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**OPINION**

# How we lost Dominion Day

## A dozen MPs, acting without a quorum, changed the holiday's name to the vapid, meaningless 'Canada Day'

BY GREG FELTON, FREELANCE    JUNE 30, 2010

At 4 p.m. on a Friday - July 9, 1982 -the House of Commons met with only one item on the agenda: Bill C-201, a private member's bill to change the name of the July 1 holiday from "Dominion Day" to "Canada Day."

About a dozen of the 282 members the House showed up for work, which presented a procedural problem: A quorum of at least 20 members is required to conduct business, so, officially, no bills could be passed. Nevertheless, Bill C-201 was given second and third reading. At 4:05 p.m., our hard-working representatives called it a day.

What transpired in those five minutes 28 years ago was a contempt of Parliament, but few MPs cared. When the error was brought to the attention of Speaker Jeanne Sauve the following Monday, she said no procedural rules had been broken because nobody had called for a quorum count. A quorum was deemed to exist, thus making the actions of the House lawful.

Leaving aside this feeble technicality, opposition members objected that they were not properly forewarned of the bill's second reading. "Today (July 12) I received notice advising that Bill C-201 ... wouldn't be before the House during private members' hour on Friday last, July 9," said Alberta Tory MP Gordon Taylor. "The notice said the second reading would be resumed, but the notice has not yet been posted on the members' bulletin board."

Yvon Pinard, president of the Privy Council, claimed that the list of bills to be debated was distributed to opposition parties on July 8, but what he then said was telling: "We [the government] had hoped the bill would be passed during one of our very late nights, but unfortunately members present at the time were not yet mature enough; now a few days later, it seems a miracle has happened and we have the results at last."

Translation: "We wanted to ram this change through without a fuss, but didn't get away with it the first time, so we cheated."

Thanks to this "miraculous act of maturity," Canadians now celebrate a vapid contrivance instead of a historically meaningful event.

July 1 is supposed to commemorate the day in 1867 when New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and the Province of Canada formed "One Dominion under the name of Canada," as described in the British North America Act.

In fact, the idea of a dominion was a uniquely Canadian achievement.

The term came from New Brunswick Senator Samuel Leonard Tilley, who took it from the eighth verse of the 72nd Psalm: "He shall have dominion from sea to sea and from the rivers unto the ends of the Earth."

"Dominion Day" became the official name of our national holiday after B.C. Senator Robert William Weir Carrall presented a bill to Parliament in 1879. In his 1926 report, Lord Balfour declared Canada (as well as other Commonwealth nations) to be self-governing dominions within the British Empire constitutionally equal to each other in all respects, and united in common allegiance to the crown.

The Balfour Report led directly to the Dec. 11, 1931, Statute of Westminster, by which Britain invested Canada and other dominions with full legal freedom.

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Beyond the religious connotation, "Dominion Day" embodies the essence of Canadian nationhood, and is associated with nation-building events. It was as the Dominion of Canada that this country came of age and fought in the Boer War and two world wars.

Those who deprecate "Dominion Day" claim that the term connotes colonialism and dependency, even though the opposite is true. Others are uncomfortable with the biblical origin of the term.

There is a way out of this mess, though. Since "Canada Day" was created illegitimately and is deliberately meaningless, Parliament should pass a private members bill to rename July 1 "Confederation Day." What better name could there be?

-| It is historically relevant because it describes the event that gave rise to the holiday;

-| Canadians of all ethnicities can commemorate it;

-| It carries no religious bias

-| It has a natural French equivalent word, which Dominion does not.

As for "Canada Day," if Parliament really wanted one it should designate Feb. 10. On that day in 1841 the Act of Union came into effect, by which means the British Parliament united Upper and Lower Canada into the Province of Canada.

Taylor described the proceedings of July 9, 1982, as "sneaky, sloppy and arrogant." What self-respecting Canadian could argue?

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