

Our Ottawa Letter

Conscription the only subject in Parliament

(By The Guide Special Correspondent)

Ottawa, June 22.—Conscription and nothing but conscription has been heard of in parliament this week—unless it be anti-conscription. The debate on the second reading of the conscription bill, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's amendment calling for a referendum, and a six months' hoist sub-amendment, moved by J. A. Barrette, Conservative Nationalist member for Berthier has continued throughout the week with every indication that parliament is suffering from an attack of "nerves." Impassioned and eloquent speeches have been made, some of which have been remarkable for the inconsistencies which they contain. Members have ridiculed the possibility, and questioned the propriety, of asking the soldiers to vote on a referendum and in almost the next breath have advocated a general election, and presumably, the taking of the soldiers' votes for individual candidates—a much more difficult problem. They have remonstrated with French Canadians from Quebec for talking "wildly" and in the next few moments predicted that dire consequences might result if a moribund parliament attempts to force conscription upon that province. They have urged the immediate necessity of securing reinforcements for the front under the terms of the bill and then asked the government to give recruiting another trial before bringing it into force. Truly parliament never presented such a bewildering mass of ideas.

Although most regrettable from the national standpoint the six months' hoist amendment moved by a government supporter has had the happy effect of making it possible to line the members of the house up behind three definite ideas. The larger group consists of the Conservative and Liberal members who will vote outright for the bill. The second group is composed of French Canadian Liberals and a considerable number of English speaking Liberals who will vote for a referendum and some of whom, when it is defeated, will vote for the second reading. The third group who might properly be described as the party of "negation" will vote for the six months' hoist and against the measure. At the moment it is believed that this group will be made up of the major part of the French Conservative members sitting behind the government. It is to say the least a curious situation and Liberals assert that the hoist was moved with the express purpose of tempting French Liberals to vote for it and against the policy of conscription, even if endorsed by the people. They assert, however, that they will not do so but will be content to support the referendum proposal. L. J. Gauthier, of St. Hyacinthe, who is so violently opposed to conscription that he made the open threat in the house that it would be rescinded by Quebec, in referring to the Barrette motion for the six months' hoist said:—

"I was amazed at the amendment to the amendment introduced by the member for Berthier (Mr. Barrette) and seconded by the member for Labelle (Mr. Ashin). These two gentlemen belonged to the 54th Battalion of Sherbrooke; they were appointed lieutenants. But after having enlisted they decided, one to propose and the other to second, the motion that the bill be given the six months' hoist. I suppose although they had enlisted they decided that they did not want to fight. This amendment is a farce. It has been engineered by the government itself. When the government appeal to the good will of the opposition, they should play the game fairly. They have played the game; they have laid on the table of the house their trump card—the little joker from Berthier."

Sir Robert Borden took occasion, however, to deny that the government was responsible for the Barrette motion.

Liberal Party Split

The members of the house who have been in the limelight and are likely to continue to be until the debate is

over are the group of Liberals who will break with Sir Wilfrid Laurier when the bill is voted upon. Those who have so far indicated their intention of doing so include Hugh Guthrie, Fred Pardee, chief Liberal whip, Hon. Geo. Graham, the deskmate of the leader of the opposition and Geo. McCraney of Saskatoon. All have declared themselves to be in favor of the principle of conscription if the voluntary enlistment has failed. Mr. Guthrie believes it has failed; Mr. Pardee was not so sure and asked the government to give it one more trial under better auspices before enforcing the bill. Mr. Graham thought a referendum unnecessary because he believes that there will be a general election. Mr. McCraney expressed the fear that grave consequences would result should a moribund parliament attempt to put such a measure into force "in certain parts of Canada." He believes that there should be an election which would produce a new parliament which, being three or four years away from an election would not be so liable to "play the political game."

Would Conscription Wealth

The opposition members supporting conscription with hardly an exception demanded wider conscription of the wealth and the resources of the country. Perhaps this demand was put in the most vigorous language by Fred Pardee who said: "This government and this parliament will be accused and rightly accused if we bring not forth further conscription of wealth and of resources. It will be said that we are willing and content by a mere aye, to spill the blood of the youth of Canada, but we are afraid to spill the rich man's money."

Mr. Graham refuted his former suggestion that vacant lands should be taxed. In this correction he said:—

"The government would be warranted in making every acre of vacant land in Canada, which is held for speculation pay taxation during the war time. That would have a double result. If the owner of such vacant land wished to escape taxation, he would have the land cultivated, and this would bring greater good to the country as a whole and would furnish traffic for our system of transportation."

Laurier in Opposition

It was generally agreed that Sir Wilfrid Laurier's speech in proposing a referendum was an able effort. The leader of the opposition was, quite apparently, aware that the majority of those both in the house and galleries, he was addressing did not share the views he gave expression to. Nevertheless his statements were followed with the closest attention and there were no visible indications of dissent from members of the house. Sir Wilfrid argued that it was not a case of Quebec alone being opposed to the proposals of the government. It was a complicated question, probably one of the most complicated that ever came before the house. There was no doubt that regarding it, there are deep differences in the country. Men with whom he had worked in political association for 30 years favor conscription, while men on the other side of the house supporting the government were opposed to it. It could not be said therefore that it is a good or wise policy in the face of such a condition to force compulsory service upon the people. "There is no use in blinking the facts," he said, "let us face it courageously, and face it so as to have harmony amongst ourselves, and that we may bring the greatest strength to the support of our troops at the front, as well as to the cause of the Empire in the war. We live under British institutions, we are a democratic country, problems we have, problems we have always had and shall always have, the solution of our present problem is to appeal to our people, to appeal to them to lay aside passions and prejudices and to ask them to make a sacrifice of something that they hold

dear upon the altar of our common country."

Sir Wilfrid, after expressing his regret that the French people have not enlisted as they should, said that he had adopted the idea of a referendum because it has made enormous progress in the western provinces as a method of political action. If we are to have peace, he said, we must meet the wishes of the laboring classes. When the consultation has been made, and a verdict pronounced, he would pledge his reputation that every man would submit to it, including the citizens of the province of Quebec. Sir Wilfrid then stated that he did not propose to bind those who stood behind and around him in the house. "If there is ever to be a time," he said, "of all times this is the time, when every man should think for himself, decide for himself, and act for himself. This moment is too solemn, the issue is too great, the questions involved in the measure are of too far reaching importance to have them decided by any other voice than the voice of each man's individual conscience. I am very firm in the belief that when the voice of every man has spoken, the aggregate voice will be the right voice and the right solution. At all events, it will have this effect, that it will be the final arbiter and will put an end to the agitation which is now going on. It will bring about harmony, now much shaken, and it will be a vindication of that spirit of democracy which we hope and believe must be the future social inspiration of the world."

Sir George Foster, who followed Sir Wilfrid, expressed the belief that the principle of the Militia Act gave the present parliament a full mandate to adopt compulsory service. Its adoption was justified he said by the need of more men and the failure of the voluntary system. Parliament had the right and the duty to take courageous action and give the people the right lead. He believed that once the law was invoked it would be obeyed in Quebec as elsewhere. He described the referendum as "but a dilatory, miserable evasion of responsibility." It would not settle the question for it would have to be dealt with by a new parliament. He was disposed to blame Sir Wilfrid and his colleagues for the situation in Quebec, maintaining that if during the past three years Sir Wilfrid and his French speaking supporters in the house had given a clear and incisive lead to their compatriots in Quebec the present situation would not have developed.

Recruiting Held Up

Hon. Frank Oliver maintained that the voluntary system of enlistment had failed largely because of the actions of the government. The government had failed to give it proper direction. There had been no honest effort on the part of the administration to maintain the honor of the Dominion. General Hughes had stated that one serious hindrance to recruiting had been an order passed by the government that no more battalions should be authorized excepting through an order-in-council. As a result of this there had been a drop in recruiting. A deliberate policy had been entered into between the prime minister and the minister of militia at the request of the munition makers to retard recruiting.

Hughes Exposes Borden

Mr. Oliver's contention that recruiting has been discouraged at one period was backed up in a rather sensational manner by Sir Sam Hughes when he spoke on the following day. He said that the dread had been expressed that workmen could not be found for the various industries if recruiting did not let up. The Imperial Munitions Board and the minister of finance each became "anxious and restrictive." Finally Lord Shaughnessy was influenced by the agitation and openly proclaimed

himself. Agitations manifested themselves all over the country. The Prime Minister yielded to these influences.

"On what occasion was it that I suggested letting up on recruiting?" Sir Robert inquired.

Sir Sam replied that the leader of the government on more than one occasion had asked him if he could not let up on recruiting. He had pointed out that there was a tremendous agitation in Toronto over the subject, that Sir Thomas White had told him that there was a storm brewing in Toronto and that the agitation was due to the fact that men could not be obtained as workers. Mr. Flavelle of the Imperial Munitions Board had been insistent that these men should not be taken. "If the Prime Minister will permit me," continued Sir Sam, "I will read letters that will cover the thing, letters from himself."

Sir Robert said he would be very glad to have the ex-minister do so and Sir Sam replied that he would like the Prime Minister to see one of the letters before he read it.

Sir Sam then went on to discuss a controversy which arose as to the raising of too many battalions in certain cities. He said: "There has been a lot of guff, privately and publicly, along this line. The finance minister on one occasion became excited about the raising of three battalions in Toronto. If the Prime Minister does not object I purpose reading some of these letters dealing with these battalions. There is one here which is marked 'confidential'; I will let the Prime Minister see it." Sir Sam started to walk over to Sir Robert's desk to show him the letter, but the Prime Minister rose and said: "I do not care to examine letters in the house. If my hon. friend desires to read confidential letters one would suppose that the proper course would be to show them to me in advance. The hon. gentleman will have to take his own course in the matter."

Sir Sam Hughes: "Well, I am prepared to take my own course in the matter; I shall not read the letter. It has been referred to in the house, however. There is nothing in my letter that I am ashamed of, and it is also marked confidential. However, if the Prime Minister does not wish the letter to be read—"

Sir Robert Borden: "Was it a letter written to me?"

Sir Sam Hughes: "It was written by the Prime Minister to me."

Sir Robert Borden: As to reading it, my hon. friend will have to take his own course."

Sir Sam Hughes: "I will take my own course; I will not read it."

Stand of Quebec

The position of the Liberal members for Quebec was voiced by a number of members, but most eloquently by Hon. Rodolphe Lemieux and Ernest Lapointe, of Kamouraska, one of the most talented members of the house of commons. "I am opposed to this bill," he said, "tem suited for this country in the present war, and that coercion will be detrimental to the one aim we all desire to attain, namely, the winning of the war. My second objection is that this proposal is a flagrant and direct violation of all the pledges given by the leaders and public men of the country to the Canadian people since the beginning of the war, upon the strength of which pledges so many sacrifices have been made. I also oppose this bill because it involves a radical and most serious change in our constitutional relations and constitutes a departure from well-known principles agreed to by all parties as to the constitution of this confederation. I claim that this Parliament has no mandate to enact such a change without consulting the Canadian people."