



**THE 2008  
ROSS ELLIS MEMORIAL LECTURE  
IN MILITARY AND STRATEGIC STUDIES**

***CANADA'S NATIONAL ARMY, CANADA'S  
NATIONAL INTEREST 1918, 2008***

**TERRY COPP**

**CENTRE FOR MILITARY  
AND STRATEGIC STUDIES**



Good evening and thank you for inviting me. It is always a pleasure to return to Calgary and a special pleasure to be invited to give the annual Ross Ellis lecture. I had the good fortune to research and write about the Calgary Highlanders while a number of Col. Ellis' friends and comrades were able to discuss the storied events of 1944-45 with me. I have interviewed hundreds of veterans and heard many stories about leadership and courage but none more impressive than the tribute his comrades paid to Ross Ellis. You will be pleased to know that my 1990 book *The Brigade: The 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade 1939-1945*, which draws upon these interviews, has been published in the United States bringing the story of the Calgary Highlanders, Black Watch and Maisonneuves to an American audience.<sup>1</sup>

When David Bercuson invited me to present the 2008 Ellis lecture he indicated that I was to address contemporary security and defence issues but he and his colleagues were kind enough to let me approach this task as an historian who believes that studying the past can help us to think more clearly and analytically about the present and future. History may only teach the most obvious of lessons but there is no limit to the questions it raises.

What I propose to do tonight is to examine the decisions taken by Prime Minister Sir Robert Laird Borden and Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie in the last years of the Great War and then raise some questions about foreign and defence policy in the era of Prime Minister Harper and General Hillier.

Canadians who followed international events had debated the possibility of war with Germany for some years before 1914 but few of them connected the assassination

---

<sup>1</sup> Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade 1939-1945* (Stackpole, 2007).

of an Austrian archduke with such an eventuality. Previous Balkan crises had been contained by diplomacy and few believed that decision-makers in Germany were ready to use the crisis as an excuse for a war to alter the balance of power in Europe.

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, and most of his colleagues, knew that Britain's national interest required it to prevent Germany from inflicting another defeat on France, never mind resisting the occupation of Belgium and the Channel coast.<sup>2</sup> Few Canadians distinguished between Canada and Britain's national interest so when war broke out there was little hesitation; most Canadians went to war in a mood of innocent exaltation and moral certainty. But even in the first flush of enthusiasm one can detect different attitudes towards the war that would later become crucial. When the House of Commons met in emergency session on August 18th, Sir Wilfrid Laurier spoke eloquently of the "duty" of Canadians "to fight for the cause of the allied nations" and noted that a "double honour" rested upon French-Canadians because both of their mother countries were involved.<sup>3</sup> Henri Bourassa returned from Europe to argue that while Canada had "no moral or constitutional obligation and no immediate interest in the present conflict" the country should "contribute in the measure of her resources and by means of an appropriate action to the triumph and above all to the endurance of the combined efforts of France and England."<sup>4</sup>

These sober calls to colonial duty were in sharp contrast to the words of English-Canadian spokesmen who from the first emphasized Canada's national responsibility.

The Editor of the Toronto *Globe* wrote:

---

<sup>2</sup> Keith Wilson (ed), *Decisions for War* (London: 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Canada, Debates of the House of Commons, 18 August 1914.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Devoir*, 8 September 1914.

It is not enough to say that when Britain is at war Canada is at war. That may go with the crowd, but in so grave an hour and in a choice so momentous Canada's moral responsibility is her own – our people choose to be a combatant.<sup>5</sup>

and the *Grain Growers Guide* argued that,

It is no time for jingoistic performances, nor for the bombastic utterances of many of our titled imperialists. It is merely time for all Canadians to act like men and join with Great Britain in the face of a common danger and to fight a common foe.<sup>6</sup>

The Protestant religious press swung overnight from its prewar advocacy of pacifism to a strident defense of participation in the “sacred cause”, “a world struggle for liberty against military despotism.”<sup>7</sup> English-Canadian political leaders echoed this moral fervour. The Prime Minister, in his opening address to Parliament, described the “national crisis” confronting the country and warned that “our patience and our fortitude will be tried to the utmost – let us see that no one grows faint and no courage is found wanting.”<sup>8</sup>

The response of the average Canadian to these appeals was mixed. Sixty-five percent of the men in the 1st Division were born in Britain and the “Canadian born” component of the 2nd Division, raised in the winter of 1914-15 was only slightly higher. Even if some percentage of British-born could be added to the Canadian total on the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Toronto Globe*, 4 August 1914.

<sup>6</sup> *The Grain Growers Guide*, 12 August 1914.

<sup>7</sup> *The Christian Guardian*, 16 September 1914.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Borden (ed), *The Memoirs of Robert Laird Borden* Vol. I (Toronto, 1969), 217.

grounds of long residence in Canada, the figures would point to a limited appreciation of the existence of a “national crisis” among native-born Canadians in 1914-15.<sup>9</sup>

On April 22, 1915 the first phase of the Canadian experience of war came to an end. The 1st Division had been moved into the Ypres salient two weeks before but apart from heavy shelling little had happened. But on that day a dense cloud of chlorine gas rolled across the flank of the Canadian position routing the French divisions exposed to its onslaught. The Canadians fought desperately to hold their ground and close the gap. On the 24th a second gas attack hit the centre of the Canadian line. Some units fought until they ceased to exist, the seventh battalion diarist noted that “at the finish there was no ammunition and almost every rifle bolt had stuck.” Yet the Canadians held and according to the British War Office they had “undoubtedly saved the situation” – at a cost of 6,000 men wounded, killed or missing in action.<sup>10</sup>

After the battle of Ypres the war could no longer be discussed in abstract terms. Casualty lists made their first appearance in local newspapers alongside accounts of the incredible bravery of the men of the First Division. In June of 1915 *Macleans's* magazine carried an article by an officer serving at the front which conveyed the mood of the soldiers who had served in the trenches.

A change of face is noticeable in most, if not all the men Young men have become old men, aged years in weeks. Talkative men have become quiet The camp visitor would scarcely recognize in these quiet men the roysterers of other days. No more is “Tipperary” heard -- never in this land.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of attitudes towards the war and recruiting in Toronto see Ian McKee, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed and revisionist account of the experiences of 1st Division, see Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> *Macleans*, 15 June 1915, 32.

In Canada attitudes were also changing. The *Montreal Star* abandoned at least some of its imperialist imagery and argued “not only is the cause of liberty to be fought for but Canadian blood as well is to be avenged.” The *Globe* editorialist wrote that:

Canada is beginning to learn the price that she must pay for her right to a place in the council of nations that, at the end, will fit the terms of the world’s peace. It is the price of blood blood and tears.<sup>12</sup>

The German use of gas was the subject of much bitter comment and, combined with the sinking of the *Lusitania*, served to arouse enormous hatred of the “Huns” who were increasingly pictured as barbarians capable of committing the most terrible atrocities. Atrocity stories, many of them accurate, had been a regular feature of war reporting since the invasion of Belgium but now the highly coloured reports included items like the alleged crucifixion of a Canadian sergeant captured by the Germans. After Ypres, Canadians were in the mood to believe the worst and needed little assistance from the elaborate propaganda machine the British were building.<sup>13</sup>

The press, politicians and other public opinion leaders put new energy into the campaign to encourage recruiting. Civilian Recruiting Leagues were established and church pulpits, motion picture theatres and factories were made available as recruiting platforms. Posters, parades, sermons and other forms of persuasion were freely used. In 1915-16, the Trades and Labour Council urged an all-out effort “to secure early and final victory for the cause of freedom and democracy”<sup>14</sup> while the Canadian Manufacturers Association suggested that everyone offer their services to the state so

---

<sup>12</sup> *Montreal Star* 26 May 1915.

<sup>13</sup> For scholarly accounts of German war crimes committed during the invasion of Belgium and the occupation of France see Jack Horne and Alan Kramer *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (Yale: 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, *Report and Proceedings 1915*, 14.

that Canada could get down to “nationalized teamwork.”<sup>15</sup> The President of the National Council of Women asked the women of Canada to create an atmosphere in their homes which would lead men and boys to feel that “their resolution to offer themselves in their country’s service is simply what we expect of them.”<sup>16</sup> A letter from one young man to the editor of the *Christian Guardian* provides some indication of the pressures that were built up in English-speaking Canada.

I cannot go to a public meeting, I cannot walk down the street, I cannot go to Sunday School, League or Church, I cannot attend any of the district conventions. I cannot even go home and read *Youth and Service* or the *Guardian* without being told I am a shirker.<sup>17</sup>

Whether most of the volunteers shared in the general commitment to the Great Crusade or responded to the pressure exerted upon them will never be known, but enlistments, which had dropped off steadily after the first month of war, began to increase after 2nd Ypres at a rate which taxed the resources of the military and created a country-wide labour shortage. By December of 1915 the monthly recruit total surpassed the number obtained in the rush to join the First Division.<sup>18</sup> In the first four months of 1916 more than 100,000 men enlisted and the Canadian Expeditionary force had close to 300,000 men on strength.<sup>19</sup>

The Government rode the crest of the wave and was largely able to ignore the mounting evidence of incompetence and outright corruption. On January 1st, 1916 the Prime Minister, without having consulted the military or indeed anyone with information about manpower resources, announced that Canada would henceforth have an

---

<sup>15</sup> Canadian Manufacturers Association, *Report 1916*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> National Council of Women, *Report 1915*.

<sup>17</sup> *Christian Guardian*, 6 October 1915.

<sup>18</sup> J Castell Hopkins, *The Canadian Annual Review 1917*, 307.

<sup>19</sup> Gen. L. Nicolson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918*, (Ottawa, 1962) Appendix C, 547.

authorized force of 500,000 men. To raise a force of half a million men would mean that many more than that number would have to enlist for not everyone who volunteered was medically fit.<sup>20</sup> Borden's announcement can only be understood in terms of the mood of the time. The Prime Minister was totally committed to the largest possible Canadian role in the war and there were no important sources of dissent from this view in English-speaking Canada.

There was, however, opposition in French Canada. Many explanations have been put forward to account for the small number of French Canadian volunteers in the First World War. British-born Canadians were such a disproportionately large part of the English-speaking total that it can be argued that those with the deepest roots in Canada were the least likely to volunteer. This explanation is of some value in understanding the first phase of the war. But since by 1917 close to 200,000 Canadian-born volunteers had enlisted and less than ten percent of them were French-Canadian other answers must be sought.<sup>21</sup>

The question of the effect of the policies pursued by Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia, on French-Canadian recruiting has been frequently raised. The most popular story about his insensitivity towards French-Canada is the tale of the appointment of a Methodist Minister as chief recruiting officer in Montreal. In fact this worthy clergyman had been asked to be Co-Chairman of the local Civilian Recruiting League. He accepted but no French-Canadian Catholic priest could be found to serve with him. Moreover, Civilian Recruiting Leagues were designed to aid recruiting not to enlist men. French-Canadian recruits could and did enlist directly at the headquarters of French-

---

<sup>20</sup> Miller, 67-105.

<sup>21</sup> Desmond Morton, *When Your Numbers Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Vintage, 1993), 61.



Canadian regiments. By the summer of 1916 eleven active French-Canadian battalions had been authorized but only five were approaching full strength.<sup>22</sup> There were a number of aspects of Militia Department policy as well as military commitments to “efficiency” which may have adversely affected French-Canadian recruiting but they would have been overcome if there had been a strong desire among French-Canadians to enlist.

Much attention has also been directed at the effect of the Ontario School question on Quebec’s attitude towards the war. Active opposition to Regulation Seventeen, which restricted the use of French as the language of instruction in Ontario schools to the first grade, had existed since 1912 and those elements of French-Canadian society that were concerned with the issue grew more militant in 1915 and 1916 as the Regulation was enforced.<sup>23</sup> But church leaders and most of the Quebec press attacked the *nationaliste* attempt to link the issues of the war and Ontario schools and it is extremely unlikely that the young urban worker or most other potential recruits to the ranks were dissuaded from joining because of French language rights in Ontario.

More fundamental reasons for the French-Canadian attitude towards the war may be advanced. The French-Canadian people had known only one homeland, one *patrie*, one loyalty, for a hundred and fifty years. There was no emotional bond with France and certainly none with Britain. French-Canadian nationalism had necessarily been defensive and introverted rather than aggressive and preoccupied with finding a place among the nations of the world. Once the more adventurous spirits had volunteered, the remaining French-Canadians, the overwhelming majority, looked at the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>23</sup> *Canadian Annual Review 1917*, 499-502.

war as a phenomenon that had little to do with them. Since no important institution or organization in their society saw the war in the terms that it was seen in English-speaking Canada, there could be no pressure or fear of being called a shirker to force the hesitant to enlist. Historians who keep searching for specific incidents to explain the persistent division in outlook between French and English Canadians confuse the consequences of the existence of two different societies in Canada with what are imagined to be causes of division.

As recruits poured into the training camps and were dispatched overseas, a second and then a third division were added to the Canadian forces which were organized as a separate Corps. In April of 1916 the Corps was back in the Ypres salient where the 2nd Division lost close to 2,000 men in the battle of the St. Eloi Craters.<sup>24</sup> All through the summer of 1916 the Corps endured life in the trenches. The 3rd Division was in the line when the Germans attacked at Mont Sorrel on June 1st. Before the battle was over all three divisions had fought and Canadian casualties in the twelve day battle numbered 9,600.<sup>25</sup>

Three weeks later the British Fourth Army was committed to its summer offensive on the River Somme. The first day cost the British Army 57,540 casualties, including 700 men of the Newfoundland Regiment, which was nearly wiped out. Three months later the offensive was still in progress and the Canadian Corps arrived to take part in what became known as the battles of Courcellette and Regina Trench. In the end it was the 4th Division, in action as a unit for the first time, that captured Regina Trench, by then nothing more than “a mere depression in the chalk in many places blown twenty

---

<sup>24</sup> Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians fighting the Great War 1914-1916 Volume I* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 329-333.

<sup>25</sup> See Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), Appendix B.

feet wide, and for long stretches filled with debris and dead bodies.” Almost 25,000 Canadians were killed, wounded or reported missing in the bloodbath at the Somme.<sup>26</sup>

At home recruiting had fallen off sharply in the summer of 1916 and in November, when the Corps was most heavily committed to the Somme battlefield, less than 6,000 volunteers enlisted. The battles of the Somme and Verdun indicated that the armies on the Western Front were locked into a military stalemate which could only be broken if one side or the other could be forced out of the war by sheer exhaustion. There was theoretically another option, negotiating an end to the war.

In December of 1916 the German Government proposed a conference to discuss peace terms, without formally indicating any conditions. President Wilson then proposed that each belligerent power issue a statement of its war aims. Germany reiterated its call for a conference but offered no concrete statement of policy. The *Entente* powers issued a collective reply which insisted that the Central Powers had started the war and that the German proposal of a peace conference “without a statement of terms” was a “sham proposal lacking all substance”, and that such offers rested on “the war-map of Europe which represents nothing more than a passing phase of the situation and not the real strength of the Belligerents. A peace concluded on these terms would only be to the advantage of the aggressors ” The *Entente* note concluded with a statement of war aims which the new British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George summarized as “complete restitution, full reparation and effectual guarantees against repetition”—in other words the surrender of the Central powers.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The quotation is from David Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, 661.

The official position of the Canadian Government was summed up by Sir Robert Borden on December 22, 1916:

we cannot yield our promise in this war unless we are prepared to let military aggressiveness go unchecked all the sacrifices we and the Allied nations have made would be in vain and would be worse than in vain if we did not pursue the struggle until its purpose is crowned with absolute and complete triumph.<sup>28</sup>

If there were to be no negotiations to end the conflict two crucial questions needed to be resolved. How was the war to be won? What kind of peace would military victory bring? The Canadian Corps, transforming itself from a colonial force into a national army, would play a role in answering the first question and the Canadian Prime Minister, invited to London to participate in the Imperial War Cabinet (IWC), was to have a voice in determining the grand strategy of the Empire.

When the four divisions of the Canadian Corps launched their attack on Vimy Ridge on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, they began one of the most carefully prepared and successful set-piece attacks of the war. Objectives had been carefully defined, rehearsals held and intensive artillery support made available. The troops advanced behind a rolling barrage and with their backs to a storm which blew sleet into the German lines. The artillery had cut the German barbed wire, the ground was frozen and the Canadians were able to move steadily without being “hung up on the wire” as they had been at the Somme. Only over the left flank, where the 4th Division came under heavy fire from a strongpoint known as the “Pimple” was the Corps unable to reach its objectives on the first day.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Borden, *Memoirs*, 272.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Hayes, Mike Bechthold, and Andrew Iarocci (eds), *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: WLU Press, 2007).

In broad perspective the capture of Vimy Ridge was a minor tactical success which merely restored a tiny shell torn ridge in Northern France to Allied control. But the newspapers proclaimed it “Canada’s Easter Gift to France” and described the 3,598 fatal casualties as light. Public opinion at home in Canada, and even the troops in France seem to have had their sagging spirits buoyed up by the battle. No doubt many individual soldiers shared the bitterness, fear and frustration that had become the norm among the other veteran formations on the western front but to a remarkable degree the Canadian battalions were immune from the crisis in morale which affected so many French, British and German units.

The decision to introduce compulsory military service was made by one man, the Prime Minister, Robert Laird Borden. There were important elements of Canadian opinion which had been pressing for conscription for some months before the decision was reached. The Borden Papers are full of letters, resolutions and press clippings urging the need for compulsion, but Borden made up his own mind in England and France during the spring of 1917.

He had gone to England in response to the invitation of David Lloyd George the new British war leader, who proposed to establish an IWC as a vehicle for encouraging greater Dominion contributions to the war. The colonial leaders would have some undefined “voice” in Imperial policy and would, it was hoped, provide even greater assistance in the mother country’s darkest hour. Borden had been seeking just such an opportunity to participate in policy making since his election as Prime Minister. Lloyd-George impressed him and London received him as the leader of the Canadian nation-in-arms. The Canadian Corps, flushed with the victory at Vimy, confident of future

success, stirred his pride and sent the heady virus of nationalism coursing through his brain.

With four divisions at the front a steady stream of reinforcements was required. Borden repeatedly cabled home for the latest recruiting figures but each week's figures only proved that voluntary enlistment would not produce the 100,000 men his policy required. He returned to Canada on May 15 and four days later told the House of Commons:

All citizens are liable to military service for the defense of their country, and I conceive that the battle for Canadian liberty and autonomy is being fought today on the plains of France and of Belgium. The time has come when the authority of the state should be invoked to provide reinforcements necessary to maintain the gallant men at the front.<sup>30</sup>

With the United States in the war Borden could not claim that the Allied Armies were facing a manpower shortage, indeed Canadian officials expressed concern about the need to reserve ships to transfer the conscripts to Europe during the period of the American build-up. Borden was concerned with Canadian manpower, with the maintenance of the national army at full strength through to the end of the war. Most English-Canadians shared his commitment or were at least willing to accept conscription. Most French-Canadians did not see the war in terms of the defense of their country and were strongly opposed to compulsory military service. The conscription issue did not divide Canadians, they were already divided over the basic issue of the nature of the European conflict. What conscription did was to focus opinion on a single dramatic issue which served to harden the differences between Canadians.

No one at the time remarked on Borden's curious turn of phrase linking the quest for Canadian autonomy within the British Empire to the fighting in Europe. But the

---

<sup>30</sup> Borden, *Memoirs*.

connection was obvious to Borden. He intended to use Canada's national army as the vehicle through which his definition of Canada's national interest could be developed. In early 1917 he thought that the national interest was best served by obtaining agreement on Resolution 17 of the Imperial War Conference recognizing the Dominions as "autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth" that ought to have a "voice in foreign policy and foreign relations" through "continuous consultation."<sup>31</sup> This approach to imperial relations was in stark contrast to Wilfrid Laurier's policy of no commitments and incremental increases in autonomy.

Borden's campaign for a voice in the foreign policy of the Empire-Commonwealth implied that Canada's national interest might be different from Britain's or Australia's and so it proved. As a member of the IWC sub-committee concerned with peace terms Borden pushed hard for a commitment to the closest possible alliance with the United States as the cornerstone of a "League of Peace" or League of Nations. The IWC was willing to accept this kind of language so long as it wasn't too specific but Borden's new colleagues bridled at his criticism of the "blatant enumeration of territorial gains" sought by Britain. "A proposal to add one million square miles to the British Empire accompanied by a proposal for a peace league and disarmament", Borden declared, "would be coldly and cynically received by the world."<sup>32</sup>

Back in Canada Borden found that broad support for conscription in English-speaking Canada was not easily translated into legislation. He approached Laurier and offered him a partnership "in which outside of the Prime Minister the two parties should

---

<sup>31</sup> Robert Craig Brown, *Robert Laird Borden* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1988), 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

be equally represented in the government". In a confidential memo to the Governor-General, Borden described his conversation with Laurier:

I dwelt upon the serious disadvantage of a war time election as it would involve much bitterness, would divide the nation and would distract the effort not only of the government but of the people from the war for several months I urged also the serious conditions which might arise if the English-speaking population should be arrayed against the population of French origin working in alliance with foreign elements in the western provinces<sup>33</sup>

Laurier refused Borden's offer and demanded that a referendum be held on the issue of conscription. As he told an Ontario supporter, he could not support conscription:

If I were to now deviate from this policy, I would again be attacked by the extremists in Quebec and represented as a deceiver; I would be put on the defensive as a jingoist Remember that the situation in Quebec was made by the Nationalists with the assistance of the official Conservative Party.<sup>34</sup>

Borden proceeded to negotiate with leaders of the Liberal Party in the English-speaking provinces but despite the broad support for conscription and a "National Government" among such men the task was not easy. The record of the Conservative Government and Borden's own reputation for indecisiveness were strong obstacles in the path of a coalition. Laurier carefully worked on this antipathy towards the government by insisting that conscription should be treated as an "open question". The issue, Laurier told his colleagues, was "purely transient", a "passing event" which must not be allowed to destroy party unity.<sup>35</sup>

Laurier's tactics seemed to be working. Despite the fact that only sixteen of the fifty liberal members from outside of Quebec had voted with Laurier in opposition to the

---

<sup>33</sup> Borden, *Memoirs*

<sup>34</sup> O.D. Skelton, *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* Volume II (Toronto: 1921), ?

<sup>35</sup> See John English, *The Decline of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 123-125.



Military Service Act (MSA), by mid-summer Borden was no closer to forming a new “fusion” government. The western Liberal Convention of August 1917 passed a resolution which urged “the vigorous prosecution of the war” but did not mention conscription.<sup>36</sup> If Laurier could keep the conscriptionist wing of his party from joining with Borden then the Liberals, secure in Quebec, might be able to form a government and avoid enforcing the MSA.

The Conservatives however had not been idle. On August 13 the government introduced the Military Voters Act which contained provisions which seemed designed to allow the government party to manipulate the soldiers’ vote. A second bill, the War Time Elections Act disenfranchised “those of enemy alien birth or native language, who have been naturalized since the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1902”, and enfranchised female relatives of soldiers who had served overseas.<sup>37</sup>

The two Acts taken together gave the Government a powerful advantage in the forthcoming election and may have been crucial factors in persuading Liberal politicians to make the final break with Laurier and support Union Government. On October 21, 1917 Borden was finally able to announce the composition of his new administration. The cabinet included eight prominent Liberals and T.A. Crerar, as a representative of the organized farmers. Of Laurier’s former Cabinet Ministers from outside Quebec, only three, Mackenzie King, Edmonton’s Frank Oliver and Charles Murphy, remained loyal. Laurier continued his attempts to salvage something from the wreck of the Liberal Party in English-speaking Canada. He urged the remaining Liberals to follow one of three alternatives. “First, opposition to conscription and Union government—Second,

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 153.

opposition to Union government favouring conscription—Third, running as Independent Liberals.”<sup>38</sup> In the end most Liberal candidates outside of Quebec opted for the second alternative but not even promises to enforce conscription could save more than a handful of them. The election campaign quickly went negative.

An official Unionist campaign leaflet described French-Canadians as having “shirked their duty” and asked if “the English-speaking people” were prepared to stand for such men having a dominating influence in the government. The opposition in Quebec was equally determined to try and make the election a referendum on linguistic lines. *Le Devoir* permitted itself endless diatribes against British Imperialists and their lackeys suggesting that the leaders of the nation chose to celebrate its 50th anniversary by “glorifying its suicide and exalting its devotion to a foreign cause.” Unionist candidates were unable to speak at Quebec political meetings and particularly vehement attacks were made on the handful of French-Canadians who endorsed the Unionist cause.<sup>39</sup>

In the English-speaking provinces a hard-core of anti-conscriptionists rallied to Laurier’s flag. In every province Laurier retained the support of a small group of Liberals and there were some labour leaders and a scattering of farmer “spokesmen” who opposed Union Government. But the total weight of such groups was not large and when “Win-the-War” conscriptionist Liberals are deducted from the total opposition vote in English-speaking Canada it is evident that less than twenty percent of the voters in such areas cast a vote for a candidate opposed to conscription. French Canada and

---

<sup>38</sup> Skelton.

<sup>39</sup> *Canadian Annual Review 1917*, 608-610.

those townships heavily settled by voters of “alien” ancestry voted against conscription by an even wider margin.<sup>40</sup>

The anglophone Liberals who remained loyal to Laurier found that it was virtually impossible to stand against the tide of opinion in favour of conscription. Even those English-Canadians who were at first opposed to compulsion found themselves caught up in what might well be described as the “general will” of the Anglo-Canadian nation. “This is a redemptive war” the General Superintendent of the Methodist Church wrote, “and its success depends entirely upon the height of sacrifice to which our people can ascend.”<sup>41</sup> An extreme example perhaps, but the mood of 1917 was extremist.

The Unionists, with 57 percent of the popular vote and 152 seats to the Liberal total of 82, were firmly in power after the election. The manipulation of the military vote, by channeling unassigned votes to doubtful constituencies, added between ten and fourteen seats to their total, but even without those members the coalition possessed a comfortable majority.<sup>42</sup>

The first call for registration under the terms of the MSA was issued on January 3, 1968. Single men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four were called and by the end of the year over 700,000 had registered. Ninety percent sought exemption from military service and almost seventy percent had their request accepted. Farmers’ sons had been generally exempted but protests from rural communities led the government to announce during the election campaign that all “farmers’ sons who are honestly engaged in the production of food will be exempt from military service.”<sup>43</sup> This

---

<sup>40</sup> English, 197-198.

<sup>41</sup> *Christian Guardian*, 12 October 1917.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, 125.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

statement, made before a political gathering in rural Ontario, did much to head off potential opposition to Union Government.

Despite the large percentage of exemptions, 19,000 men were enlisted in January of 1918 and by the end of March 1918 close to 40,000 conscripts had been enrolled in the army.<sup>44</sup> Borden had consciously pursued a policy which was bound to split the country along linguistic and ethnic lines because he believed that maintaining the combat strength of the Canadian Corps was more important than any other issue. If Canada played and could be seen to play a significant role in the defeat of Germany it would establish an international identity as a nation. Borden hoped that pride in Canada's accomplishments on the battlefield and at the peace conference would help to heal the grievous wounds inflicted on the country but there was worse to come. Then in April the Germans launched their last great offensive and for six weeks the fate of the Allied cause was seriously in doubt. The British Prime Minister cabled the Canadian Government urging it "to reinforce its heroic troops in the fullest possible manner, and with the smallest possible delay Before this campaign is finished" Lloyd-George declared, "the last man may count."<sup>45</sup>

The Borden government initially hesitated to do more than hasten the dispatch of troops overseas but on April 20th, with the prospect of a German break through imminent, an Order-in-Council authorized the call-up of men from "20 to 22 inclusive and if necessary from 19 to 23 years of age" regardless of existing exemptions or possible claims. To an angry crowd of farmers who marched on Ottawa in protest, Borden declared:

---

<sup>44</sup> *Canadian Annual Review 1918*, 459.

<sup>45</sup> Borden, *Memoirs*.

if the Channel Ports should be reached through the breaking of our line, it would be, to say the least problematical whether any of this production would be made of service to the Allied nations overseas or to our men. You speak of solemn covenants and pledges. Do you imagine for one moment a solemn covenant and a pledge to those men?<sup>46</sup>

Close to 40,000 men were conscripted during the month of May, and there was little resistance though much anger in English-speaking Canada.

Exemptions had been freely granted in Quebec where only 4,000 of the 115,000 claims for exemption had been disallowed. Resistance to conscription was widespread throughout the province and two thirds of the 27,000 defaulters under the Act were from Quebec. But French Canada nursed its deeply felt grievances against the system which sought to compel enlistment in a cause which few believed in for many months before a serious disturbance occurred. On March 28, 1918 in Quebec City a young man who had left his exemption papers at home was taken in custody and a crowd gathered in the streets. The riot which followed lasted for three days as the crowd set out to destroy selected targets including the files of the Military Registrar, and the offices of the conscriptionist *Quebec Chronicle*. The Mayor of Quebec refused to read the Riot Act and the Minister of Militia intervened directly by ordering troops into Quebec City. This action, which was *afterwards* legalized by an Order-in-Council, led to a confrontation on the streets of the city and the death of four civilians. The Dominion Government maintained the troops had only fired "after several soldiers had received bullet wounds" while a Coroner's Jury held that the victims "had been innocent of participation in said riot which owed its origin to the tactless and grossly unwise fashion in which the Federal police in charge of the MSA did their work."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Canadian Annual Review 1918*, 462-463.

The Quebec City riots of Easter weekend 1918 were the most dramatic manifestation of French-Canadian discontent but there were many other incidents. The most widely discussed political development of the year was the “Francoeur motion” introduced in the Quebec legislature in January of 1918. J.N. Francoeur a Liberal MLA proposed a resolution which read:

That this house is of the opinion that the Province of Quebec would be disposed to accept the breaking of the Confederation pact of 1867 if, in the other Provinces it is believed she is an obstacle to the Union, progress and development of Canada.

The subsequent debate provided an opportunity to vent some frustration but in the end Francoeur under pressure from Premier Gouin, agreed to withdraw his motion.<sup>48</sup>

While Canadians at home were preoccupied with the politics of conscription the Canadian Corps was caught up in the summer offensives of 1917. The battle of Vimy Ridge had begun a process that was to transform the corps from an imperial formation of mixed reputation into the “shock army of the British Empire.”<sup>49</sup> This no doubt sounds like a cliché but it happens to be true. Under Julian Byng the corps had trained and fought and seen itself as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).<sup>50</sup> Under their new Commander Arthur Currie they became Canada’s national army.

Currie, who began the war as a militia colonel proved to be a man of extraordinary ability and determination. Upon the promotion of Byng to army command Currie, as the senior divisional commander, was knighted and made acting Corps Commander. His reply to Borden’s message of congratulations noted that he accepted

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 634-636.

<sup>49</sup> Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Brennan, “Julian Byng and leadership in the Canadian Corps” in Hayes *et al*, 87-104.

his “responsibility not only to the British army in France but to Canada and to the interests of Canadian soldiers.”<sup>51</sup> Currie, like Borden, lacked the characteristics of an inspirational leader. Physically awkward with a heavy pear-shaped build, he secured the respect of his superior and subordinate officers by demonstrating outstanding qualities as a commander.

One of my colleagues, Mark Humphries, has edited a collection of Currie’s reports, letters and diary entries to be published by our centre this month.<sup>52</sup> It allows the reader to see into Currie’s mind as he struggled with a series of complex challenges. Currie comes across as a cautious, thoughtful empiricist. He encouraged his officers to find the best solutions to the tactical puzzles that confronted the corps while he concentrated on operational problems. Currie was not a scientist or a gunner and he left the details of counter battery, the moving barrage and other such questions to his experts. When, shortly after his appointment as corps commander, he was tasked with a diversionary attack on Lens intended to hold German reserves away from Haig’s summer offensive in Flanders. Currie rejected the Army Commander’s proposal to attack the city and won agreement to stage a carefully rehearsed and coordinated battle to seize Hill 70, high ground that the enemy would attempt to recover. Many analysts regard Hill 70 as the most successful battle fought by the corps as the Germans responded to the bait with repeated counterattacks that wasted their reserves. But, as University of Calgary historian Geoff Jackson has pointed out Currie then allowed the corps to be drawn into costly attempts to capture the ruined city. Was

---

<sup>51</sup> Borden Papers, Currie to Borden 11 June 1917.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Humphries (ed), *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-33* (Waterloo: LCMSDS/WLU Press, 2008).

Currie simply following orders or was the battle the first of several examples of overconfidence and excessive pride in the corps combat capabilities?<sup>53</sup>

Currie's letters and diary do not lend unqualified support to his claim that he protested Canadian involvement in the Passchendaele offensive "to the extreme limit". He did insist on conditions before committing the corps and it is true that the capture of the ruins of the village permitted Haig to declare victory and call off the offensive, but adding 16,000 Canadian casualties to the totals did not appear to justify prolonging the offensive. It also exacerbated the manpower crisis.

Could Currie have refused Haig's order to participate in the offensive? Probably not. In the Second World War Harry Crerar was required to sanction the employment of Canadian troops but in 1917 the Corps was legally part of the BEF and Currie would not have tried to exceed his authority. During the Kaiser's offensive in the spring of 1918 Currie, with the support of the Minister of Overseas Services, protested the detachment of Canadian divisions to other corps but this did not prevent the transfers.<sup>54</sup> His protests may however have hastened the process of reuniting the corps in time for its part in the Amiens offensive of August 1918.

During the winter of 1917-1918 Currie successfully resisted proposals to downsize the Canadian divisions from 12 to 9 battalions, as the British army was forced to do. Currie might have chosen to accept this change, bring the 5th Division to France and take command of an Army of two corps. The British would have welcomed such a development but Currie rejected the plan arguing successfully that the 5th Division should be used to reinforce the existing 12 battalion divisions which would further

---

<sup>53</sup> Geoff Jackson, " 'Anything but lovely': The Canadian Corps at Lens in the summer of 1917" *Canadian Military History* 17, 1 (2007): 5-20.

<sup>54</sup> Humphries. 87-97.



benefit from additional infantry, artillery and engineer resources. The Canadian Corps thus transformed into a formation with exceptional combat power further emphasizing its special position with the BEF.

The Canadians suffered close to 10,000 casualties in the nine months between Passchendaele and Amiens when, with the exception of the Cavalry Brigade and Brutinel's Machine Gun Brigade, they were simply holding quiet sections of the front and carrying out raids.<sup>55</sup> These losses were made good from reinforcements in England. The corps was therefore the obvious choice to spearhead the Amiens offensive. The Canadian achievement in August 1918 added to the laurels that were heaped upon the Canadians. Currie and his senior commanders as well as most of the corps had begun to think of themselves as an elite force capable of anything. His Special Order of 13 August 1918 described the success of the first stage of the Battle of Amiens and noted that:

Canada has always placed the most implicit confidence in her Army. How nobly has that confidence been justified and with what pride has the story of your gallant success been read in your homeland.

The Special Order concluded with a plea to "remember our gallant dead whose spirit shall ever be with us inspiring us to nobler effort and when the call comes again I know the same measure of success will be yours."<sup>56</sup>

Pride in the accomplishments of the corps, the guarantee of a steady stream of replacements through conscription and Haig's readiness to employ the corps in the most difficult operations created a situation that was to result in a series of battlefield victories won at an enormous price. Canadian casualties in the last 100 days of the war

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 101. See also Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

<sup>56</sup> Borden Papers #57112.

were simply extraordinary, 45,830 killed, missing, and wounded—just short of the total of Canadian casualties in all of First Canadian Army from Normandy to the Baltic.<sup>57</sup>

Currie and his generals were criticized repeatedly for these losses, but Currie insisted, that the sacrifices were necessary to ensure “that we do not have to do this all over again in fifteen or twenty years.”<sup>58</sup> On 1 November 1918 he informed Sir Edward Kemp that he “regretted the number of casualties” but insisted they were “not excessive when the extent and security of the operations are considered.”<sup>59</sup> This was no doubt true but many observers could not understand why Canadians had to be repeatedly employed as assault troops.

The corps continued to press forward through Valenciennes towards Mons even though it was obvious the war was quickly coming to an end. Post-war criticism focused on the last day of the war and the allegation that Currie had ordered an all out attack on Mons. During the notorious libel trial in Port Hope Currie’s lawyers successfully demolished this claim<sup>60</sup> but the losses suffered at Passchendaele and during the 100 days continued to haunt Canadians and to shape the politics and culture of the interwar years.

While Currie and Canada’s national army were spearheading the advance through Northern France and Belgium Prime Minister Borden was shaping Canada’s new international identity in London. He arrived there in June 1918 during a period of intense pessimism and war-weariness. The German offensive which began in March 1918 was still in progress and Lloyd George described the situation as “critical”. Borden

---

<sup>57</sup> Schreiber, 131-132.

<sup>58</sup> Humphries, 128.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 131-2.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Sharpe, *The Last Day, The Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial* (Toronto: Osgoode Law Society, 1988).

asked Currie to come to London to report. According to Borden Currie gave “an awful picture of the war situation among the British, [he] says incompetent officers not removed, officers too coward, too cocksure, no foresight.” He told Borden that Passchendaele “had no useful result, the effort was simply wasted.” Currie also claimed that the success of the German offensive was due to failures in British military leadership.<sup>61</sup>

Borden used this information to deliver what historian Craig Brown has rightfully described as “the harshest criticism of the British war effort ever uttered in the IWC.”<sup>62</sup> Lloyd George welcomed Borden’s intervention and asked the Canadian Prime Minister to serve on a cabinet sub-committee to consider the conduct of the war.

Borden’s new role gave him a voice in imperial military strategy as well as foreign relations, a development that proved to be a double-edged sword. Pessimism about the war still prevailed in June and July 1918 and Borden endorsed plans to reconstitute the Russian front by sending an Allied expeditionary force to Siberia. When Lloyd George sought Canadian military participation Borden had to agree though he knew such a commitment would prove deeply unpopular in Canada.<sup>63</sup>

Borden left London in mid-August before anyone fully understood the significance of the Allied victories at Chemin des Dames and Amiens. Back home he found that Canadians had little interest in the transformation of the Empire into a Commonwealth of Nations. The high cost of living, labour unrest and general war weariness had created a climate of anxiety throughout the country.

---

<sup>61</sup> Brown, 136-137.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 139. See Ian Moffat, “Forgotten Battlefields: Canadians in Siberia 1918-19” *Canadian Military Journal* 8, 3 (2007):73-82.

There was little that Borden could do about these trends or the onslaught of the influenza epidemic which peaked in October 1918. When Borden left Ottawa for London to represent Canada in the peace conference more than 5000 Canadians had died of the flu in Ontario and there were 16,000 cases in Alberta alone.<sup>64</sup> Borden arrived in London armed with a cabinet resolution demanding separate Canadian representation at the peace conference which was to open in Versailles. The achievement of the Canadian Corps he insisted demanded no less. Borden was to claim that such recognition, as well as its logical sequel, signatory status at Versailles and separate membership in the League of Nations, were not incompatible with a voice in a common imperial policy but he knew they were. When Borden submitted the Versailles Treaty to the Parliament of Canada for ratification he spoke in strongly nationalistic terms setting a course that led to the Statute of Westminster and full Canadian independence.<sup>65</sup>

Borden and Currie had followed separate but complimentary paths from colonial status to national identity. Along the way they had developed ideas about Canada's national interest that laid the foundation for an independent and activist foreign and defence policy. Both men envisaged a far larger role for Canada than the one carried out under Mackenzie King. After Borden's retirement Currie abandoned his post-war appointment as Inspector General of the Canadian army as it had become evident that there was little interest in sustaining a significant military force.

I began this presentation by suggesting that while we can only learn the most obvious of lessons from history there was no limit to the questions a study of the First

---

<sup>64</sup> *Canadian Annual Review 1918*, 574

<sup>65</sup> Brown, 161.

World War can raise. Let us look at some of them. Borden and Currie were preoccupied with issues related to Canada's subordinate status within the Empire. Both tried to redefine the relationship without addressing the question of what the Canadian public or the Canadian soldier understood to be their interests. Some critics of Borden's policies argued that he was "breaking up the British Empire" while others declared that he had put Canada at "the beck and call of the League of Nations." In the end the result was Mackenzie King and support for appeasement. No one directly associated with the war effort was in a position of power and the collective memory was dominated by the themes of Christian sacrifice described by Jonathan Vance in his book *Death So Noble*. I wonder if our mission in Afghanistan will be remembered in terms of casualties including those to soldiers who will report symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder over the next several decades?

I would suggest that our collective failure to think through the basic questions related to our national interest have in this new century led to foreign policy paralysis. General Hillier, his recent predecessors and current colleagues, are transforming the Canadian Forces into a highly trained, superbly led, well equipped military. In terms of numbers the CF is a pale shadow of the old CEF but they share a similar professionalism and esprit de corps. But what exactly is their purpose? What role do we as a people wish them to play in furthering the national interest?

Our major military commitment, Afghanistan, was to put it mildly unplanned. We are there because we are there. This may be the best short term policy but what comes after 2011? Borden's great failing was his inability to mobilize Canadians behind his policies. He left French Canada and much of rural Canada embittered and driven

inward. How can Prime Minister Harper or his successors engage Canadians in a discussion about Canada's role in the international community? Should we have an open debate about our relationship with the American Empire? Our voice in Washington is even more limited than it was in London in 1918.

My friend Jack Granatstein and many others argue that good relations with Washington are crucial to Canada's national interests. But do good relations require us to work within the shifting constraints of American foreign policy or could we determine our own priorities? Next January a new US President will be sworn in and it is likely that he or she will begin the withdrawal from Iraq and re-focus the US military on Afghanistan. The American build-up will eclipse the role of other NATO countries providing an opportunity for us to consider alternatives.

We also need to get past the debates over soft versus hard power and of peacekeeping versus peacemaking. Currie helped to shape a force that was best suited to accomplish the task at hand but then he knew what that task was. Throughout the debate on Canada's deployment in Kandahar the part that ought to have bothered us the most was our inability to send a second battalion-sized battle group to ensure that there were enough boots on the ground, filled with soldiers trained to Canadian standards. Whatever role we wish the CF to play in our foreign and domestic policy we should surely follow Currie's example and reinforce our three mechanized brigades so that each battalion is at full strength with additional specialist cadres. If Canada could put 400,000 volunteers in the field when it was a country of seven million surely we can sustain the equivalent of a single division when we are more than 30 million.

As long as the CF is focused on Afghanistan the recruiting of young people for the regular force and the reserves will disguise the longer term problems of retaining the more skilled and experienced officers and NCOs. Once we withdraw from a combat role in Afghanistan a serious effort will be required to maintain the strength of the CF in the next decade. Such an army, working with air and naval assets, would allow us to contribute to international peace and security in both peacekeeping and peacemaking roles. We could offer far more than a handful of staff officers and senior NCOs to UN missions in Sudan, Haiti and other areas and still be ready to respond militarily when the next crisis occurs.

If we are to sustain the idea of a Canadian military that represents the national interest we need to begin at the political level avoiding mistakes of the kind that led to so much conflict in 1918. General Hillier like General Currie has provided the leadership and the vision to allow the CF to become a leading national institution. I have no doubt that General Natynczyk, Gauthier, or Leslie will continue to provide effective leadership to the CF but can our political leaders avoid the problems that plagued Robert Borden and help us to define the national interest of the multi-cultural country we have become? Recently Jim Balsillie who has done so much to encourage interest in Canadian foreign policy as Chair of the Canadian International Council concluded an article he wrote for the *Globe and Mail* with these words:

*Our polyglot population, our bilingual history and future, our huge diasporas from Asia, Europe and the Hispanic world, our wealth of intellectual and natural resources, and our capacity to accommodate and encourage growth all speak to the opportunities ahead. But complacency about our foreign policy, about how we distribute foreign aid and in what quantity, about our deployable defence and humanitarian capacity or*

*about how our alliances and relationships abroad need to be modernized could dilute many of these advantages.*

*The world does not care greatly whether Canada makes the right choices. But Canadians who want their children and grandchildren to have better lives, in a world made more complex by non-state actors, climate change, new rising economic powers in Asia, South America and Eastern Europe cannot afford to share that disinterest.*



