

*Plebiscite Act*

The intention was to remove the ambiguity of the wording of the question to be submitted to the people. There can be no doubt as to the ambiguity; I think even the Prime Minister himself will admit that now.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: Not at all.

Mr. JOHNSTON (Bow River): Let me read the wording:

Are you in favour of releasing the government from any obligation arising out of any past commitments restricting the methods of raising men for military service?

In the first place, as I pointed out the other day, the government are not asking to be released from anything; they are asking the people if they, the people, are willing to release the government. The government are not committing themselves to anything whatsoever. It was pointed out as well that the wording of this question refers definitely, as the Prime Minister pointed out last night, to the commitments or obligations restricting the methods of raising men for military service. Both the leader of the opposition and the Prime Minister stated yesterday, I believe, that they were agreed that under the National Resources Mobilization Act legal authority is given the government to raise men in any manner they wish.

Mr. HANSON (York-Sunbury): Pardon me; under the War Measures Act they could raise them by any method.

Mr. JOHNSTON (Bow River): I thank the hon. member for the correction, but I think they can under the National Resources Mobilization Act also. But the method is not the thing we are worrying about. The method might be that which the government now use, asking men to appear before a medical board for examination. On the other hand they might say they are going to send the mounted police out to take them by the collar and bring them in. That is a method; whether or not it is a right method is not the point. The wording of the plebiscite deals with the method of raising men. Nobody is criticizing the present method.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: It deals with commitments as to the method of raising men for military service. There was no commitment with respect to the use of the mounted police.

Mr. JOHNSTON (Bow River): That is the point. There is tremendous ambiguity in the wording of the question proposed to be used in the plebiscite. If hon. members themselves are not clear as to the meaning, how can the public be expected to be clear on it? I suggest to the Prime Minister that

[Mr. C. E. Johnston.]

in all fairness this question should be put to the people in such manner that there will be no shadow of doubt or possibility of misunderstanding. If the Prime Minister wants to be fair with the people of Canada he should put the question to them in such form that they will know what they are doing. They should know definitely whether they are voting on the commitment or on the methods. A large number of hon. members are satisfied that the wording of this plebiscite deals with the methods.

The Prime Minister has said there are sufficient men offering for the air force and the navy, and that they are going along quite well in regard to men for the army. Therefore there should be no objection as to the method they use. Whether or not the method is a proper one is not the point.

When I was speaking on the resolution I pointed out that the Prime Minister had never in his speech at the beginning of this session made reference so far as the plebiscite is concerned to the conscription of men for overseas service. I went through his speech very carefully in an attempt to find whether there was any connection between this plebiscite and conscription for overseas service. I combed the speech pretty thoroughly, but I failed to find any reference to conscription of men for overseas service. In fact the Prime Minister said that the question which was to be put before the people had nothing to do with conscription. He made that quite definite. Let me read his words as reported on page 826 of *Hansard*:

Hon. members have been talking about conscription, about no conscription and the like. That is not the issue in this plebiscite.

There can be no misunderstanding about that. I think the Prime Minister was quite right there. If I can interpret his thoughts I would say he had no desire whatever to bring up the question of conscription for overseas service so far as this plebiscite is concerned. That is what I tried to point out the other day. But now, apparently, the Prime Minister has changed his mind. Let me read what he said on February 2. He was speaking about the commitments made in the election of 1940. There is no question, as he pointed out, that the pledge given to the people was that there would be no conscription for overseas service. I think we are all agreed on that. Certainly in my constituency I was the one who was accused of advocating conscription for overseas service, which was quite untrue. Nevertheless, that was the issue there; that was the commitment that tied the hands of the govern-