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CONSCRIPTION IN CANADA

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The passage of the Conscription Bill through the lower house of the Canadian Parliament by a vote of 118 to 55 is an event of more than mere military significance.

This bill, "the Military Service Act of 1917," includes men between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Men between twenty and thirty-five are to be called first.

Roughly speaking, the Canadian population of, say, 8,000,000 is about a quarter French. Most of the French-Canadians live in the Province of Quebec, but there are a few hundred thousand in the Provinces of Ontario and Manitoba.

When the war broke out, it was announced that Canadian military service would remain voluntary. Under that pledge the number of men to be enlisted for overseas service was raised gradually from 20,000 to 500,000.

When, in January, 1916, Parliament allowed the full increase, Sir Robert Borden, the Conservative Prime Minister, said: "In speaking in the first three months of the war, I made it clear to the people of Canada that we did not propose any conscription. I repeat that announcement with emphasis to-day." In his turn, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the Liberal party, and the most distinguished of French-Canadians, declared that "conscription has come in England, but conscription is not to come in Canada." In the debate the other day Sir Wilfrid said no word against conscription, but his position regarding it may be thus summarized: He has no desire to diminish the numbers of those to be sent abroad, but he urges that the extra force to be raised by conscription can be raised by the present volunteer system. Moreover, he points out, under existing law the Government's actual power is limited to repel "invasion" and to "the defense of Canada," and it has no power to conscript for service abroad; for the present Parliament, therefore, to give the Government that power would not be just, because with its many vacancies the present Parliament does not fully represent the people's will. Furthermore, the Constitution fixes the life of a Parliament at five years, and the present Parliament's life has been extended a year on the understanding that there was to be no conscription. Finally, as British procedure provides for an appeal to the people where important issues arise on which they have not been consulted, the present Parliament's attempt violates constitutional right. Hence the Government should have appealed to the people. But Sir Wilfrid's proposal of a referendum was defeated by a majority of 49.

On the other hand, Sir Wilfrid's opponents assert that the question of conscription is a grave problem for experts, and should in no event be submitted to uninformed public opinion; that it is necessary to legislate upon it at once, and with the means at hand. To Sir Wilfrid's "invasion" argument they reply by asking if the present war is not really a war in defense of Canada, for Canadian troops in France are fighting to protect Canada from Germany's threatened future invasion and against an envelopment of what Sir Wilfrid Laurier has well called "the black shroud of Germany's insolence, cruelties, and barbarities." Finally, Sir Wilfrid's opponents call attention to his own eloquent speeches bidding God-speed to the soldiers departing from Canada, and his implied pledge that the country would support them to the final issue; and his opponents assert that, in view of the 35,000 Canadians killed in the war, the duty rests with the Canadians at home immediately to assure those still fighting of support to the final issue, and at once to give a guaranty that the sacrifices already made have not been in vain.

THE FRENCH-CANADIANS

Sir Wilfrid's position is peculiar. Foreseeing that the will of the Canadian people as a whole was for conscription, he thought to persuade his French-speaking constituents to support the movement by moving for a referendum, and thus avoiding a situation regarding conscription like that in Ireland. If he had favored the immediate enactment of a conscription law, his leadership might have passed to M. Bourassa, the Nationalist leader, and the disaffection in the Province of Quebec would in consequence have become solidified and increased the difficulties of the Government. That disaffection has become solidified enough. Correctly assuming the passage by the upper house of the Conscription Bill, the French-Canadians have appealed to their provincial Premier to petition the British Government for redress against Parliament's action. Though the cry of "race and religion" has been a feature of every Dominion election, English-speaking Canadians did not suppose that the opposition to conscription would be so strong.

Quebec has sent but a very slender proportion of the total Canadian forces, and, with only one exception, no French-Canadian unit has ever been brought to full strength without drafts from other units. The rest of Canada resents this, and refuses to accept M. Bourassa's contention that any further weakening of the country's man power would handicap agricultural production and other essential industries, that this would not alone threaten the nation's economic life but would also threaten its political life by promoting racial conflict, and that it would thus weaken the cause of Great Britain and her allies. Yet "La Croix," a paper published in the city of Quebec, declares that, as for half a century the Confederation has been fatal to French-Canadians, the time has now come when Lower Canada should separate from Upper Canada, and, while still subject to the British Crown, be administered by the French-Canadian majority. The editor of the Montreal "L'Idéal Catholique," as reported, even urges Quebec to secede from the Confederation, form a French republic on the banks of the St. Lawrence, and impose taxes on all exports from Ontario passing down the river!

Threats of secession are perhaps not to be taken too seriously. Disloyalty, we think, is hardly the French-Canadians' motive. Most of them, we believe, oppose conscription, but do not oppose the British connection, and many of them oppose only the method of obtaining conscription.

But, with the French-Canadian press practically unanimous against conscription, and with signs of secession in the French clerical press, it is perhaps not surprising that the rest of Canada sees in the Quebec attitude nothing but disloyalty, and is more determined than ever to make it certain that Quebec shall not prevent the Dominion from doing its entire and splendid duty to the men at the front.

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