

Bourassa Rejects Conscription

Who Spoke The Truth?

For nearly three years of war, for more than seven years since *Le Devoir* was born to speak its mind, for eighteen years since I began the struggle against British Imperialism,—a foolish struggle, if you will, certainly without delusion, but also without capitulation—we never ceased saying: a blood tax is the logical, inevitable outcome of the principles laid down and actions pursued by the two parties which have in turn governed the country. The germ of conscription was contained in the "voluntary" expedition to South Africa; the regime of Imperial Conferences hatched it; the Navy Act of 1910 contributed to its growth; the emergency contribution proposed in 1913 strengthened it; the participation of Canada in the present war, decided in the name of the imperial solidarity of all British Countries, brought it to its deadly climax. . . .

Canada Has Done Enough

. . . All Canadians who want logically and effectively to oppose conscription ought to have the courage to say and repeat everywhere: "*No conscription, no enlistments; Canada has done enough.*" . . . we have enlisted for the European war six per cent of our population. That is the equivalent of an army of 2,400,000 for France and 2,7110,000 for the United Kingdom. Now, despite its enormous army on paper England has not yet sent to France, in the two years and ten months of the war, this number of men.

. . . Another question may be fairly put in respect to our principal allies: —*How many French soldiers, or even British soldiers, would they send to America, if Canada was attacked by the United States?* . . .

The Labour Crisis—Danger of Famine

. . . What England has most need of is not soldiers, but bread, meat and potatoes.

. . . If the government at Ottawa had a real grasp of the situation, they would at once cease the enlistment and the transportation of new troops to Europe, and seek to stimulate agricultural production in Canada by all means at their command.

Conscription of Wealth and Industry

Another measure of conscription far more imperatively needed than conscription for cannon food is the conscription of capital and industry. . . . If it is just to let fall upon all classes of society the

tax of blood and the heavy burden of military duties (or so-called duties), it is infinitely more equitable to distribute the charges of the war budget in proportion to the *capacity for paying*.

That millions of fathers of families, who can hardly balance their modest domestic budget, should be burdened with our taxes, while a few thousand vampires receive twenty, fifty, and as high as *nine hundred per cent*, thanks to the war and war operations, is absolutely unjust, immoral, contrary to social order and destructive of all economic equilibrium.

. . . let me remind you of a fundamental truth, and at the same time give you a piece of advice. The truth is that before being charged with the care of “saving” the Empire of France, “superior civilization” and “democracy”, you are under the bounden obligation of saving Canada, its national unity, its internal peace. In the execution of what you believe to be your duty towards an Empire and humanity, you are preparing to increase the sufferings of the Canadian people, to make mothers weep, and to reduce to misery thousands of homes by depriving them of their natural sustenance. Take care that the people do not soon rise against you and against the vultures who are gorging themselves with millions torn from the vitals of the nation. The danger of to-morrow, threatening and formidable, all the world over, is not the triumph of “German Barbarism”; it is class hatred and social war. Even here the tempest is gathering more quickly than you imagine; conscription may be the first lightning in the storm. . . .

The War and the Race Problem

French-Canadians, it cannot be too often repeated, are exclusively *Canadians*. Canada is their only country, their *unique patrie*. To no other country in the world—not to France, not to Britain—they acknowledge those duties which, at all times and in all lands, have been incumbent on the citizens of each country. Foremost among these exclusively *national* duties is military service, which entails the tax of blood.

Separated from France for one hundred and fifty years, first by the Cession, and perhaps even more by the French Revolution, the French-Canadians have preserved for the land of their origin a sincere affection. . . . But they do not consider themselves *obliged* to fight for France, any more than the French of Europe would believe themselves *bound* to fight for French Canada if “civil war” broke out here, or for Canada as whole if the United States or Japan were to attack it. . . .

If painful misunderstandings between Old and New France are to be averted, it is high time that this elementary truism should be stated.

As regards Great Britain, French-Canadians hold themselves bound—as all Canadians—by *all* the duties resulting from the Constitution (voted by the British Parliament), from the agreements made fifty years ago and over by the Imperial authorities and the Canadian governments and also from the respective positions occupied in the world by the two countries—but by *nothing more*. For a century and a half their religious and civil heads, the leaders of all parties, Liberal, Conservative, National, English and French, Protestant and Catholic, have taught them that they have no other military duty to perform than to defend the territory of Canada when it is directly attacked. That England, being sole mistress of the Empire's foreign policy, is alone bound to bear the burdens of imperial wars, has been the oft-repeated and never contradicted assertion of all those leaders. . . .

. . . The mentality of a people, its temperaments and ideas, cannot be changed in a moment; its principles of national life, its habits, its prejudices, if you will, cannot be destroyed in an hour, especially when they are of a sudden confronted with a doctrine radically opposed to that which has been, for a century and a half, presented to them as the only true one. . . .

It is idle to disguise the truth: *two millions of French-Canadians are opposed en masse to conscription*. . . .

Let these words be well pondered: the adoption of conscription will mark for the French-Canadians the beginning of an evolution that will soon transform the most peaceable, perhaps the most orderly, population of the two Americas into a revolutionary people. Once unleashed this revolutionary spirit will not rest; it will not only smart under military rule: it will make itself manifest in the factories, in the fields, everywhere, in all functions of our industrial, social, and political life. . . .