

ONTARIO LEGISLATURE.

Third Parliament—Third Session.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY,

Toronto, Jan. 11, 1878.

The Speaker took the chair at three o'clock.

PETITIONS.

The following petitions were presented:—

Mr. Bethune—Petition of David Fisher *et al.* praying that an Act may pass to authorize them to sell the property of the Port Whitby Harbour Company.

Mr. Flesher—Petitions of the Township Council of Caledon, praying that an Act may pass to confirm a survey of said township.

Mr. Deacon—Two petitions of the County Council of Renfrew, praying for certain amendments to the Municipal Institutions Act.

PRAYERS IN THE HOUSE.

Mr. MOWAT moved "That it be an Order of the House that the business of each day shall commence with prayers; that a Special Committee be appointed to consider and report upon a form of prayer, and upon other arrangements in connection therewith; such Committee to be composed of the Honourable Attorney-General Mowat, and the Honourable Messieurs Crooks, Fraser and Cameron, Messieurs Boulter, Ferris, Graham and Harkin." He considered that it was a proper thing that an assembly of this kind, composed of the representatives of a Christian people, and of all classes, creeds, and nationalities, should acknowledge its dependence upon the King of Kings, and ask for the Divine guidance before entering upon its deliberations. There might be a question amongst Christians as to the particular occasions on which public prayer should be offered, but there appeared to be a general consensus amongst English-speaking people everywhere that one of the fitting occasions for united prayer was at the opening of Parliamentary and Legislative bodies. They all acknowledged their dependence upon the God that made them, and if they were really anxious to do what good they could in the places they occupied, and to fulfil the duties that were assigned to them, they might consider themselves in the language of the Scriptures — and he spoke with all humility—co-workers with God Himself. He need not remind the House that in the old land the custom of offering prayers at the opening of both Houses of Parliament had existed from time immemorial. The ancient method appeared to be for a form of prayer to be read by the Clerk of the House; sometimes also there was a prayer read by the Speaker. In the seventeenth century the practice seemed to have been introduced for the first time to have the prayers read by a chaplain, and the same practice had been maintained since. The two Houses at Washington, as well as the State Legislatures in the United States, had adopted the same rule. The practice had prevailed in the old Council of Canada and in the Senate. It had lately been adopted by the House of Commons at Ottawa, which fact had suggested the motion he had laid before the House. It had also been the practice in the Assembly of Upper Canada till 1820, when, in consequence of the excitement which then prevailed in reference to Church establishment, the rule was rescinded. The Lieutenant-Governor had appointed a minister of the Church of England as chaplain to the House, and there was such hostility to the idea of an established Church in Canada that that proceeding was supposed to be antagonistic to the interests of the country. The Legislative Assembly consequently rescinded its order, and no change had been made up to the time of Confederation. In view of all the facts he had stated, he asked the House to resume this old custom. He asked the House first to affirm the principle that their proceedings should be opened with prayers, and then he proposed a Committee to consider the details. The form of prayer adopted by the House of Commons at Ottawa was probably the one most likely to be adopted, still there might be some modification of it required. By whom the prayers should be read would also be a matter for the consideration of the Committee. He thought there would be a difficulty in having them read by a clergyman, and the Committee might consider whether they should be read by the Speaker or the Clerk.

Mr. LAUDER, in seconding the motion of the Attorney-General, said that at the same time he did not think the proposition would be the most suitable thing for them to adopt. On the principle of asking the sanction and direction of the Divine Being over the deliberations of a body representing a Christian country there could be no doubt or difference of opinion. But in an Assembly like this, where there was considerable bitterness of feeling exhibited, he did not think very much practical good would result from the adoption of the proposition made. He was satisfied that both sides of the House were desirous to uphold and foster a Christian sentiment in this country. Personally, he had pleasure in seconding the motion, but he saw difficulties in the way of carrying it out.

The motion having been put,

Mr. CLARKE (Norfolk) thought the example set them by the House of Commons at Ottawa was well worthy of being followed, and he should be glad to give the motion his hearty support. He had long felt that there should be a public, as well as a private, recognition of the supervision of the Divine Being over their deliberations. If such were the case he believed their discussions would be characterized by far less bitterness than they were usually. (Hear, hear.) He thought the man who conducted the service, however, should be a God-fearing man—one who did not swear in his common conversation—(hear, hear, and laughter)—and whose moral character was above suspicion. Otherwise the whole proceeding would terminate in a farce. As a solemn service to Almighty God, it should be conducted with due reverence, and not as a mere matter of form.