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# Party Discipline and the Confidence Convention: An Historical Perspective

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*Seventy years ago a member of the now defunct Progressive Party introduced a motion "That, in the opinion of this House, a defeat of a government measure should not be considered as a sufficient reason for the resignation of the government, unless followed by a vote of lack of confidence. The classical arguments for and against the issue were aired in a debate that took place on February 23, 1923. In light of the recurring interest in this issue we are reprinting from Hansard of that date extracts from three of the participants. William Irvine of Calgary of the Progressive Party spoke in favour of the resolution. Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Arthur Meighen, Leader of the Opposition, both spoke against it.*

**W**illiam Irvine: This resolution is for the good and welfare of the House. It deals with a situation in which every individual member is to some extent interested. My resolution does not deal with any theory but with an actual condition. I am disposed to think that if there is any objection offered to the passing of this resolution it will have to be offered on theoretical grounds, for I believe it would be difficult to maintain by argument that there is anything of real democratic value to be gained by the continuance of the practice against which this resolution declares. The condition with which we are dealing is that in the process of development our system of government has finally come to be government by a cabinet. Here it will be unnecessary to explain that I am not making any reference to the present government or the present cabinet. I am dealing with the system of government and the practices appertaining thereto. Parliament has lost its old supremacy, if indeed it ever really was supreme. The course of our constitutional development has been one leading from an absolute autocracy to that measure of democracy which we now enjoy. Some may argue that parliament is as supreme today as it has ever been, which if true, would simply prove that parliament has yet to attain its supremacy, for certain it is that we have now government by cabinet.

When we consider the development of our constitutional system, we find there are still influences of autocracy present. Every bit of the freedom which we now enjoy has been slowly and laboriously wrenched from autocracy. Indeed, it is clear that it would be

difficult for us to be completely rid of those influences. Parliament today, I maintain, is dominated by the cabinet through the party caucus, and much of our boasted democratic liberty is pure theory. Theoretically, the Cabinet is responsible to parliament, and parliament, in turn, is responsible to the people. The actual condition, however, is that the cabinet is responsible to those who appoint it, and as the cabinet brings forward its policies and ensures support of them by a pre-arranged majority, it is not in any real sense responsible to parliament. Of course, parliament is allowed to discuss the policies of the cabinet, but an effective majority has been arranged for. The policies of the cabinet have been already drawn up. They are outlined in the Speech from the Throne and will be carried through in the manner and to the extent desired by the cabinet, provided that the majority party is strong enough numerically to outvote the rest of parliament.

It is contended, that such a party, namely, the majority or government party, represents the voice of parliament because it is a majority. Again theoretically, this is perfectly true. But practically it is not true. A mechanical, mathematical majority may not represent the voice of parliament. Under the conditions that exist today members of the majority party may be compelled to vote contrary to their best thoughts and their declared principles. A system which puts a member of parliament in that position is defective both from the point of view of the mentality and the morality of parliament.

But, it may be asked, what magic power has the cabinet over the majority or government party so as to ensure that its measures will be upheld at all times. That magic power is exercised by confusing the issues which may be brought before parliament with the life of the administration, so that the government party is left with the alternative of supporting the issue or saving the administration, and it is only natural if the desire to save the administration should take precedence in the minds of most members of a government party. It is commonly understood to be the practice in Canada that if a government is defeated on a matter of policy, or on a measure considered by the administration to be of importance, that such defeat is tantamount to a vote of no confidence, and that the resignation of the government should follow. Not only is this so, but a government may at any time declare an issue to be a vote of no confidence. That declaration has the effect of a whip—not the party whip, but the real shillalah held over the heads of all the government supporters—the possibility of defeat and the bringing on of a general election. But it has the effect also usually of defeating the measure, no matter what merit there may be in the measure, because in such a case the salvation of the government is considered first by the majority party and the measure afterwards. So really while the government party may vote against a very good measure in order to save the government, their action is no indication of what they really think about that measure.

If the majority party had been free to vote upon such issues as have been declared by governments to imply no confidence, it is very likely that in most cases those issues would have received majorities. But in every case I believe in this history of the Canadian parliament when the government has treated such a vote as tantamount to a vote of non-confidence the issue has been defeated. That there is no instance so far as I am able to find in our parliamentary records of a government having been defeated under such circumstances, tends only to prove two things. It proves, in the first place, that the governments of the past have always had a fairly safe majority; and it proves further that the majority party has given the life of the government first consideration.

Now, this practice of confusing an issue with the life of the government is not a mere formality such as we have in the ceremonials incident to the opening of parliament, though the practice is equally as far out of date. Today it is used chiefly to keep governments in office. It is used also for the purpose of defeating measures which the people's representatives may desire, but which for some reason or other the cabinet does not want.

This practice is not at all an aid to responsible government, indeed, it is rather a hindrance to that

desirable end, for we find that by this practice the principle of responsible government has been inverted. Today the individual members of the government party are responsible to the Cabinet instead of the Cabinet being responsible to the individual members of the party. What chance has the courageous individual who can still think clearly even under threats of a general election between the merits of a government measure and the defeat of the government, and who is prepared to stand up for the principle in which he believes? What political future in a party has such an individual? He is really held responsible to this Cabinet for his action on the vote, instead of the Cabinet being held responsible to him for their action when he votes.

*This practice of cabinet control by threat of election has a tendency to confuse the issues upon which members are called upon to decide, and it has the effect of placing them in a position which to say the least is at times very uncomfortable and very embarrassing.*

William Irvine

If this resolution is carried, it will not be left in the hands of the government to say when the government shall be defeated. That power will be in parliament. At the present time the Cabinet has the decision as to whether a resolution shall or shall not be considered as a want of confidence motion. We want to take that from the hands of the Cabinet and leave the decision with parliament.

I believe the practice against which this resolution declares should be abandoned because it is humiliating to the representatives of the people. In instances such as I have given they find themselves forced at times to abandon the principles under which they have been elected and being forced thus to abandon their principles, they are considered in the public mind as being untrue and unfaithful servants of the people. Good men in this way find themselves robbed of their good characters in the eyes of the public. I do not think it is amiss to emphasize here a fact that we have all met with, that the politician in Canada has a very low status indeed in the estimation of the public, and it is the present practice that has helped more than anything else to undermine the confidence of the people in their representatives. I think it should be part of our duty as members of this House to raise the status of parliamentarians, that we may be as noted in the coming years for standing firm to our

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principles and true to our word, as we have been noted in the past for forgetting about them in such instances as I have just given to the House.

But there is another side to this question that is as bad or even worse than the personal side. By this practice now prevailing, bad issues may be passed in order to save an otherwise very good government, and on the other hand, a good issue may be defeated to save a bad administration. By confusing these two things, namely the issue before the House and the fitness of the administration to govern, the members of parliament are often placed in a position where they must either defeat the measure in which they believe, or defeat the government. But even if a good measure were passed to save a good government, that would not balance the sheet. We had better put governments in a position where they do not need to be saved, and that is the purpose of this resolution. The life of the administration and the merits of legislative proposals should not be confused. If the administration is to be responsible to parliament, it should allow parliament a free mind to come to a conclusion on resolutions, or bills without embarrassment of any kind. I believe a reasonable, clean, energetic, efficient and courageous administration has nothing to fear from a Canadian parliament. Parliament, however, does have something to fear from the supremacy of the cabinet. I believe that a bill brought in by the cabinet should not be considered in any way different from a bill brought in by a private member. But such is not the case as things are now.

Here, then, is a protection which I would invite you anti-protectionists to consider. Here is a practice by which a cabinet protects itself by its very threats to carry through what legislation it may wish to promote, or defeat what legislation it might desire to defeat. That is a protective wall which it might be in our interests today to break down by the passing of this resolution. I urge the passing of this resolution in the interests of every member of this House. We are all interested, and we are all concerned. It is true, those of us who happen to sit in the so-called opposition benches are not so directly affected by a vote of no confidence as the members on the other side. But still we have to consider it too. I do not know whether it would have been a very wise thing for this parliament to have decided to bring on an election over the last issue on which we voted. We had to consider that in connection with the issue, for it is not only the government that is affected, but everybody is affected.

Look at it from another point of view. I do not believe members on this side of the House, from the left wing of the opposition down this far at least, are particularly anxious to defeat either this government or any other government. I believe their attitude as expressed is one

of co-operation. Personally, I do not wish to defeat any government. I want to help every government to do the best they can. I want to vote for the government when I think they ought to be voted for, but I do not want to be called upon to vote for the government when that means voting against something that I want to vote for. But until the present practice is changed I may be called upon to vote against the government that I do not want to defeat, in order to save a principle. That is one of the points I would ask members on the government side to consider. I believe the passing of this resolution would have the effect of stabilizing governments. We are living in a time when government majorities are not as large as they used to be, and their tendency seems to be to grow smaller, which leaves the life of an administration more precarious than heretofore. It would be better for all concerned if Cabinets would look for a majority on the issue rather than counting heads before the issue is proposed. If members will review the history of the Manitoba government in the last session or two they will find that because it failed to take the short practical step which this resolution suggests it was in a position where it could not do any business for the people. It was afraid to move for fear it would be defeated. The consequence was that ultimately it had to be voted out of power.

I have tried to outline the condition as it exists in our parliamentary practice at the present time, and have tried to show how embarrassing and how unfair it is to individual members especially on the government side. I have tried to show that good legislation might be defeated by this practice, or bad legislation might be enacted in the interests of the administration. I ask them in their own interests, in the interest of parliament, and in the interest of progressive development of our constitutional system of government, to free themselves by voting for this resolution.

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**W**.L. Mackenzie King: The resolution introduced is perhaps as important as any which can be brought forward in this House, inasmuch as it has to do with what is really the corner stone of our constitutional structure the responsibility of the ministry to parliament. Our present constitution and parliamentary practice are not the result of any sudden arrangement effected without mature and deliberate consideration. They come to us with all their attendant features as perhaps the greatest inheritance which the peoples of British descent hold. Britain has been rightly called the Mother of Parliaments, and at Westminster, as nowhere else in the world, there has been worked out a parliamentary practice which tends to preserve liberty

and freedom as no other parliamentary practice even begins to do. For that reason, I think we should approach any change in parliamentary practice with the utmost caution. Customs which have stood the test of years, which have been found in different parliamentary assemblies to be of advantage, not for five or ten or twenty years, but for a hundred years or more, are customs which must have much to support them, and we should move carefully and very slowly in any effort to alter them, or to substitute something in their stead.

May I submit, that this of all times is a period in the world's history when we should be particularly careful about adopting innovations? It is an age of unrest in many parts of the world, and customs and practices which have been found to serve mankind well have been thrown overboard in some quarters of the globe. With what result? In those countries where men have dealt lightly with their accepted constitutions and methods of procedure, we find today not orderly development but in some cases chaos in an extreme form.

*One has but to contrast the conditions as they exist today in some legislative bodies in Europe with what they were before the recent war to appreciate why great caution and great care is needed in accepting any proposals which make for a radical change in parliamentary procedure.*

William Lyon Mackenzie King

It might be expected, that the government would be the first to welcome this resolution. A government that has a very slender majority like this government has might be expected to be among the first to accept it.

When one considers that the present administration has behind it a majority of possibly but one or two over that of the other parties in the House, one might readily assume that the government would welcome any kind of change which would justify it, in case of the defeat of some measure before the House, in holding on to office and refusing to go to the country. Were we to give our support to this resolution, the first criticism that would be levelled against us would be that we had accepted it because we had at last found some means whereby we could retain office in the face of an adverse vote. That would be a most unfortunate situation, for the country to permit any government to get itself into.

My friend who has introduced the resolution spoke about autocracy and democracy. He said that our present

system of cabinet government lends itself to autocracy on the part of Cabinets. May I ask what is the one check by parliament on possible autocracy by a Cabinet other than that when a government brings in a measure, and is defeated, the government must regard itself as no longer possessing the confidence of the House? My friend is helping autocracy rather than furthering democracy in government when he leaves it open to an administration, once it has been shown by the votes of the members of the House that it no longer enjoys their confidence, still to retain office. It gives an autocratic government a second chance for its life. To my way of thinking, in these days when we wish to have democratic principles prevail in matters of government, the very first chance to put an autocratic government out of power, is the chance to seize. It should never be let go by. That is the position we take in regard to this resolution.

The reason that the practice has prevailed in British government that a ministry must be supported by the people's representatives, or otherwise go back to the people, is that such a practice is the most effective in keeping a ministry true to those principles which are the ones the people wish to have regarded in legislation.

I fear this resolution, well intended as it is, would have an effect entirely different to that which he believes it would have? It is in the interests of the government in any country that every precaution should be taken to see that a ministry in bringing down legislation does so only after the most careful deliberate and mature thought, and that in presenting their legislation to parliament they present only legislation which they believe to be necessary in the country's interests. Permit the ministry to use its own judgment in the matter of whether or not it shall resign upon its legislation being defeated, and it will soon begin to introduce all kinds of legislation without very much thought. You open the door to the introduction of measure after measure that is half-baked, once the ministry knows that if defeated on particular measures it may, by skirmishing about and by conferences here and there with different members of the House, get itself re-established in a position where it can continue to carry on. That would be much against the interests of good legislation; it would tend to make a ministry not more careful, but possibly indifferent, with respect to some of the measures it might bring before the House.

May I say a further word in regard to the subject of party caucuses? Here again we notice a tendency which has become all too prevalent in recent years, that of finding fault with old customs and methods of doing public business. The caucus in the minds of some people today is supposed to be a very wicked thing. In some way, it is assumed that, through this instrument the

cabinet can do what it wishes with its followers, but many of those who have been strongest in condemning the party caucus have been among the first, I have noticed, to recognize that they can get nowhere in understanding the views of their own following until they have a caucus themselves and discuss questions before its members.

Now what is a parliamentary caucus? It is nothing more than a gathering of a certain number of members of parliament. In the case of a government caucus it is a bringing together of the majority of members in the House of Commons supporting the government. It is the means whereby a government can ascertain through its following what the views and opinions of the public, as represented by the various constituencies may be. It is not a means of over-riding parliament. It is a means of discovering the will of the people through their representatives in a manner which cannot be done under the formal procedure which is required in this chamber. That is what a party caucus amounts to. A government ought to seek continually to give expression to the public will. A government has to be careful in the matter of the legislation it brings into parliament, to be sure that it is in accord with the public will. How can that best be ascertained? Wait until the legislation is brought down in parliament and put on the Table or by a conference with the government's own following, if there is any doubt one way or the other in regard to any phases of the legislation? After all, what a government has to keep it, if it is to be worthy of the name is first of all the support it will receive in the country for the measures it introduces and secondly, the support it will receive in parliament. The government should continually endeavour to bring in legislation which it feels is in accordance with the needs and desires of the people at large, but there may well be occasions where a government may be obliged to have a further conference with its own following to ascertain whether or not the particular views which it is about to present in the form of legislation are to all intents and purposes in accordance with the wishes of the people, as they understand them. That is in the interests of democracy. That is not taking away any rights from the people's representatives in parliament. It is simply coming into closer consultation with the people's representatives in a manner that permits of the greatest freedom of expression on their part.

I cannot imagine a more intolerable situation for the government; I cannot imagine anything better calculated to destroy confidence in an administration throughout the country, than that a government should come to parliament with legislation which it is prepared to stand up and fight for, and still permit the slightest doubt as to

its securing from parliament what it believes to be necessary in the public interest. Failing this it should be prepared to take its appeal from parliament to the country. A Cabinet has carefully to consider all aspects of public questions before it introduces any legislation. My friend says that to all intents and purposes a government measure should be the same as a private bill. Well, then, may I ask him, why have any Cabinet at all? Why not let us have a Soviet at once, because that is what it amounts to; no head whatever, no directing agency, anyone free to get up and propose any measure with just such knowledge as he may have, free to spring it on the House at any moment, and, with such eloquence as he can muster, carry it through if possible. I do not know what will happen to the legislation of the country if we proceed in that way. Government measures are not brought down lightly. They are the result of long and careful consideration. Government measures are brought down in the light of carefully matured policy, and an administration that brings down its legislation in any other way should not be entitled to expect from parliament a second opportunity once it meets with defeat on a matter which it is prepared to say to the House it regards as all important in the public interest.

My friend says that without the adoption of his resolution bad legislation might be passed to save a good administration, and good legislation defeated to save a bad administration. There is a passage that my friend will recognize and remember — "By their fruits ye shall know them," and the only way you can tell whether an administration is good or bad is by what it does. I cannot well imagine a good administration bringing in bad legislation or a bad administration bringing in good legislation. I think you must judge an administration in large measure by the class of legislation which it brings in.

The position to my mind is exactly the same whether there are three parties or thirty. A government that cannot bring together a group of men, no matter where they are taken from, sufficiently strong to command the confidence of those who compose a parliament has no right to exist. How is public business to be carried on in a manner which will inspire confidence in the country unless a ministry is able to say to the public: With our knowledge of affairs, acquired as only a ministry can acquire it, we believe such and such legislation necessary for the country; we think this or that measure absolutely essential to meet a situation. We give our reasons, give them publicly on the floor of parliament, and if our reasons are not accepted, we shall appeal to those from whom our authority is derived and ask them if they are unable to give us their support, to put someone else in our place. The idea that the ministry should be in any way

restricted in its appeal to the people at any time is the very antithesis of democracy. The whole effort manifest in the evolution of government has been to bring the ministry to the point where, if for any reason whatever, it ceases to hold the confidence of parliament it will be obliged to go to the people. Once you take away that safeguard, you have substituted possibilities of autocracy for what is after all the strongest factor in the maintenance of democratic principles of government.

I should not wish to have anything to do with a government which I did not believe had the confidence of the people. I should not wish to belong to a government that would introduce measures which it did not regard as essential to good government and to the needs of the people. I should not wish to belong to a government, nor would I think of retaining in a Cabinet which would think of continuing in office after a vote of want of confidence was expressed by a refusal by the House of Commons to pass legislation deemed essential by its directing head. That is the position we take as a government and we take it in the interest of democratic government in the interests of government by the people, and as a means of maintaining responsible government is the corner stone of our whole constitutional structure.

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**A**rthur Meighen: I am opposed to the resolution. At the same time I really do not apprehend that if the resolution were to pass we would immediately be precipitated into a condition of chaos, or anything resembling the unfortunate plight of Russia today. I am disposed to think the resolution might pass without anything more disastrous happening than the declaration of a mistaken principle, a principle that the experience of years has shown not to be to the advantage of democracy. I do not think Canada is liable to be plunged into chaos because of such an assertion as this obtaining the approval of parliament. My reasons for opposing the resolution are by no means of so startling or determined a character as that.

Even should the resolution pass, I really do not think any difference in the present practice would then obtain. The government is at liberty to resign any minute. The government is ultimately the sole judge of what shall be sufficient or insufficient cause for its continuance or discontinuance in office. Nor does the member suggest that a government in this regard should be finally restrained at all. Even should the resolution, as it is understood by its sponsor, carry, a government could then take any vote of the House as a vote of want of confidence and retire. Its liberty of action in that regard would not be restrained in the least.

Then I ask what would be the consequence of the resolution carrying? Well, it would simply be a declaration by the House that the government would be wrong (even though it had quite a constitutional right) it would be wrong in exercising liberty of action, 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, 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? 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, though I must say that I did not understand the process by which he arrived at his conclusion. I come to my opinion, 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, 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 but 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 today. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was considered the constitutional right of a government to continue in office year after year, although on vital measures is met repeatedly with an adverse vote of the people's representatives. But that was in days when the direct answerability of the House of Commons 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 today.

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. 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 onto 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, would not advance the measure of democratic power and control, but very perceptibly contract and diminish it.

I stated that there had survived even to the present time 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.

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. Does it form an integral part of public policy of the government? 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 government would also have to inquire how far that particular piece of legislation, or that adverse vote, perhaps, on a resolution from the other side, affected the commitment of the government to the people of the country, upon which commitment it was returned to office. That would be a fundamental factor as well.

Another factor would be how long has the government been in office. If a government is newly returned with a strong and popular majority, then it would not be affected by as light considerations as might be regarded of moment under other circumstances. Still, a fourth factor would be this: How far do indications within parliament and beyond parliament reveal the support of the government in the popular mind? If, by the evidence of by-elections, if by what other evidences might be prominent, a government felt that it was losing popular support, then it would not take so important an adverse vote in parliament to justify its accepting that vote as want of confidence and resigning. All these things must

be taken into account. But the tendency of the years has been to restrict the right of government to hang onto office rather than to amplify that right in the presence and under the mandate of an adverse vote of parliament.

I do not subscribe to the viewpoint, I might say to the general theory or principle that seems to animate certain gentlemen in this House. I do not for a moment challenge the sincerity of their attitude. In fact I know that their viewpoint is the viewpoint of the majority, at least it was of those they represent, for this very principle has been under consideration at popular assemblies of their followers through this country many a time, and I think it has usually received approval.

*I do not subscribe to the viewpoint that the government of Canada is in the nature of a hired servant whose only duty is to obey the directions, the orders, the mandates of the representatives in parliament who support it, of parliament as a whole, and of the populace of the country.*

Arthur Meighen

I do not subscribe to the theory that the government is in the relation of a hired man to this House. I do not believe in the hired man theory at all. I did not believe it when I was in office and I do not change my belief when in opposition. Such a theory is entirely at variance with the whole idea of constitutional government. The government is in not sense the hired man of the House of Commons. It is not a committee of the House of Commons. We had that theory brought forward last session, and these words came from the mouth of the Prime Minister, although we did not hear much to that effect this afternoon. The fact is that the theory is wrong. It is not British at all. I repeat, a government is not a committee of the House of Commons: it is the responsible body of officers of the King in this country. The duty of the government is to lead public policy, domestic and foreign. The government must submit their proposals to the people's representatives and must abide by the verdict of those representatives, favourable or unfavourable. And a country that is accursed with a government that has not within itself the power of leadership, of showing what the right road is in the light of information that only a government can have, is going to suffer in the race in this world. It is not going to enjoy what it ought to enjoy. It is not going to get the service it ought to get from the government that leads it. A government must submit legislative proposals and must

take the leadership, because it is in a position to take leadership. Those who hold the theory that leadership can be taken by the rank and file are opposed to a principle which it seems to me has been vindicated by the march of centuries. Those in authority must lead. The British constitutional practice has led to this result. While they lead, they may be checked, they may be directed, they may be hurled from power as the penalty of failure. But failure to lead is just as great a failure as any other. The government is answerable for its legislative proposals to this House in just precisely the same way as it is answerable for its administrative acts. It is responsible for the one as it is responsible for the other. It is charged with the responsibility of initiating both, and the government that fails in either respect does not do its duty by the people of the country which it is supposed to lead.

Now, I do not deny for a moment that some difficulties do arise as a consequence of that practice. I do not deny at all that times arise when members of this House have to decide between the support of a measure, on which perhaps the balance of influence, in their own minds, would be favourable, and voting against it, when they know that a vote against that measure is a vote of want of confidence in the administration. I know that the consequence is that the question of confidence comes into the question of the merits of the specific proposal or the specific legislation. If that is confusion, then to that degree there is confusion. But that we must abide by. There is no way by which that can be surmounted, except at a cost that would be far greater than any possible results of confusion. If a government could come into the House and, either through one of its own members or through a private member, propose a course of fundamental public policy going to the very root of the prosperity of the country, going perhaps to the very root of our national destiny, and then, having been defeated upon that and having found that it does not meet with the favour of the House, say, "Very well, we will wait a few weeks and come back again with another proposal and see whether it will not meet with approval at the hands of parliament; after we have tested the situation we will come again,"—if that could be done, then the moral authority of government would be gone. If that could be done no government could command any respect. There are times, on matters of minor consequence, where perhaps it is justifiable for an administration to leave to the general vote of parliament, without the lead of government, the direction of its

course. But necessarily that must be in regard to a matter of minor consequence; and necessarily, also, it must be rare. For if even that were to occur frequently—and I am making no reference to the present administration, because so far they have not done it frequently—if the government were to come frequently to parliament and say, "Upon this subject we cannot unite, upon this subject we have no opinion, we will leave it to you and will act merely as your messengers and carry out whatever you say, because we have no opinion to offer ourselves," then, I repeat, the moral authority of government throughout the country would be impaired day by day. And no government could long last in this Dominion or in any other British country that frequently submitted itself to the exigences of situations such as that.

Let us for a moment just review the occasion last session when it did occur. The government had no united view on the question of the admission of oleomargarine into this country. Consequently, they said to parliament, "We cannot unite; we have no opinion as a government. You discuss it now and decide what you want and we will carry out your wishes, whatever they may be." Parliament discussed the matter and decided on the permanent admission of oleomargarine into the country. The government found that they could not accept that decision. A division in the government made it impossible to carry out the recommendation. What did they do? They came and said, "We promised to carry out your wishes but we cannot. However, if you will meet us half way we will meet you and admit oleomargarine for twelve months." And we had the spectacle in the House of the Minister of Agriculture standing in his place, the sponsor of a measure which he described in his own classical language as a rotten old bill. Now, that was a consequence of one of the departures from the constitutional principle. Let these instances be rare; and especially, let them be rare on the part of the present administration. For any moral authority which it may have enjoyed a year ago is very seriously reduced just now. Do not let that moral authority be prejudiced by failure to unite on important measures of any character. Let the government show to the country that it is united and that it can advance opinions that are government opinions and policies that are government policies. The more we follow that course the more we shall lead to the result where there shall be the most immediate answerability of government to parliament. And that, as I understand it, is the perfection of British institutions.

Editor's note: After further debate the motion was defeated by a vote of 103 to 52.