

Sir, when the policy of conscription was introduced last session, it seemed to me that, if the object of the Government was really to assist in winning the war, they were singularly blind as to the condition of the country whose affairs it was their duty to administer. We divided, as I have said, upon this question. I challenge no man's conscience; I respect everybody's views upon this question. But now, Sir, that the fight has been fought, now that the smoke of battle has cleared away, now that the Government are in the saddle—no matter by what methods—in the face of what has taken place, in the face of what is taking place every day, I ask the Government if they will not question their own methods, and if they still believe that the policy that was adopted by them is the surest way of helping to win the war. I think the views of the Government changed on that question when they passed in December last an Order in Council to which it is now the duty to call the attention of the House. On the third of December last the following Order in Council was passed:

His Excellency the Governor General in Council, on the recommendation of the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Laird Borden, the Prime Minister, and under and in virtue of the provisions of The Military Service Act, is pleased to order and it is hereby ordered that in any case where a person engaged in agriculture has applied for exemption and such exemption has been refused—

Mark those words "and such exemption has been refused"

—the Minister of Militia and Defence, if he is of the opinion that the services of such person are essential for promoting agricultural production may, by order under his hand, discharge such person from military service.

In the Act passed last session it was provided that conscription was to be universal, that the Government should not interfere, that judges should be appointed for the purpose of determining who, and who alone, should be exempted. Yet here is an Order in Council, whereby a minister of the Crown is empowered to discharge any farmer or any one engaged in agriculture if, in the minister's opinion, it is believed that his services would be better upon the farm than in the ranks. Well, Sir, if such be the case, why was this Order made, I want to know? Why was it made during the election?

Some hon. MEMBERS: Hear, hear.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER: Why was it made during the election? It was because there were so many complaints coming

from all parts of the country that 4 p.m. if the Act was to be applied it would disorganize the country for agricultural production, and this demand was so insistent that this order was passed, an order which the Government have no power to pass.

Some hon. MEMBERS: Hear, hear.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER: Where, in the Military Service Act, is power given to the Government to exempt anybody? Judges can grant exemptions; but I am not aware that, under the Act, there is any member of the Government authorized to take such liberties with the enactments of Parliament. In this connection, a very important correspondence has taken place (which I hold in my hands), giving the opinion of the law experts of the Government upon their own action. My right hon. friend the Prime Minister received in last month the following letter:

Uxbridge, Ont., Feb. 18, 1918.

The Honourable Sir Robert Borden,  
Ottawa.

Dear Sir,

On the 28th of November last, while delivering your speech to a full house at Uxbridge, you said that if any farmer's sons that always worked on the farm and always intended to do so, if they thought that they did not receive justice at the appeal courts, if they wrote to you, you would give them their exemption.

Some hon. MEMBERS: Hear, hear.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER: (Reading):

Now I feel that I have not received justice at these appeal tribunals, and I am appealing to you for justice. I am sending you a copy of my appeal. I have always worked on the farm since childhood and always intend to. Thirty-eight of my nearest neighbors signed a petition stating that I would be of more service to my country in working my farm and producing food.

This letter was evidently passed on by the Prime Minister to the Department of Justice, and the following is the answer which my correspondent received from that department:

Military Service Branch,  
Royal Bank Building,  
Ottawa, March 1st, 1918.

Dear Sir,

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of February 18th addressed to the Honourable Sir Robert Borden.

In reply I have to inform you that no minister of the Crown has the power to interfere in any way with the working of an Act passed by parliament. All matters of exemption must be left to the sole discretion of the local tribunals and appeal courts,——