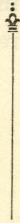


THE CONSCRIPTION
DEBATES OF
1917 AND 1944

AN ANALYSIS BY
GRANT DEXTER

(Associate Editor of the Winnipeg Free Press)



WINNIPEG FREE PRESS
WINNIPEG, CANADA

FOREWORD

CONSCRIPTION for overseas service has been twice debated in the Canadian House of Commons—in 1917 and again in 1944.

The Free Press believes that the difference in attitude of the anti-conscription bloc between 1917 and 1944 represents an important growth in the development of Canadian politics. A study of the Hansard record was made by Mr. Grant Dexter, associate editor, and the articles, as they appeared in the columns of the Free Press at the time are here reproduced without change.

VICTOR SIFTON,
Publisher.

HISTORIC ATTITUDES

ACROSS the terrain of national politics, the question of Canada's participation in overseas wars, culminating in conscription in 1917, runs like a watershed. The Military Service Act of the last war divided Canada as it had never been divided before.

What consequences are likely to follow the imposition of conscription for overseas service in 1944?

Beyond the fact that the solid Liberal bloc from Quebec has been broken, it is too early to attempt any forecast in political terms. But comparison is now possible between 1917 and 1944 up to the point where conscription has come into force. What differences are there between the arguments of the Quebec anti-conscriptionists in 1917 and in 1944? In what respect, if at all, has the case against Canada's full participation in overseas war—including conscription—been changed? And to what extent do such differences hold out the prospect of greater unity or disunity in this country? After all, the purely political or party consequences are of secondary importance.

* * *

IN outlining the origins of the anti-conscription movement in Quebec in 1917 it is impossible, in the space of newspaper articles, to do more than generalize. The source material is available in Hansard, in the Bourassa pamphlets and speeches, the Ewart Kingdom and Independence papers and such pamphlets as "The Disruption of Canada," and in the editorial columns of the time.

The French Canadian point of view, basically, is a purely Canadian attitude. French Canadians, severed from France since 1759,

feel no loyalty to their own motherland, and understandably so. And, naturally, they have never felt the attachment of their English-speaking compatriots to Great Britain. To this day, Quebecers call themselves "Canadians" and the people of the other provinces "English." Their loyalty to Britain has always been the result of reason and not of emotion.

It was well-established doctrine prior to the Boer war that a self-governing colony owed no support to the Imperial power, to which it belonged, in foreign wars. Its obligation ended when it helped in its own defence. Authorities to support this doctrine abound. It was the position taken by successive British ministries and Canadian governments. It was confirmed in the War Office memorandum to the Colonial conference of 1902:

"Prior to the outbreak of the war in South Africa, so far as any general scheme for the defence of the Empire as a whole has been considered, it was assumed that the military responsibilities of our great self-governing colonies were limited to local defence, and that the entire burden of furnishing reinforcements to any portion of the Empire against which a hostile attack in force might be directed must fall on the regular army."

The domestic political problem posed by the Boer war solved by the Laurier government by sending a small contingent of volunteers. Mr. Bourassa, hitherto a supporter of Laurier, broke from the Liberal party on this policy and was joined by a number of Quebec Liberals. He moved a resolution protesting this act as an

infringement of Canadian autonomy, resigned his seat in further protest, and was returned by acclamation on this issue. The Nationalist party was formed shortly after by Oliver Asselin, a follower of Bourassa. Asselin's position, as expressed by himself, was:

"You are confronted with this conclusion, that as long as a colony is a colony, she is entitled to the armed protection of the Mother country."

* * *

AS the German peril grew, the pressure for Canadian aid to Britain became stronger and the Nationalist counter - movement grew also. The Laurier naval policy of 1909-10 was an attempt to solve this difficulty by the creation of a Canadian navy. This policy, however, was decried alike by the Imperialist Conservatives and the Quebec Nationalists. And the main argument against Laurier, in substantial degree, was common to both extremes. The Nationalists argued that a Canadian navy would be just as much His Majesty's navy as the Royal Navy, and equally bound to participate in all His Majesty's wars. Since Canada was a self-governing colony, without any voice in British foreign policy, this was, clearly, a case of obligation without representation. As such it was argued to be indefensible. The Nationalists promptly assailed Laurier as an arch-Imperialist and the Naval bill as a means of delivering Canadians over to service in all British wars.

The Conservatives conceded this Nationalist point. They approved of the principle of automatic participation in British wars. But they demanded that Laurier agree to some form of Imperial consoli-

ation so that Canada would have a voice in British foreign policy. The move to consolidate or unify the Empire had been under way since the 1880's.

Sir Robert Borden put it as follows (Hansard, Nov. 24, 1910, pages 227-8):

"I think the question of Canada's co-operation upon a permanent basis in Imperial defence involves very large and wide considerations. If Canada and the other Dominions of the Empire are to take their part as nations of this Empire in the defence of the Empire as a whole, shall it be that we, contributing to that defence of the whole Empire, shall have absolutely, as citizens of this country, no voice whatever in the councils of the Empire touching the issues of peace or war throughout the Empire?"

"I do not think that such would be a tolerable condition; I do not believe the people of Canada would for one moment submit to such a condition. Shall members of this House, representative men, representing constituencies of this country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, shall no one of them have the same voice with regard to those vast Imperial issues that the humblest taxpayer in the British Isles has at this moment?"

* * *

THE record of the attempts in the first decade of this century to consolidate the Empire are well known. They failed. The master quotation, in this regard, is from a speech by Mr. Asquith at the 1911 Imperial conference. Mr. Asquith was dealing with a resolution moved by Sir Joseph Ward, of New Zealand, that the Empire had now reached a stage of development which rendered it expedient that there should be an Imperial Council of State, with representatives from all the constituent parts of the Empire.

Such a council, said Mr. Asquith, would impair, if not altogether destroy, the authority of the government of the United Kingdom in such grave matters as the conduct of foreign policy, the declaration and maintenance of peace, or the declaration of war.

"That authority," he said, "cannot be shared, and the co-existence side by side with the cabinet of the United Kingdom of this proposed body—it does not matter by what name you call it for the moment—clothed

with the functions and the jurisdiction which Sir Joseph Ward proposed to invest it with, would in our judgment be absolutely fatal to our present system of responsible government."

In a constitutional sense, therefore, war in 1914 found Canada a colony—self-governing, but still a colony. Canada automatically was at war from the moment Great Britain declared war. Technically, there was no answer to the main argument advanced, later on, by the Nationalists.

CONSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS

BETWEEN the Laurier naval policy of 1909-10 and the outbreak of war in 1914, much happened in Quebec. The Bourassa Nationalists and the Conservatives, with the knowledge and connivance of the party chiefs, including Sir Robert Borden, joined hands in 1911 to beat Laurier in Quebec. They succeeded and thus did the Conservatives attain power. But the price paid by both parties to this unnatural union was high. The Conservative party was discredited. Bourassa's hold on his countrymen was also weakened. It would be untrue to say that all the antagonism of Quebec to the Conservative party since 1911 is attributable to conscription.

As in 1944, there was virtually unanimous support in 1914 for Canadian participation in the war. Everybody, including Mr. Bourassa, was agreed. Dissension did not begin until late in 1915.

Before 1914 there had been an influential movement in English-speaking Canada in support of Canadian autonomy. Co-operation between this group and the Quebec

Nationalists, however, ended on or shortly after the outbreak of hostilities. The correspondence, on this point, between J. S. Ewart and Mr. Bourassa is conclusive.

* * *

AS the Quebec Nationalists became increasingly critical of the war, Mr. Bourassa felt impelled to explain his earlier attitude of support. The explanation was that the Nationalists always had made reservations on the point of constitutional status. And now that the imperialists were willing to "bankrupt" Canada to save the Empire (a quotation from Mr. Meighen), it was time these constitutional limitations were emphasized. Canada's actual obligation was strictly limited to defence. This limitation derived directly from the Constitutional act of 1791; the B.N.A. act and the various Militia acts. Canada, Mr. Bourassa went on, was a self-governing colony and the Imperial power—Great Britain—as the single voice in foreign policy must bear the responsibility for

war. French Canadians were right in abstaining from overseas service. They were obeying a sound instinct. Efforts to encourage greater Canadian participation were ascribed by the Nationalists to scheming Imperialists, under orders from Downing street. Such appeals were to be resisted.

Up to 1916, the Quebec Liberals under Laurier vigorously supported the war. Enthusiasm then began to wane. Charges were made, and for the most part proved, that the government had seriously mishandled French Canada. When conscription was introduced in the House of Commons, Laurier, himself, took ground similar to that occupied by the Nationalists in opposing it.

The Nationalists by resolution passed at Montreal on June 7, at the outset of the debate at Ottawa, declared conscription to be contrary to the principles of the Canadian constitution. A few days later, June 13, in the House of Commons, Laurier said:

"The law of the land, which antedates Confederation, not by many years, but by many generations, and which was re-introduced very shortly after Confederation, emphatically declares that no man in Canada shall be subject to compulsory military service except to repel invasion or for the defence of Canada."

Rodolphe Lemieux, on the following day, put the case as follows:

"Sir, on this grave issue I stand upon the bedrock of our constitution, and I claim that England has accepted the Canadian contention that there is no constitutional obligation upon us to take part in war outside of Canada, except for the defence of our territory. . . . The view

taken by the sober people of Quebec is that, according to the constitution of Canada, there is to be no conscription of blood for service abroad. For the defence of the territory, certainly, and that they have proved again and again from the time of the cession until now."

Ernest Lapointe developed the constitutional argument in detail:

"I also oppose this bill," he said, "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."

Innumerable citations could be given. For example, Mr. Boulay (Rimouski) put it this way: "We are opposing conscription . . . because our traditions, our constitution, our status as a colony are opposed to it."

* * *

TH**ERE** were, of course, a multitude of other reasons. Canada was doing too much. Parliament, having already been extended by one year and with many vacancies, was moribund and unfit to deal with so important a matter. There were numerous grievances such as the mistreatment of the minority by the majority, the language question in Ontario, and so on. The mishandling of recruiting in Quebec by the government, indeed the fumbling of the Quebec situation entirely, was stressed. It was argued that the proof that this was a British and not a Canadian war was plain in the enlistment figures: 14,245 French Canadians; 125,245 native-born English-speaking Canadians, and 155,095 British-born Canadians.

The basic argument, however—the bedrock in Mr. Lemieux's phrase—was the constitution. Canada was a self-governing colony, not obligated to participate in

overseas wars. Voluntary participation was one thing; compulsion was another. The mother country was obligated to defend Canada and to wage her own wars. How could it be different when Canada had no voice in British foreign policy; had no foreign policy of her own; had nothing to say on the issues leading to war; had not declared war herself; was, so to speak, dragged into the conflict as a part of the colonial empire?

Successive British governments have recognized Canada's freedom from all obligation. Mr. Asquith only a few years before had explained why Canada could not have any part in foreign policy. Surely it must follow that, under responsible government, there could be no obligation without representation. This was the Quebec case against conscription—theoretically iron-clad, clinched, unanswerable.

The development of this argument in the conscription debate of 1917 in the speeches of Laurier, Lemieux, Lapointe and many others has already been referred to. It would be repetitious to pursue the survey into the anti-

scription campaign which got under way forthwith in Quebec, with Mr. Bourassa unsuccessfully competing with the Liberals for the spotlight. The story will be found in many books. The most concise and accurate is Elizabeth Armstrong's "The Crisis of Quebec." W. H. Moore's, "The Clash," is another. And of course the pamphlets and other material issued at the time are full of it.

The conscriptionists really made no effort to meet the constitutional argument. About the only front-bencher who referred to it was Sir George Foster, who followed Sir Wilfrid in the debate on second reading. He brushed it aside as legalistic hair-splitting. This was a practical, not a constitutional question. Were our boys to be reinforced or abandoned?

That the constitutional argument weighed heavily in Quebec in 1917-18 is obvious from the record. Anti-conscriptionists eagerly sought a footing on this "bedrock." Thus supported, they developed all kinds of other arguments but always their final stroke was that the basic rights of a colony had been invaded.

QUEBEC LIBERAL VIEWPOINT

WHILE only one French-Canadian, Hon. L. S. St. Laurent, Minister of Justice, spoke for conscription in the recent debate, it should not be assumed that the rest of the Quebec members took common ground in opposition. The opposition in Quebec, in point of fact, fell into two distinct groups.

The larger of these groups, embracing many of the Liberals who broke with the government, was not opposed to conscription on principle and advanced no argument which would rule out compulsory overseas service as a matter of right or of constitutional law. In this regard, the Liberal

opposition in Quebec in 1944 was wholly different from 1917.

The smaller group, comprising the Bloc Populaire and a handful of Independent members, including Mr. Cardin, revealed themselves as the inheritors of the Bourassa Nationalist movement. These members did attempt to establish a case in principle. Their efforts were exceedingly interesting and will be discussed in a later article.

* * *

THE Liberal members—as distinct from the Nationalists—were strongly for the war. They were deeply sensitive to the feeling against Quebec in the rest of

the country. They pointed out that on two occasions French Canadians by their willingness to die in battle, had saved Canada from conquest by the United States. In the American Revolution, French Canadians had fought and defeated the U.S. invader despite the appeals of Lafayette and other distinguished Frenchmen. Again in 1812, French Canadians had fought for the survival of this country.

They pointed out that Canada's army in time of war was based upon peacetime militia units. In the long period of peace from 1812 to the Boer war, Quebec had possessed practically no militia establishment. Even in 1914-18 the then government had refused to grant Quebec the number of battalions desired. French Canadian recruits, as a deliberate policy, had been spread among English-speaking battalions by the Borden government. In the present war, Quebec had four battalions in the line and these would be kept fully reinforced by volunteers.

French Canada felt no "call of the blood." Volunteering was a matter of cold reason, rather than of emotion. Moreover, Quebec had been long nurtured in the belief that there was no obligation to serve overseas, except voluntarily. And, anyhow, Quebec was unashamedly opposed to conscription. Speakers, here, quoted Mr. Asquith in 1916, Mr. Churchill in the present war with regard to Northern Ireland, and cited the examples of South Africa and Australia.

* * *

THERE was no disposition to argue that this was not Canada's war. It was argued, however, that the voluntary system had not broken down. It would

have produced the required number of men if it had not been sabotaged by English-speaking Conservatives. The hatred of the "Conservative gang," the "black-mailers," the people who had evoked this "frenzy against Quebec," these "foul conspirators" who had carried on a "sly, dishonest campaign"—this hatred was intense.

The "betrayal" of 1911, when the Conservatives and the Quebec Nationalists combined to beat Laurier, was referred to over and over again, and one new exhibit was added to this 1911 record. It was a quotation from the late Armand Lavergne, lieutenant of Bourassa, elected as a supporter of Mr. Bennett in 1930, and made deputy speaker of the House of Commons. Mr. Lavergne had written:

"In 1911, when the Conservatives of the other provinces began to feel that Laurier in Quebec was losing ground to the Nationalists, they redoubled their help to us and money flowed in abundance into the National electoral treasury."

These Liberals declared that Canada is doing too much in the war. They asserted that the Poles, the Belgians and the French who are clamoring for arms and a greater place in the battle line, should be helped to fight.

Overseas conscription, they said, was unnecessary and inadvisable. They used the word "unnecessary" in the sense of unnecessary to victory. By "inadvisable" they meant that national unity would be impaired. Conscription, it was pointed out, was not regarded in Quebec as a military policy but as a symbol of race domination. And there was the question of moral right: "In a democracy, if democracy is to survive, the majority have not the moral right, though

they have the power, to force upon a minority an obligation which they know this minority is unwilling to assume."

* * *

BUT the argument upon which the Liberals from Quebec chiefly relied was this:

All parties either in 1939 or 1940, and most of them in both years, had pledged themselves against overseas conscription. That was the basis upon which this country entered the war. Quebec's position had been made clear by the late Mr. Lapointe and other leaders in the province.

The plebiscite had been taken to release the government from these pledges. Quebec had voted "No." These members had cam-

"COLONIAL" NATIONALISTS

A PART from a minority of the Quebec members of the House of Commons, represented by the Bloc Populaire, Hon. P. J. A. Cardin and a number of Independents, there is no substantial difference between the 1944 opposition to overseas conscription in Quebec and other parts of the country. This was illustrated in two of the motions moved by L. P. Picard, member for Bellechasse. In both, the seconder of the motion was a westerner — Walter Tucker, native of Portage la Prairie and member for Rosthern.

In the sense of dividing the country, the conflict was between the Quebec minority and the rest of the House of Commons. This minority is in direct succession to the old Nationalist party of Bourassa. So far as the record goes, it is a minority in the Com-

monwealth. They were not prepared to go back on their word. Rather, they considered themselves as still bound by every consideration of honor to oppose conscription.

Importance, in these speeches, was placed on the maintenance of trust and confidence between the people and their representatives in Parliament. Unless pledges were kept, the people would lose faith.

In all of this, however, the basic anti-conscription argument of 1917 does not appear. The right of Canada to adopt compulsory overseas service was not questioned and there was no suggestion that the constitutional rights of French Canadians were being invaded.

mons. It appears also to be a minority in Quebec but, until an election takes place, this will not be certain. It is evident, however, that the Liberals of Quebec disagree with the Nationalists. In 1917, the two took common ground in opposing conscription.

* * *

THE position of the present-day Nationalists is most interesting. Up to and including the 1917 controversy, their argument was that Canada, being a self-governing colony, was under no obligation to send soldiers overseas in a war except voluntarily. Canada had no voice in British foreign policy and had no policy of her own. Overseas conscription, therefore, meant obligation without representation.

Between the two wars, Canada became an autonomous nation,

with full control over her own foreign policy. Canada declared war in 1939, and has functioned throughout as one of the United Nations.

Mr. Raymond, the leader of the Bloc, argued that our self-government was an illusion. There was much talk about independence, but the acts of the country had become increasingly "imperialistic." How could it be said that we are free when we always go to war in support of Britain?

Mr. Lacombe said that conscription was "anti-national" and was a reversion to colonialism.

Mr. Cardin said:

"... In reality we are only a colony in the British Empire and are not, as I said when speaking on Bill 80 in the House of Commons, really an independent and sovereign country."

Mr. Anjou felt that the imposition of conscription proved that Canada was a colony. He hoped we could become independent in the near future.

Mr. Choquette devoted much of his speech to showing that the Bloc Populaire was not an isolationist movement but one which desired to co-operate with the rest of the country. The trouble was that the Bloc did not want to engage in war.

* * *

COMPARED with the debates of 1917, this is feeble argument. The rapid constitutional progress in recent years obviously has destroyed the basis of the Nationalist case. Not one of these members suggested that the pres-

ent situation is one of obligation without representation. But their arguments did show an ingrained colonialism. They made it clear that their chief purpose was not to make Canada a nation, but to avoid war in general and conscription in particular.

Being a nation involves obligations, but the present-day Nationalists are not prepared to accept obligations. Rather than face the fact that Canada is an autonomous nation, has declared war in her own right and now applies overseas conscription to assure reinforcements for her armies—rather than do this, these members preferred to seek refuge in the old colonial argument.

They had nothing to support such a position, but they boldly claimed that conscription, of itself, is proof of a colonial status. This argument is so obviously false that no one bothered to answer it. What they did make clear was that they would prefer to be colonials and possess a constitutional right to exemption from war than to be a nation and shoulder the obligations of nationhood.

It was certainly true of the House of Commons that the self-confession of the Nationalists that they are only interested in Canadian independence if it means escape from obligations—which is a contradiction in terms—was a surprise. These speakers were without influence even among their fellow members from Quebec. Whether this will hold true in the greater constituency of Quebec remains to be seen.

Faint, illegible text at the top of the page, possibly a header or introductory paragraph.

Second block of faint, illegible text, continuing the narrative or report.

Third block of faint, illegible text, appearing as a distinct section.

Fourth block of faint, illegible text, possibly a list or detailed notes.

Fifth block of faint, illegible text, continuing the main body of the document.

Sixth block of faint, illegible text, showing further progression of the text.

Seventh block of faint, illegible text, located near the bottom of the page.

Faint, illegible text on the right side of the page, top section.

Second block of faint, illegible text on the right side, middle section.

Third block of faint, illegible text on the right side, lower middle section.

Fourth block of faint, illegible text on the right side, bottom section.