

Canadian Flag

Mr. Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege.

Mr. Diefenbaker: No, the hon. gentleman cannot interrupt me now.

Mr. Speaker: The Postmaster General is rising on a question of privilege.

Mr. Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, this matter was raised during the last speech made by the right hon. gentleman. At that time I rose and stated that when his government were in power they issued a press release stating what the three maple leaves stood for. It was not this government which initiated that particular explanation.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker, that statement came from the same department. All I have to say in that connection is that that was unadulterated nonsense. In 1868, when the coat of arms of Quebec bore three maple leaves on one stem, was anybody thinking at that time of other racial origins? In 1868 in the province of Ontario, when that design appeared on a memorial plate of Ontario, was anybody thinking then about this? They could have been thinking of those of German or Dutch origin, because there were some 220,000 of them in Canada; but this had no basis in fact. It was simply part of the softening process of this government to bring about a flag which the Prime Minister desired.

On May 17 the three maple leaf flag was unveiled before the Royal Canadian Legion. The Prime Minister disavowed the ensign and talked about his maple leaf flag. On May 18 he revealed the design to the press at Winnipeg. Then he denied in parliament that a decision had been made. On May 29 he brought the design before parliament, and then placed on the order paper a resolution containing two parts. This is a resolution which should be placed on the record because it indicates, Mr. Speaker, that the government did not know where it was going. One of the reasons we want to bring back a sense of reason is to give the Canadian people the opportunity of saying what in fact they want. The resolution then read:

That the government be authorized to take such steps as may be necessary to establish officially as the flag of Canada a flag embodying the emblem proclaimed by His Majesty King George V on November 21, 1921—three maple leaves conjoined on one stem—in the colours red and white then designated for Canada, the red leaves occupying a field of white between vertical sections of blue on the edges of the flag—

The resolution also provided:

—that the royal union flag, generally known as the union jack, may continue to be flown as a symbol of Canadian membership in the commonwealth of nations and of our allegiance to the crown.

Then, sir, on the basis of the authorities and by virtue of the power possessed by Your Honour, you divided that resolution into two resolutions.

During the progress of the debate—and this shows how uncertain the government has been of its stand—the members of the government marshalled all the arguments of heraldry. The Minister without Portfolio went into the flag business. He had 100,000 of them made. I do not know, in the bankruptcy proceedings in connection with these flag designs, who is responsible for them or whether they will be designated as plain ordinary furniture; all I know is that they said our opposition to the three maple leaf flag was disruptive of Canadian unity. They tried to bludgeon us. They tried to threaten us. First of all they said there would be an election. Then they talked of closure. But Her Majesty's loyal opposition stood for what it believed in; a matter of principle, not an expedient to be adopted to meet every changing wind of public opinion.

Hon. gentlemen opposite said that because they had a majority in parliament, with the help of their complacent supporters and the complacent support of third parties, therefore indeed they were infallible in their viewpoint. They could not help but be right. Walter Lippmann once said in this connection the idea that because you could command a majority, therefore you were right, is heresy. He said it was heresy to think a majority could do no wrong; that there is no higher truth than the transient opinion of contemporary majorities, and there is no higher law than the ambitions and manoeuvres of the persons the people are persuaded to elect. He said that was also heresy.

When the government found they could not push us around they changed their viewpoint from that which they held at the beginning, that unless this resolution was passed and everybody voted in the right way the vote would be regarded as a vote of non-confidence. When the opposition took a strong stand they then said no, it will be a free vote. The freedom of that vote will be indicated by the attitude the members on that side have taken toward the hon. member for York-Humber (Mr. Cowan) who is treated almost as a pariah.