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Fielding, William S

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CANADIAN POLITICS IN WAR
AND PEACE

Letter from the ex-Minister of Finance,
Hon. W. S. Fielding, M.P. for
Shelburne and Queens.

The following correspondence was published in the Halifax, Nova Scotia, Morning Chronicle of November 9, 1918. Dr. Kendall is a prominent physician of Sydney, Nova Scotia, who is at present engaged in hospital work in Halifax. For some years he represented Cape Breton County in the Nova Scotia Legislature, after which he served as member for the same county in the House of Commons of Canada, having defeated in the election the late Sir Charles Tupper:

To the Editor of the Chronicle:

Sir,—I beg to enclose copies of letters which have passed between myself and Hon. W. S. Fielding on a matter which I venture to think is of sufficient importance to Liberals generally to warrant their publication in the columns of your paper.

A. S. KENDALL.

Halifax, N.S.,

November 7th, 1918.

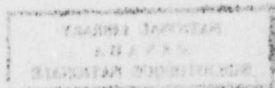
**DR. KENDALL'S LETTER TO HON. W. S.
FIELDING.**

Halifax, N.S., October 18th, 1918.

Honourable W. S. Fielding,

Montreal.

Dear Sir,—Residence in Halifax during the last eight months has afforded me opportunity to enquire from Liberal leaders all over Nova



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Scotia as to the attitude of the rank and file of our party toward yourself, Honorable A. K. Maclean and other leaders who in the last Dominion election saw fit to cut loose from party to form an administration of leaders selected from both the old parties.

You know the political situation in this Province is unsettled. In my judgment the criticism directed against Liberals who took new ground as a war measure, actuated only by patriotism as they affirmed, has lost much of its acrimony during the last few months.

In the hope of assisting to remove discord I venture to request that you furnish the Liberals with a fresh statement as regards the convictions that induced you to withdraw your support in the last election from Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who for so long a period has been the idol of the Liberal party.

If the old straw is rethreshed in the cool light of experience of the last eight months of the war, food may be found attractive enough to bring the opposing elements together again. Let me here interject that I was no last hour convert to conscription. The war was scarcely one year old when the inequalities of sacrifice round about me in Cape Breton became so conspicuous, I could not restrain my conviction that well regulated conscription was the only fair means to secure the necessary power in men and munitions—the burdens to be distributed where they could best be carried. My convictions, strong as they were, in regard to conscription, would not, however, drive me to vote against the candidates of my own political faith, who were pledged to equal support of war measures and were supported by thousands whose loyal devotion was unquestionable.

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I am not one of those who impute unworthy motives to leading Liberals who took part in securing the return of the Union Government. Conviction may have been the impelling force. Certainly we know that the tide so favoured Union Government and conscription in the Western Provinces that Liberal leaders there had to acquiesce, willingly or unwillingly, or cease to be leaders; and the Western Provinces had only recently placed four Liberal administrations in office after severe party struggles.

I am free to admit that most of the opposition in Nova Scotia to your course appears to be limited in view to the horizon of this Province. If Liberals wish the Liberal party to perform its function in the State they must view Dominion policy from the standpoint of every Province.

I hope that open discussion will dissolve existing differences and result in the reunion of the factors in the party which, in the next contest, I hope to see lined up with the Dominion segment of the almost world wide industrial movement for the working of the substance of democracy into the warp and woof of the life of the masses.

Unity is essential to success in Nova Scotia.

Yours faithfully,

A. S. KENDALL.

HON. MR. FIELDING'S REPLY.

Ottawa, 28th October, 1918.

Dear Dr. Kendall:

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 18th inst.

I regret that I had not the pleasure of meeting you on one of my recent visits to Halifax. There is much in the subject on which you have written me that could be more satisfactorily

discussed orally than in a written communication. Nevertheless, I willingly respond to your request and offer you—for whatever they may be worth—my views of the present political situation in Nova Scotia and the Dominion.

I am well aware that there has been amongst the Nova Scotia Liberals a large measure of hostility to the Union Government at Ottawa, and that the action of Liberals who have given that Government any degree of support has been regarded with disapproval by many of our old friends. So far as I am personally concerned, I am conscious of the fact that criticism has been tempered with much kindness. In my own constituency, after heart to heart talks on all aspects of the subject, I have had the happiness of receiving, along with much friendly consideration from opponents of former days, the hearty and unanimous support of those with whom I had the pleasure of working as a Liberal during the fifteen years of my former term of service as a representative in Parliament. But while I thus have no personal reason to complain, I cannot be indifferent to the fact that the Liberal Party has been much divided.

While I regret that there has been so much hostility to the Union Government, I cannot say that I have been surprised that such a feeling existed. There need be no difficulty in understanding the cause of it. There is nothing to be gained by ignoring palpable facts. As I ventured to say in my remarks published at the time of the formation of the administration, Union Government came too late to effect the chief purpose for which it had been desirable. A movement in the early months of the war to unite all political parties in the forming of an administration—as occurred in Great Britain—would have been eminently proper. I believe

that it would then have been satisfactorily accomplished. In England, from the beginning of the war there was a mutual confidence and co-operation between the party leaders which easily ripened into the formation of a Union Government, supported by practically all parties in Parliament.

Unfortunately, nothing of the kind occurred in Canada. Those who had the responsibilities of Government in their hands preferred to adhere to the party system during a long war period. Party patronage—which has recently been declared by the Government to be a great evil—never flourished more than in the three years after the war began. When an appeal was made to the Conservative Government to suspend party patronage, even in such a matter as appointments to the Senate, the appeal was rejected. There were a number of vacancies in the House of Commons; there was no hurry in filling them. The Senate was at the time almost idle. There was no urgent business requiring its attention, no need of filling vacancies. But when a Liberal member of the Commons proposed that the making of appointments to the Senate be suspended, the Government rallied their supporters to defeat the proposal.

What wonder is it that, after three years of such war-time administration under the leadership of Sir Robert Borden, so many Liberals refused to give their assent to any kind of Government under his Premiership?

Union Government at that late stage did not and could not put an end to party politics. We know, as a matter of fact, that instead of doing so the new order of things created wide and bitter party strife. Some case could be made out for the formation of a Union Govern-

ment even at that stage, but the intense partyism of the Conservative Government for three war years had created in many quarters an atmosphere in which calm reason could receive but scant consideration. The mass of the Nova Scotia Liberals could not forget the events of the recent years. Perhaps it was too much to expect them to forget.

I am pleased to have your assurance that there is now a disposition to discuss without acrimony the differences which arose a few months ago. The time seems favourable for a dispassionate consideration of the whole matter.

You invite me to offer a fresh statement of the reasons which led me to differ from Sir Wilfrid Laurier at the last election. It is a fair inquiry — one that is entitled to a clear and frank answer. It is a case in which frankness is necessary, if misunderstandings are to be removed.

I and many other Liberals were unable to cooperate with our leader at that time because we differed from him on a question which, in our judgment, was the paramount issue of the time. The Conservative Government, necessarily the best authority, represented that there was urgent need of reinforcements for our battalions at the front. We reluctantly reached the conclusion that the voluntary system of enlistment had exhausted its powers and that the additional men who were urgently needed could only be obtained by a resort to conscription. Sir Wilfrid Laurier was resolutely opposed to conscription. In this he was entirely consistent. He had been at all stages of the discussion opposed to conscription. He had neither changed nor qualified his views.

It is not necessary for either party in the

ease to insist that he was right and the other wrong. Conscription was a question on which patriotic men might honestly differ. I had no sympathy with the effort made in some quarters to treat all opponents of conscription as disloyal men. More than once I protested against it. That kind of argument, sometimes used in the election campaign, savored too much of the flag-waving trickery of earlier campaigns to find favor with Liberals. There was no reason why men who were opposed to conscription should not so declare themselves, as Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the majority of Liberals in the last Parliament did. But while the question was thus one on which men might honestly differ, it was, in our view, a question of the highest importance, in the presence of which men might well lay aside their ordinary differences. Conscription is less popular today than it was at that time. The manner in which the Military Service Act has been administered has caused wide discontent. But is it not the simple truth to say that, at the time of which I am writing, conscription was regarded by the mass of the people in most of the Provinces of the Dominion as necessary for the reinforcement of our army in Europe?

What were conscriptionist Liberals, numerous in all the Provinces and overwhelmingly numerous in the three Prairie Provinces, to do in the face of the situation that presented itself?

On nearly all the political questions of the day they were cordially in sympathy with Sir Wilfrid Laurier, but on what they regarded as the greatest issue requiring decision at that time they were distinctly against him. On most of the ordinary political questions they were opposed to Sir Robert Borden, but on that

which they believed to be the greatest question of the moment they were cordially in sympathy with him. The Union Government then formed was prepared to enforce the conscription law. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, if he had been placed in power, would have stopped all proceedings for the carrying out of conscription. That the opponents of conscription should rally around Sir Wilfrid was quite right. They were following the dictates of their consciences. In what other way could conscriptionist Liberals act on their convictions than by co-operating with the men who were favorable to the enforcement of the law? Liberals who were opposed to conscription claimed and exercised the right to act with those who agreed with them. How could anybody with reason deny the same right to Liberals who held the contrary view?

It is sometimes argued that a Prime Minister stamps his political character and record on his administration, and that consequently the Liberals who accepted seats in the Government became responsible for the previous political acts of Sir Robert Borden. Perhaps in some circumstances there would be force in this argument. But we are not living in ordinary times. It is war time, and war conditions have called us to unusual duties. Many things which in normal circumstances would be deemed extraordinary are accepted to-day as reasonable and proper. It is so in the political situation, both here and in the Mother Country.

Look at the records of the men who entered the Union Government in Great Britain under the Premiership of Mr. Asquith! Look at the records of the men who sit in the Union Government to-day under Mr. Lloyd George! Mr. Asquith was Prime Minister when the war came. The question of Home Rule for Ireland—not

to mention other important questions — had sharply divided British public men. There was no question in Canadian politics more controversial than the question of Home Rule was in the politics of the United Kingdom. Mr. Balfour, Lord Lansdowne, Mr. Bonar Law, Mr. Walter Long and other Conservatives had strenuously fought against every proposal for the granting of Home Rule to Ireland, while Mr. Asquith and his Liberal associates had as zealously advocated Home Rule. Yet, under the stress of war, all the Conservatives I have named, with others less prominent, entered the British Cabinet under Mr. Asquith. Can it be said that in taking office under a Liberal Premier they accepted or in any way became responsible for the Liberal policy of Home Rule? Nobody claims that they did. If Mr. Balfour and his Conservative friends could, for the prosecution of the war, enter the Cabinet under a Liberal Prime Minister, how can it be held that Mr. Maclean and other Liberals sacrificed their Liberalism by accepting office under a Conservative Premier for the same purpose?

The circumstances under which many Nova Scotia Liberals consented to act with the Union Government are worth recalling. The Liberals of our Province had very little to do with the creation of the Union Government. The new administration had been formed, including representatives of eight of the nine Provinces, and including prominent Liberals from six of those Provinces, before any definite action was taken by any Nova Scotia Liberal. A place in the Cabinet had been left open, which the Premier was ready to give to any prominent Liberal from our Province who was a supporter of conscription. The question

for consideration then was, whether it was better for the Nova Scotia Liberals to be unrepresented in the Cabinet, or to have one of their number take a place in it along with Liberals from the other Provinces? For the consideration of that question a meeting of representative Liberals was called at Halifax. All the Liberal members of the House of Commons from Nova Scotia, and all the candidates who were expected to represent the party at the general election, were invited. Nearly all attended the gathering. Provincial Liberalism was represented by members of the Local Government. After a full consideration of the perplexing situation the conclusion was reached, with very little dissent, that it was better that some Liberal should enter the Cabinet than that the whole party should stay out when Liberals from the rest of the Dominion had joined. The meeting made no selection for the vacant place. But Mr. Maclean's name was among those mentioned at the time, and those who were present at the meeting could not have been surprised when it was announced, a few days later, that he had been appointed a Minister.

Apart from measures necessary for the prosecution of the war, I am not concerned in upholding the acts of the Government. They have some excellent measures to their credit. I had to differ from them on several questions which had no relation to the war, on which, therefore, I thought there should be the utmost freedom of action. But neither their action nor mine on those questions nor anything that has happened in recent months affects the position as it was when the Union Government was formed and the election brought on. It

is the political situation of last fall that we are here considering. That situation I have endeavored to set forth with clearness and accuracy.

The division that occurred in the Liberal party was, from one point of view, a great misfortune. But I am sure that, so far as the future of the party is concerned, a greater misfortune would have occurred if leading Liberals who favored conscription had suppressed their convictions and fallen in line with the Liberal majority in the last Parliament. If the conscriptionist Liberals had not taken action as they did the whole party would have been arrayed on a war issue in antagonism to the greater public opinion of the Dominion. Thousands of electors, well disposed towards the Liberal Party, but perhaps not wedded to it as you and I have been, would have been driven into the ranks of the Conservative Party, there to remain, probably, for the future. The breaking away of the conscriptionist Liberals saved the Liberal Party from that disaster. Their action created a ground on which these independent electors could stand and still retain their connection with Liberalism.

So much concerning the past. What of the future? We have had a great Liberal Party in Canada. We have had a great Liberal Party in Nova Scotia. In the building up of that party, from the time of its severe defeat in 1878, I have had some part. Nobody would regret more than I any impairment of the party's usefulness. Gladly would I be helpful, if I could, in bringing about the reunion which you desire. Let us remember, however, that the building up of a political party is not an end, but a means to an end. The Liberal

Party ought to be, as we believe it has been in the past, a powerful instrument for the promotion of the best interests of the country. The record of past services forms a ground on which, at the proper time, a united party could justly ask the confidence of the country. New questions, however, are arising, in the handling of which the Liberal Party should prove itself best qualified to meet the needs of the time. Out of the conflict of the last four years there has grown throughout the world a higher appreciation of the principles of democracy. To-day, in a larger degree than ever before, the interests of the masses, rather than those of the classes, are demanding consideration. To recognize and adequately respond to the progressive movements of the time, to apply them to our Canadian affairs in the spirit of moderation that has characterized the advance of Liberalism in the Mother Country,

“Where freedom broadens slowly down
From precedent to precedent,”

is a task which a united Liberal Party should be expected to perform.

Some very excellent people, whose opinions are entitled to the utmost respect, think that the day of partyism is over; that the Union Government, formed for the prosecution of the war, can be maintained after the war. I am not of those who hold that view. If the question of government were, as some are disposed to think, merely a question of the Ins and Outs, if there were no large public questions to divide men, there would be no reason why the Union Government should not continue. But those who see in party contests only a struggle for office and power see only the weaker side of the system, ignoring the

larger and better side. To say that the party system has defects is but to say that it is a human device. Perfection is no more to be hoped for in the field of politics than in any other field. With all its faults, the party system seems to be the best that the wisdom of statesmen has been able to devise for the management of the larger affairs of a people. There are important questions on which the public men of the country are so divided in opinion that in dealing with them common action cannot be expected. These questions are almost wholly laid aside now, in order that men may unite their energies in the great purpose of vigorously prosecuting our part in the war. But when this common purpose has been served, when the cementing power of the great conflict is no longer present, when we are able to close up the dreadful business of war, these questions will again take a front rank, and then a re-alignment of parties will, I believe, be unavoidable.

Holding this view, I regard it as most desirable that whatever is reasonably possible shall be done to prevent further division in the Liberal ranks, and to leave the way open for a re-union of those who felt obliged to differ at the last general election. If there are still to be war issues between the two sections, of course that re-union cannot be brought about. But I hope and believe there will be no cause for such further division.

There is, I am aware, in some minds a conception that the duty of an Opposition is to worry and annoy a Government; to watch for opportunities to embarrass them, and to seek above everything else their defeat. That conception is not a good one at any time; it is a very bad one at this time. Under our system

of government an Opposition have at all times an important part to play. In our present circumstances that part is more than usually important. The Government of the day, by whatever name it may be called, should, I think, receive from all sides a cordial support in measures necessary for the prosecution of the war. Even where there is doubt as to the wisdom of some of the methods employed, the Government might well have the benefit of the doubt, for their knowledge of the situation ought to be much greater than that possessed by others. If there is a proper recognition of these things in the present Parliament, if the Opposition are content to employ temperate criticism, they will do much to win public confidence. This does not mean an abstention from inquiry and criticism. These are the special functions of an Opposition — functions which, when properly exercised, make for good government. The public at a time like this will have little sympathy with criticism that clearly has a partisan aim. But inquiry and criticism from a higher viewpoint;—reasonable inquiry into public affairs, and criticism that is keen while still moderate, criticism designed to expose and correct whatever is wrong rather than to win a party victory — will gain public confidence in a degree that will in due course bear the fruit of victory.

To defeat the Union Government now, to bring about a change of Government at this time, is, in my judgment, the last object for which Liberals should strive. A change of Government has not seemed to me desirable at any time since the war began. In my mind the old proverb about not swapping horses while crossing a stream held good. So strongly

did I feel impressed with his view that, differing from most of my Liberal friends, I would have assented to a further extension of the term of the last Parliament. There were some reasons against such a course, but they seemed to me to be minor things in comparison with the confusion that would probably arise (and did arise) from a war time election. As matters stand today I do not think the Liberals should desire to obtain power. If at any time events should impose on them as a party the responsibility of governing, they should, of course, meet the situation courageously and patriotically. But that responsibility, it seems to me, is not one to be desired at this stage. If placed in power now, they would be obliged to take over the responsibility of carrying on the war with an organization in the creation of which they had no part, in some portions of which possibly, they have no confidence. There would be no time for adequate reorganization. Satisfactory management of public affairs would be impossible under such circumstances. From every point of view then, I think it is better that the Union Government shall be permitted to carry on the war in what we all hope are its last stages, and in this work they should have the co-operation of the Opposition, coupled, of course, with legitimate criticism. When the war and its immediate business are over, a new situation will arise. Then, I think, the Liberals may reasonably ask for a new deal, in which, in all probability, a united party would place a Liberal Government in power at Ottawa.

The record of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Sir Robert Borden remains, and a time will come when it can again

be discussed with propriety. Some features of it have been too deeply impressed in the Liberal mind to be easily obliterated. The alliance with the Quebec Nationalists in 1910 and 1911, which was largely the foundation of the trouble that arose in that Province; the abandonment of the Laurier naval policy, which, if adhered to, would have given Canada war vessels to protect our ships and seamen from the depredations of German submarines; the election campaign of 1911; the fomenting of hostility to our neighbors, the people of the great American Republic; the cry of "No truck or trade with the Yankees;" the misrepresentation and defeat of a fair Reciprocity agreement, a measure which was a realization of the desire of every Canadian Government, Liberal or Conservative, for more than half a century; the partisanship of the Conservative Government for three years of the war, culminating in the passing of the War Times Election Act; these are things not likely to be forgotten—things which must yet be discussed before the bar of intelligent Canadian opinion, in the light of the abundant vindication of Liberal policy which time has brought. But even these things may be laid aside for the time in order to obtain, as far as possible, unity of action in the carrying on of the war.

Shall we not make that our first thought, reserving our party effort for the day when it will be more useful and when it can be put forth without offense to the patriotic spirit of the Canadian people?

Yours faithfully,

W. S. FIELDING.

Dr. A. S. Kendall, Halifax.