

# PRAYERS IN THE COMMONS

By NORMAN WARD

CITIZENS who are accustomed to assume that the Dominion of Canada was launched under the best of all possible circumstances in 1867 will be disturbed to learn that for a full decade after Confederation the House of Commons met without opening its sittings with prayer. When this sin of omission was finally brought to the attention of parliament in 1877, measures were promptly taken to clean up the situation, but not before members had indulged in a debate which, by coming perilously close to arousing a good deal of unchristian ill-feeling, demonstrated rather neatly how much the Commons conceivably stood to gain by changing its ways.

The debate about prayer in 1877 began, very appropriately, on a high plane. A Mr. Macdonald, M.P.—who, nobody will be surprised to learn, represented a Toronto constituency—rose in his place on February 12 to move that “the prayers now read daily in the Senate be read in this chamber by such chaplain as the Speaker may appoint for that purpose, and in his absence by the Clerk of the House.” Mr. Macdonald spoke to his motion feelingly and well, citing precedents of other legislative bodies that opened with prayer, and indeed going so far as to state that when it came to prayers, the Canadian House of Commons was “an exception to the legislatures of all civilized countries.” Opening prayers, he said, involved a duty which members owed “to themselves, to their children, and to the people of Canada, whose representatives they are.”

His motion was supported in general terms by the Prime Minister, Alexander Mackenzie, a politician who had gained considerable notoriety for his unbending rectitude under all circumstances. While personally in favour of prayer, however, Mr. Mackenzie referred shrewdly to “the difficulties in carrying on religious services in an assembly composed so largely of different denominations.” Religious distinctions, he thought, “might cause some difficulty and jarring in regard to public worship.” Sir John A. Macdonald, the leader of His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, also supported the motion, but was more specific in his objections. “Were this assembly composed entirely of Protestants, although of various denominations,” he said, “I fancy no practical difficulty would arise.” But the presence of large numbers of Roman Catholics in the Commons, he thought, added a serious complication. “They form so

large and important a body," he averred somewhat tactlessly, "that their feelings and even their prejudices should be respected." He felt that the "very praiseworthy object of the mover of the resolution would be thwarted if by its adoption the feelings of our Catholic friends were wounded, and they were caused to abstain from entering the House during prayer."

The obvious immediate step was the appointment of a committee to look into the whole business. But in so delicate a matter, party leaders on both sides considered that it would be improper to establish the committee immediately, some time being required for consideration of the business of establishing a committee. They therefore moved the adjournment of the debate, a motion which Toronto's Mr. Macdonald agreed to, provided—and here he nearly wrecked his own motion—it be clearly understood that any committee set up was merely "to decide on the form of prayer—not to consider the advisability of having prayer", a matter which he apparently regarded as settled. Several members objected to this high-handed presumption, and the Prime Minister pointed out that it would be "hardly respectful" for the House to instruct the Committee to decide on the form of prayer. The ordinary course, he concluded, would be to instruct it to report on the subject in general and with that Mr. Macdonald had to be content.

Mr. Macdonald's apparent contentment was, however, a ruse. When the House resumed the debate about prayers next day, Mr. Macdonald at once moved that a committee of thirteen members, carefully chosen to represent all religions and provinces, be established "to bring before this House a form of prayer." This under-handed attempt to slip one across the House was challenged by two leading members, one of whom suggested that the best form of prayer was silent prayer, and that this sort might best suit the peculiar needs of the Commons; thus it would be clearly inappropriate to bind the committee to bring in "a form of prayer". Mr. Macdonald, who had come to the sitting well prepared, then withdrew his first motion and substituted for it a 'second-best' resolution in favour of a committee to consider and report on the desirability of using a form of prayer. This motion passed, although not before an unregenerate British Columbian had startled the House by asserting bluntly that "there was no more necessity to have prayers in this House to do the legislation of the country than to have prayers in dry goods stores in Toronto to

sell goods." The westerer concerned, a man who had legally changed his name from Bill Smith to Amor de Cosmos, apparently because he thought the latter meant 'Lover of the Universe', pointed out that British Columbia had one of the best school systems in the country, and no religious exercises were permitted therein. All the pussy-footing being done in connection with this business of prayers in the Commons, he asserted darkly, was taking place because "hon. members really desired to push the subject out of the House." This allegation was not accorded the dignity of a reply.

Despite the magnitude of its task, the committee established to examine the desirability of prayer reported within a week, accepting the proposition that prayer was desirable, and including in its report a draft of a non-partisan prayer. The House of Commons concurred in the committee's report without debate, but immediately ran into technical problems connected with implementation of the committee's recommendation. The Speaker asked whether prayers should be read before or after the House opened its doors for the day, pointing out that some members of parliament might like to have members of the public present in the galleries. For procedural reasons, it was decided that the prayers would have to be held before the public were admitted. French members, naturally suspicious that some of their rights were in jeopardy began to ask searching questions about whether the prayers were to be read in English or French, or both, and the Speaker drew to their attention the embarrassing fact that he knew no French. Any attempt of his to read prayers in French, he said, "would be ludicrous." That led a member to suggest that the Clerk of the House could read the French version, but objection was quickly taken to the grave impropriety of having the prayers read by a mere employé. One member suggested that the House prayers be printed in both languages and distributed like any other official paper, and another urged the French members to accept English prayers now, and wait until the House had a French Speaker to hear them in French. Two Liberal leaders, displaying that solid incapacity to grasp political realities that was to drive them into Opposition within a year, tried vainly to develop the argument that "the Divinity could be invoked as well in the English language as in the French" and that "as the prayer was addressed to the Almighty and not to the House," there need be no trouble over language.

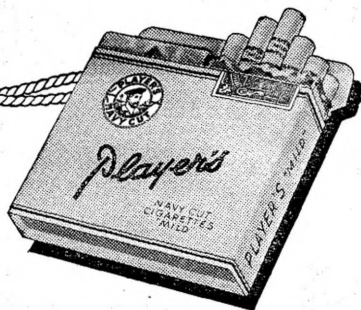
There was, though, and the House didn't settle down

until the Speaker had made a few constructive suggestions. First of all, he said, a translation of the prayers into French should be prepared under careful supervision of members of the House, so that it would be unobjectionable to all. Secondly, he proposed that the prayers be printed in the House records at the beginning of each session, so that everybody would have a copy. And finally, he suggested that each successive Speaker should read the prayers in whatever language he was most familiar with, instead of the House undertaking to listen every day to prayers in both languages. (The Speaker was averse to using both languages because his experience of the House led him to fear the length of time that would be involved; "the practice either of avoiding prayers, or of paying little attention to them in one or other of these languages, would in the course of time begin to prevail," he said, "creating a scandal among members and the public".) Undoubtedly a major factor in the acceptance of these suggestions by the House was the fortunate accident that the Speaker, though incapable of reading French, was a Roman Catholic, and thus in himself represented a nice reconciliation of some of the forces in conflict.

The precise effect of the adoption of prayers by the Commons is not easy to measure, and in view of the deep waters stirred in 1877, can in any case perhaps more properly be assessed by a committee of the House of Commons than by a private citizen. One immediate result of passing interest was that members of parliament began to use the Speaker's facility in reading prayers as a measure of his fitness for his task, and soon after 1877 we find a Speaker being lauded in extravagant terms for the fine sonorous tones in which he read prayers. "We thought," a perceptive member assured the Speaker, "that we would hear the rustling of divinity, the fluttering of angelic wings, and the odor of violets and orange flowers in our passages and corridors . . . and we trust that when the period arrives, which comes to Speakers as well as to meaner organisms, when you will be exalted into the political arcana—we hope then when you will be transferred to another sphere, you will pass your time studying patiently, parliamentary problems and curious constitutional questions so that you may enjoy the utmost happiness consistent with the state of things here below. And I am sure I shall express the opinion of every member in saying we trust that when that time arrives, you will have so comforted yourself that we will be able to join in saying: 'Well done good and faithful Speaker, enter thou into the new government, the collectorship, or the judgeship prepared for you!'"



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CANADA'S LEADING CIGARETTE