

*Reinforcements—Ministerial Changes*

Alternatives were suggested such as reducing our commitments or breaking up units or formations. I felt I could not concur in this when these trained N.R.M.A. men were available; and that at this crucial period Canada's duty was to support our men in the line, and not to relax but to go on with the task to help shorten the war and speed the victory.

It was suggested that, if a further appeal were made to trained N.R.M.A. personnel by ministers of the crown and others, such personnel might volunteer for general service in sufficient numbers to meet the need. This suggestion involved delays which I considered would be serious if the appeal was not successful. Consequently I wished to be assured that it was government policy that if, after the appeal, the need for reinforcements overseas still existed and volunteers were not available, N.R.M.A. personnel would be sent. This was the course which I and some other colleagues had understood would follow from your speech in 1942. It was in effect what I, as minister, have repeatedly said in the house since then.

No such assurance was forthcoming. On the contrary it has developed in the discussions that the government as a whole (certain colleagues excepted) do not consider that your speech committed the government to this course.

I consider myself bound by what I have said in the house. Our differences are fundamental on the vital matter of reinforcing our troops, and consequently and as requested by you, I at once tender my resignation as Minister of National Defence.

In the stand I have taken I have considered that my first thought should be my duty to our fighting men in our overseas army.

I wish every success to the distinguished citizen who I understand will take up the duties of this department, and at the same time I want to express to you my very sincere appreciation of the opportunity I have had of serving in Canada's war activities.

Yours very sincerely,

J. L. Ralston.

To that communication I sent the following reply:

Office of the Prime Minister  
Canada

Ottawa, November 3, 1944.

The Honourable J. L. Ralston, M.P.,  
Mayfair Apartments,  
Ottawa.

Dear Colonel Ralston:

I thank you for your letter of the 1st instant which I received while at a meeting of the cabinet yesterday forenoon. I regret that until to-day I have not had an opportunity to send you a reply.

You will recall that it was not until the 19th of October that you informed the cabinet war committee that you had received a report from the chief of staff at Canadian military headquarters in London, stating that the future effective maintenance of our forces in the two theatres of operations required that additional personnel be made available from Canada.

This was the first report made to the government that the army's reinforcement position was causing concern. You will recall the assurance given the cabinet during the first week of August, that additional military commitments then being sought would not adversely

[Mr. Mackenzie King.]

affect this position. During discussions at Quebec, at the time of the conference in September, when future plans for the Canadian army, navy and air force were being considered, no intimation was given of any prospective insufficiency of reinforcements for the Canadian army.

From the 19th of October, as you are aware, the cabinet has been giving its time almost exclusively to a most careful study of the whole situation, exploring every possible aspect of it, but without deciding upon any of the courses explored.

There is one paragraph in your letter to which I regret I must take exception. You say, "Our differences are fundamental on the vital matter of reinforcing our troops, and consequently, as requested by you, I at once tender my resignation as Minister of National Defence". Surely you are in error when you say that "our differences are fundamental on the vital matter of reinforcing our troops". From the outset, the government has been agreed that the matter of reinforcing our troops was "vital". I have never agreed to a single increase in our military commitments without first asking and receiving assurances that the additional commitment would not jeopardize our capacity to provide needed reinforcements. The only difference which exists is one of the method or methods of meeting this fundamental vital necessity.

In your letter you also say "In the stand I have taken I have considered that my first thought should be my duty to our fighting men in our overseas army". I need scarcely say that I have always had the same thought and conception of duty towards all of our fighting men. It is for this reason that I have striven as I have to see that Canada's effort in the present war should be the maximum of which our country is capable. That is why I feel so strongly that at the present time no course of action should be taken if it can possibly be avoided, which, while not certain of accomplishing its purpose, would divide the country and thereby prejudice much that has been so magnificently accomplished throughout more than five years of war—and this on the eve of certain victory.

I have made it clear that I am prepared to follow the course outlined in my speeches in parliament in 1942, if that course should ever be necessary, but I do not believe that it has become necessary.

There has not been a time since the war began that it has not been recognized that resort to conscription for service overseas would occasion the most serious controversy that could arise in Canada. I can think of no course of action fraught with greater danger to our war effort—to say nothing of the unity and strength of Canada to-day and for generations to come—than a general election at this late stage of war on the conscription issue. I believe that such an issue would almost certainly arise were the House of Commons to be asked to endorse an order in council extending the terms of service of N.R.M.A. personnel to include service overseas. Until it is apparent that conscription for overseas service is necessary to the full support of Canada's forces overseas, and that its application would prove effective, the government would not be justified in taking the risk of widespread national dissension.

As to any request by me for your resignation, you will recall that on several occasions you