PRESS STATEMENT:  

MALCOLM FRASER’S FIRST REPORT FROM OTTAWA

June 18th, 1964

Since I last reported I have had a few days in Ottawa, speaking to Government Leaders there, two or three days in Havard, speaking to people from the Havard Centre of International Affairs, and also some time in New York with representatives from the Australian Mission to the United Nations. I sat in on some of the United Nations permanent Committees and spoke to people from several other countries. In this report I would like to deal with my impressions from Ottawa.

CONCERN WITH DOMESTIC ISSUES:

One of the first impressions I gained in Ottawa was an intense pre-occupation by almost everyone I met with their own domestic politics. I don’t mean domestic in the sense of our State politics as opposed to Federal politics, but domestic in the sense that eyes seemed to be turned inward on to issues that concerned Canada and Canada alone. Let me give an example of this. Prime Minister Pearson has threatened to test the fate of his minority Government on whether or not he gets support for the new flag. The flag that Canada has used to the present time has strong links, as does the Australian flag, with the United Kingdom and the Union Jack. The new flag would break these links. As I understand it, it has a yellow background with some bright red Canadian maple leaves in the centre.

It might be thought that for a minority Government this is an unwise issue with which to become concerned. It seems that it may well make more enemies than friends. People with strong attachments for the United Kingdom - and these are many, are offended at putting the old Canadian flag aside. They say that this flag issue is an attempt by the Government to consolidate French Canadian support from Quebec. One may have thought that this issue of the flag is not one of great national moment, but it is important emotionally to the country and it does run the risk of dividing Canada on traditional lines, that is the English speaking Canadian on one hand and the French Canadians on the other.

The flag debate had been postponed when I was in Ottawa and it had not taken place, but the intense concern with this issue, almost to the exclusion of all others, was just one example of how Canadians are looking to their own affairs and not to the world around them.

When I asked Canadians why this was so, they said “Well, world tensions are better, there is stability in Europe between the Warsaw Pact powers, that is the Russian Alliance, and the Nato Powers - the Western Alliance. This gives us validity to be extravagant over these domestic issues.”

When I put it to them that the world situation was really not a great deal better because of the intense difficulty and problems of South-East Asia they were inclined to say that Canada had traditionally looked to Europe and was less concerned and seemed more remote from South-East Asia.

Apart from the Canadian Department of External Affairs I don’t think I met one Canadian who showed a real concern for what is happening in this particular region. The Department on the other hand, and the Department through the Government, has always played an active part in the international sphere and through the United Nations in trying to do what it can in South-East Asia. In this regard their Department of External Affairs is a very long way ahead of the Canadian people. Canada has played a relatively leading part on the Control Commissions and Conventions which were designed to secure peace in Laos for example, which were designed to but which have failed. But this is something about which the average Canadian is not concerned.
I sat in on one or two sessions of the Canadian House of Commons. Although their procedures and Standing Orders have developed from the same source as have ours in Canberra there are some very marked differences. At Question time all the questions came from the Opposition members, there were no questions by Government members. When an Opposition member asked a question that seemed to be particularly pertinent or particularly difficult the Speaker would get up and say - "The Minister may not care to answer this question now because it is a serious one and obviously requires a considered reply." However if, despite this, the Minister concerned feels he wants to say something he may. This is, in fact, an operation by the Speaker of the House of Commons which does nothing more than protect Ministers from the questioning of Opposition members. This should not be necessary. In our Parliament I think Ministers are fully able to protect themselves, and I can imagine the uproar that would occur if our Speaker attempted to protect one of our Ministers in this way, or if our Speaker tried to prevent our Prime Minister replying to a question in this way as I heard the Canadian Speaker try to prevent Prime Minister Pearson replying to one. In two Question periods there was not one question on anything but domestic issues.
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
Fraser, Malcolm

Title:
First report from Ottawa

Date:
18 June 1964

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/40128

File Description:
First report from Ottawa

Terms and Conditions:
Copyright courtesy of Malcolm Fraser. Contact the University of Melbourne Archives for permission requests.