**Conscription Debate – Yes or No?**

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Serge Durflinger

Ottawa University

**NO**

Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden blew it.

His government’s First World War recruiting policies and practices were inefficient and chaotic, his ill-judged manpower commitments to Britain unsustainable, and, ultimately, his resort to conscription in 1917 undemocratic and unnecessary.

Worse, the very enacting of conscription, along with his 1918 rescinding of promised exemptions, deeply fractured the nation along language, class, occupational and regional lines. It made little sense to bolster the front lines with thousands of unwilling Canadians when the cost of doing so might be Confederation itself. It would have been the classic case of the operation being a success, but the patient dying. Canada barely survived intact and the seeds of Quebec nationalism, Western Canadian alienation and labour strife, already plainly planted prior to 1914, took firmer root and, in 1918-19, flowered into social unrest and violence, altering and complicating the country’s political landscape for decades.

It did not have to be this way.

In 1914 Canada was a self-governing colony of Britain, managing its internal affairs but without any formal international status. About 27 per cent of Canada’s eight million inhabitants were French speaking without family ties to Britain or emotional links to King and Empire. Fighting in British wars was not for everyone, and the fiercely divisive controversies engendered by Canada’s participation in the South African War and the creation of the Royal Canadian Navy had demonstrated the fragility of our national unity.

Borden had his reasons when, in 1914, he declared that recruitment would be based on volunteerism only. But his public pledge on Jan. 1, 1916, that Canada would raise an army of 500,000 was hastily made and poorly considered. In May 1917, with losses high, volunteers more difficult to find outside the ranks of Canada’s large British-born population (who made up more than half of the Canadian Expeditionary Force at that time), and with French-Canadian enlistment especially low, Borden announced his intention to enact conscription, which became law. More than 90 per cent of conscripted Canadians, whatever their ethnicity, applied for exemptions.

As never before, the country dangerously split along language lines. Borden’s Union Government won the bitterly contested December 1917 election in part through the enactment of highly dubious electoral legislation, suborning Canada’s democracy in the process. A motion in the Quebec legislature, debated in January 1918, wondered whether Quebec should leave Confederation if the rest of Canada considered Quebec an obstacle to the pursuance of Canadian political goals. Borden’s single-minded objective of helping Britain win the seemingly interminable war, and his passionate refusal to break faith with the tens of thousands of Canadian casualties incurred thus far, led him to conscript more men, bereave yet more Canadians, and all with the flimsy war aim of securing greater Canadian involvement and autonomy within the evolving Empire-Commonwealth. It hardly seemed worth compelling people to war, and Canada certainly did not need this draconian measure to emerge from the war more autonomous; that right had already been earned.

The Australians, whose voluntary enlistments had been massive, had rejected wartime conscription not once, but twice, in two referenda. They had given enough. So had we. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George certainly wanted the Canadian conscript reinforcements but had no intention of truly sharing imperial decision-making with the colonies. The gallantry of Canadian troops throughout the war is incontestable and their important role in helping defeat Germany during the war’s last three months is well known. But the weighty burden of conscription’s lasting legacy of alienation, especially in French Canada, was for others to inherit.

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J.L. Granastein

University of Toronto

**YES**

The military case for conscription is simple: Canada was fighting a war and casualties at the front by 1917 were outpacing recruiting in Canada. Either more men were put in khaki or the Canadian Corps would dwindle in numbers and effectiveness. Moreover, understrength infantry battalions suffered higher casualties—and were less successful on the attack or in defence—than those at or near full strength.

Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden had not wanted conscription because he knew what its political impact would be in Quebec and rural Canada. But when he visited France in the spring of 1917 he saw how the capture of Vimy Ridge had cost the Corps more than 10,000 casualties. Shaken, he wrote that he had had “the privilege of looking into the eyes of tens of thousands of men at the front who look to us for the effort which will make their sacrifice serve the great purpose for which it was undertaken.”

In Parliament, a Liberal MP declared that Borden had broken his promise by imposing conscription. Angered, Borden asked if Canada had not made a promise to the men it sent into battle. To him, that was a sacred vow.

The government’s plan, put into law with the Military Service Act on Aug. 29, 1917, was to conscript 100,000 men. After a viciously partisan election in December, call-ups began in January 1918. The vast majority in every province sought exemption, but the local appeal tribunals in most parts of the country dealt expeditiously with such cases. The required number of enlistments in the Canadian Expeditionary Force was soon reached, precisely 99,651 according to Department of Militia and Defence figures. Had the war continued into 1919, as every military strategist expected, all these conscripts would have reached the front line overseas. As it was, the first conscripts reached France on May 10, 1918. By the Armistice of Nov. 11, 24,132 conscripts had been taken on strength of units at the front.

Was it worth such a paltry number to tear Canada apart, to turn French- against English-speaking Canadians, farmers against city dwellers?

First, 24,132 men were more than the strength of an infantry division, no paltry number. Second, the Canadian Corps had been engaged in a series of crucial offensives beginning on Aug. 8 at Amiens and continuing at the end of the month near Arras. They had made huge gains on Aug. 8, then broken the Drocourt-Quéant Line, crossed the Canal du Nord in September, and liberated Cambrai and Valenciennes in October and early November. These actions of Canada’s Hundred Days had literally broken the German Army on the Western Front, and they constituted the CEF’s greatest contribution to victory over Germany and, arguably, the greatest military contribution ever made by Canadian troops in any conflict.

But the Hundred Days were terribly costly—45,000 casualties in just over three months fighting, some 20 per cent of Canada’s total casualties during the entire war and 45 per cent of the Corps’ strength. Without the conscripts to fill the ranks, the Corps’ four divisions simply could not have continued to fight. And if Canada had been obliged to pull its Corps out of the line, the great reputation the Dominion had earned during the war by its battlefield performance might have been compromised.

So, yes, conscription was necessary militarily. In terms of domestic politics, the case is more difficult to defend. But if we believe that a nation that sends its soldiers to war must support them to the fullest, then the case for conscription is unanswerable.