

THE MAPLE LEAF FOREVER

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Where were you in the summer of '64? Oh, what a summer! I was a high school student working as a playground attendant on the Central Commons in Halifax. The country was abuzz with talk of a new Canadian flag. Someone had seen a picture in the newspaper, or more likely on television, of what turned out to be Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson's preferred design. The design had three maple leaves with a white background and blue border. Being young and not too concerned or well versed in flag etiquette, as well as unaware of just how much debate there was over the flag, a group of us made a replica of the proposed flag and flew it on the flagpole on the Commons. You can imagine the uproar as the early morning commuters saw our version of the flag flying over city property. A telephone call from the mayor's office to our supervisor resulted in the order to remove the flag immediately. No time was lost as the proud creation was lowered to the ground. We hung our heads, embarrassed by our ignorance. But I have never forgotten the impact of that fine summer day and the lesson on flag etiquette.

Now some 41 years later, the Canadian flag flies proudly in the fair city of Halifax, throughout Canada and in many places around the world. I was recently brought back to that day on the Commons that caused me to research the events leading to the historical event of February 15, 1965, when the flag was first flown over the Peace Tower in Ottawa.

It turns out that Lester B. Pearson had made a promise during his election campaign that the federal government would adopt a distinctive flag. The Red Ensign had been Canada's official flag since 1946 and Prime Minister Pearson believed that a Canadian flag should represent the diversity of Canadians, not just the European countries that had power in Canada.

There had been previous debates and committees struck to research possible designs. In 1925, and again in 1946, a committee of the Privy Council performed this research. However, in spite of the research and number of submissions the works of the committees were never completed. Canada's Parliament was never called upon to formally vote on a design.

The debate on our present flag began in the House of Commons on June 15, 1964, and would carry on for 37 sitting

days. The debate ended in December 1964 after a 210-day sitting of an extended Parliament. The leader of the opposition, John Diefenbaker, and members of the Progressive Conservative Party made 210 speeches on the issue. The spirited debate was marked with name-calling and passion not unlike the debates of the most recent session of Parliament.

The committee charged with coming up with a design was flooded with more than 2,600 proposals. In October 1964, after eliminating many proposals, the committee narrowed the decision to three – a Red Ensign with the fleur-de-lis and the Union Jack, a design incorporating three red maple leaves, and a red flag with a single, stylized red maple leaf on a white square.

Finally, Parliament adopted a revised red-and-white maple leaf flag as our new national flag and royal assent was given. The Canadian Red Ensign, bearing the Union Jack and the shield of the royal arms of Canada, was lowered for the last time and the new maple leaf flag was raised. This day marked a great milestone in Canada's history. There were tears of sorrow from those who did not support a new flag as they grieved the loss of the beloved symbol of their country, and tears of joy from the proponents of the new flag.

The following words, spoken on that day by The Hon. Maurice Bourget, Speaker of the Senate, added further symbolic meaning to the flag, "The flag is the symbol of the nation's unity, for it, beyond any doubt, represents all the citizens of Canada without distinction of race, language, belief or opinion."

The flag remains a symbol within Canada and throughout the world of the many rights and freedoms we enjoy as Canadians. These include the right to speak out against injustice, freedom to practice religion and to express beliefs or opinions without fear of reprisal. Canada is a coveted country because of the rights and freedoms that are protected under Canadian law.

Indeed the national flag is a symbol of honour and pride for all Canadians. As a member of The Catholic Women's League of Canada, I have been present at citizenship courts where new citizens are presented with small versions of the flag. It is a powerful experience as new Canadians, with tears in their eyes, gratefully accept the flag of their chosen country. This year



during the Olympics, Canadians watched with fierce pride and enthusiasm as our athletes proudly entered under the banner of the Canadian flag. When Canadians travel around the world, the symbol of the Canadian flag is displayed like a badge of honour and identifies them as Canadian citizens, who are envied, loved and welcomed all over the world.

My playground days, the debate and the animosity are long forgotten. The Red Ensign has its place in a long and noble history, the original flag is in Ottawa, on display in the Hall of Honour, and the maple leaf flag flies proudly on Parliament Hill and atop flag poles across the country.

Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson ended his address on February 15, 1965, with the words "God bless Canada." The League motto is "For God and Canada" and the Canadian flag presides over most League assemblies. It not only helps to define us as Canadians, but also roots us in our journey and reminds us of our call to embrace our motto. We must never lose sight of the privileges we have as Canadian citizens. The words of a song I was taught as a school girl are still very appropriate to express the sentiment Canadians feel toward the flag. "Long may it wave...the maple leaf forever!" †

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

RE: WORSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM (WINTER 2006)

Dear Editor:

The writer of the above letter outlined the benefits to our nation that would result if worship and religious studies were permitted in the classrooms and decries that this is not allowed. The Ontario Ministry of Education is quoted as to why this is the situation.

The reader may be left with the impression that the situation in that particular province is the situation all across the country. That is not the case.

There is no ministry of education at the federal level. Education is the responsibility of each province and territory. Educational services are delivered under the authority of the school act of each. Anyone who has moved from one province to another will be aware that programs and curriculum may vary considerably from one part of the country to another.

In Alberta, the *School Act*, Section 50, states that, "A board may (a) prescribe religious instruction to be offered to its students; (b) prescribe religious exercises for its students;

...(e) permit persons other than teachers to provide religious instruction to its students."

The Alberta *School Act* also provides for the formation of separate school districts – Roman Catholic or Protestant – if a religious group wishes to withdraw from the public school system. The same funding formula is applied to both public and separate school districts.

I would strongly encourage every CWL member to familiarize herself with the school act of her province. Then, as individuals and as parish councils, work to see that whatever is allowed regarding religious instruction and exercises is implemented to the fullest extent in the local school district. It is quite possible that much more can be done than is generally believed.

I completely agree with the writer that a lack of any spiritual component in the educational experience delivered by our schools leaves our students very much impoverished.

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ST. JAMES PARISH COUNCIL WILKIE, SASKATCHEWAN

St. James Parish Council convened the Ribbon of Signatures Campaign in support of raising the age of consent for sexual relations from 14 to 18 years of age. Supporters were asked to sign a 10 centimetre wide ribbon that was sent to local Member of Parliament Gerry Ritz. The Ribbon of Signatures Campaign has replaced White Ribbon Against Pornography Week. More information can be obtained by contacting Canadians Addressing Sexual Exploitation at www.4case.ca or telephone (416) 412-6065.

