

General Election, Referendum  
or Plebiscite

January 26th, 1942:

If, then, it is desirable that the government subject only to its responsibility to parliament, should possess complete freedom to act in accordance with its judgment, irrespective of any previous commitments, it is clear that means must be found of releasing the government from any obligation arising out of any past commitments restricting the methods of raising men for military service.

There are, as I see it, three means by which this release could be obtained:

The first would be by means of a general election. In a general election at this time the issue of conscription for service overseas would become one of the issues and, in existing circumstances, would almost certainly be the main issue.

The second would be by means of referendum solely with reference to the question of conscription for service overseas.

The third would be by means of a plebiscite, not to obtain a decision with respect to conscription, but solely with the object of releasing the government from any obligation arising out of any past commitments restricting the methods of raising men for military service.

These three means have been considered by the government with relation particularly to which of the three would occasion the least interference with the war effort of the country.

The government is of the opinion that neither a general election nor a referendum on the question of conscription is either advisable or necessary.

As for a general election, apart from the fact that the government has every reason to believe it continues to possess the confidence of the country, it would not, we believe, be in the interest of the people themselves, in the existing crisis, to leave the country without a parliament for the time which it would take to hold a general election. Moreover, other issues entering in, it would not be possible to say that the verdict of the people, whatever it might be, had related solely to the issue of the application of conscription for overseas service.

The objection to a referendum on conscription is that far from freeing the hands of the government it would be a specific request to the people to make a decision with respect to conscription. As I have already said, the proper place to debate the question as to the extent to which conscription should be applied is on the floor of parliament.

The strongest of reasons why the government should be given a free hand to take, subject to its responsibility to parliament, any course of action which it may believe to be necessary at a time of war is that the government itself alone can know all the circumstances and reasons which necessitate a particular course of action. These reasons cannot all be made public, linked as they are with the combined plans of other countries, with questions of military strategy, and the necessity of such matters being carefully concealed from the enemy.

A plebiscite differs from a referendum in that a plebiscite is taken to ascertain the views of the people, whereas a referendum is a request for a decision by the people on a specific plan or project. The government does not believe that it would be fair to the people to ask them to make military decisions. It is, as I already have said, not possible, in war time, to make public adequate information on which wise judgments can be made.