

When, prior to its outbreak, the possibility of war in Europe was discussed in Canada, it was thought of in terms of another European war, the scene of which would be confined for the most part to Europe. The last war was still much in mind. The incidents connected with conscription and the results which flowed from its application remained vivid memories. The mere thought of the repetition of anything of the kind was abhorrent to the minds of most people in Canada. Few, if any, even dreamed at the time that war might so spread as to bring into the orbit of actual hostilities, any part of the western hemisphere. When people on this side of the Atlantic thought of war during the autumn and winter months of 1938 and the early spring of 1939, they thought first of the protecting power of the British fleet. The war between Japan and China, though it had been in existence for some years, seemed so remote as to have little or no bearing upon the security of the Pacific coast of this continent.

When the general elections were held during the month of March in 1940, the recollections of 1917 were still vividly in mind. Also in the mind of the people were commitments made in and out of parliament respecting no conscription for service in the armed forces overseas. The relatively greater part which the air and naval forces would play in the present war, in comparison with the last; the obligation which Canada had assumed with respect to the commonwealth air training plan; the need for the immediate development of the navy, the importance of developing the manufacture of munitions on a large scale, all pointed to the unwisdom of raising any issue with respect to conscription.

It was not until the intent and might of nazi aggression had become apparent by the subjugation of Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, Belgium and France, that its danger to all free countries began to be appreciated. When Italy entered the war, concern was still mostly with what might happen around the shores of the Mediterranean and in Africa. It was difficult for many to believe that the enemy might, some day, be battering our own shores on the Atlantic, and even on the Pacific.

During the past year, however, the bombardment of Britain from the air, the varying fortunes of her armies in a continuously increasing number of areas; the vast additions in resources and man-power gained by Germany through the countries she had overrun; the unrest in the far east; all this, and much else, helped, during the past year, to change the picture vastly as viewed from this side.

On the other hand, Russia's entry into the war on the side of the allies served to lessen anxiety with respect to the need for men needed for the army.

Japan's declaration of war against the United States and the British commonwealth, the consequences flowing from her treacherous attack upon United States' possessions in the Pacific, and upon British and Dutch possessions in Asia and the Indies; the present menace of her armed forces to the island dominions of Australia and New Zealand; all these have given rise to fresh anxiety throughout Canada.

The declaration of war by Germany and Italy, as well as Japan, against the United States has brought the United States into the conflict against the combined axis powers. This, in turn, has given rise to problems which the government is facing in meeting its obligations with respect to the joint defence of the two countries. The declaration signed at Washington on January 1 by 26 nations to combine their efforts against the axis powers, has still further emphasized Canada's responsibilities.

In a world situation so involved, with enemies on every front, with no one able to say what the outcome of battle in other parts of the world may bring of immediate and increased danger to our own land, the government feels strongly that it should be perfectly free to recommend to parliament whatever course of action it deems essential to the security of our own country, and to the preservation of freedom in our own and other lands.

Such freedom the government does not possess at the present time, not because of any limitations upon the powers of parliament—parliament is at all times supreme—but because of past commitments made by the government and, regardless of party, by most members of this house.

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.