

National Unity
Essential to
Victory



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National Unity Essential to Victory

I.

There is Union Government in Canada. It has come home, slowly but steadily, to all those Canadians whose hearts are in the war that the whole power of Canada can only be put into the struggle if the energies of the country are directed by an administration national in character.

The reasons why the continuation of the traditional system of a party government with a party opposition makes united national effort impossible in time of war lie in the very nature of party politics.

A political party is not a permanent and unchanging institution rooted in the nature of things. It is not a religion, nor a superstition. Men are not born into it as they are into nationality. They do not owe it unchanging fidelity as a man owes his country. All ideas of this kind arise from a misconception of what a political party is.

A party is a voluntary association of men for the furthering of policies which they hold in common and which they deem necessary for the welfare of the state. All party organization is directed to this end. Political leaders have no attributes of sovereignty or overlordship. They are chosen because of special fitness for purposes of advocacy; and continue in their position only so long as they can retain the confidence of their associates.

In normal times parties form around questions of economics, of internal development and of external relations. In the nature of things there is a tendency on the part of the people to divide into parties in nearly equal proportions. There is thus a state of political equilibrium which results in each party alternately holding office, the best features of both party programmes thus being gradually adopted by the state.

This arrangement, which ordinarily works on the whole to the advantage of the public, breaks down, of necessity, in time of war. All the issues which give life to political parties are suspended upon the outbreak of war. The safety and the continued existence of the state become the supreme concern. The attitude of the patriotic citizen is then fixed by war considerations alone. It follows that in time of war political parties upon conventional lines have no reason for their existence. When a nation's life is threatened by an armed foe a new and imperative basis for the co-operation of the citizens appears. Those who are of like kind in their resolution to defend the commonwealth must get together. The common danger imposes upon them a common duty.

II.

In a nation a war the division among the people—if unfortunately there is division—must be upon the war and upon no other issue. Each man is for the vigorous prosecution of the war to the end that victory may result in a just peace; or, for any one of a number of varied reasons—pacifism, lack of understanding, cowardice, treasonable sympathy with the enemy—he is against any real national effort being put forward to win the war. A nation, even when it fights for its life, usually has its faint-hearts, its indifferents, its traitors and its quitters; and when they are not held in check by the vigorous assertion of the national will by the patriotic elements the result is disunion, threatening defeat. The situation in Russia during the past few months is an illustration of the disastrous effect of division upon the national will.

In order to make possible the full co-operation of all who are concerned to see full national strength exerted in the waging of war, a government representative of every patriotic element is necessary. Every British nation began the war with a party government in charge of its affairs; and at first trusted to them to direct the directions of national defence. As the stresses of the war developed they each found, in turn, that no party government could act efficiently for the nation in the momentous decisions that had to be made. Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada in succession replaced party administrations by national governments. In South Africa the government, though its membership is drawn exclusively from one source, is maintained in office by the fusion of the South African and Unionist parties.

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III.

In Canada the direction of affairs has been taken over by a national government representing all sections of the country and all classes of the people. It has been formed by the union of men who have sunk political differences and have subordinated political ambitions to their duty to their country in an hour of great national danger.

The government by its composition, and still more by its programme, is one that every Canadian who believes in winning the war can support, without question or apology. It came into existence in order that the whole moral power of Canada could be organized behind it, thus enabling the country to exert in the late stages of the war, a power which, it is quite conceivable, might affect the final result. A very narrow margin may divide victory from defeat in the final stages of the war.

Whether the Union Government is to be given the political power and moral authority to keep Canada in the war to the full extent of her strength rests now with the people. They are being offered, as an alternative to a national administration, a return to party government.

The proposal submitted to the people by Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his associates, is that the system which has failed everywhere and has been discarded in every belligerent country because it fostered national weakness and disunion, is to be re-established in Canada. The national energies are to be devoted primarily to carrying out a domestic programme. The war policy that is proposed is one of delay and indecision.

IV.

The programme outlined by Sir Wilfrid Laurier assumes that time is a matter of no consequence in the prosecution of the war. It is proposed to disorganize and throw away the machinery by which men to replace the wastage at the front are now being secured.

The procedure to be followed in the event of Sir Wilfrid's return to power has not been clearly defined in his declaration of policy; but it is plain that there is to be an abandonment of the whole present system of securing recruits. This is to be followed by a resort to voluntary enlistment. The methods by which in the earlier stages of the war battalions were recruited by voluntary enlistment are now obsolete; they could not be revived. If voluntary enlistment is again to be relied upon some new system must be devised. Of necessity it will have to be directed by the government—the day of voluntary campaigns for voluntary recruits is certainly past. If this effort fails there may be, the public is told, a return to compulsory enlistment; but before this can be done there must first be held a referendum of all the electors in Canada.

The leisurely processes thus indicated suggest that in the minds of those responsible for this programme there is illimitable time at the disposal of the Allies for the winning of the war. A little reflection will show that if the national government, which is actually on the job of securing soldiers in sufficient numbers to keep our armies up to the fighting strength, is replaced by a party government, pledged to carry out the programme suggested in Sir Wilfrid's manifesto, there will follow months of confusion when no progress whatever will be made towards securing reinforcements.

The work done under the provisions of the Military Service Act, which is now actually securing men by the thousands for the army, will be discarded. The suspension of the operation of the Military Service Act, to which Sir Wilfrid has pledged himself, would logically involve the return to their homes of all men who have joined the colors through the enforcement of the Act. There would be an interregnum of weeks while the new government was settling down to work. Then the working out of the plans of voluntary enlistment would take time. If finally it was decided to submit the Military Service Act to a Referendum, parliament would have to meet to create the necessary machinery.

V.

Consider the question as one may it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that if the Military Service Act is knocked on the head by the people's vote on December 17 there must be a virtually complete stoppage of enlistment for a period of at least four or five months.

Even if, under the auspices of a government headed by Sir Wilfrid Laurier and kept in power by the elements in our population which are the special sources of his political strength, voluntary enlistments in large numbers were secured—as to which there is surely reasonable grounds for doubt—they could not become available for actual service in the field, taking into account the time necessary for training, during the military season of 1918.

If, as seems highly probable, the decisive crisis of the war is reached next year, the inevitable consequence of a decision by the people of Canada in favor of a party as against Union government will be that only those troops which Canada has already enlisted, sadly reduced in number by the casualties of the coming winter, will be available for that stern struggle in the field which may determine the fate of the world for a thousand years.

VI.

Equally disastrous and far-reaching might be the moral consequences of the rejection of Union Government by the people and their adoption of a cautious policy of expediency. This war is a test of civilian morale as well as of military efficiency. Behind the armies stand the peoples; if they break no valor in the field will avert defeat. It was civilian war-weariness in Russia that destroyed the power of the Russian armies at the front and placed in jeopardy the cause that had been almost won. The reaction of Russian unrest and discontent has been felt in every Allied nation; while it has strengthened Germany to persist in her programme of world domination through the might of the sword.

What would be the effect upon public opinion in Great Britain and the other British dominions, in the United States, in France and in Italy if on December 17 the news should be flashed around the world that the people of Canada had dismissed from office a Union War Government which had been formed for the express purpose of more vigorously prosecuting the war, and had gone to the people for ratification of their programme of compulsory military service?

The people of these lands—our allies—would say that Canada, one of the first to enter the field in defence of civilization, had grown weary of the war and had decided to quit. And they would be right! It would be a staggering blow to the morale of every Allied nation and a corresponding encouragement to Berlin.

VII.

These disasters can only come upon Canada through failure of the people to recognize the seriousness of the issue which they are now called upon to face. In words that seem to have been written for this very day de Tocqueville said:

"For a generation which is manifestly called upon to witness the stern and terrible changes of the constitutions of the empires of the earth, the deadliest sin is thoughtlessness, the most noxious food is prejudice, and the most fatal disease is party spirit."

From thoughtlessness, prejudice and party spirit the people of Canada must turn aside; and uniting one with another go forward in the path of duty and sacrifice with unflinching steps.