

REGINA RIOTS

Mr. J. S. WOODSWORTH (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, there is a matter I had intended to take up on the estimates of the Department of Justice, but since it does not relate immediately to the work of the present government I think perhaps I had better introduce it at this time. Earlier in the session, owing to a commission having been appointed to consider the matter of the Regina riots and also owing to several court cases arising therefrom which were pending, we were prohibited from discussing the matter. Some of the men who were in those riots have been convicted.

The question arises as to who was responsible. An attempt has been made to place the blame on communist agitators, but I should like to point out, as was so eloquently pointed out by Liberal speakers a few days ago, that communism makes an appeal only when conditions become desperate, and without going into the question of the camps I would remind the house that even the Macdonald commission found in connection with the British Columbia camps a good many things which were far from satisfactory.

It seems to me that the root of the trouble was in the unsatisfactory methods of dealing with single unemployed men. I take it that the abandonment of the camps is a recognition of the fact that those methods were unsatisfactory. The immediate difficulty in connection with the riots appears to be due to the bungling and incompetence of police officials who apparently had the backing of the late government. In a recent editorial the Winnipeg Free Press remarked:

The record remains a lesson as to how not to deal with the problem of law enforcement.

The former government has been removed from office. The high officials of the police, however, still hold their positions, and a certain number of men are in gaol. Let me review, as briefly as I can, some of the outstanding facts about the situation. On May 19 the mayor of Vancouver, the hon. member for Vancouver-Burrard (Mr. McGeer), warned the government of the seriousness of the situation. He said that the situation was extremely critical; he suggested a certain plan and warned the government that unless it was accepted serious trouble was certain to occur. I think the position of the government can be very well understood from these sentences contained in the reply of the then Prime Minister on May 20:

Should they collect in a municipality it is obviously the duty of that municipality to seek

any assistance required from their provincial authorities. . . . I note your anxiety as regards possible disturbances in Vancouver. . . . Any requests for assistance must in the first instance be made through the province.

The hon. member for Vancouver-Burrard replied on May 21:

Communist organizers and agitators taking advantage of justifiable dissatisfaction on part of citizens in every strata of society and particularly objectionable features of relief camp system. . . . We cannot hold situation any further without resorting to force. Am confident that if federal government could cooperate with provincial and municipal governments situation could be remedied and riots with their inevitable consequences would be avoided.

At that time there seems to have been ample force to stop the trek at Vancouver. The former Prime Minister declared in the house that there was no force to stop them. On the other hand the commission report says in clause 14:

Had the dominion government wanted to stop it at that point there was a combined police force in Vancouver at the time and ample for that purpose; in fact a larger force than was available at Regina when the movement was actually stopped there.

It was when the men reached Regina that there was a complete reversal of policy. Before that time they had been allowed to proceed. The railways had actually assisted them, sometimes holding the trains and stopping them at convenient places. But when they got to Regina it was decided that they were to be prevented from proceeding east. Premier Gardiner objected to this. On June 12 he telegraphed:

Am informed Ottawa has issued orders without consulting provincial government that Ottawa marchers from British Columbia and Alberta are to be prevented from passing out of this province by the means they were permitted to enter. We object to police force which acts in matters of law enforcement under instructions of this government being used for any such purpose and will so instruct them. C.P.R. delivered these men in Saskatchewan en route to Ottawa and we expect them to carry them through.

The commission states that the government had decided to stop the trek at Regina and to do so regardless of the attitude of the provincial government thereto.

Now, there we have the situation. The men had trouble in British Columbia; they were assisted by the railroads to go east. The government at that time claimed that it had no right to interfere, so the men came east to Regina. There they were stopped. The then Prime Minister claimed that he had authority under some special provision as to duty of the police to enforce dominion