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THE CASE AGAINST CONSCRIPTION

I

“WIN THE WAR,”

AND

LOSE CANADA

*by*

*Henri BOURASSA*

Director of LE DEVOIR

BIBLIOTHEQUE

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## The Case against Conscription

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## “WIN THE WAR,” AND LOSE CANADA<sup>1</sup>

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At the request of the *Evening Post*, I have not the slightest objection to state the present situation in Canada, as seen from the viewpoint of Canadian Nationalists, who hold that such principles and facts for which Canada is supposed to fight in Europe ought not to be disregarded at home.

We are opposed to further enlistments for the war in Europe, whether by conscription or otherwise, for the following reasons: (1) Canada has already made a military display, in men and money, proportionately superior to that of any nation engaged in the war; (2) any further weakening of the man-power of the country would seriously handicap agricultural production and other essential industries; (3) an increase in the war budget of Canada spells national bankruptcy; (4) it threatens the economic life of the nation and, eventually, its political independence; (5) conscription means national disunion and strife, and would thereby hurt the cause of the Allies to a much greater extent than the addition of a few thousand soldiers to their fighting forces could bring them help and comfort.

<sup>1</sup> Most of the following statement appeared in the *Evening Post* (New York) of July 10. It was published in full in *Le Devoir*, July 12.

## 1. — Military Effort

Canada has already supplied 420,000 men to the Imperial forces of Great Britain<sup>1</sup> — not counting the numerous French or Italian reservists, who have rejoined their respective colours in their native lands. This is equivalent, in proportion to population, to an army of 2,400,000 men for France, 2,700,000 for Great Britain and Ireland, 6,000,000 for the United States.

If the proportionate cost of the armies is taken into account, as well as the population of the countries, Canada's war expenditure is now equivalent to what France would spend for a fighting force of 9,600,000 men, Great Britain for 8,100,000 and the United States for 7,000,000. Which of those countries has done or *will do* as much?<sup>2</sup>

Suppose the United States enlist, arm, equip and send to the front within one year from their declaration of war an army of 2,000,000 men, while Canada rests content with what it has already done — the incurred financial obligations being covered, of course, — what will be the result? Each Canadian, man, woman and child, will have been taxed or indebted in the proportion of \$100 as against \$7 or \$8 paid for or incurred by each Ame-

<sup>1</sup> Since this was written, the government has stated that over 60,000 recruits were dismissed as bodily unfit, or for other reasons, and that 10,000 had deserted. This alters the comparison with other nations, as regards the number of troops. But as to cost, it makes the position of Canada worse. The loss of money incurred by the dislocation of regimental units is tremendous.

<sup>2</sup> Everything being counted, the basis of comparison with France and Great Britain is below the mark. France pays only 5 cents a day to her troopers, and Great Britain, one shilling.

rican. The longer the war lasts the greater the disproportion.

It should be remembered, also, that over one half of the Canadian contingent is composed of British-born volunteers, who, instead of enlisting in the British section of the Imperial army, have preferred joining the Canadians, thereby receiving from Canada a pay four times as high as that of Great Britain.

Finally, when we know that England is still keeping at home, for profitable purposes, at least three million of her own men, enlisted or serviceable, we sincerely believe that we have done more than our share.

## 2. — Labour and Agricultural Crisis

To realize the extent of the labour crisis, one must know the conditions of the country. The scanty population of 7,000,000 is scattered over a territory as large as that of the United States. The present army of 420,000, to which must be added at least 20,000 to 30,000 foreign reservists, has been recruited without the slightest regard to local or special conditions, or the technical competency of the recruits. Certain industries, as the extraction of coal, for example, have been disorganized. For want of labour, land under cultivation is much less this year than last, — and this, at the very moment the supply of food is likely to be the main factor of the situation in Europe.

The conditions of agriculture appeared so serious as early as last year that, during the winter

months, the Canadian Government made, through thousands of American publications, an urgent appeal to American labour. Seventy thousand farm labourers were needed. When the declaration of war by Congress brought that propaganda to a standstill, about 7,000 Americans had crossed the border. So that Canadian farming has remained and will remain short of more than 60,000 labourers, the help of whom was considered by our government as *absolutely necessary* to ensure the required production of foodstuffs. How then can we accept, from the same government, the suggestion of increasing the fatal gap by the further enlistment of 100,000 men for military operations in Europe?

It must not be forgotten that, in England and France, thousands of men are periodically recalled from the trenches and put at work on the farms, during seed and harvest times. This is impossible in Canada. Once in Europe, our soldiers are there to stay till the end of the war, and a good while after. The wounded and the crippled alone are brought back, to help in impoverishing the country.

If Canada persists in her run towards extreme militarism, in order to supply the armies of Europe with a number of men wholly insufficient to influence the fate of arms, she will soon find herself utterly unable to give to the Allied nations the real help which ought to be, and could be, her most valuable contribution to the common cause : nourishment.

### 3. — National Bankruptcy

Canada is a country of immense natural wealth, still undeveloped. But it is *poor* in money. Even before the war, it was practically living on borrowed money. The highest authority on economics, in the British Empire, Sir George Paish, estimated Canada's total indebtedness, on the eve of the war, at \$3,000,000,000 — over \$400 per head of population. Out of that amount, \$300,000,000 represented the federal or national debt, piled up in half a century. Within 3½ years, \$1,000,000,000 will have been added to that national debt for war purposes alone. In other words, Canada in less than four years will have borrowed, for destructive purposes, three times as much as in the previous fifty years for constructive work. What the result will be, after the war, when the transient activity of munition making and army equipping collapses suddenly and entirely, is casier to imagine than to cope with. Nothing further at least should be done to make it worse.

Two of our transcontinental railways (out of three), the Grand Trunk Pacific and the Canadian Northern, are practically bankrupt. To let them go into the hands of the receiver would mean the ruin of at least one of our four main banks. A general collapse of our financial credit would be sure to follow. To prevent that disaster, the government and parliament of Canada are contemplating the *nationalization* of those huge enterprises. This means an addition to our national liabilities of a further debt of some hundreds of millions, when the

*whole* of our national revenue is already insufficient to meet ordinary expenditures and the payment of interest on our present indebtedness. It also means the state-ownership and state-control of two deficit-earning enterprises, under a political system honeycombed with party patronage and administrative incompetency<sup>1</sup>.

A striking evidence of the crippled conditions of the country is the repeated refusal of the Finance minister to tax private incomes, as in England and the United States, because, says he, the cost of raising an income tax would likely absorb most of the proceeds.

#### 4. — Menace to American Peace

Another consideration should make us pause in the race for bankruptcy.

Previous to the war, most of our public debt and a large proportion of our semi-public or private indebtedness was due in London: \$1,800,000,000, out of \$3,000,000,000, according to the safest calculations. The English money-market is now closed to us, and will be for a long time. We have to borrow in the United States, for war and peace purposes alike. A very large proportion of our *credit paper* of every description — railroad shares and bonds, among others — has been transferred from London to New York. In short, the United States has taken the place of England as the creditor of Canada; it has become the mainstay of our national

<sup>1</sup> The government's railway policy has since come to light. Although coping but partially with the problem, — since only the C. N. R. is dealt with — it fully justifies this anticipation.



credit, the feeder of our economic and industrial life.

On the other hand, the government and parliament of Canada will be forced, in a very near future, to adopt stringent measures to meet the financial conditions of the country and revigorate the peaceful and *permanent* industries, crippled by the scarcity of labour and capital. This will mean an increased customs tariff and other measures of protection for home industries. There is already a strong movement on foot to organize the whole British Empire on the basis of a gigantic self-supporting trust. The Trade and Industry Committee of the Royal Colonial Institute, in London, has already appealed to all the Chambers of Commerce of the Empire to adopt the following resolution:

“That with a view to encouraging  
“the establishment of new industries in the British Empire and  
“giving a measure of confidence  
“and security to capital to be embarked therein, as well as assisting the expansion of existing industries, the Governments of the  
“Empire be urged to make it *obligatory* on all Government Departments, Municipalities, Railways, Dock and Harbour Boards, Gas, Water and Electric Light Corporations, and all such bodies spending public monies, or enjoying *charters from Government or other public authorities*, to purchase *Empire-made goods* and to place all contracts with *British firms*;—exceptions to be made, by special permission of proper authority, only in cases where such

"a course is considered to be at  
"variance with public interests."

May it be remarked that this proposal to boycott French goods and French enterprise — no exception being made in favour of any of the Allied nations — was propounded in the last days of the famous Verdun resistance, where rivers of French blood were flowing for the salvation of England as well as for that of France herself?

In Canada, where imperialistic and high protectionist tendencies are rampant, there is but too much chance that this program of economic antagonism to the rest of the world will find much favour. What, if adopted, would it mean? The exclusion of American goods from Canada, the interdiction to American enterprise to compete in the economic reconstruction of a country which its own rulers and financial leaders have virtually handed over to the goodwill and tender mercy of American capital.

We, Canadian Nationalists, hold that Canada has not the right to commit suicide for the sake of any European or humanitarian cause, excellent as it may be. It must live and do honour to its own obligations. It must also keep the *pax americana*, and not sow the seeds of future strifes with its only neighbour. British politics brought it twice in war with the United States, in 1774 and 1812, and twice at least on the verge of conflict, during the Secession war and the Venezuela embroilment. We do not want Canada to raise a quarrel of its own; we do not want to see it reduced to such a state of financial despondency that the money

lenders of the United States will have to recoup themselves at the expense of our national independence. A free Canada — free politically, free economically — and a peaceful America are more important to us than the establishment of democratic governments in Europe, or the settlement of the Balkan problem.

## 5. — National Disunion and Strife.

Conscription is sure to bring serious troubles in the labour circles. Indiscriminate enlistment has already disorganized labour conditions. Rightly or wrongly, labour leaders apprehend that conscription is sought for not so much for military purposes as with the object of controlling wages and work. The enforcement of conscription will certainly be resisted by the organized labour of Canada.

There is also in Canada a large foreign element to which conscription is distateful to the extreme. Most of these foreigners were invited to come. The government paid premiums to secure them. They were assured that Canada was free from military service. They have therefore against conscription a case much stronger than that of the so-called "hyphenated" Americans.

The situation and sentiments of the French-Canadians, who form between one third and one fourth of the population of Canada, have also to be reckoned with. Such silly things have appeared about them in some of the English-Canadian papers, and occasionnally in the

American press, that elementary truths have to be recalled.

In spite of all statements to the contrary, the French-Canadians are loyal to Great Britain and friendly to France ; but they do not acknowledge to either country what, in every land, is considered as the most exclusively national duty : the obligation to bear arms and fight.

Much has been said about the small number of French-Canadians who have enlisted for the war ; but very little about the large number of European-born volunteers in the so-called "Canadian" force. The truth is, that the over proportion of British-born volunteers, as compared with Canadian-born volunteers of English or Scottish extraction, is as great as between English-speaking and French - speaking *Canadians*. The fact is that the proportion of enlistments, among Canadians of various extractions, has been in *inverse ratio* to their enrootment in the soil.

The only trouble with the French Canadians is that they remain the only true "unhyphenated" Canadians. Under the sway of British Imperialism, Canadians of British origin have become quite unsettled as to their allegiance: they have not yet made up their mind whether they are more British than Canadian, or more Canadian than British; whether they are the citizens of a world-scattered empire, or members of an American community. The French-Canadians have remained, and want to remain, exclusively Canadian and American.

Canada has entered the war in a very peculiar and new fashion.

She has not, like the United States, declared war on Germany in order to avenge wrongs committed against her liberty of trade, against the life or property of her citizens; nor like Great Britain or France, to uphold treaties to which she was a party.

Without any previous declaration of war, Canada has thrown herself into the conflict as a mere satellite of Great Britain. She was not forced to do so, either by constitution or previous understandings. On the contrary, a well defined agreement with Great Britain made it clear that, in case of war, Canada had no other duty to perform than that of defending her own territory, if attacked.

When war broke out, it was specified that military service was and would remain voluntary. Under that pledge, the number of men to be enlisted for overseas' service was gradually raised from 20,000 to 500,000. When, in January 1916, parliament, at the request of the government, decided to allow the latter increase, the prime minister, Sir Robert Borden, made the following declaration:

"In speaking in the first two or three months in the war, I made it clear to the people of Canada that we did not propose any conscription. I repeat that announcement with emphasis to-day."

The leader of the opposition, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, was no less emphatic:

"Conscription has come in England, said he, but conscription is not to come in Canada."

A few days later, a newly appointed member of the cabinet, Mr. Sévigny, was re-elected in a Quebec constituency upon the specific and solemn pledge that "conscription would never be established." That pledge has been repeatedly given by every representative of Quebec in the government. One of them, Mr. Patenaude, has lately resigned because he felt he could not, in honour, support conscription.

So that, in the eyes of all French Canadians, the adoption of conscription would not only result in an economic collapse of the country: it would also shake their faith in the honour and truthfulness of their public men.

Finally, the economic readjustment of the country is sure to bring dispute between the rural provinces of the West and the industrial provinces of the East.

In short, apart from the menace to the economic equilibrium of the country, the inevitable outcome of conscription and of any overstrained effort for the war in Europe is three-fold: (1) labour troubles and class hatred; (2) racial strife; (3) a deep cleavage between East and West. If wise counsels do not prevail, it may mean, within a very short period, a second Mexico north of the 45th and 49th parallels.

Opposition to conscription and war-madness in Canada is not anti-patriotic: it is essentially patriotic and clear-sighted.

Montreal, July 4, 1917.