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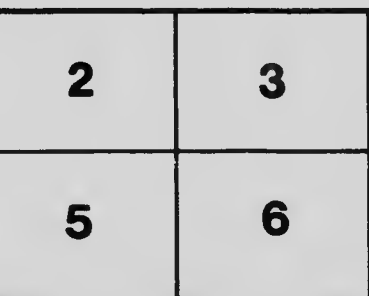
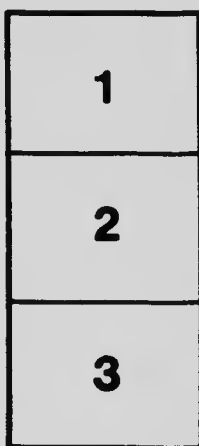
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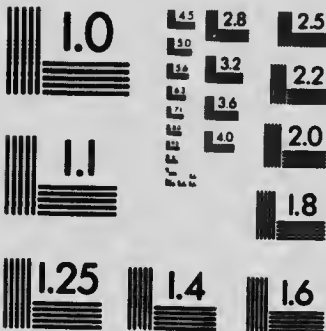
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House of Commons Debates

FIRST SESSION—NINTH PARLIAMENT

SPEECH

OF

HENRI BOURASSA, M. P.

ON

THE CORONATION OATH

OTTAWA, FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 1901

Mr. HENRI BOURASSA (Labelle). Mr. Speaker, It is not my intention to offer any lengthened remarks upon this subject; but the speech, well intentioned, I am sure, that we have listened to from the hon. member for Lanark (Mr. Haggart) proves that this subject has not received from himself and from the members of this House, the attention as to the facts that it should have received after the notice that has been given of it by the hon. member for Victoria, N.B. (Mr. Costigan). In fact, I may safely say that up to the last few days, when it was known through the press that this subject was to be taken up by the parliament of Canada, most of the people who knew anything at all about the subject thought that the coronation oath and the declaration that we have objection to were one and the same thing. The hon. member for Lanark has based his argument on a point which, I think, from his point of view, from the point of view of the majority of the British people and from the point of view of a large majority of the citizens of the empire, is a right one. It is that the sovereign of England should be a Protestant. As far as that is concerned, there is no Roman Catholic sitting in this House who is urging any difference of opinion on the matter. Had the hon. gentleman had time to study the subject, he would see that there is nothing in the Bill of Rights and that there is less in the present declaration to force the British King to be a Protestant. No Roman Catholic or Greek schismatic could take that

declaration; but outside of these, any man belonging to any faith or creed which does not believe in transubstantiation or in prayers to the saints and the Holy Virgin could take it; and, therefore, the object that the hon. gentleman has in view, that of guaranteeing to the people of England that their King shall be a Protestant, is not at all covered by this declaration. A Pagan or a Buddhist could take it; in fact, any man but a Roman Catholic or a Greek schismatic could take it. It is not a declaration of Protestantism; it is simply an anti-Catholic declaration; and if to-day we are asking the parliament of Canada to urge the British parliament to repeal that declaration, it is not because it is a Protestant declaration. No, Sir, we are not asking for anything to be taken from the rights or privileges that belong to our Protestant fellow-citizens; we are asking that a useless, obsolete, anti-Catholic declaration should not be imposed upon the British King at a moment when his accession to the Throne should be synonymous with peace, liberty, freedom and equal rights to all of his loyal subjects, who are ready to uphold him in keeping this empire up to the glorious state that it has attained. The hon. gentleman has spoken about the coronation oath which is not at all affected by this motion, and to which we have no objection at all. He has stated that a Roman Catholic could take the coronation oath. No, Sir, he could not; because the King of England, by that oath, is obliged to declare that he will uphold the

Protestant faith. No Roman Catholic would make such a declaration. Therefore, I think the guarantee which every fair-minded Protestant wants to be given to him is completely covered by the coronation oath enacted by the Bill of Rights of 1688. The declaration to which we object was not added by the Act of Settlement of 1701, for the purpose, as every one who has studied English history knows, to give a guarantee to the Protestant people at large; but simply as a result of dynastic feuds which had been agitating England at that time. The only object of this declaration was to prevent the Pretender, who was a Catholic, from conquering the Throne of England; or, if he had succeeded in conquering the Throne, from ascending it. If he had succeeded in conquering the Throne, he would have been prevented by this declaration from accepting the Crown and acceding to power.

From the very point of view taken by the hon. gentleman which as a matter of principle, may be the right view for him to take, the objection he is making to this motion is completely unfounded. It is unfounded legally and constitutionally. If the hon. gentleman looks upon this question in the broad way that should be taken by this House, he will see that his opposition is still more futile. As long as the parliament of England is there, the people of Great Britain and the people of the empire cannot have imposed on them a King they would not like to have. We all respect the sovereignty of the empire; but we know that the King is there only as the crowning of that magnificent edifice that we call the British constitution; and that the safeguard of the British constitution is the free parliament of Great Britain where the people is represented by men who can look after its interests, and prevent the accession of a successor to the King who might not be in accordance with the views of the majority of the people of Great Britain. The intention of the hon. member for Victoria, N.B., as I understand it, and the intention of the hon. gentleman (Mr. Kendall) who seconded the motion, the intention of the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister (Rt. Hon. Sir Wilfrid Laurier), and the intention of the hon. leader of the opposition (Mr. Borden, Halifax), are all the same after all; and we should all be united upon the matter. We come here as the representatives of a free British community, proud to be living under British institutions. We have fought even against British authority to acquire rights we thought we were entitled to. We are proud to live under these institutions, and we should be willing that the parliament of England should now sanction that magnificent work of freedom of thought, freedom of law, freedom of constitution which has been carried on in Great Britain from the beginning of this century. The first step in that direction was the abolition

of the test oath for the free elected representatives of the people; then, it went on abolishing that same test oath for the civil servants of the Crown; and to-day, we ask that this test oath which is but an obsolete relic of days long past, should not be imposed upon the sovereign of that free people who is proud to call itself British.

The hon. leader of the opposition (Mr. Borden, Halifax) has made an argument which I cannot accept. He said that my hon. friend from Victoria, N.B., (Mr. Costigan) was lacking in logic inasmuch as that the conclusion of the resolution was not relevant to the preamble. I believe the contrary. It is only a detail, of course, and I am glad to say that I can agree on the whole with the hon. gentleman (Mr. Borden, Halifax). But, after all, this detail has its importance. The preamble of the resolution says:

That as a token of the civil and religious liberties and of the equality of rights guaranteed to all British subjects in the Canadian confederation as well as under the British constitution, the British sovereign should not be called to make any declaration offensive to the religious belief of any subject of the British Crown.

Sir, the purpose of this resolution is not to ask for a special favour for Roman Catholics; the principle of this resolution declares in favour of the very basis of our British institutions, namely, that there shall be perfect equality before the law for all nationalities and for all religions. Therefore, if the hon. gentleman (Mr. Costigan) followed the advice of the leader of the opposition, he would simply ask that that part of the declaration which is offensive to Roman Catholics should be repealed. As a matter of fact, I agree with my hon. friend (Mr. Emerson) who says that if you take out that which is offensive you take out nearly the whole of it. But this is not the main point. Should we follow the advice of the hon. leader of the opposition and ask to amend that declaration by merely taking out what is offensive to Catholics, we would not fulfil the principle of this preamble; because this preamble asks on broad lines that the British King should be acknowledged by Catholics and Protestants, by non-believers and believers, as their King. The King of Great Britain should not be forced, in this new century, to make any declaration of the kind he is now obliged to make. I do not say that the King of England should not make any profession of his faith. The coronation oath is there for him to promise to uphold the faith of the majority of his subjects; but he should not be bound to further take this declaration at the opening of the first parliament; a declaration which I will not say is insulting only to his Roman Catholic subjects; but offensive also to all the true Protestant British subjects who believe in the same equality and in the same acknowledgment of equal rights and freedom for all His Majesty's subjects.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I shall not devote any time to the speech of the hon. gentleman from West York (Mr. Wallace). I shall reply to that speech and to that gentleman in the words that Mr. Gladstone used toward a certain noisy member of the House who opposed him when he moved the second reading of the Disabilities Removal Bill in 1891. Mr. Gladstone, pointing at the man, said: I am not surprised, because I have always recognized that gentleman 'as the prop and pillar of everything that deserved to be overthrown and removed.' So I may designate the hon. member for West York (Mr. Wallace). He has thought proper to give us a course on comparative religions, contradicting the very words of his opening remarks when he said that this is not the place to discuss religious matters. With these words, and with these words only uttered by the hon. gentleman (Mr. Wallace) do I agree. If this were only a question of religion; if this were not a question affecting the rights of all British subjects; if this were not a question based upon the very spirit of British institutions, we would have no business to bring it here.

I fully agree with the right hon. the Prime Minister and with the other hon. gentlemen who have spoken in favour of the resolution when they said that as British subjects we have a right to concern ourselves with everything that is in the interest of the empire at large. On a previous occasion, when I found myself obliged to differ from the almost unanimous opinion of this House on matters of Imperial concern, I clearly stated that every time when I believe that a large portion, or any portion of our fellow-citizens of the empire were affected in their rights, I was in favour of voting in this parliament for an expression of sentiment that might be favourable to that class of our fellow-citizens. But, I go further: I say that as Canadians, as representatives of the Canadian people, as members of the Canadian parliament, this is a matter of direct interest to us. What is the constitution of our country? The constitution of our country is an Act of the British parliament. We cannot touch the slightest portion of the British North America Act without proceeding along the same lines as the mover of this resolution has resorted to. Suppose we wanted to amend the constitution of our Senate, or the power of our executive, or the relations between the provinces and the federal government, the only procedure which we could follow would be to vote an address to the King of England asking the parliament of Great Britain to amend our constitution. Article 9 of the British North America Act says:

The executive government and authority of and over Canada is hereby declared to be continued and vested in the Queen.

So, the King of England is for us not only the King of England, not only the head of

the British Empire, but he is the sovereign of Canada. He forms part of our executive system; he forms as much a part of our constitutional system as does this very House of Commons and the Senate. Therefore, in voting for this resolution I do not vote only on sentimental grounds, I do not vote only as a Roman Catholic; but I vote as one of the representatives of the Canadian people in the Canadian parliament. And I am following the very procedure which the British North America Act obliges me to follow. If in that same capacity, I wished the Imperial parliament to amend our constitution in any other respect. Therefore, finding that the head of our government, that the chief of our Canadian empire is bound by a law which I am sure he detests himself, by a law over which he has no power and over which we have no power to make on the day of his coronation a declaration offensive to the dearest feelings of 19 per cent of the Canadian people, I say that it is our duty to ask, and to ask now, that the British parliament, which is the proper authority to do so, should amend the Act of Settlement and abolish that declaration. At the opening of this new century, in the first year of the reign of Edward VII., in this year when we have gathered together, Catholics as well as Protestants, French Canadians as well as English Canadians, the deplorable loss of that noble and kind-hearted woman who for sixty-four years reigned so gloriously over Canada as well as the empire at large; I say that we are simply doing our duty to the people of Canada and to the King of England in asking that the parliament of Great Britain, which has the sole legislative control in the matter, should free for ever our future kings from making this declaration, and thus enable the sovereign to be considered not only as the king of a certain portion of his subjects, but as the king of all his subjects in this vast empire.

As the Prime Minister said this afternoon, if that declaration is not to be abolished, certainly the Roman Catholic subjects of His Majesty will not be more disloyal to him. But I ask all fair-minded men of this House: Do you think the loyalty of the Roman Catholic Canadians as well as the Roman Catholic British, that loyalty which has proved itself not only on the battlefield, but in every way in which a man can give to his nation and his sovereign the best of his efforts and abilities—do you think that loyalty which has been so staunch and so fully acknowledged by everybody, which cannot now be under the suspicion which dynastic feuds and rivalries of former times might cast upon it—do you think that loyalty should be rewarded by a declaration so offensive that, if it attacked any of the Protestant creeds of this Dominion, I my-

self would be proud to stand with those who would demand its repeal, and ask that the Protestant section of the people should be put upon the same footing as the rest. Sir, let us all be equal in Canada, let us all be equal in Great Britain; and let us vote unanimously, if possible, for a resolution asking, not that the King of England should lose any of his privileges, not that

the Protestant section of this country should lose any of its rights, but that the King of England should be more and more respected and loved by all his faithful subjects; and it will be a great work which we shall have performed—a work which will be well received on the other side of the Atlantic by all the men who wish for the real welfare of the empire at large.



