

kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falleth”.

The restriction upon the power of the government was necessary at the outset to preserve national unity. It has helped until recently to maintain national unity. In the past few months it has, however, become a matter of controversy and a threat to unity. You know full well that a foremost aim of my public life has been the preservation of the unity of Canada. I must say that under the changed conditions of to-day, and with Canada's record in the war what it has been over the past two and a half years, I see no reason why the removal of the restriction should weaken our unity. Instead, I believe firmly that its removal will help to overcome a source of irritation and disunity within our own country. It will, I believe, also help to remove a source of misunderstanding in the other countries united with Canada in the common effort to preserve freedom in the world.

Why Plebiscite Necessary

I come now to the question: why have the government and parliament not tackled this question on their own responsibility without resorting to a plebiscite?

The answer is very simple. Had the government taken the position that, as conditions had changed, it did not intend longer to be bound by any pledge, it would immediately have been said that the government had violated the most sacred undertaking ever given in its name.

It would most certainly have been said that, before so deciding, we should have referred the matter to the people in a general election, or a referendum, or as we are doing, by means of a plebiscite, and asked to be relieved from all past commitments. It would have been asserted that we were no better than the Nazis; that we had ceased to have regard for the will of the people and were now relying upon force to give effect to policies which were the direct opposite of those on which we had been returned to power. Had the present government attempted to do such a thing, does anyone imagine it would have been able to retain the confidence of parliament? For the government to have disregarded its pledged word would, I believe, have helped to destroy faith, not merely in the government, but in democratic institutions. Far from increasing our total war effort, the disunity caused by such a breach of faith would, I believe, have made our effort less effective. By such an arbitrary act, we might well have destroyed the national unity on which our war effort is founded.

Maintenance of Faith in Democratic Institutions

There never was a time when the need is what it is to-day to conserve what still exists of faith in democratic institutions. The present unhappy state of the world is, in large part, the result of broken pledges. Nazi Germany has erected bad faith and the broken pledge into a principle of action. Bad faith, broken pledges, and disregard of the popular will, are the forces against which Canada is fighting to-day.

But, you may say, no one would expect the government to have taken any such arbitrary action. What the government should have done was to have gone to parliament and asked the members to give it a free hand. It is said that a release would have been granted immediately. But would it? I am certain, in fact, it would not. And that for the simple reason that members of parliament would, for the most part, have taken the position that they were as much bound by past commitments as were the members of the government.

Canada's War Effort Being Placed in False Light

And that brings me to the last of the questions to which you are awaiting a reply: “Why, after two and a half years of war, has it become necessary to have the restriction removed?”

One answer is that this restriction is being represented as the bar to an all-out effort on Canada's part. It makes no difference whether conscription for service overseas would add to Canada's total effort or not, the fact that the government is not free to consider its adoption is made to appear as limiting Canada's war effort.

The truth, of course, is that our army to-day is just as large as it would have been if conscription for overseas service had been adopted. The absence of conscription for overseas service has not limited our war effort. The lack of power to impose such conscription has, however, placed our war effort in a wholly false light before our own citizens, and, what is worse, before our allies. In other words, conscription has been made the symbol of a total effort, regardless of all Canada is doing to help win the war.

Issue not Conscription—but Powers of Government

The issue at present is not conscription; it is whether or not the government, subject to its responsibility to parliament, is to be free to decide that question itself in the light of all national considerations. The government is not asking you to say whether or not conscription should be adopted. That responsibility the government is asking you to leave to itself and to parliament, with entire freedom to decide the question on its merits.