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It will be recalled that in the speech from the throne it was announced, as part of government policy, that a plebiscite would be taken on the question of removing a certain limitation which now is imposed upon the government with respect to the enlistment of men for service overseas. The question which it is intended to ask the public in the plebiscite is the following:

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?

As I said, at the time of speaking on the address, the question is very simple in its language and meaning and is a straightforward one. I do not think it is capable of any more than one interpretation. It asks the people of Canada whether they are willing to release the government from a certain limitation which arises out of past commitments with respect to the enlistment of men for overseas. If the answer is in the affirmative it will mean that the government, according to the opinion expressed by the people, has been released from commitments that have been made; if it is in the negative it will mean that the majority of the electors are of the opinion that the government should continue to be governed by the commitment that was made at the time of the last general election and on previous occasions, and on subsequent occasions as well.

The subject of the plebiscite has been debated at such length that it would perhaps seem unnecessary to discuss it further. My purpose this afternoon is not so much to attempt to add to what has been said but rather, if possible, to clear away some of the confusion that has arisen out of the discussion that has already taken place.

To that end, let me first of all make quite clear the purpose of the plebiscite. As I have said, the purpose is to give the government—I put it in general terms—a perfectly free hand to deal with all matters affecting the war in the manner which, in its judgment, is most in the national interest.

There is a distinction to be made between the legal powers which the government has and the moral authority which it possesses. With respect to the legal power, there can be no question whatever that this parliament has full power to do whatever it may decide to do with respect to the management of matters pertaining to the war. The one limitation which exists on that power so far as this parliament is concerned is not a legal limitation but a moral obligation.

There may be some who take the view that, in matters of government, in time of war, moral obligations count for nothing. May I

say that, in my opinion, moral obligations, especially where they relate to a specific measure, a concrete matter related to the war on which the government of the country itself has given a pledge, are as binding as any obligation could possibly be. To say that the parliament of Canada, which derives its powers from the people, after a solemn pledge has been given to the people on a matter which is of deep concern to them, is released from this pledge the moment the people have elected it, is simply for parliament itself to create a precedent which would be subversive of parliamentary institutions.

Let me ask first of all how this limitation arose. It arose out of a situation that existed several years ago in this country. That of itself is significant as indicating how long the public memory is with respect to matters which affect the people themselves. I would pause here to say that the public memory is going to be long in the matter of how this parliament views its moral obligations as well as its legal powers. It is because I feel very strongly that the people of Canada will wish to have their present and their future governments pay the utmost regard to pledges given to the electorate that I feel it all important that this matter of past commitments should be presented to the people in the form of a question which will secure their opinion, before the time comes when the government may be called upon to consider whether further action than it is empowered now to take, should or should not become necessary later on.

During the last war the question of conscription came up near the end of the conflict. I will not go into what took place at the time except to remind hon. members of the fact that nothing in the political history of Canada since Confederation has given rise to so much bitterness, so much ill feeling, or has done so much in the way of dividing the peoples of this country, setting one lot against another, as did the conscription issue at that particular time, and the manner in which it was dealt with by the government of the day. Now it was because of that fact that, when the government of the day saw looming on the horizon the possibility of a future war, it was recognized that this question of conscription would present itself immediately. It was of importance therefore to national unity that a position should be taken and stated by the administration which would prevent any of the kind of controversy and bitterness which had previously arisen, and would maintain the unity of the country at a time when the situation might be most critical. Having that in mind, the government of the day—this was before the present war began—and, not merely