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Hong Kong Expedition 'Classic Blunder': Drew

Ontario Conservative Leader Demands That Freedom of Speech Be Maintained in War

In insistent demand that freedom of speech and the right of critical analysis be maintained in wartime, Ontario Conservative Leader George A. Drew, last night, on the first anniversary of the sailing of the Hong Kong expedition, declared that when the facts are fully known, the handling of the expedition "will become a classic example of military blundering comparable to the first expedition to Crimea nearly ninety years ago."

Lieutenant-Colonel Drew spoke before the Young Men's Section of the Board of Trade, and, coupled with his criticism the charge that the decision to send the two battalions to Hong Kong "was made by the War Committee without even the most elementary military information, and from then until the capitulation of the force they were uninformed regarding the most essential details."

He added: "The same chairman of the War Committee, the same Minister of National Defense, and the same staff officer who were in charge of the operation are still in charge of our military affairs."

The speaker, last summer charged under Defense of Canada Regulations by Justice Department order because of statements made by him relative to the Hong Kong expedition, and later freed by withdrawal of the charge against him, at the outset stressed that Canada was fighting, not only to preserve the integrity of its soil, but to preserve as well the freedom of its democratic inheritance.

One of the most convenient explanations for restricting freedom of speech and freedom of the press, he said, is that discussion of military affairs will be of assistance to the enemy. "What more convenient device could there be for restraining embarrassing criticism than to have a charge laid under the Defense of Canada Regulations?" he asked.

This argument, charged Colonel Drew, "is nothing new, but is one of the oldest devices employed by those who seek to evade an accounting for their conduct." The last war was nearly lost, he said, by restrictions which barred public comment on the shortage of munitions.

"After all," he said, "who is really helping the enemy? The man who places before the public weaknesses, which should be cured, or a political leader who seeks to obscure a vital national issue? Time is precious. It is little short of treachery to help the enemy by postponing decisions upon issues which involve the lives of us all. It is, moreover, the greatest insult that can be offered to a free people to tell them that they are unfitted to know the facts and are not able to judge."

Into his address Colonel Drew wove the argument that it was important to recall the Hong Kong Expedition because necessary reorganization in the Department of National Defense has not taken place and "in the second place, we are again being asked by the same men to accept their assurances without details in support of their statements."

Public Should Know.

"We are told," he continued, "that the Canadian Forces overseas may take part in an offensive at any time. We Canadians have a right to know that the military organization in Canada, to support that offensive, is efficient; and we have a right to know that the reinforcement situation is satisfactory. Above all, the men in uniform have a right to this assurance.

"If you believe that we are fighting for democracy; if you believe that freedom is a fact and not a meaningless word; if you believe that government of the people, by the people can work; then it is not merely your right — you have no higher duty than to exercise your right of free speech and demand that immediate steps be taken to assure efficient control and adequate reinforcements for our fighting forces when they go into action."

Moreover, warned Colonel Drew, if a blackout of free speech is permitted, Canada may have a blackout of freedom. "There is only one important basis of division for the people of Canada today. Those who believe in total war and those who do not. That is the choice before each one of us. Upon our choice depends the fate of our fighting men and our own future," he declared.

The lessons of Hong Kong, stressed the speaker, should be remembered until an informed public opinion forced the changes in military organization "which will prevent a repetition of the same blunders on a larger scale in the future." The real trouble, he maintained, has not been tackled and there is "no more effective coordination of the civil and military control at defense headquarters now than there was a year ago."

In comparison with the proportions of the conflict, the Hong Kong Expedition, said Colonel Drew, was a "tiny force." "But that very fact increased the importance of the lessons to be learned," he added. "If so many blunders could occur in such a simple operation, what might happen if the same men, working under the same system, were called on suddenly to move scores of thousands in some urgent and vital military manoeuvre?"

He recalled the training record of the battalions. One had firing practice with rifles and Brens. The other only with rifles, he said. Neither had fired or had any real training with mortars and their other weapons.

A Strange Excuse.

"We are told that if these had been the best trained battalions in the world and the best equipped, it would have made no difference to the result. That," said Colonel Drew, "is a strange excuse for sending untrained men against a desperate enemy.

"But that is not the important point. Both battalions had been in training since early in the war. And since early in the war the people of Canada had been assured that our troops were well equipped and well trained. Nevertheless, when the facts became known, the defense was that no other battalions in Canada were any better trained in the second month of the third year of war."

What better proof, asked the speaker, could there be that Canadians must not be asked to accept the unsupported assurances of those whose "earlier statements have been proved grossly inaccurate by their own subsequent admissions." That single fact in itself "offers the most powerful reason for open and frank discussion of our military organization and of our methods of training.

He recalled that not a single vehicle reached the ship which left Vancouver a year ago yesterday, although, "up until just before it left, they had been waiting for these vehicles and the ship left with two holds nearly empty although every inch of space was required."

"There was such a complete breakdown in the system of checking and control that no officer at National Defense Headquarters received word that the ship was leaving without these 'Priority Vehicles.' It was not until they were far at sea that the military authorities at Ottawa were informed. Even when it was learned that this had happened, the War Committee of the Cabinet — which is in supreme authority over our military affairs—heard nothing of it," said Colonel Drew.

"But that was not the most astonishing oversight. The Japanese attacked on Dec. 8 and it was not until those gallant young men had been fighting at Hong Kong for a week that the Minister of National Defense happened to learn on Dec. 15 that not a single one of their vehicles was with these men at Hong Kong.

"The reason for that shocking state of affairs is the obsolete organization of the civil and military control of our armed forces at headquarters. Even with that very small force, the system of checking and control broke down and the War Committee, in whose hands the fate of more than half a million young Canadians now rests, were unaware of even the most vital details."

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