

One speaker has said that this is the last opportunity which we members will enjoy to discuss and to determine this question of conscription. Well, let us determine it now. This is the debate and now is the time. I noted with a great deal of pleasure the statement of the Prime Minister in his speech of yesterday that he invited a full discussion of conscription—an invitation which I propose to accept.

It would be easy for me to argue the question of conscription on its merits, because there are so many sound arguments on both sides. I suppose that one could list every possible relevant fact and argument in two opposing columns and, after a contemplation of the weight of both sides, could honestly come to either conclusion. But for me the time for argument has gone by. The decision on this question was taken out of my hands. It was made for me by an authority that I acknowledge to be my superior and to whom I owe a very willing obedience. It has been decided by the high court of the electors of the riding from which I come.

The pledge which was the subject of the plebiscite had a number of aspects. In the first instance, it bound the government in whose name it was given. In the second instance, it bound the Liberal and Conservative parties, perhaps others, whose leaders and many of whose members spoke on their behalf. Finally, it bound the individuals whose personal honour was involved in the keeping of the pledge. The pledge against conscription was an individual obligation on all those members of the house who adopted it by outright spoken declaration, or who tacitly became bound to it by acceptance of its benefits. The pledge was a matter of general and national concern and it was also a matter of private concern, between each individual member and his respective electors.

The request for release affected that personal relationship between myself and my own constituents; and yet the reference was made to the people for the release from the pledge without any prior consultation with the members of the house. It appeared in the speech from the throne which was prepared before the arrival of the members in Ottawa at the opening of the session. I am not complaining—do not misunderstand me—of the decision to hold a plebiscite. It is the right of the government to take the initiative and to stand or fall by the consequences. It is not only its right to take the initiative; at times it is its duty to do so. So I am not complaining of being presented with a *fait accompli* with respect to the request for release from the pledge.

I am only pointing out that the plebiscite was a government measure pure and simple, and the government, having taken the responsibility of asking for an expression of the views of the electors whom I represent, no doubt will not be surprised—it will expect—that I follow the decision of my electors, as I understand it, that I heed what they say. This was the appeal to Caesar.

Now, then, what was it that my constituents said to me in the course of the plebiscite campaign? In the speech delivered in the house on the second reading of the bill by the Prime Minister on February 25, 1942, he made abundantly clear the meaning which would be attached to the answer by the government. The Prime Minister said, as reported at page 823 of *Hansard*:

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.

That is to say, if the electors voted “no”, there would be no conscription; if the electors voted “yes”, there would be no conscription still, unless and until the government sees fit. However much that may resemble a proposition of “heads I win, tails you lose”, that was the meaning attached to the question by the government. That was the construction which was placed upon it, and I submit now that neither the Prime Minister nor the government can be charged with inconsistency if the government now contends that “no” means “no” and that “yes” means “no” at its pleasure. That was the plain logic of the situation.

But, Mr. Speaker, I am troubled. I am troubled with this question: Is there any obligation on the part of the public to accept for themselves the interpretation placed by the government upon the question which they were asked to answer? The electors when called upon to vote are not civil servants to be instructed by a government; they are, in fact, its masters. They are not servants at all; they are masters. They are not confined in the expression of their opinions to any narrow formula that may be placed in print upon a bill. They can express any opinion they please by any method they care to adopt, and they, too, can announce in advance or afterwards the meaning which they place upon their vote. This they did in my constituency, and the meaning which