambit of cases in which that is possible is far more restricted now than it was in the days of Pitt, Walpole, Grey or Peel. What was considered right for those statesmen would, in the days of Asquith, Lloyd George and Bonar Law, be considered a practical usurpation of power. The tendency all through the century and a quarter has been to restrict the privileges of government in this regard, to restrict its right to hold on to office after the general principles of its policy, after its legislative proposals in essence have met with an adverse vote of the House of Commons. To pass this resolution, however well intended it may be, would be not to advance the measure of democratic power and control, but very perceptibly to contract and diminish it.

I stated that there had survived even to the present time—and I think it will always survive—the doctrine that a government is not required, merely because of an adverse vote, under certain limited circumstances, to take that vote as a want of confidence and to retire. In the last thirty years, there have been in the British House of Commons four cases where an adverse vote has been taken on measures of more or less consequence, in one or two cases mentioned by the hon. member for Calgary West, of considerable consequence. But in three or four cases, the government saw fit not to retire; in the one case, it saw fit to retire. Nevertheless, in the three cases, there were circumstances present which were of an important character and which, undoubtedly, detracted from the obligation of the government to take the vote as a want of confidence.

Every case must be judged in the light of the circumstances that surround it, and I would mention some of the pertinent circumstances as these: First of all, the importance of the measure; that is to say: Does it form an integral part of public policy of the government, or does it not? If it is merely incidental, then that would be a factor to take into account and would tend to lead a government not to take an adverse vote as necessarily fatal to tenure of office. But that alone would not be the only factor. A gov-

[Mr. Meighen.]