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# Apathy greets the inquiry into October crisis

MONTREAL

Beside the main entrance of the Union Nationale Francaise on Viger Square, two blocks from Montreal's city hall, stands a bronzed statue of Joan of Arc. She is completely out of place this week as the building houses the opening sessions of the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry into the War Measures Act.

The launching of the commission on Tuesday, before 20 spectators and as many journalists, was the ultimate exposure, as a result of the crisis of October, 1970, of the frailty of what might be called the "critical left" in Canada. It showed that the spirit of Joan of Arc, the spirit of an audacious and critical minority, is weak in Quebec and almost inconsequential in the rest of the country. And it raised an interesting question as to whether this weakness is an after-effect of the severe measures adopted during the crisis or a permanent feature of political life in Canada in the mid-twentieth century which has been hidden up to now by the stability of our political institutions.

The absence of audience on Tuesday was only a minor symptom. The real problem lay in the absence of Canadians of stature from the panel of inquiry. To say this isn't to criticize the good intentions of the 10 Canadians who did agree to serve on the commission. It is a criticism of the motives which prompted dozens of prominent Canadians, in politics, in universities, in the churches and the arts, to refuse to serve.

The initial encouragement to "those who will voice concern at the extent of power assumed by the government under this procedure" was given by the Prime Minister himself when he introduced the War Measures Act in the House of Commons last Oct. 16.

## Applause for speaking out

"I can only say that I sympathize with their attitude, and applaud them for speaking out," he said.

In fact, only a handful of Canadians spoke out at the time as the authorities detained more than 500 people under the War Measures Act and its successor, the Public Order (Temporary Measures) Act 1970. A year later, critical study of the event is represented by only a thin sheaf of articles and pamphlets and a few books. But the weakness of this critical opposition in Canada was never exposed to the public as clearly as it was this week when the commission opened its hearings.

The questions which had to be answered by the commission were many and insistent. Were the authorities justified in adopting such an extensive and prolonged scheme of detentions? What was the role of radio and television during the crisis? Was there censorship of the media? What were the root causes of the event?

In his television address to the nation last Oct. 16, Prime Minister Trudeau assured Canadians that "the government recognizes its grave responsibilities in interfering in certain cases with civil liberties, and that it remains answerable to the people of Canada for its actions." But very few answers have been given and the government has made it clear that it has no intention of establishing an official inquiry. This leaves a citizens' inquiry as the only alternative.

It has many disadvantages. It is usually partisan. It is open to political exploitation. But in this case, the organizers felt that the gravity of the event might persuade prominent Canadians to take a few political risks.

The result of the six-month search is a 10-member commission that contains only two names of some national reputation: Woodrow Lloyd, the former NDP premier of Saskatchewan, and Laurier Lapierre, historian, television commentator and former NDP federal candidate. The other members of the commission are the executive secretary of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, an associate professor of law from the University of British Columbia, the president of the student council at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, a Unitarian minister from Toronto, three Quebec labor union officials and a journalist employed by a union-supported weekly newspaper in Montreal.

## Lukewarm response

Organizers in Montreal and Toronto admitted that difficulty in finding commissioners was the main reason for the late start. Prominent churchmen declined to serve. Senior labor officials in English-speaking Canada didn't want to become involved. Only one member of the House of Commons initially agreed to serve but only if the inquiry were held during Parliament's summer recess.

The same lukewarm response has met the commission's appeal for funds, although the \$20,000 that is being sought is a bargain price for a commission that will hold hearings in nine major Canadian cities and a number of smaller ones between now and the end of December.

During the first day of hearings in Montreal, the problems of the commission were all too evident. Witnesses were all on one side of the question. There was insufficient cross-examination. By the end of the afternoon, the public audience was down to six people and outside the building, it looked as if Joan of Arc had stopped listening for Canadian voices.