

How then, you ask, are the hands of the government tied? What is it that binds the government? What is the restriction which the government seeks to have removed? Why was the restriction ever imposed? Why should the government and parliament not tackle this question on their own responsibility without resorting to a plebiscite, and why, after two and a half years of war, has it become necessary to have the restriction removed?

These are questions which have been repeatedly raised ever since the government announced its intention to ask you to free its hands. They are very natural questions. They are questions to which you will expect a satisfactory answer.

Legal Powers and Moral Obligations

If the only thing that mattered in the relations between the people and the government was the possession of power, the government would, of course, be free to do as it pleases. That is what obtains under a dictatorship. No account is taken of the will of the people. It is on that principle that the Nazi, Italian and Japanese dictators are acting to-day. Under democratic government, however, quite as important as the possession of power is its exercise in accordance with the will of the people.

When those who hold representative and responsible positions have given a definite promise to the people, they have created an obligation to act in accordance with that promise, until the people are again consulted. Such an obligation may not be binding according to law, but as an obligation it is no less sacred.

There are those, I know, who make light of what they call "political promises." It will, I think, be generally agreed that a political platform or programme is one thing; a definite and concrete promise or pledge is quite another. Because of circumstances, a government may, without breaking faith, fail to carry out, to the letter, its full programme. No change in circumstances could, however, justify a government in ignoring a specific pledge to the people, unless it was clear that the safety of the nation was immediately involved, and there was no possibility of consulting the people.

Nature of Restriction upon Government

The pledge from which the present government is asking to be freed is not related to any ordinary day-to-day matter of policy. It is a pledge which was made specifically in relation to the conduct of the present war. It is a pledge which was given, by government and opposition alike, before and since the outbreak of the war, and to which, at the time it was made, no political party took exception. The present House of Commons was returned in the light of that pledge.

The pledge to which I refer is, as you are all aware, that, as a method of raising men for military service overseas, resort would not be had to conscription. In other words, that voluntary enlistment would be the method by which men would be raised for service overseas.

That promise is a restriction upon the government to-day. It is, as I have said, not a legal restriction. It is a moral obligation and I need not add a moral obligation of the most solemn kind. It is equally the one and only restriction upon the exercise by the government of its full power.

How Restriction came to be Imposed

You ask: why was the restriction ever imposed? Why was the promise given? "Surely," many will say, "the government should have known that it would need a free hand in time of war. Why, then, did the government tie its own hands?" The answer to this question is very simple.

The pledge not to impose conscription, as everyone knows, was the result of Canada's experience in the last war. The way in which conscription was then introduced, and the way it was enforced, gave rise to bitter resentment. Moreover, events proved that conscription in the last war had little or no military value.

Before, and at the commencement of the war, the people of Canada, like the peoples of most other countries, continued to think of the present war in terms of the last war. They thought of the situation *overseas* as they remembered it from 1914 to 1918. They thought of the situation *in Canada* in terms of the disunity which followed the introduction of conscription. They thought of just another European war. They most certainly did not think of a war in which all the nations of the world would be in danger. Much less did Canadians think of the war as one in which Canada might become the most coveted of all the prizes of war. That, however, is the actual situation to-day.

The pledge not to impose conscription for service overseas was given in order to maintain the unity of Canada. Without this assurance, I do not believe that parliament would have given, as it did, prompt and wholehearted approval to Canada's entry into the war. It was the trust of the people in the pledged word of the government which then maintained our national unity.

Importance of National Unity

We must never lose sight of the importance of national unity. National unity is, I believe, more essential to the success of the war effort of any country than most other factors combined. "Every