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THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY AND CONSCRIPTION IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Conscription was the most contentious political issue of the Second World War. As in 1917, the question of compulsory military service divided the nation, setting *Canadien* against Canadian, Liberal against Conservative. As in 1917, the Liberal Party was torn with dissension over conscription. But as had not happened in 1917, conscription also became a divisive issue for English-speaking members of the Conservative Party.

If the unhappy Conservatives of the war years are remembered at all today, it is as conscriptionists. Arthur Meighen's return to the leadership in November, 1941, on a platform of conscription and National Government comes readily to mind, while Dr. Robert Manion's repeated declarations of 1939 and 1940 that he opposed conscription are forgotten. Except for two relatively brief periods of the war, in fact, the leadership of the Conservative Party either took a position in opposition to conscription or remained mute on the issue. This is not to say that most Conservatives, did not believe that ideally conscription was the fairest and best way to fight the war. They did. But if this is so, how can the wavering course of the party leaders be explained? Why did conscription divide the Conservative Party during the Second World War?



Dr. Robert J. Manion had become leader of the party in July, 1938. A 56-year old physician from Fort William, Ontario, he had first been elected to Parliament in 1917 as a Liberal Unionist. Unlike many others, Manion did not return to the Liberal fold after the war but became a minister in both of Meighen's short-lived administrations and in the Bennett government. He was an Irish Catholic and, although he was not fluent in French, Manion's wife was French-Canadian and his children were bilingual. At the leadership convention, Manion had received strong support from Quebec delegates who had apparently forgotten his wartime advocacy of conscription, and the new leader had confidence in his ability to break the Liberal stranglehold on the province. Manion also believed that he could bring the government down at the next election, for Mackenzie King had not succeeded any better than Bennett in coping with the depression.

Only the threat of war and the possibility of Canadian involvement, Manion believed, could put his plans for election victory in jeopardy.

With few exceptions, English-speaking Conservatives believed that when England was at war, Canada was at war, and the most vocal among them favoured conscription from the outset. On the other hand, Manion's *Canadien* followers generally would have preferred to see Canada remain neutral in any new conflict, but recognizing the impossibility of this in the light of the three-to-one English majority, most accepted the necessity for a "limited liability" war. Canada could send economic aid and volunteers, they maintained, but under no circumstances would conscription for overseas service be accepted.

Manion's dilemma was all too obvious. If he attempted to woo Quebec by pledging the party against conscription and an all-out war effort, he would be attacked by anglophilic Tories and the metropolitan press; but if he refused to make the concessions demanded by Quebec, he stood no chance of gaining strength there, so strong were the memories of 1917. It might be possible to play a cautious game for a time, but Manion soon would have to make his move. His ultimate choice was scarcely in doubt. Manion had been chosen leader because it was believed that he would appeal to Quebec, and the French-Canadian delegates had been his strongest supporters at the convention. In addition, Manion had come to the belief that Canadian unity would not survive a second conscription crisis. "Apparently you do not see the need of trying to keep Canada from splitting down the middle," he wrote to one vociferous Vancouver conscriptionist. "I do. I cannot see for the life of me what good it would do to the Empire for Canada to get into a sort of semi Civil War of its own."¹ Clearly Manion had chosen Quebec.

Manion made his play in March, 1939, shortly after the Nazi rape of Czechoslovakia. Then he acted only after he had been "tipped off on Sunday night [March 26] that King was coming out anti-conscription and Lapointe was coming out in support of the idea that there could be no neutrality" in a war in which Britain was involved. "It was my idea of a proper compromise policy," he wrote to his son, "and I gave an interview to the press on Monday which covered the points . . . as I felt if they beat me with this proposal I would be just trailing along behind."² "I do not believe Canadian youth should be conscripted to fight outside the borders of Canada," Manion told the press in Ottawa. "Canada can play her part in the Empire and in support of our democratic institutions by full co-operation with Great Britain through supplying munitions, foods, and other necessities to our allies, and by fully protecting Canada's own territory."³ Manion's advice about King's plans

¹ Public Archives of Canada, R. J. Manion Papers, Vol. 13, Manion to J. A. Clark, September 13, 1939. As recently as 1936, however, Manion had written in his autobiography, *Life is an Adventure*, p. 224, that "the only fair and just method of raising men for the army during war is by conscription . . ."

² Manion Papers, Vol. 16, Manion to his son James, March 31, 1939.

³ *Toronto Daily Star*, March 28, 1939, p. 1.

proved correct, and on March 30 the Prime Minister came out against conscription for overseas service.⁴ Both great parties were now on record against conscription and in favour of voluntary service — the policy that in essence Canada was to follow for the first five years of the war. Considering the past history of his party, and considering that Conservatism's strength was concentrated in English-speaking Canada, it is remarkable that the Conservative leader was the first to take a stand on this issue. Many in his party were most dissatisfied, however.

"I may say personally that I am very disappointed in Manion's leadership," wrote Dr. Herbert Bruce, a Toronto surgeon recently retired as Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, even before his leader's declaration against conscription, "because he will not take a stand without first considering what the attitude of Quebec will be, so that in essence he allows Quebec to determine his policy and in this respect is following the lead of King . . ." ⁵ At the same time, Manion's Quebec supporters were urging him to go further than King, demanding in fact that he declare against any automatic commitment by Canada in the event of England's becoming involved in war.

The attitude of Quebec Conservatives baffled Manion. "I do not see any reason," he wrote to Georges Héon, the lone French-speaking Conservative M.P. and a key worker in Manion's leadership campaign, "why I must, every time I open my mouth, talk of this damned issue, which stirs up trouble in both [Ontario and Quebec]; and, quite frankly, I don't see why so many of you chaps down there find it necessary to talk all the time on questions of this kind . . . Why," he asked with understandable exasperation, "must it always be the subject in Quebec?" ⁶ Manion's vehemence did little to satisfy Héon and French-speaking Conservatives. It seems clear that neither really understood the problems of the other. Manion's attitude was already an extraordinary one for the leader of the Conservative Party to take and one which threatened the foundations of his support. On the other hand, Héon faced the herculean task of persuading French Canada that the Conservatives had changed, that Manion was not Meighen. The only way to overcome the legacy of 1917, Héon maintained, would be to state that Canada's "obligations to the Commonwealth should be limited to securing the inviolability of our territory." ⁷ This might have been stern medicine for Manion to swallow, but as he was on the verge of a clear breakthrough in the province of Quebec, it is not inconceivable that he would have gone along.

⁴ House of Commons *Debates*, March 30, 1939, p. 2426.

⁵ Herbert Bruce Papers (Toronto), Bruce to Lord Beaverbrook, February 27, 1939. (The Bruce Papers are now at Queen's University.)

⁶ Manion Papers, Vol. 6, Manion to Georges Héon, August 1, 1939.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Héon to Manion, August 21, 1939.

Manion and Premier Duplessis had arrived at an agreement early in August, 1939, that guaranteed the Conservatives the full support of the Union Nationale organization. "You will be getting the entire support of the Duplessis government," the jubilant Manion was told, "without even having to spend one cent for travelling expenses."⁸ With the assurance of support in Quebec, Manion was certain he could win the election, carrying the English-speaking Conservatives who were hungry for victory along with him. Perhaps he was correct, perhaps not. The question became academic on the morning of September 1, 1939, when the first reports of the Nazi invasion of Poland reached Canada.

The war disrupted everything. Within two weeks of the Canadian declaration of war, Duplessis had called an election, challenged Ottawa, and accused Mackenzie King of using the war as an excuse to destroy provincial autonomy. Duplessis' interjection of war issues revived the memories of 1917 with a vengeance, but the intervention of the Liberal Cabinet turned the mighty force of the conscription issue against the Union Nationale. There was nothing that Duplessis could do to counter the Liberals' clear and explicit promises against conscription, and his party was destroyed at the polls. The result was the death blow to Conservative chances in Quebec. The *coup de grace* to Manion and the party came a few months later when Mackenzie King staged his one day session in January, 1940, and dissolved Parliament. The Conservatives were caught without money, without organization, and without hard evidence of shortcomings in the war effort.

The party caucus met to discuss election strategy on January 26, the day following the abbreviated session. With the exception of one M.P. who had already indicated his intention of leaving public life, the Members unanimously endorsed Manion's policy against conscription for overseas service. This could hardly be interpreted as an appeal to Quebec, for after the Duplessis defeat few Conservatives could have held illusions about party strength there; it can only be interpreted, therefore, as reflecting a Conservative desire to maintain national unity and as a reaction to what was believed to be the mood of the electorate. At the same caucus, as Dr. Manion later recalled it, Earl Rowe, the M.P. for Dufferin-Simcoe, "without previous consultation with me — arose and proposed that in the ensuing election we stand on a national government platform. There was wild and enthusiastic acclaim and not one word of opposition."⁹ Accordingly, after the caucus, Manion released a statement advocating "a truly national government in the sense that

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 15, T. H. Onslow to Manion, August 5, 1939, enclosing Onslow to Dr. Robb, August 4, 1939.

⁹ *Ottawa Journal*, March 20, 1942, p. 10. This is a statement released by Manion in explanation of his reasons for advocating National Government.

the very best brains among our people are drafted to serve in the Cabinet." If elected, he stated, "I shall form such a government."¹⁰

For any number of reasons, however, the National Government issue never got off the ground. Too few people had any faith in Manion as a war leader. The announcements by Mackenzie King and CCF leader J.S. Woodsworth that no members of their parties would join in a Manion government made the exercise appear as a cloak for the Conservative Party.¹¹ Die-hard Tories were offended by Manion's dropping the name "Conservative" and designating the party as "National Government."¹² Still others disliked what they regarded as Manion's "policy of catering to French and Catholic sentiment in Canada, instead of following the traditional Conservative course of militant imperialism."¹³ Most important, perhaps, was that the issue of national government was too suggestive of the political strife of 1917. Certainly there was no enthusiasm for the war in Canada in the winter of 1940. The phoney war was not arousing the people. "It is a fantastic situation," wrote W. D. Herridge of his attempts to shape a war party out of Social Credit and other motley groups. "We try to form a war party in a country which scarcely realizes it is at war."¹⁴ There was no popular support for conscription anywhere in Canada, Manion noted, and "before every meeting . . . the first demand by our candidates was that I make it very clear that I was opposed to conscription for overseas service."¹⁵

But, despite Manion's repeated pledges against conscription, the Conservatives suffered once more from the memories of 1917. The mood of the country was such that the most effective weapon against Manion was the belief that his party, if elected, was more likely to implement conscription than the Liberals.¹⁶ Any Conservative remarks on the war, therefore, only reinforced the fear that the Conservatives were too aggressive, too imperialistic, too likely to press for conscription as in 1917. Paradoxically, few Canadians believed that Mackenzie King favoured a massive war effort, and as a result the Liberals were able to stress the war more — and more effectively — than their opponents.¹⁷ When

¹⁰ Clipping from *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, January 27, 1940, in Manion Papers, Vol. 61.

¹¹ W. L. M. King, *Mackenzie King to the People of Canada* (Ottawa, 1940), pp. 36-53; Manion Papers, Vol. 14, J. Earl Lawson to Manion, February 13, 1940.

¹² E.g., P. A. C., Hanson Papers, Hanson to T. Cantley, April 1, 1940.

¹³ University of New Brunswick, R. B. Bennett Papers, Notable Persons File, Norman MacLeod to Bennett, January 30, 1940.

¹⁴ Saskatchewan Provincial Archives, G. H. Barr Papers, W. D. Herridge to Barr, February 5, 1940.

¹⁵ *Ottawa Journal*, March 20, 1942, p. 10. Cf. W. D. Herridge Papers (Toronto), Herridge to R. B. Bennett, May 24, 1941.

¹⁶ E.g., Manion Papers, Vol. 16, Manion to his son James, March 4, 1940; *ibid.*, Vol. 66, Diary entry, March 26, 1940; Hanson Papers, Hanson to A. Davidson, March 25, 1940.

¹⁷ E.g., *Halifax Chronicle*, March 25, 1940, advertisements; Queen's University, Norman Rogers Papers, 1940 Election Speeches, Address, February 19, 1940.

Manion turned his attention to other areas of public concern, however, he was instantly attacked for neglecting the war, the central issue. Promises to increase the price of wheat were met by sardonic calls in the Maritimes to increase the price of fish at the same time.¹⁸ The Conservative *Montreal Gazette*, for example, criticized Manion for not sticking to war issues, then proceeded to blast the unfortunate Conservative for his opposition to railway unification, the central issue to St. James Street and its mouthpiece.¹⁹ In national broadcasts, Mackenzie King accused Manion of leaving a path strewn with "promissory notes. . . . At no place has he enunciated a war policy," King proclaimed. "At every place he has left behind a peace promise. . . ." ²⁰

Feared as too aggressive by some sections of the electorate, attacked for neglecting the war by others, Manion's National Government Party sustained a crushing defeat. Only forty Conservatives were elected, twenty-five from Ontario and only one French-speaking Quebecker, as against 184 Liberals, the largest majority to that time. Manion, who had lost his own seat, believed his party had been beaten because "anti-war sentiment across Canada thinks King less aggressive. . . ." ²¹ People were afraid of conscription, and they were certain King would never implement it. "Undoubtedly," he added, "the big item was the fact that I had with me most of those who are sometimes called the ultra-Imperialists and the people largely felt that King is doing enough." ²² There were other reasons for the defeat, of course, but fear of conscription was high on everyone's list. ²³ Whatever the reasons, however, Manion's brief tenure of the Conservative leadership came to an abrupt end at the party's first caucus a few days before the opening of the new Parliament. Manion had seen his policies and plans destroyed more by bad luck than by bad management. His attempt to seek an accommodation with Quebec had been destroyed by the war and by Duplessis' machinations. The chance of defeating King in the election was wiped out by the snap dissolution, by the electorate's disinclination to swap horses in midstream, and by folk memories of conscription. Manion had never had a chance.

His successor was Hon. R. B. Hanson of Fredericton, a stolid, heavy lawyer and Minister of Trade and Commerce for the last year of the

¹⁸ *Halifax Chronicle*, February 20, 1940, p. 8. Cf. Saskatchewan Public Archives, J. G. Gardiner Papers, Election Material, Address, "Manion at Brandon," n.d.

¹⁹ *Montreal Gazette*, February 20, 1940, p. 8.

²⁰ *Mackenzie King to the People of Canada*, pp. 77-78.

²¹ Manion Papers, Vol. 66, Diary entry, March 26, 1940.

²² *Ibid.*, Vol. 17, Manion to his son James, April 18, 1940.

²³ E.g., A. R. Adamson Papers (Toronto), Election Correspondence 1940, Memorandum, n.d.; Progressive Conservative Party Files (Ottawa), file PEI-Q-1a, Robb to P. W. Turner, April 4, 1940; Hanson Papers, Hanson to C. D. Gordon, April 5, 1940; P. A. C., Arthur Meighen Papers, E. N. McGirr to Meighen, June 22, 1940; Manion Papers, Vol. 14, L. H. Snider to Manion, May 3, 1940.

Bennett government. The new Leader of the Opposition took over as the Allied front in France began to crumble. Almost immediately the whole tenor of the war changed for Canada, and public opinion began to demand action. The limited liability policies were scrapped, and as the Army's new Chief of the General Staff, General H. D. G. Crerar, wrote to a friend, "the pressure on the Government developed by recent events has completely blown off the restrictive lid of the Canadian military effort. . . ." ²⁴ The Conservative leader played an important part in the events of that terrible summer.

The fall of France spurred Hanson to action. "I thought the matter over . . .," he wrote to R. B. Bennett in London,

feeling that something drastic had to be done to stir [the government] out of their inertness and complacency. I finally decided on three things; (1) that [King] should declare a state of national emergency; (2) that he should pass legislation putting at the disposal of the state all the manpower and material resources of the nation; and (3) that in order to effectively carry out (1) and (2), especially (2), he would have to have a National Government

Accordingly I sought an interview

I prefaced my remarks by stating that I believed the position demanded immediate action, that I was not actuated in any degree by political or partisan motives, but that I felt I had to insist that steps be taken at once to meet the situation. I was laying down principles to him rather than details of any measures, and I placed before him proposals. ²⁵

"[Hanson] asked me," King recorded in his diary on June 17, "for the sake of the country, would I not feel that I could change my view on conscription." There was absolutely no chance of this. "In the first place," King said, "I believed it would create a worse situation in Canada than it would remedy." If it ever became necessary to introduce conscription for overseas service, "I would be ready to step out." ²⁶ To his surprise, however, Hanson found Mackenzie King willing to accept conscription for home defence, and within a few days the National Resources Mobilization Act, which authorized such steps, was law. ²⁷

The Conservative leader was pleased with his success. "I have found that I can get action by going to King personally," he wrote, "and telling him that if he doesn't do this and so I will get the big newspapers after him and also get after him in the House. Then I can get some

²⁴ Directorate of History, Canadian Forces Headquarters, H. D. G. Crerar Papers, Crerar to L. B. Pearson, July 27, 1940.

²⁵ Bennett Papers, Hanson to Bennett, July 4, 1940; Bruce Papers, Mrs. Bruce's Diary, June 17, 1940; J. W. Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record*, Vol. I: 1939-1944 (Toronto, 1960), pp. 94-95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁷ The N.R.M.A. gave "special emergency powers to permit of the mobilization of all the effective resources of the nation, both human and material, for the purpose of the defence and security of Canada. . . ." *Statutes*, 4 Geo. VI, C. 13.

half-way measures." Conscription for home defence was only half a loaf, Hanson said, but it was better than no conscription at all.²⁸ But for the next six months and more, while Britain fought for her life, Hanson was preoccupied with the task of keeping the Conservative Party alive. The party was bankrupt, there was no organization, and if the Conservatives succumbed, the only alternative to the government would be the socialist CCF.²⁹ This, Hanson believed, was a terrible fate for the country.

Other Conservatives were not so concerned with the fate of the party, and they were beginning to demand an end to the restrictions in the N.R.M.A. that limited the service of conscripts to Canada. In the House, Hanson was confronted with a difficult problem. "From the very beginning," he wrote to a Calgarian who was urging him to action,

we have endeavoured to manœuvre the position so that the Liberals will have to adopt conscription. Our view is that those who are anxious for conscription underestimate the sentiment in the country against it and that it is not opportune for us to come out at this time flatfooted for conscription. The time will arrive and that time will be when the voluntary system has demonstrated its failure. Meanwhile our rural Members are absolutely opposed to it, and without unanimity in the Party here I could not take this step. My own view is in favour of conscription but I cannot carry the rank and file of the Party with me and it is useless to take this step without that unanimity, which is so essential. You just have to balance things one against the other.³⁰

As Hanson frankly admitted, he hoped to attach the blame for conscription in this war to the Liberals.

As he also had indicated, the caucus was not unanimous in its view of the manpower problem. The rural M.P.s, almost certainly reflecting the views of their constituents, opposed conscription, but some Members from urban areas did not share their fears. One of the most vigorous conscriptionists in caucus was Herbert Bruce, elected in 1940 as M.P. for Toronto Parkdale. In a speech on May 12, 1941, Bruce explained his position:

I am not a politician and I am speaking only for myself when I call upon the government to take immediate steps to meet the present urgent situation and make available by a national selective process the men necessary to bring our armed forces up to the strength that represents the fighting might of Canada.³¹

Bruce's speech went as far as any Conservative Member was prepared to go in the first six months of 1941, and despite his careful avoidance

²⁸ Hanson Papers, Hanson to T. G. Norris, June 20, 1940.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Hanson to J. M. Macdonnell, December 9, 1940; *ibid.*, Hanson to H. A. Newman, October 8, 1940.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Hanson to H. C. Farthing, May 27, 1941. Cf. Herridge Papers, Hanson to Herridge, May 25, 1941.

³¹ House of Commons *Debates*, May 12, 1941, p. 2729.

of the shibboleth "conscription," his speech was not well received by caucus. But, as Bruce wrote a friend, he "didn't care a d— about the fortunes of the Conservative Party," nor did he care what the other Members thought "because they are only thinking of the political effect."³²

Impatient spirits outside the House agreed with Bruce. The Conservative press was becoming increasingly virulent in its attacks on the government's manpower policy,³³ and prominent Conservatives were coming out in favour of conscription. Murdoch MacPherson, a leadership candidate in 1938 and a former Attorney General of Saskatchewan, was the first to speak out bluntly, in a Regina speech on May 9, 1941. Warned of his intentions by John Diefenbaker, the M.P. for Lake Centre, Hanson telegraphed MacPherson that "there is no objection but you must make it plain that you are speaking for yourself and not officially. Our rural members emphatically object to coming out foursquare at this time desiring to fasten the odium on the government if possible." MacPherson agreed to speak on his own responsibility, but his pique was evident in his reply that "to avoid any complication am today resigning from provincial executive."³⁴ His speech received good coverage in the press, but its timing raised some doubts. "To many people," said Rod Finlayson, one-time private secretary to R. B. Bennett, "it doesn't seem to be playing the game to make a demand for conscription just as the government is launching its recruiting drive . . ." The first major recruiting campaign had opened on May 11, just two days after the Regina speech. "I meet men here," Finlayson continued from Winnipeg, "who say they will not help in the drive. Briefly put, they want the drive to fail so that conscription will then become absolutely necessary."³⁵

But the drive did not fail. Indeed, there was as yet no difficulty of serious nature in recruiting. In mid-1941, the Army had 218,000 volunteers, the R.C.A.F. was approaching a strength of 90,000, and the Navy numbered some 20,000 all ranks. For a country of only 11,500,000, simultaneously devoting every effort to increasing its agricultural and industrial production, 330,000 volunteers in two years was a highly creditable achievement. The position of the conscriptionists was a curious one, and it was made even more so by the simple fact that the Army overseas had not been committed to action as yet and so had incurred few casualties.

In these circumstances, why would anyone favour conscription? The reasons, based on an amalgam of emotion, prejudice, wisdom, and

³² Bruce Papers, Bruce to George McCullagh, May 15, 1941.

³³ E.g., *Toronto Evening Telegram*, April 22, 1941, p. 6. Cf. P.A.C., J. W. Dafoe Papers, Microfilm M-79, T. A. Crerar to Dafoe, April 25, 30, 1941.

³⁴ Hanson Papers, Hanson to MacPherson, May 9, 1941, and reply, May 9, 1941.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Finlayson to Hanson, May 14, 1941. For detail on the recruiting campaign, see C. P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, Vol. I: *Six Years of War* (Ottawa, 1955), 121.

experience, are complex and difficult to unravel. Conscription had had to be imposed in the Great War, and those like Arthur Meighen who had been instrumental in securing it, believed that only similar legislation could produce results in this war. "How many Germans," Meighen asked in July, 1941, "have been killed by Canadian Forces?"³⁶ Meighen's query, coming from one of the most lucid, if blinkered, men in Canadian politics, illustrates the emotional nature of the issue. Conscription was necessary to fight the war — regardless of the large air force and navy that had scarcely existed in the Great War; regardless of the tactical differences between the two wars; regardless of the greatly increased war production of 1941 compared with 1916; and regardless of the steady flow of volunteers. Conscription was necessary, and there could be no argument about this.

Certainly conscription was probably a fair method of raising men, and if its implementation would not have produced drastic effects on national unity, few would have opposed it. Most Conservatives tended to discount Liberal claims of preserving the unity of the two Canadian races, but many were not averse to calculating just how far Quebec lagged behind the loyal provinces. One memorandum in Arthur Meighen's papers estimates that, compared to Ontario, Quebec had contributed only 49 percent of its share of Army volunteers.³⁷ The "disloyal bloody French," as one Toronto Conservative M.P. viewed them, simply would not fight.³⁸ In fact, as a perceptive Army report on "The Recruiting Problem in the Province of Quebec" noted in June, 1941, such an attitude could be held only by those "who fail to appreciate either the tactless blunders of a past generation, or the difficult and complex technical obstacles to proportional mobilization of French-speaking Army units."³⁹ There were two fundamental problems. The civil education system in Quebec, one officer observed, was based on metaphysics, not physics, and did not produce men fitted for the technical services.⁴⁰ The second problem, of course, was language. Instruction in the technical corps and in most officer training units was entirely in English. Almost all training pamphlets were unilingual, and the *Canadien* could be pardoned for thinking that only the "poor bloody infantry" wanted him.⁴¹ But despite these drawbacks, total Army enlistments in Quebec were 15,000 men higher — fifty-eight percent — in 1941 than in 1916.

³⁶ Meighen Papers, Meighen to Bennett, July 24, 1941.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Memorandum, n.d.

³⁸ Adamson Papers, Diary entry, February 12, 1942.

³⁹ Directorate of History file 112.3S2009 (D36), June 9, 1941. An earlier draft of this paper is in P.A.C., Ernest Lapointe Papers, Vol. 45.

⁴⁰ Directorate of History file 112.3S2009 (D36), Memorandum, Director of Military Training to Chief of General Staff, June 25, 1941.

⁴¹ E.g., Edmond Turcotte, "What Canada's War Effort Might Be," in A.R.M. Lower and J. F. Parkinson, eds., *War and Reconstruction* (Toronto, 1942), p. 35.

Meighen and his conscriptionist friends also neglected the consideration that popular opinion in Quebec, like it or not, viewed the proper aim of the war to be the defence of Canada, not overseas adventures. All these factors notwithstanding, conscription was still necessary, so thought the conscriptionists, if one was to be considered a true Conservative. There was no truer Conservative than Senator Arthur Meighen. He had favoured conscription from the opening shot of the war, but he had said nothing fearing that an immediate campaign would do more harm than good.⁴² In the general election of 1940, he had remained silent although he had disagreed with Manion's position.⁴³ Even after the fall of France his voice had remained muted. By mid-1941, however, his indignation had reached a peak and he was ready at last. "I have not taken the field as an aggressive conscriptionist," he said, "being somewhat reluctant to appear as usurping the leadership. That the time has come I have no question," he continued, "and the Party cannot too soon take up its true position to suit me."⁴⁴

Meighen's disgust mounted through the summer and fall of 1941 as Hanson continued to equivocate. As a result, Meighen and some supporters began to mull over the question of the leadership. In May the caucus had agreed that a conference would be held in November to select the date and site for a full leadership convention in 1942. But, as Meighen wrote to MacPherson, "I am steadily moving to the conviction that we ought to move faster than that and that the Conservative Party has to take this thing in hand as its own mission, that it must choose its leader and choose him soon and get into action on strong British total war lines without delay. . . . I believe that whatever is done should be done this Fall."⁴⁵

Much to Meighen's dismay, the decision of the party conference in November was that he should abandon the Senate and once again become the leader. The conference reached this decision only after long, heated debate and amidst charges that the meeting had been packed. Disturbed by the opposition to him within the party and fearing for his health, Meighen hesitated. But only for a while. "I became convinced," he said, "and certainly my wife became convinced that I would lose what respect and regard the people felt for me if in the full light of day and with an appeal which had by that time reached Coast-to-Coast dimensions, I refused to try to do the one thing I can do, if, indeed, there is anything I can do, entirely well. . . ." ⁴⁶ There was no doubt about the new leader's policy. The battle would be for conscription and National Government. Mackenzie King would have to be excluded from

⁴² Roger Graham, *Arthur Meighen*, Vol. III: *No Surrender* (Toronto, 1965), 89.

⁴³ *Toronto Daily Star*, February 4, 1942, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Meighen Papers, Meighen to H. R. Milner, May 14, 1941.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Meighen to MacPherson, August 7, 1941.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Meighen to Hugh Clark, November 14, 1941.

any coalition, and this could only be accomplished if an alliance, strong enough to form a government, could be forged from Conservatives and conscriptionist Liberals. The policy was to be 1917 all over again.⁴⁷

But the campaign for conscription was dead within three months when Mackenzie King's astuteness and Meighen's political ineptitude produced the predictable result. Choosing to run for the House in the Toronto riding of York South, Meighen fought his campaign entirely on war issues. York South, however, while traditionally Conservative, was heavily working class in composition, and Meighen fell easy victim to a two-pronged CCF campaign that stressed the Conservative leader's reactionary views on labour and welfare measures and called for a programme of advanced social reforms. Fearing the effects of Meighen's conscriptionist efforts, the Prime Minister assisted by announcing his decision to hold a plebiscite. The plebiscite would free King from his potentially embarrassing pledges against conscription for overseas service. Equally important in the short term, the plebiscite would cut the ground out from under Meighen and his supporters by offering a way around the Conservative leader's attempt to win his by-election simply on a show of hands between those for and against conscription. With the prospect of a vote on conscription before them, only those who wanted conscription immediately, regardless of the situation in the country, would be compelled to vote for Meighen.⁴⁸ King's reasoning was correct. Meighen's defeat in York South ended the external threat to the Liberal government.

The plebiscite also posed delicate problems for the Conservatives in the House. The Opposition M.P.s could denounce the government for its cowardice, but the dilemma confronting them was all too clear. "I have been giving some thought as to how I should vote . . .," a perplexed Hanson wrote.

If I vote "No," I am in effect telling King that he has been right all along and that he should adhere to his policy of "no conscription for overseas service" . . . if I vote "Yes" and to relieve him of all his obligations, I have not the slightest assurance in the world that he will do anything . . .⁴⁹

Nonetheless, as all Conservatives were aware, they could not allow conscription to be defeated, and even Arthur Meighen had to indicate his support for the Government's campaign to be freed of its pledges.⁵⁰ Mackenzie King had manoeuvred his enemies into the unenviable position of having no choice other than to work for his policy.

⁴⁷ Graham, III, 106.

⁴⁸ Pickersgill, I, 313.

⁴⁹ Hanson Papers, Hanson to H. A. Hanson, February 2, 1942.

⁵⁰ Meighen Papers, Statement by Mr. Meighen, March 31, 1942.

The results of the plebiscite, however, compounded King's difficulties. Nationally, a majority favoured releasing the government from its pledges, and under pressure in the Cabinet, the Prime Minister had no option but to take action. As a result, on May 11, 1942, he introduced House of Commons Bill No. 80 to amend the National Resources Mobilization Act and repeal its limiting clause prohibiting the employment of conscripts overseas. But, as Mackenzie King told the House, the amendment did "not denote any change in government policy," and was intended only "to obtain for the government the freedom of decision and action approved by the plebiscite."⁵¹

Initially the Conservatives had been divided in their attitude to King's tortured contortions. From Toronto, Meighen pressed the harassed Hanson to pound away at King,⁵² but the House leader felt bound by the wishes of caucus. "My position is extremely difficult," he wrote to Meighen on May 9, 1942:

Our people here are absolutely averse to demanding conscription, on the theory that now the limitation is removed the responsibility is [King's], and [the government] have the information and the knowledge of the whole position, and that they should go forward. If we come out and declare now further for immediate conscription, it will give him the opportunity of saying when the time comes that the Opposition demanded it and that he was being driven into it. I am not merely reflecting my own view at the moment but the view of Caucus...⁵³

But at a long caucus on May 12, the day after King introduced Bill 80 with the advice that it did not mean a change in government policy, the angry Members overwhelmingly rejected Hanson's advice and decided to press for conscription. Apparently only three M.P.s — John Diefenbaker (Lake Centre), Russell Boucher (Carleton), and Karl Homuth (Waterloo) — supported Hanson.⁵⁴ The Leader of the Opposition loyally accepted the situation, and said that "I intend, with all the force at my command, to demand the immediate and full institution of compulsory selective service over the whole field of the war."⁵⁵

He was as good as his word. "To everyone's surprise," the American Minister in Ottawa noted of Hanson's assault on King on June 10, "Mr. Hanson instead of mumbling his reply let go with both fists and poured vitriol on Mr. King. It is the first and only time in the two years I have been here that he made an effective speech."⁵⁶ The criticism

⁵¹ House of Commons *Debates*, May 11, 1942, pp. 2280-81.

⁵² E.g., Hanson Papers, Meighen to Hanson, May 8, 1942.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Hanson to Meighen, May 9, 1942.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Memo for Caucus and attached notes, May 12, 1942. Cf. Bruce Papers, Bruce to Meighen, May 12, 1942; Adamson Papers, Diary entry, May 12, 1942.

⁵⁵ Herridge Papers, Hanson to Herridge, May 25, 1942.

⁵⁶ Harvard University, J. Pierrepont Moffat Papers, Vol. 47, Memorandum of Conversations..., June 10, 1942.

was unfair, but the praise was deserved. Hanson summed up the nation's frustration at the Prime Minister's tactics with a few lines from Gilbert and Sullivan:

A complicated gentleman allow me to present,
 Of all the arts and faculties the terse embodiment,
 He's a great arithmetician who can demonstrate with ease
 That two and two are three, or five, or anything you please;
 An eminent Logician who can make it clear to you
 That black is white — when looked at from the proper point of view;
 A marvellous philologist who'll undertake to show
 That "yes" is but another and a neater form of "no."⁵⁷

"That 'yes' is but another and a neater form of 'no.'" That line captured Mackenzie King's plebiscite performance to perfection. But, boxed in by King's tactics, the Conservatives had no alternative other than to vote for the government's amendment of the N. R. M. A. "If we were to vote against the Government," Hanson had written earlier, "the thing would be very close — I have an idea that the government might possibly be defeated. . . . If I wanted to play politics and were disregarding of results afterwards, we might defeat him. . . ." But he would not do this, Hanson concluded, as this "would bring down upon my head the execration of this generation and all future generations."⁵⁸

Conscription ceased to be a major issue during the next two years. The war was seemingly off-stage, and the Conservative caucus was content to let Mackenzie King worry about the responsibilities that Bill 80 had given him. Arthur Meighen alone of the Conservatives continued to talk of the need for compulsory service, and Meighen soon was gone. Balking at his ineffectual and stubborn leadership and fearing that Meighen's tiresome insistence on conscription and national government would doom Conservatism to post-war defeat by the CCF,⁵⁹ the party began to veer to the left. The Port Hope Conference of September, 1942, a meeting of lay Conservatives arranged by J. M. Macdonnell, H. R. Milner, and Rod Finlayson, took the first step toward a progressive Conservatism. Three months later the party chose John Bracken, the Liberal-Progressive Premier of Manitoba, as leader. Curiously, Bracken was the choice of both Meighen and the progressives. To Meighen, the Manitoban was a convinced conscriptionist who could lead a reinvigorated drive for compulsory service and national government and at the same time beat the CCF in rural Canada.⁶⁰ The party progressives, however, rejected conscription and national government as useful issues. The

⁵⁷ House of Commons *Debates*, June 10, 1942, p. 3244.

⁵⁸ Hanson Papers, Hanson to G. B. Jones, July 16, 1942.

⁵⁹ E.g., P.A.C., R. A. Bell Papers, Vol. 1, Bell to Hanson, September 11, 1942; Hanson Papers, D. K. Hazen to Hanson, September 12, 1941; *ibid.*, Grote Stirling to Hanson, October 5, 1942.

⁶⁰ Meighen Papers, Meighen to L. G. Gravel, April 6, 1944; Pickersgill, I, 313-14; *Winnipeg Free Press*, January 20, 1942, p. 1.

duty of the Conservative Party, they believed, was to be in a position to defeat the CCF and form the government after the war when, they were convinced, the Liberals would be driven from office.⁶¹ To do this, the party needed progressive welfare policies. Bracken was the man who could change the old Tory image and give reality to the party's new label, Progressive Conservative.

Through 1943 and early 1944, Bracken toured the country making speeches. The conscription cry was deliberately played down. The leader believed that King should pull his own chestnuts from the fire. And in addition the party was confident of its strength in conscriptionist Ontario, recently captured by George Drew's Tories. Now Conservatism was searching for support in the rural West and in Quebec, areas in which conscription was not a saleable commodity.⁶² But soon Bracken began to lose control of his party.

The cause of the difficulties was the continued growth of the CCF. Bracken had been brought in as leader to counter the social-democrats, and the Conservatives had abandoned many of their cherished traditions at Port Hope and Winnipeg with this in mind. What had been the results? The CCF had taken 34 seats in the Ontario elections of 1943, won several federal by-elections, and captured the government of Saskatchewan in June, 1944. Worse yet, every Conservative candidate in the Saskatchewan election had lost his deposit. Apparently, neither the name Progressive Conservative nor John Bracken's reputation were of much value on the prairies.

The failure in Saskatchewan, Bracken's backyard, ended the party's silence on conscription. Bracken had had his chance to offer the Progressive Conservative brand of social welfare, and he had gone nowhere. Now if the CCF were to be stopped, different issues would have to be found. What better issue could there be than conscription?

The pace was forced by Hon. C. P. McTague, a former Ontario justice and a member of the National War Labour Board until his resignation to become the party's National Chairman in early 1944. Addressing his own nomination meeting at Guelph, Ontario, just four days after the Saskatchewan election, the Toronto Tory dealt bluntly with the manpower question:

Now as to where *this party stands on this matter*, let me state in simple unequivocal terms. To our army overseas and their relatives here we say you should have reinforcements now, and they are all available now from the trained troops not now and never required for home defence.... Na-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1942, p. 11. Cf. Queen's University, J. M. Macdonnell Papers, Vol. 52, Address to Toronto Conservative Businessmen's Club, June 12, 1942.

⁶² Hon. J. M. Macdonnell Interview, July 10, 1963; Rod Finlayson Interview, July 6, 1963.

tional honour demands that without an hour's delay the necessary order in council should be passed making these reinforcements available

The government's persistence in leaving these trained soldiers of the home army in Canada can only be construed as deference to the will of the minority in the Province of Quebec as voiced in the plebiscite⁶³

Seated behind McTague on the platform, Bracken apparently was unaware that his lieutenant was going to deal with manpower in these terms.⁶⁴ He could not let the matter pass without comment, however, and Bracken endorsed the policy.⁶⁵

The caucus' response to these events was unfavourable. Only Dr. Bruce was pleased. "I was delighted with the nomination speech of Charlie McTague which came as a complete surprise to our members here," he wrote to his friend and fellow zealot, George McCullagh of the *Globe and Mail*. "In fact some of our friends were foolish enough to express criticism because this had been done without consulting caucus."⁶⁶ Attempts to push the balky caucus along McTague's path, however, were unsuccessful. Rodney Adamson, the M.P. for York West, noted the events of July 24, 1944, in his diary:

Arrive Ottawa. [Met] at station Caucus at 10. Important. It is the Globe [and Mail] group. Have asked Bracken to have us divide the House on conscription. Caucus is 100% against taking this suicidal step. Really a great show and a sock in the eye for the Toronto crowd.⁶⁷

Within three months, however, a genuine shortage of infantry reinforcements had developed overseas, and conscription once again dominated discussion.

The Progressive Conservative Party had no difficulty in determining its course of action in the conscription crisis of October and November, 1944. For the first time in the war, public opinion was fully aroused against the government, and the Conservatives did not miss their cue. The party press accused King of risking military disaster in his attempts to win political advantage.⁶⁸ Conservative speakers charged the Prime Minister with "deliberately ruling according to the will of a minority. . . . Why did he not tell us at the time of the plebiscite in 1942," one Toronto Conservative demanded, "that he would not use the conscript army for fighting overseas if the Province of Quebec opposed it?"⁶⁹ In Parliament, House leader Gordon Graydon moved the party amendment to the

⁶³ Quoted in Progressive Conservative Party, *Progressive Conservative Speaker's Handbook, 1945* (Ottawa, 1945), War Policy, Section I.

⁶⁴ Hon. R. A. Bell Interview, July 15, 1964.

⁶⁵ Cited in "War Policy, John Bracken on Record," mimeo, n.d.

⁶⁶ Bruce Papers, Bruce to George McCullagh, June 21, 1944.

⁶⁷ Adamson Papers, Diary entry, July 24, 1944.

⁶⁸ E.g., *Montreal Gazette*, November 13, 1944, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Donald Fleming quoted in *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November 8, 1944, p. 4.

government's motion of confidence: "This house is of the opinion that the government has not made certain of adequate and continuous trained reinforcements by requiring all N.R.M.A. personnel whether now or hereafter enrolled to serve in any theatre of war and has failed to assure equality of service and sacrifice."⁷⁰

The Conservatives maintained the pressure of their criticism into February, 1945, throwing the full weight of the party into a by-election in Grey North, Ontario, where the Minister of National Defence, General A.G.L. McNaughton, was seeking election. Bracken, still out of Parliament more than two years after his selection as leader, did not choose to run, but he campaigned in the constituency in support of the Conservative candidate. The leader's style was unusually hard-hitting and he lambasted the Liberals ferociously.⁷¹ The result was an impressive victory for the party. Bracken had succeeded in making reinforcements the sole issue, and the by-election had been won with this tactic. It seemed significant, too, that the CCF candidate who had stressed reconstruction and social welfare had lost his deposit. Grey North raised Conservative hopes for the coming general election, but R.B. Hanson assessed the issue correctly: "If the Election is held before the Germans collapse, Bracken might win. But if peace comes soon and you lose the issue of reinforcements it might be otherwise."⁷²

Peace in Europe came on May 8, 1945, but the Conservative leadership continued to ride the conscription horse. In his first major speech of the 1945 election campaign on May 16, Bracken promulgated his "Charter for a Better Canada". The portion of his speech that attracted the most attention, however, was his pledge to use conscripts in the war against Japan.⁷³ With fatal timing, the Conservatives had again nailed conscription to the party's masthead. Nowhere in Canada was there any enthusiasm for a major effort in the Pacific, and to make this party policy was madness. Bracken's speech was probably prompted by two reasons: first, conscription was still being demanded by influential figures in Toronto, led by McCullagh and the *Globe and Mail*; and second, an anti-Quebec line was believed to have strong appeal in English Canada and particularly in Ontario.⁷⁴

The call for conscription for the Pacific served notice that the Tories had written off Quebec. Indeed there was little left to write off. Bracken's

⁷⁰ House of Commons *Debates*, November 27, 1944, p. 6622.

⁷¹ E.g., Bracken's speech at Meaford, Ontario, February 1, 1945, quoted in Progressive Conservative press release, March 1, 1945, copy in Directorate of History, A. G. L. McNaughton Papers.

⁷² Hanson Papers, Hanson to Bell, February 17, 1945.

⁷³ *Ottawa Journal*, May 16, 1945, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Adamson Papers, Diary entries, March 20, 21, 1945; Adamson Papers, "Study of Public Opinion and Political Preference of Voters, West York," February, 1945.

scrupulous tiptoeing around the conscription issue in 1943 and early 1944 had been appreciated in the province, but attempts to cement an alliance with Duplessis had collapsed after the McTague speech.⁷⁵ The Conservatives had then tried to unite the anti-King forces and carried on talks with P. J. A. Cardin, the one-time Minister of Public Works who had left the Cabinet in 1942; with Camillien Houde, the Montreal mayor who had been interned from 1940 to 1944; and with Frédéric Dorion, a nationalist M.P. since 1942.⁷⁶ These attempts finally collapsed in May, 1945.⁷⁷ As a result, there were few Conservatives in Quebec left to object when Bracken flogged the race issue for all it was worth. "They have drained your firesides of your sons and they have deceived Quebec in this war," Bracken told an Ontario audience.

The Government has now announced that it will expect the war in the Pacific to be fought by those who volunteer. The Government's policy in this respect is but another bid for Quebec's support . . .

. . . They are asking your sons to die in double the number of others and they are asking Quebec to continue to be misrepresented before the world. The patriotic among Canada's sons will again be asked to die for Canada, while others will stay at home to populate the land their brothers saved.⁷⁸

Despite these efforts, Bracken's party lost the election of 1945. R. B. Hanson, who had not run for re-election, saw the causes of the defeat as being family allowances, Liberal campaign funds, and conscription. Family allowances were popular in poor districts and conscription for the Pacific was not. "The war," he said, "ended too soon."⁷⁹

Why, then, did conscription divide the Conservative Party? Because of the legacy of 1917. Some in the party had learned the lesson of the Great War. National unity had to be maintained, and conscription would split the country. But many Tories had learned nothing. Conscription to them was not just a means but an end in itself. To rely on volunteers was to relieve the disloyal French Canadian of his share of sacrifice. To rely on volunteers was to betray the men overseas. To rely on volunteers was to admit that 1917 had been a mistake, that the party had been wrong.

But this is too bald a picture of the divisions of party opinion. Manion and Meighen were not the only Conservatives. The typical Conservative of the Second World War was undoubtedly R. B. Hanson. Hanson favoured conscription but feared its effects on his party. Conservatism could not afford to lead the nation on this issue, he believed,

⁷⁵ Bell Papers, Vol. 1, Memorandum, "Problems of Organization . . ." n.d.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Bona Arsenault to Bell, October 6, 8, 1944.

⁷⁷ "Backstage at Ottawa," *Maclean's*, LVIII (July 15, 1945), 15.

⁷⁸ *Montreal Gazette*, May 17, 1945, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Hanson Papers, Hanson to G. Black, June 29, 1945.

or the party would be doomed to spend still another generation in the political wilderness. It was far better to let the Liberals emerge from this war with the conscriptionist reputation.

All things considered, Hanson's course was undoubtedly the wisest one for the party to follow. The only way to counter Mackenzie King was to play his own game. But the gift of properly appraising political realities has never been a Conservative strongpoint. The Hanson course was rejected, and the result, carried to the extremes of political absurdity, was John Bracken's campaign to send conscripts to the Pacific. If there is any lesson to be drawn from the experience of the Conservative Party with conscription in the Second World War, it is this: expediency may be a four letter word to editorial writers, but sometimes it is better for politicians to practise expediency than to stand on the wrong principles.