

FRIDAY, MARCH 3, 1945.

Defense Minister's Obligation

Maj.-Gen. G. R. Pearkes, VC, DSO, MC, who last month was removed as general officer commanding-in-chief, Pacific Command, has issued a statement in defense of himself and the other officers whom Agriculture Minister Gardiner accused of disloyalty, charging disobedience of orders and dereliction of duty. The Minister made his first accusations at the time of the general's retirement. They went unchallenged by the Minister of National Defense. With his silence as corroboration, Mr. Gardiner repeated his accusations in a letter to the Winnipeg Tribune on Feb. 27.

Defense Minister McNaughton has stayed silent, forcing Gen. Pearkes to answer the Gardiner accusations, which command attention by reason of the author's position. The general's statement may seem inadequate. But the reason it is inadequate is a shocking condemnation of the Defense Minister. Gen. Pearkes states that Mr. Gardiner's accusations were "utterly false and slanderous." But he must refrain from demonstrating them to be so because the information with which he could do it was acquired in the course of his official duties and is "the property of the Department of National Defense."

This being so, Gen. Pearkes first requested the Defense Minister to make a statement clearing him and the other officers. Mr. McNaughton is in possession of, or has ready access to, all the information Gen. Pearkes would have. Possessed of that, and being professedly interested in the morale and discipline of the army, not to mention the morale of the nation, it is incredible that he should have to be prodded by the defendants to deal with the matter. Yet even under prodding Mr. McNaughton refused to do his duty.

According to the general's statement, he declined to speak "on the grounds that he has no responsibility for the correctness or otherwise of statements published in the press which have not been issued by the Department of National Defense." This, we recall, has not always been the Minister's attitude. While it is

true that he may not have responsibility for all statements which get into the newspapers, in this instance he draws the line of isolation a little fine.

As Defense Minister, Mr. McNaughton has a definite responsibility to and for the officers within his administration, and an equally definite responsibility to the public which he is supposed to serve. As a member of the Government he also shares a responsibility for statements made by colleagues in that Ministry on matters of public concern, and especially on matters falling directly within his department. The Minister might like to think Ministerial responsibility is divisible, but it is not. When he made false statements about the submarine warfare, Naval Minister Macdonald publicly contradicted him.

If Mr. McNaughton is unconcerned about the character and honor of the army's leaders, he at least has a duty to assure the men in uniform and the public that officers guilty of the conduct Mr. Gardiner charges are not staffing that army. It is a duty he cannot ignore as he has sought to ignore the onus of explaining Gen. Pearkes' retirement. Mr. McNaughton has a choice of two courses of action: He must either bring the officers to trial on the Gardiner charges before a court-martial, or he must state publicly that Mr. Gardiner was not telling the truth, and consequently should be removed from office.

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