

SHALL FREE DEMOCRACY PREVAIL?

The time has come in Canada to make a stand for free discussion free elections, freedom of all kinds. It is freedom, democracy, and justice that we are fighting for in France. We owe it to our soldiers to keep freedom alive in Canada, to "keep the home fires burning." In war there is a tendency to restrict freedom. Some restrictions may be necessary, but they are necessary evils, and should be kept within the narrowest possible limits. There is grave danger that they may be carried too far. Every community has its Prussian junkers, who are ready to seize upon a state of war as a pretext for domineering over their neighbors. War is the opportunity for heroes at the front. It is the opportunity for tyrants at home.

In this election the issue is clearly defined. On one side there are continual encroachments on liberty and disregard for fundamental rights. On the other side is a steady defence of liberty and right.

Both parties agreed to one extension of the life of Parliament. The motives were patriotic and conscientious. Yet perhaps here the first false step was taken. Here tyranny obtained its opportunity to enact laws without the consent of the people and without a mandate from the people. It was not intended that such an opportunity should be given, and to seize it by violence and fraud was a distinct act of bad faith.

Conscription is a kind of measure which ought not to be passed except by a Parliament possessing a clear mandate from the people. It was passed by a Parliament elected in 1911 upon the basis of the census of 1901. It was elected for five years, and in its sixth year it had no authority from the people. This added strength to Sir Wilfrid Laurier's demand that there should be a referendum. That would not only have safe-guarded popular rights, but it would have excluded party politics. Liberals and Conservatives would have voted for or against, without any consideration of party gain or loss. The real opinion of the people would have been obtained upon this question alone, confused with no other question, and without party bias.

This fair and reasonable demand being refused, the only thing remaining was to have a general election. Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the greater part of the Liberal party insisted that the voice of the people should be heard, and refused to consent to any further extension of the life of Parliament, to any further exercise of power by a government and Parliament having no mandate from the people. It is because of this firm stand for popular rights that you are able to exercise your franchise to-day.

Still fearing and distrusting the people of Canada, the government introduced a bill designed to rob a large part of them of the franchise, of their rights as citizens and free men and women. Many were disfranchised, not because by word or deed they had shown hostility to the country, but simply because of the accident of birth. Many of these persons had actually left Germany or Austria because they detested the very tyranny against which our soldiers are fighting. They did not force themselves upon us. We invited them to come in and share their lot with us. We promised them the rights of citizen-

ship. This promise was basely broken, as basely as Germany broke its pledge to protect the neutrality of Belgium. Our promise was treated as a scrap of paper.

Even persons born in allied countries were disfranchised for no other reason than that their mother tongue was German or one of the numerous languages of Austria-Hungary. Many of these were natives of Russia, whose parents had migrated for the express purpose of escaping from the rule of our enemy.

The franchise has been granted to women in Ontario and the Western Provinces for Provincial purposes, and according either to law or custom they should have had the franchise for Federal purposes. The new Franchise Act withholds it from all except the women relatives of soldiers overseas. These relatives, of course, ought to have the vote. But there is no excuse for disfranchising women who have not the good fortune to be related to able-bodied men. Most of these are women of British birth or descent. Many have done splendid work for the cause which Canada has at heart. Defenders of the law say that men of German or Austrian birth are possible traitors. Then, by putting British women in the same class, they also insult British women as possible traitors and suspects.

The inspiration of this iniquitous law came from Germany, and especially from Prussia. It is by juggling with the franchise that the common people of Germany are deprived of their rightful voice in the Reichstag, and the Junkers, or aristocrats, retain their domination. True, things are not quite as bad yet in Canada as in Germany. But there is no assurance that they will not become as bad. The Parliament of Canada could if it chose disfranchise Roman Catholics, or any other religious denomination which is in a minority. It could disfranchise workingmen by insisting on a large property qualification for voting. It could make a property qualification for women voters. There is nothing that Parliament cannot do in the way of preventing the expression of the popular will. Our Junkers have discovered the way. Is it not likely that they will use their power, going from bad to worse until they turn popular elections into a farce, and make themselves absolute rulers of Canada?

The authors of this law pose as the friends of the soldier. But the soldier is just as much interested in liberty and justice as any other citizen. When the soldier returns, he can assert his rights only under a truly democratic system, and the authors of this law have struck the first blow at democracy, to be followed by other blows, unless soldiers and other citizens assert their rights now, in this election. The position of the private soldier in Germany is one of virtual slavery, in peace and in war. Our Canadian Junkers and plutocrats would be delighted to reduce the Canadian private soldier to the same position.

The crimes committed by Germany in this war may be traced back to State-worship, to tyranny on the part of governments and servility on the part of the people. The State or Government exacts