

A COUNTRY DIVIDED

The Conscription Crisis

FOCUSING ON THE ISSUE

When the Canadian army began to run short of men in 1916, the government turned to conscription to find the necessary replacements. Why did the conscription issue cause such deep divisions in Canada?

The Recruitment Crisis

By late 1916, the Canadian Expeditionary Force had participated in several bloody battles, and casualty rates were high. Most Canadian families had a relative or friend who had been killed or wounded. Since Canadian newspapers regularly printed the casualty lists, there were few Canadians who did not know of the losses. Although wounded soldiers were frequently returned to the front lines after treatment, those who were badly hurt were sent home.

The sight of these injured men deeply disturbed Canadians. The returning veterans also brought tales about the reality of war—the horrors of the trenches, the gas attacks, and the shortages of ammunition and supplies. Thus many young Canadians lost their enthusiasm and began to reconsider their ideas about the nobility of war.

Early in the war, Sam Hughes, the minister of militia, had convinced the Borden government that Canada should become a major producer of war materials. Many of the very profitable contracts for these materials went to Hughes's

friends. While most Canadians could accept that contractors should make a profit, many Canadians believed that if men were risking their lives in the war, businesses should forgo their profits. These Canadians were outraged by what they called profiteering on war supplies, and demanded that the government put a stop to it. When word reached Canada that Hughes and his friends were supplying rifles that jammed under heavy use, ammunition that did not fire, boots and uniforms that fell apart in the mud, and horses that were diseased and unfit, there was a public outcry. Many Canadians wondered why they should risk their lives so that Hughes and his cronies could get rich.

In Quebec, the government was having serious difficulty with its recruitment campaign. Hughes had refused to allow French Canadians to form their own units with French-speaking officers. In fact, he had publicly stated that the highest-ranking French-Canadian military officer was not fit to command troops in the field. In addition, both the Manitoba and Ontario governments had recently banned the use of French as a language of instruction in schools, even where the students were French-speaking. As a result, there was much anger in Quebec and few volunteers.



Gradually, stories about the horrors of the war began to spread throughout the country. By 1917, volunteers were not coming forward. Why not?

he 1917 Election

In 1916, the shortage of volunteers led the Borden government to propose the introduction of conscription. Conservatives and Liberals who supported conscription formed a Union government for the election. Only one Union candidate was nominated in each riding. Those who opposed the Union candidates were accused of a traitorous betrayal of the men at the front.

Before the election, the government passed the Military Voters Act, which denied the vote to conscientious objectors and allowed all men and women in the armed forces, regardless of age or citizenship, to cast their votes in any riding they chose. This act was followed by the Wartime Elections Act, which gave the vote to the widows, wives, mothers, and adult daughters and sisters of Canadian men serving overseas. When the votes were counted, these two laws

gave the Union government an overwhelming victory in every province except Prince Edward Island, where the vote was evenly divided, and Quebec, where all but three of the province's 65 seats went to the Liberals.

Conscription

The Military Service Act of 1917 granted exemptions from military service to those who were already engaged in important war work or who could provide a good reason

for not reporting. The act was not administered uniformly across Canada, which meant that some boards granted no exemptions while others gave exemptions to nearly everyone who asked. Those who lived in certain areas or who had the right connections were able to avoid military service. Many other men did not answer the sum-

mons when it came because they had already left their homes to work in the mines and forests. Since labour was scarce in these industries, the identities of the workers were not checked. Although nearly 100 000 Canadians were conscripted, no conscripts actually reached the battlefield before the war ended.

Define: Military Service Act (1917):

WHO SUPPORTED THE ACT AND WHY?

Borden:
→
→
→

WHO OPPOSED THE ACT AND WHY?

Bourassa:
→ Canada lost enough men
→ Farmers: Strain agriculture
→ Workers: paid less than soldiers

WHO WAS ELIGIBLE

WHO WAS EXEMPTED?

POLITICAL RESULTS

SOCIAL RESULTS

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Why did the government pass the Military Voters Act and the Wartime Elections Act?
2. What was the purpose of allowing the votes of military personnel to be counted in any riding in Canada?

KEYWORDS

- casualty
- profiteering
- conscription
- conscientious objector