

Pelletier — one of PET's best

It was an odd rebuke given Gerard Pelletier by Mr. Trudeau over the predominance of French over English at the Dominion Day ceremonies in Ottawa.

The Prime Minister by-passed the normal escape route of politicians after a boob. He did not drag out the previous record to evade the indignation of the English-language folk in Ottawa who were affronted by a program almost wholly in French.

I can remember previous Dominion Day programs in which only a smidgin of French was included. No one complained after those occasions.

It was an error, a mistake, said Mr. Trudeau. Mr. Pelletier, he thought, had done "rather well" as Secretary of State these past four years. He said (and later said that it was partially in jest) that he would move Mr. Pelletier to another portfolio after the next election.

Even in fun, it is unusual for a Prime Minister to indicate he plans to shift a minister. Apologies have not rolled easily out of Mr. Trudeau. Indeed, they have been rarer than public castigations of his ministers. Since 1968 he has pulled a number of them up, including Bob Andras, John Munro, Jean Marchand, Joe Greene and Eric Kierans (when a minister). This is the first time he has been so rough with the man who is usually assumed to be his closest friend in politics.

On his part, Mr. Pelletier has not fudged on the goof nor has he seemed rattled at the indication that the Prime Minister plans to move him.

Not enough of us have noticed how quietly Mr. Pelletier has gotten through the past four years in what is potentially the most controversial ministry of all.

The grab-bag ministry

It was under Mr. Pearson and when Maurice Lamontagne was Secretary of State that this Ministry became the grab-bag Ministry of Culture. Although Mr. Lamontagne was sidetracked later into the Senate because of the embarrassments caused by his private arrangements for purchasing furniture (the scandal days), he was in hot water many times over matters concerning the Canada Council, the CBC, the trans-

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lation Bureau, the flag, the film industry, the Mr. Pearson film, etc. All this in a little over a year in the job.

Mr. Lamontagne was succeeded by Judy LaMarsh. Remember the controversies she got into in this post? Bilingualism (!) Seven Days, the CBC's "rotten management," citizenship (!).

Wonder he's done so well

When you appreciate that Mr. Pelletier has had additional matters thrust on him, the Company of Young Canadians, assorted youth programs, responsibility for the official languages programs, a mix of ethnic and heritage items plus delicate dealing with the Francophone countries at the same time Quebec has been pushing its arrangements with them, the wonder is that he has done so well. And this through a period when both the English MPs of his own party and many in the press gallery have tended to see him as a scheming, dangerous fellow with too much influence on the Prime Minister.

Mr. Pelletier did not have Mr. Trudeau's advantages as a boy. His father was a railway worker in a small town. It was more his own scholarly capacities than family means which took him through a higher education and into journalism. The breadth of his cultural interests are much wider than Mr. Trudeau's. Indeed, they are extraordinary for a politician. Further, he has none of the combativeness, nor does he take any of the personal pleasure which his two old associates, Trudeau and Marchand, get as political figures. While all three have been denigrated by the younger intellectuals in Quebec, the criticism and contempt shown towards Mr. Pelletier has been more fierce. One may guess that this has hurt him more than his colleagues, judging by the candid book he wrote to explain why he supported the War Measures Act during and after the October crisis.

Hasn't run for cover

It is my individual opinion, one on which I would find few supporters on Parliament Hill, that Mr. Pelletier has been a remarkably successful minister, and not only because he has kept a fairly smooth surface over some extraordinarily difficult subject and administrative areas.

He hasn't run for cover on the youth programs, nor ducked away from the commitments in support of social action groups in his department. He has resisted the temptation to push either the CRTC or the CBC around. In the cultural areas, like the arts, films, museums and libraries, he has been more positive than neutral and safe.

Mr. Pelletier has never leaned publicly on his closeness to Mr. Trudeau. Rather, he ignores it, and if questioned about it, goes out of his way to emphasize that he is a colleague and follower, and not an intimate or crony. There are many poorer ministers and few better.