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THE KING-BYNG EPISODE: A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY

ALTHOUGH THE CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES involved in the "King-Byng episode" of 1926 have been thoroughly examined and almost unquestionably resolved by Dr. Forsey,¹ his conclusions are still challenged. A recent article in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, for example, concludes: "Clearly it is unjust to Mr. Meighen to believe his action in 1926 was dictated by selfish or party interest. The fact that he was in the wrong and Mr. King was in the right in no way affects his motives."² In fact, the events of the crisis have been considered from practically every point of view except Byng's. How did Byng feel as the episode arose and what were his reactions to the eventual outcome? Both Meighen and King aired their personal opinions, but Lord Byng, as Governor General, quite rightly refused to defend his actions publicly. His refusal of dissolution to Mr. King of June 29, 1926,³ was the only statement Byng made. He returned to England at the end of his appointment in 1926 and died nine years later, on June 6, 1935, at the age of seventy-two in Thorpe-le-Soken, Essex. His official silence regarding the 1926 constitutional crisis in Canada remained unbroken.

Byng did, however, explain his position to his friend and former subordinate, General Sir Arthur Currie. Letters in the Currie Papers⁴ give some insight into Byng's character and the reasons behind his refusal to King. They indicate that Byng was a warm and generous man, vitally concerned that he should act only in the best interests of Canada and keenly aware of the responsibilities of his position. The letters confirm the belief that some form of agreement between King and Byng was made after the general election in 1925. Dr. Forsey has argued that, "constitutionally speaking, the alleged promise doesn't matter a button."⁵ This may be the case, but morally speaking, the fact that the promise was made and broken by Mr. King tells us quite a lot about the Prime Minister. In other respects the letters reinforce Forsey's constitutional argument, although they add little that is new.

Like many previous Governors General, Byng had had an active and successful military career before his appointment. His military service was the basis for

the Currie-Byng friendship and also provided a unique opportunity for Byng to become familiar with Canadians. He joined the army at the age of twenty-one and was initiated in war during Kitchener's Sudan Expedition and again in the South African War. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Byng was serving in Egypt and was immediately recalled to England to command the 3rd Cavalry Division, which at the First Battle of Ypres was part of Allenby's Cavalry, holding the right of the salient. At Second Ypres, Byng commanded the entire Cavalry Corps. In February, 1916, he was chosen to replace General Alderson as commander of the Canadian Corps and subsequently directed the most famous of Canadian actions, the capture of Vimy Ridge. He commanded the Canadian Corps until June, 1917, when he was given the Third Army and was asked to choose his successor. Byng's choice was General Currie who, until he died, remained a close friend and correspondent. Already the recipient of many honours and awards from several governments, Byng was publicly thanked by the British Parliament and granted £30,000 at the end of the war.

Today Byng is probably associated more frequently by Canadians with the King-Byng episode than he is with Vimy Ridge. But to Byng the association with the Canadian Corps during the war was very precious. Because of this old tie, his affection for Canada and his desire to be a good, efficient Governor General were the more vital to him. The constitutional crisis of 1926 and the resulting general election were to cause him much personal anguish.

The events of the crisis in June have become so familiar that they hardly bear repeating. King's government was defeated and he asked for a dissolution, which was refused (quite constitutionally and for very good reason, as Dr. Forsey proves). Mr. Meighen, at the request of the Governor General, then formed a Conservative government. Two days later the Conservatives were defeated and Byng granted Meighen a dissolution. The pressures which finally erupted in the crisis of June had been building throughout the winter of 1926. In December, Byng wrote to Currie explaining some of the difficulties of his position:

I have rather avoided seeking a confabulation of late with you—though goodness knows I wanted to unbosom myself badly, especially to a friend—but I was afraid of compromising people so I bottled myself up so that no one else would have a share in the decisions I had to make. It has not been easy, nor have the politicians made it easier. But it has gone fairly well up to now.⁶

Currie, busily occupied as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill University, did not often see Byng, although they corresponded frequently. After Byng

received Mr. Meighen's advice to dissolve parliament, he answered a letter of encouragement from Currie:⁷

July 6th 1926

My dear old Arthur,

It is letters like yours that make this situation easy for me. Thank you Old Boy.

I want to tell you the whole story but I had better wait till we meet. I begged Mr. King not to put the King's Representative in the position of having to make a controversial decision and offered him two ways out of it. He refused and then told me (1) I was ruining the constitution (2) Breaking up the Empire (3) Putting Canada back in a colonial status. I replied that he put me in the position of being either (1) an inefficient and unconstitutional Govn Genl or (2) A moral coward — and that I chose the former and left the verdict to history.

But there! there! Nuff said!—I will tell you the whole story when we meet. I don't think I let Canada down, or the Corps, or my friends. Of course it will all blow over and of course my Canadian pals have been magnificent. I knew they would be.

Bless you Arthur my old friend and lots of love to her Ladyship and Marjorie from us both.

Yrs. ever

Bungo

Currie and Byng did meet before the latter returned to England, and presumably Byng gave his friend the "whole story"; unfortunately, however, there is no record of their conversation. If there were, we would know the two solutions that Byng had offered King. It would be easy to read out of context Lord Byng's remarks on his position and conclude that he would rather be inefficient and unconstitutional than be a moral coward—but such a conclusion would be erroneous. Clearly Byng was trying to prevent King from raising any constitutional controversy ("I begged Mr. King not to put the King's Representative in the position of having to make a controversial decision.").

Byng realized that his duty was not to grant a dissolution until every reasonable expedient had been tried; as Mr. Forsey has written, Byng's position "was simply that *Parliament* should be given another chance to decide who should govern."⁸ Mr. King argued that the only constitutional course was the one he advocated—one that Byng considered not only unconstitutional but cowardly. Presented with this choice, Byng "chose the former and left the verdict to history."

After Byng's departure from Canada, Currie took it upon himself to keep Byng informed of Canadian politics. In a letter of March 30, 1927, he described the existing state of affairs at some length. The Liberal party, he predicted, had the prospect of "quite a long political life", while the Conservatives appeared "quite disorganized and down in the mouth." Currie, perhaps to make Byng feel better but

probably because he believed it, said that the constitutional issue had "cut no ice" in the past election and that the decisive factors had been "Mr. Meighen's preaching of high protection . . . coupled with Quebec's unalterable antagonism to Meighen." Turning to Mackenzie King, he continued:

The Prime Minister has denied in the most emphatic manner that there was any agreement, implied or otherwise between yourself and him that he should not seek a dissolution in the Parliament after the election of 1925. He was replying to something which had appeared in the *Ottawa Journal*, and in his reply I think he deviated more than once from the path of truth You know I do not think it is right that he should, as we say, get away with what he is doing in the matter of the events of last June. I know you won't say anything because you feel that no good can come of it, and you object to having your name bandied about in the heat of political contention. I dare say you are right, but there are a great many of your friends who would like to put the people right if you would allow them to do so.⁹

Byng's reply, understandably enough, reflects a certain bitterness towards politics and political leaders. But he rejects any suggestion of re-opening the issue with Mr. King. "I would say", he wrote, "that politics spoil so many of people's best efforts at reconciliation, comprehension, sympathy, and compromise. Once a question gets into Parliament any form of 'get-together' becomes impossible." But so far as making any public statement about King—

No, Arthur, I think I was Cardinal Wiseman not to make any statement re the King Byng episode. In the first place, I am too fond of Canada to do a bad turn to her representative government. In the second place, what good would it have done?

The Canadian Conservatives would have made some capital out of it, if they knew the truth—but are they fit to govern? Look through that list of names in Meighen's eleven day governing [sic] and say if you would like them back.

King of course lied about the agreement but I suppose he had to. The first thing he said when I spoke to him about it was 'The time for all we said last November is over' and a 'new situation has arisen'. M'yes—Well that's that.

The great effort I have always had in mind was not to be peevish, hence my civilities to King when he was in London, and never writing about it except to you. I have nothing to regret and am really quite happy in the retrospect as I don't think I did Canada any harm. If I thought I had I should be miserable. It was forced on me, as you know, and I had to try and not let the Canadian[s] down.¹⁰

Again it would perhaps be possible to misinterpret Lord Byng's meaning. His use of the phrase "representative government" is, in a sense, unfortunate, as it might be argued that Byng completely misunderstood the Canadian system of government. In the first place, however, only a fool could be Governor General for five years and have no knowledge of Canadian government. Byng was no fool. Secondly, to make

clear his own position in the events of June, 1926, Byng would have had to reveal that King's many statements were incorrect—in short, show that King was not being truthful. If Byng did this, the Canadian Prime Minister, representing the people of Canada, would be discredited and a slur cast upon those people who selected him as their leader. This Lord Byng was not prepared to do, despite any personal desire to defend his actions.

Although Byng and Currie continued to correspond until Currie's death, this is the last mention of the King-Byng episode. Henceforth their letters are increasingly concerned with reminiscences of old times. Byng was appointed Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard in 1928 and initiated a thorough reorganization of the force, while Currie became more deeply involved in his administrative work at McGill. Ill health forced Byng's retirement from Scotland Yard in 1931, and the following year he was appointed Field Marshal in the British Army.

Mr. Forsey's conclusions, as before, remain valid, but Byng's letters to Currie are significant. They add weight to existing evidence that Byng's decisions were made with no reference to Downing Street. They prove that King and Byng did make an agreement after the election of 1926. Perhaps more than anything else they indicate Byng's high regard for Canada; he would not attempt to discredit the leader of the Canadian Government, though that leader had "used" him in a shoddy and selfish manner.

NOTES

1. E. A. Forsey, *The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth* (Toronto, 1943). See also Mr. Forsey's article, "Mr. King and Parliamentary Government", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XVII (November, 1951), pp. 457-468.
2. *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 29, 1960.
3. Quoted in R. M. Dawson, *Constitutional Issues in Canada, 1900-1931* (Oxford, 1931), p. 75.
4. The Currie Papers have been used with the kind permission of Mr. G. O. Currie. All letters used are from the file "Byng, Right Hon. Lord."
5. Forsey, "A Gamble and the Constitution", *Saturday Night*, LXVIII (January 3, 1953), p. 9.
6. Byng to Currie, December 31, 1925.
7. Byng to Currie, July 6, 1926.
8. Forsey, *The Royal Power of Dissolution*, p. 178.
9. Currie to Byng, March 30, 1927.
10. Byng to Currie, April 14, 1927.