

## **THE MAPLE LEAF FOREVER:**

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February 15, 2000 was the 35th anniversary of our National Flag but who really knows or cares? Does our Canadian Flag have to be blood stained to be respected? I am appalled at the condition of some flags flying on outside flag poles in many cities in this province. Many are worn, tattered, frayed and some even give the perception that they have been shot at! Many have lost that rich, bright, clear, distinct red and white colour. Many are no longer fitting emblems for display on flagpoles. It was not meant to be this way. These "flag culprits" should be fined! The National Flag of Canada should be a sign of pride for all Canadians.

Our Flag should be raised with the honour and respect befitting the national emblem, it should not be subjected to any indignity. The Canadian Heritage Department describes in a 28-page booklet, The Canadian Flag: Flag Etiquette in Canada requires that when the Flag becomes tattered and unsuitable for use, "it should be destroyed in a dignified way by burning it privately." Take a look at the condition of some flags waving in the wind around Ontario. There could be many private burnings!

Our National Flag deserves much better! A National Flag stands for its land, people, government and ideas. It defines our identity and reminds us of our heritage. So often when I see Olympic or international events with Canadian winners standing proudly watching the raising of the Flag or wrapping it around themselves in pride and glory, I often question our attitude the rest of the time. If we are proud of Canada at a time of glory, should we not appreciate Canada at all times? Many forget that the fight to establish the Maple Leaf was a long, tough battle that threatened to divide the country.

Prime Minister Pearson in 1964 stirred a passionate national debate across the country with these words: "A distinctive Flag which will say to the world and to the future, I stand for Canada!" Arguments for and against raged in Parliament. The Flag Debate was a project, a dream that had defeated every other Prime Minister in Canada's history. Since our birth as a nation in 1867, the Flag of Canada had been either the British Union Jack or the unofficial Red Ensign (a Union Jack with the Canadian coat of arms). The lines of debate were drawn. Quebecers would demand a fleur-de-lis be included. British immigrants and descendants of United Empire Loyalists were adamant that the Union Jack be kept. For many veterans and their families the Union Jack was the banner under which Canada had gone to war. Thousands died wearing the Flag emblem sewn to their uniform.

The "Flag Issue" as it came to be known became a highly emotional and divisive one. Every Prime Minister who had tried to tackle the issue of a new flag was told that the whole idea was political suicide. There were stories about friends who bluntly told Pearson that if he insisted on adopting a new flag, they would never speak to him again. President Valera of Ireland told him his project was doomed. "To get a new flag accepted, you have to have blood on it," he said, and then jokingly suggested that Pearson take his proposed flag down to the American border to get some of his friends to take shots at it.

Pearson was unswayed by any negative reaction. He truly believed the time had come for a National Flag. His passionate Flag Speech in 1964 is considered to be one of the most memorable in the Parliamentary history of Canada. Pearson said, "The Flag is the symbol of the nation's unity, for it, beyond any doubt, represents all the citizens of Canada, new and old, native born and naturalized, without distinction of race, language, belief or opinion." Our former P.M. had sparked fire in the nation!

The parliamentary mailroom was swamped with over two thousand drawings incorporating everything from beavers munching on birch trees to the Northern Lights shining over the Arctic Ocean to represent the country. On February 15, 1965, after 33 days of bitter debate and 252 speeches in the Commons, a new red and white Flag, bearing at its centre a maple leaf, rose for the first time to the top of the Peace Tower in Ottawa. It was a signal to the world that there was now a new symbol for a new Country. Canada proudly took its rightful place among the nations of the world. Pearson had made History!

The Wellington Catholic District School Board in Guelph has made History too! After discussions with Canadian Heritage in Ottawa, we are one of the few, if not the only, Board in the country that actually has a formal Flag Policy. At the minimum, our schools must raise the Flag on Monday and lower it on Friday. What a fitting tribute this is to the dream of Prime Minister Pearson. What a lesson for our students! Recognition of our National Symbol shows our youth that our Flag is sacred, that it does mean something, that it does reflect the common values we hold so dear: freedom, peace, respect, justice and tolerance.

Celebrate Flag Day with great passion. Have a Flag raising ceremony. Involve new Canadians. It can be simple or more elaborate. Hold it publicly or in your own school. Invite a guest speaker. Do something to make it a special day to celebrate one of the most prominent Canadian symbols.

If you see a tattered or faded Flag that is unfit to be flown, phone the individual, business or company. Our falling leaf needs to be resurrected to its proper place in History. Raise a Flag for Canada! Raise it with pride!