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THE CASE AGAINST CONSCRIPTIO

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by

Hon. J.-E. CARON

Minister of Agriculture,
Province of Quebec

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CONSCRIPTION AND AGRICULTURE

A systematic campaign of slurs and slanders is being carried on against the Province of Quebec. It has found its way in the American press. The French-Canadians are bitterly assailed on account of their lack of enthusiasm for military service. Complaints are made of what is called the *small* number of recruits in Quebec.

May I be permitted to point out one of the numerous causes of the existing state of things, for which this province is blamed? — a cause, I may say in passing, which fully justifies the notable decrease of voluntary enlistments, not only in Quebec, but in the whole Dominion as well.

It ought first to be remembered that the Province of Quebec has freely given to the cause of the Allies more than twenty thousand of its children [French-Canadians]. If account is kept of the peculiar situation of the Province, of the mentality of its population and the rural life of the majority of its people, this result is all sufficient.

A pretty long list could be made of the numerous causes which have hampered voluntary enlistments in Quebec. These obstacles have been enumerated elsewhere; they are known to all: it would be useless to repeat them here. It is sufficient for

my purpose to state that, on the whole, the French-Canadians in Quebec are amply justified in viewing with distaste and repugnance the military organization as constituted and maintained by the Federal government.

When one remembers the ill-will, the hostile dispositions, the open injustices and marked contempt to which the French-Canadians have been subjected, from the very inception of the recruiting movement, one is bound to confess that the number of French-Canadian recruits bears the highest testimony to the loyalty of our race, to its spirit of forbearance and its devotion to the British Crown, in spite of the systematic efforts of certain authorities to keep French Canada isolated and disaffected, in order to have, later on, some semblance of pretext to blame its "disloyalty".

Leaving aside all those considerations, there is a very material point connected with recruiting, which I desire to emphasize: it is that which relates to agricultural conditions.

Agriculture is the staple and fundamental industry in Quebec. The rural population is proportionately more numerous here than in the other provinces; for generations, it has been wholly devoted to farming. For generations back, family homesteads have been transmitted from father to son. Each new generation pursues the object of the preceding one, and that object is *farming*. The expansion of the race has enhanced the conquests of agriculture over the forrest and its industries. Woodlands are still cleared up and rapidly turned into farms.

Thus, the French-Canadian population is enrooted far more deeply than any other race in the native soil which it has tilled and cultivated for hundreds of years. Consequently, it is much more difficult to enlist our farmers than the floating population of the large manufacturing centres of Ontario, to make them break habits and sentiments formed with centuries, and sacrifice the interests of agriculture, their all, which would be vitally affected, if deprived of any portion of the manpower it requires.

The not unrestricted number of available recruits in the cities being reached, recruiting for the army cannot be pursued in the rural districts without producing a deep perturbation in the established order and considerably hampering agricultural production, which is more important, now, than the recruiting of soldiers.

Food production will be the determining factor of the war. This the highest authorities proclaimed from the first. Famine will likely put a stop to war; and the most starved countries will be at the mercy of the others.

The world is nearing that stage of the situation. It is not soldiers that are needed. The Allies have two million troops over and above the enemies' armies. In England alone, it is admitted that one million and a half could be enlisted without difficulty. The entrance of the United States into the conflict ought to assure at least one million fresh recruits, within a year.

On the other hand, the food problem becomes more serious every day. Agricultural production has

ceased to be sufficient for the world's requirements. All surpluses are gone, and the world has to face a substantial deficit which no normal production could fill. This growing menace is taxing the anxieties of all British statesmen, including the Empire's "dictator", Mr. Lloyd George. In order to cope with the situation, the British Government has undertaken a crusade for agricultural overproduction. The movement is kept up by all means. Through a system of special enlistments, all available troopers, not at the front, are put to work on farms, and especially on the numerous agricultural implements purchased by the State to accelerate and increase the production of land. The Food Dictator, Lord Rhondda, has just stated that "in this war, and especially at this stage, food power is co-equal with man-power", and that "the solution of the problem of supply lies in America". — "For this, he added, we depend to a vital degree upon the United States and Canada." ¹

Even in the United States, at the very outset of its participation in the war, and in spite of the enormous benefits so far derived from the European conflict, the food problem is already a source of anxiety. One of the most important businessmen of the country, Mr BRONTINGHAM, president of the *National Implement Association*, has recently stated that unless agricultural production is immediately encouraged, the United States will soon be on the verge of famine. He considers that agriculture should be

¹ Interview of June 19, 1917.

put on the same basis as the making of munitions, and that not only should all farm laborers be kept on the land, but their number largely increased.

The situation in Canada is certainly not better, far from it. The federal government has, so far, limited its efforts to a campaign in the press to stimulate production; all practical measures have been neglected.

The sole preoccupation seems to be the recruiting of troops; but those troops, and all the armies of the allies, and all the people, *will have to be fed*. The government's inaction in that regard makes the situation but more alarming. Mr BENNETT, M.P., Director of National Service, says that "agricultural production is more important than anything else, at present." The new Food Controller, Mr HANNA, practically repeats the same thing:

"The outstanding fact of the food situation, which it is imperative that every citizen of Canada should realize at once, is that Great Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, and their European allies, are wholly unable to supply the allied armies at the front and on their way.

"Their food shortage and the food to supply the armies of Canada and the United States must be wholly provided from this side of the Atlantic. The supply must also be sufficient to cover losses at sea. Australia, New Zealand, the Argentine Republic, and other countries are not now available to relieve the situation.

"The crop of storeable foods grown in Canada and the United States suitable for shipment over-

seas threatens to be entirely inadequate to meet the demand unless the whole people determine by every means in their power to make up the shortage. Every individual is under a direct obligation to assist in rationing the allied forces. There must be national self-denial and national co-operation to provide the necessary supplies." ¹

Food supplies therefore depend mainly on Canada and the United States. Upon our food production lies the victory of the Allies. Our main effort should therefore be strained in that direction. Of all the provinces of the Dominion, Quebec is, both on account of its large farming population and its geographical situation, the most favorably situated to help the Allies in that regard.

If some tangible result is to be reached, it is not all sufficient to *express views*, without any practical action being taken. Still less should a policy be pursued in complete disagreement, *in fact*, with the universally accepted view that agricultural production must be fostered — a view to which the federal government pays no attention, in the form at least of practical execution.

The scarcity of farm-labour is already much felt in Quebec. Thousands of young men heretofore working on farms are now employed in munitions factories. This gap in farm-labour ought to be filled, more than filled. On the contrary, farm labour is threatened with a further depletion, the unavoidable result of a measure of conscription

¹ Statement of June 28, 1917.

adopted against the most positive pledges.

Canada has already enlisted 420,000 men: *it has reached the limit of its capacity to supply men and money.* Let all factors be considered — a small population scattered on an immense territory; a greater proportionate war expenditure than that of any European nation; the relatively slow development of the country — and it may be stated, without any exaggeration, that the proportion of our sacrifices is already greater than that of Great Britain.

Belgium and invaded France may, in ten years, regain most of their past prosperity. The density of their population, their immense wealth in money, will enable them to repair their material losses.

But for us, Canadians, fifty years at least will elapse before our country can find again its economic balance and go on with the normal development of its resources, interrupted by the war.

Instead of plunging more deeply into the abyss of militarism, we should bend all our energies on the revival of agriculture, thus preparing the work of economic reconstruction after the war. Of that reconstruction, the cultivation of the land is the first and safest element. The Allies would be the first to profit by the overproduction of our farms, much more than by the sending of more troops. "The food producer is a more needed soldier than the one who bears a rifle", as the British prime minister recently said.

The province of Quebec, after

having given her quota in men, has applied herself to the fulfilment of this second part of the war program: she handsomely plays her role as purveyor of food.

The campaign of slanders pursued against Quebec is most unfair. The French Canadians work as effectively as any other community to the triumph of the common cause. Events will soon prove that they have chosen the right path and adopted the most efficacious means of helping our allies to a successful issue.

