

THE CONSCRIPTION REFERENDUM IN AUSTRALIA.

DETAILS of the conscription campaign in Australia launched by Premier Hughes on his return from England, and of the defeat of the proposal by popular referendum, are now coming to Canada through the medium of the newspapers of the Commonwealth. They point an interesting moral, and teach a valuable lesson. An effort, little short of actual compulsion, was made to ensure a vote favorable to conscription. The strongest possible outside influences were brought to bear apparently through the instigation of Premier Hughes. But the free and democratic people of Australia, who under voluntary enlistment had shown the strongest loyalty to the cause of the Allies and the Empire, refused to sanction conscription, in spite of all these influences.

When Premier Hughes returned to Australia from England on August 7th last, it was generally anticipated, from his utterances while in England, that he would at once put conscription into effect, in the Commonwealth. Instead he decided upon a conscription referendum, and in the following terms in a speech delivered in the House of Representatives on August 30th, outlined the policy of his government:—

"In view of certain urgent and grave communications from the War Council of Great Britain, and of the present state of the War, and the duty of Australia in regard thereto, and as a result of long and earnest deliberation the Government has arrived at the conclusion that the voluntary system of recruiting cannot be relied upon to supply that steady stream of reinforcements necessary to maintain the Australian Expeditionary Forces at their full strength. As the Government is very strongly of the opinion that it is the plain duty of Australia to do this, and as it believes that their opinion is one which is held by the country generally, it has formulated a policy which it believes to be at once adequate to meet the gravity of our circumstances and compatible with the principles of democratic government under which it is our privilege to live. . . .

"People's Voice Must Be Heard."

"But this is a country where the people rule; and in this crisis—in which their future is concerned—their voice must be heard. The will of the nation must be ascertained. Autocracy forces its decrees upon the people—democracy ascertains and then carries out the wishes of the people. In these circumstances the Government considers that there is but one course to pursue, namely, to ask the electors for their authority to make up the deficiency by compulsion. Set out briefly, the policy of the Government is to take a referendum of the people at the earliest possible moment upon the question whether they approve of compulsory overseas service to the extent necessary to keep our Expeditionary Forces at their full strength. If the majority of the people approve, compulsion will be applied to the extent that voluntaryism fails. Otherwise it will not."

The Conscription Manifesto.

Later, on September 18th, when the details for the referendum on conscription had been completed, Premier Hughes issued a manifesto to the citizens of Australia appealing for support and requesting the electors of Australia to vote in favor of conscription, thus backing up the government in its efforts to secure additional recruits for the prosecution of the War. Extracts from the manifesto are herewith quoted:—

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September 18th, 1916.

Fellow-citizens,—

"After more than two years of the most dreadful War the world has known, Australia is called upon to face the test of manhood. We, boasting our freedom, are called upon to prove ourselves worthy to be free.

"Though Europe has been drenched with blood, innocent non-combatants foully murdered or subjected to unspeakable outrages, millions of helpless men, women, and little children driven from their homes, their beloved country ravaged by fire and sword, not the faintest breath of such horrors has touched these favored shores. Though many of our brave soldiers have died on the battlefield, this nation in its own home has pursued its peaceful way as though War did not exist, secure and prosperous. But we, too, must now face the dread realities of War. We have made many sacrifices, but we know nothing of the agonies which France, Belgium, Russia, and Serbia have endured.

"Now is the hour Australia is called upon to gird up her loins and make her great effort. Now is the hour in which, if we but obey the call to duty, the enemy can be crushed, the War shortened, and triumphant victory and lasting peace ensured.

"Our duty and our interests alike point the way we must go. I appeal to every individual citizen of Australia to sweep aside the mists of indifference, error, and misunderstanding and face the great realities of the hour.

A Supreme Effort—The Price of Victory.

"This is a War to the death, a fight to the finish. The future of Australia and the hopes of Australian democracy hang upon victory. We are called upon to do our share in the great offensive against our victory. We are not called upon to do more than our share, but our share we must do. As the strain becomes greater, so we must endure more and endeavor more.

"The Empire and its Allies are making a supreme effort to crush the enemy. Britain is calling up more men. New Zealand is calling up more men. Canada is calling up more men. Upon us rests the same burden; we, too, must make the same sacrifice.

Australia Must Do Her Share.

"What we are expected to do in this great hour has been stated in precise terms. We are to keep our five divisions up to their full strength. . . . For September of this year 32,500 men are required, and for each subsequent month 16,500 men, to maintain our five divisions in the field. . . . Up to date we have sent over 220,000 men overseas, and have 44,000 in camp. . . . If Australia had done as well as Britain she would have an army of over 500,000 instead of one under 300,000.

We Must Get the Men.

"We must supply the men asked for. It is the price we are asked to pay for our national existence and our liberties. We must get the men; so much is certain. The question then is, how shall we get them? It is, unfortunately, only too apparent that the voluntary system of recruiting our armies does not ensure them. For many months, indeed, the numbers of volunteers have been steadily diminishing. In June, July, and August less than one-third of the number required have enrolled. If voluntaryism fails, is the nation to fail, where to fail is to perish? No patriot can deny the necessity of reinforcements; no democrat can impugn the right of the nation to demand this duty from its citizens.

"Abraham Lincoln, defending the Conscription Act