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Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Canada)

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This article examines the shifting nature of Canadian federal politics during the First World War with an emphasis on conscription and the formation of the Union Government. The impact of these issues on national unity is examined, as is the deterioration in relations between English and French-speaking Canadians. The crisis in national unity was expressed politically with the fracturing of the Liberal Party along linguistic lines and the creation of a national government under the leadership of Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden. A new kind of nationalism emerged from the war, but not one that was shared by all Canadians.

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1. Introduction

Canadians were not asked whether or not they wanted to participate in the First World War but, had

they been consulted, a great majority would have supported participation. Four years later, with 60,000 [dead](#) and thousands more wounded, Canadians had reason to ask if the sacrifice at home and abroad had been worthwhile. Canadians drew a degree of pride from the significant contribution they had made to the Allied victory, and few denied the growth in international prestige and national identity. Equally, all could see the disunion created by the war – political and linguistic divisions that threatened to tear the country apart. In recent years Canadian historians have neglected the political history of the First World War; newer studies have instead examined the extent and nature of the social and economic “transformation” that [Canada](#) experienced in 1914-1918.^[1] But the tensions within Canadian society were reflected in Canada’s political life as well, and they were exposed in the debates over national government, [conscription](#), and support for the war, culminating in the bitter election of 1917. These issues are the focus of this article.

2. The Nature of Canadian Politics

Canadians played practically no role in the [events that led to the outbreak of war](#) in August 1914 and were generally unprepared to participate in the war in any significant way. As a [self-governing Dominion](#) in the British Empire, Canada had almost complete independence domestically; but in foreign affairs the diplomatic unity of the [Empire](#) remained intact. When [Great Britain](#) declared war on 4 August 1914, it did so on behalf of the whole Empire. Participation was not an issue; the extent of that participation was.

When Canadians went to the polls in 1911 they had no idea that they were electing the government that would lead them into war. The major issue in that election was a reciprocity agreement with the [United States](#), which sparked a national debate about Canada’s continental and imperial relationships. The Liberal government, led by Sir [Wilfrid Laurier \(1841-1919\)](#), campaigned on the economic benefits of increased American trade, while the Conservative opposition of [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) opposed reciprocity as a sell-out of the British Empire and the beginning of the end of Canada as an independent nation. In the French-speaking province of Quebec the election turned on Laurier’s plan to establish an independent Canadian navy which could be “loaned” to Great Britain during times of crisis (a debate sparked by the [Anglo-German naval race](#)). Ironically, in English-Canada Laurier was condemned for selling out the Empire, but in Quebec he was accused of being too much of an [imperialist](#) and was attacked for a policy that might lead to young French Canadians being forced to fight in Britain’s imperial wars.^[2]

Fidelity to the Empire triumphed in the 1911 election, however, and the Liberals and reciprocity were defeated. What the election illustrated was the different and often opposing views of the Empire held by Canadians. For the majority English Canadians, the Empire was a positive force in the world and the connection with Britain was a good thing, if only that it helped to define a Canadian identity separate from the United States. French Canadians, the other large linguistic group in Canada, exhibited a certain regard or respect for the British Empire (economic relations, parliamentary institutions, etc.), but they did not share the strong English-Canadian attachment to it. The newly

elected Conservative government, therefore, contained relatively weak representation from [French Canada](#) and what support it had largely evaporated over the next few years. As a result, when the war broke out in 1914, Canada's federal government was three years old, was dominated by English-Canada, and was unprepared for war of any kind, let alone a war on the scale and duration of the First World War.

Once war was declared on 4 August, Borden's government issued a notice of support for Britain. Few of his ministers had any military experience, the small civil service was unprepared for the extra burdens that war would bring, and the militia was badly equipped and not in a state of readiness. The first task was to raise, equip, transport, and finance a large expeditionary force. There were other problems too, including coastal defence, overseeing procurement and distribution of supplies, and dealing with security concerns over the "enemy aliens" – the tens of thousands of Canadians who had emigrated from countries that were now enemy nations.

3. Initial Cooperation

Canada maintained vital trade and strategic ties with Britain, as well as shared traditions and values. There was a widespread sense that the war was about democracy and freedom and that the defeat of Britain would be catastrophic for Canada, which led both English and French Canadians to support participation in the war. Indeed, there was considerable enthusiasm for the war in the fall of 1914, especially among British-born Canadians, a group that comprised approximately 11 percent of the population. Many believed that the war would be short, and thousands of young Canadians, perhaps holding overly-romantic notions about war, honour, and bravery, were eager to volunteer to fight.^[3]

Politicians of all stripes were quick to announce their support for the war. It was an easy thing to do in 1914 when no one had a clear understanding of the strains that the war would place on the Canadian economy and society or of the enormous sacrifices that Canadians would be asked to make. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, now the leader of the Official Opposition, promised a political truce for the duration of war:

...if in what has been done or in what remains to be done there may be anything which in our judgement should not be done or should be differently done, we raise no question, we take no exception, we offer no criticism, and we shall offer no criticism so long as there is danger at the front.^[4]

The two major parties agreed to extend the life of Parliament for a year and postpone a wartime election. With politicians announcing a political truce and with thousands of Canadians hoping to volunteer, the Borden government quickly promised that there would be no conscription for overseas service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). As the war progressed it became an increasingly difficult promise to keep.

The initial sense of cooperation and goodwill began to evaporate as the casualty lists and the other strains of war mounted. The voluntary method of recruitment appeared to work in the early months.

The first contingent was easily filled with British-born Canadians, the unemployed, and young unmarried men. But as these pools of recruits dried up, the number of enlistments began to drop. What also became apparent was that English Canadians were enlisting at a higher rate than French Canadians and this fact sparked a degree of anger and resentment as well as calls for conscription – to force French Canada to “do its share.” There were problems hindering the enlistment of French Canadians, ranging from the way the recruitment campaigns were launched in Quebec to the fact that the Canadian army was an English-speaking institution and somewhat unwelcoming to French Canadians. Even more important, French Canadians did not view the war in the same way as English Canadians did and, while they supported Britain and Canadian participation, most French Canadians felt little obligation to fight for the Empire outside of North America. To make matters worse, a nasty language dispute flared up in the province of Ontario as a result of the Ontario government’s Regulation 17, which limited the use of the French language in Ontario schools. Regulation 17 became a national issue at an unfortunate time with respect to recruitment for the CEF, as many French Canadians questioned why they should be called upon to fight for freedom in Europe when their own language rights were being taken away in Ontario.^[5]

The linguistic tensions crossed political boundaries as well, especially in the Liberal Party where cracks appeared between French and English members. Support for conscription was drawing out English Liberals towards the Conservative Party while French Canadians – virtually unrepresented in the Conservative Party and government – increasingly identified with Laurier’s Liberal Party. At the start of 1916 Prime Minister Borden, thinking primarily of Canada’s growing international prestige and his desire to win the war, announced the doubling of the size of the CEF to 500,000 men.^[6] This announcement was followed – unintentionally – by a significant drop in national recruitment (meaning that it would be almost impossible to achieve the goal of 500,000 men without resorting to conscription) and it came at a time when the French and English in Canada were moving in opposite directions.

4. Conscription and Union Government

Sir Robert Borden’s Conservative government reflected the views of English Canada. By 1917 it was becoming harder to resist the calls for, on the one hand, conscription to maintain the CEF in the field and, on the other, for the formation of a national or coalition government to oversee the prosecution of the war effort. Borden, like many English Canadians, believed the war to be “Canada’s war” and a just cause that must be won at all costs. Various campaigns were launched to encourage enlistment and sincere efforts were made to increase French-Canadian support for the war. All were unsuccessful, but the National Registration undertaken in 1916 revealed that there was a large pool of eligible Canadians who were not enlisting. By early 1917 Borden had stopped saying that he would not introduce conscription. “We have more than two and a half millions of French Canadians in Canada,” he wrote a colleague on 2 January 1917,

and I realize that the feeling between them and the English people is intensely bitter at

present. The vision of the French-Canadian is very limited. He is not well informed.... It may be necessary to resort to compulsion. I hope not; but if necessity arises I shall not hesitate to act accordingly.^[7]

In the spring of 1917 Borden attended the Imperial War Conference organized by British Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) to discuss the war effort. While in Europe, he visited the Canadian troops in France in the aftermath of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the brilliant but very costly victory of the Canadian Corps in April 1917. In London he was instrumental in the negotiation of Resolution IX of the Imperial Conference, which recognized the Dominions as autonomous nations and guaranteed them an “adequate voice” in the making of imperial foreign policy.^[8] He returned to Canada in May, having rededicated himself and his country to the war effort and more determined than ever not to let the Canadian soldiers down. He immediately announced his intention to introduce conscription. In August his government passed the *Military Service Act* which called for the raising of an additional 100,000 men for the CEF.

At the same time, Laurier’s refusal to extend the life of Parliament for another year meant that an election would have to be held by the end of 1917. The government had lost considerable support since 1911. Its war policies had been criticized from all sides, and victory for the government in the forthcoming election was very much in doubt. Borden knew that French Canada was adamantly opposed to both conscription and his government; there were also many English Canadians whose support could not be counted on. [Rural](#) Canadians, especially on the Prairies and in Ontario, were critical of the government for its failure to take action on several fronts, including lowering the tariff. While they supported the war effort, there was widespread feeling that their sons (because of their essential war work on the farm) should be exempted from conscription. Organized [labour](#) was very critical of conscription, especially if it was not accompanied by the conscription of wealth; [pacifist](#) groups and [conscientious objectors](#) were unlikely to support the government; and the thousands of “enemy aliens” from [Germany](#) and the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) were deemed suspect and likely to support the Liberals.^[9]

For Borden and many other government members the victory of the Opposition Liberals was unacceptable if Canada were to see the war through to a successful conclusion, and the Conservatives were determined to do whatever it took to win the election. Action was taken in two areas. First, two bills were introduced into Parliament that significantly rearranged who could vote in the forthcoming election. The *Military Service Act* gave the vote to all members of the armed services regardless of how long they had been resident in Canada. Moreover, if the soldier could not remember which riding he lived in, the government could decide where to place the vote. It was believed that the soldiers would support conscription overwhelmingly and being able to add some of these votes to close ridings would surely help the government win. The *Wartime Elections Act* was equally political in that it gave the vote to all Canadian women who had a close relative (son, father, or husband) in the CEF and took the vote away from conscientious objectors and all immigrants from enemy countries who had come to Canada since 1902. This act effectively removed the vote from thousands of Canadians who were likely to vote Liberal and gave the vote to women who were

likely to vote Conservative.

Second, Borden moved towards the creation of a national government by offering a coalition agreement to Laurier. The one stipulation was that Laurier embrace conscription, which was unacceptable to the Liberal leader. Unable to achieve a coalition with Laurier himself, Borden next went after the pro-conscription members of Laurier's Party, many of whom believed that their chances of re-election were now much diminished by the passage of the *Military Voters and Wartime Elections Acts*. In October an agreement was reached to establish the Union Government, a coalition of Conservatives and English-speaking Liberals. United under the banner of conscription, the Union Government sought a new mandate from the now much more limited Canadian electorate.^[10]

5. Political Discord

The wartime election of 17 December 1917 was one of the most contentious and divisive elections in Canadian history. The issue was conscription but the Unionists tried to rally all of English Canada behind the Union Government by running their campaign on an anti-Quebec basis and by playing up the fear that a Liberal victory would lead to Quebec domination and an end to the Canadian war effort. The aging Unionist politician Sir [George Foster \(1847-1931\)](#) set the tone when he announced that

every alien enemy sympathizer, every man of alien blood born in an alien country with few exceptions, is with Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and every Hun sympathizer from Berlin to the trenches, from Berlin to the Cameroons, wishes success to Laurier, with his anti-conscriptionist campaign.^[11]

On 2 December 1917 the government issued an Order-in-Council exempting the sons of farmers from conscription so long as they stayed on their farms. This move effectively neutralized the opposition of rural Canada and almost ensured victory for the Union Party. The Liberal Party, conversely, had a much harder time. In Quebec a majority was secure, but in English Canada the Liberals were disorganized and forced to campaign in very difficult circumstances.

The results of the election revealed the deep linguistic divisions in the country, with the Union Party winning 152 seats (but only three in Quebec) to eighty-two (mainly in Quebec) for the Liberals. The total vote was much closer, but Borden took the victory as a mandate to pursue his government's war effort, including conscription.^[12] English Canada had triumphed over French Canada and individuals and groups from both sides appealed for calm and for the acceptance of the results. But the divisions within the country were starkly evident. French Canadians, who had reason to resent being portrayed as traitors and cowards, now found themselves politically isolated and facing an English Canada more determined to pursue the war to the end. Any hopes that the war would help to create a new pan-Canadian nationality that included Quebec were shattered.

The government moved ahead with the implementation of conscription but found it extremely difficult to find the required men, as over 93 percent of those called up for service requested exemptions. Nevertheless, by late 1918 conscription had produced close to 100,000 men (although only 24,000 made it overseas). In the process the Government cancelled most exemptions, including the one given to farmers' sons, and broke up the fifth CEF division in England to redistribute the men as reinforcements for the four divisions in [France](#).^[13] Had the war continued into 1919 the CEF may well have faced a grave manpower crisis and more conscripts would likely have been forced into uniform.

In the meantime, the fabric of Canadian society began to tear. Between 28 March and 1 April 1918 anti-conscription riots erupted in Quebec City, leading to the death of four protestors and the jailing of thousands under the *War Measures Act*. The government responded harshly, threatening to enlist anyone "obstructing" the federal government, and stationed troops in the city for the duration of the war.^[14] In addition, rural protest boiled over following the cancellation of the exemption for farmers' sons, while delegations of farmers marched on Ottawa. The labour movement was equally restless after the implementation of conscription, anti-labour legislation, and years of inflation which had made it seem that workers were always falling behind. The number of strikes rose dramatically in 1918.

6. End of the War

The end of the war did not bring an end to the unrest in Canada. Rural protest shifted into political action with the formation of farmers' parties both provincially and federally. Farmers' parties came to power in Ontario and Alberta, and nationally, the new Progressive Party won sixty-five seats in the 1921 election. Organized labour, which had become increasingly radicalized during the war, erupted in a nationwide wave of strikes in 1919, including the Winnipeg General Strike which paralyzed the city for several weeks. There were other strains as well, along class and gender lines, over prohibition, woman's suffrage, and efforts to implement "moral reform" such as temperance or, as others saw it, "moral regulation."

The war helped spark the creation of a new English Canadian [nationalism](#). Canadians had gone off to war as part of the British Empire but the war weakened the imperial tie. As the bonds of Empire diminished in subsequent years, they increasingly expressed this new nationalism in more "North American" terms. But this nationalism was not shared by all Canadians; although calm had been restored in Quebec, national unity remained strained and French Canadians increasingly began to identify themselves as *Quebecois*. Thus, as Canadians began to memorialize, interpret, and understand the war over the following decades it was clear that they did not all remember the war in the same way.^[15]

The hope of Borden and others that the new Union Party would reflect and capitalize on this new English-Canadian nationalism was never realized. The Union Government failed to achieve the cohesion necessary to ensure its survival and soon after the Armistice Unionist-Liberals began

breaking ranks. It was, after all, a party of English-Canadians that had run almost solely on winning the war, and there were too many groups in Canadian society who were opposed to it – including those whose votes were taken away temporarily in 1917. Borden resigned in 1920 and was replaced by [Arthur Meighen \(1874-1960\)](#), but the Union Party soon fell apart.^[16] The Liberal Party, despite the demoralizing loss in 1917, was in better shape; with the gradual return of English-speaking Western and Ontario Liberals and its solid base in Quebec, the Liberals were set to dominate federal politics for the next sixty-five years. Laurier died in 1919 but his successor [William Lyon Mackenzie King \(1874-1950\)](#) won the election of 1921 and went on to become Canada's longest serving prime minister.

7. Conclusion

Canada emerged from the First World War an economically stronger and more autonomous nation with a greatly enhanced international reputation, but also a nation more mature and divided, with fewer illusions about war and about itself. For Sir Robert Borden, despite his significant achievements regarding Canadian independence and international recognition, conscription was to become his most enduring legacy. Conscription became the symbol of a terrible war for Canadians, and its memory remained in the minds of those politicians who lived to lead Canada through a second world war only twenty years later.

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Notes

1. ↑ See the essays in: Glassford, Sarah/Shaw, Amy (eds.): *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service. Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*, Vancouver 2012; MacKenzie, David (ed.): *Canada and the First World War. Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, Toronto 2005.
2. ↑ See Dutil, Patrice/MacKenzie, David: *Canada 1911: The Decisive Election that Shaped the Country*, Toronto 2011.
3. ↑ Bray, R. Matthew: "Fighting as an ally": The English-Canadian Patriotic Response to the Great War, in *Canadian Historical Review* 61/2 (1980), pp. 141-168.
4. ↑ Skelton, Oscar Douglas: *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Volume 2*, Toronto 1922, p. 433.
5. ↑ Granatstein, J.L./Hitsman, J.M.: *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, Toronto 1977, pp. 25-34.
6. ↑ Brown, Robert Craig: *Robert Laird Borden: A Biography. Volume II: 1914-1937*, Toronto 1980, pp. 33-34.

7. ↑ English, John: *The Decline of Politics. The Conservatives and the Party System, 1901-20*, Toronto 1977, pp. 124-225.
8. ↑ Brown, R. Craig/Bothwell, Robert: The 'Canadian Resolution', in Cross, Michael/Bothwell, Robert (eds.): *Policy by Other Means: Essays in Honour of C. P. Stacey*, Toronto 1972, p. 174.
9. ↑ Bothwell, Robert/Drummond, Ian/English, John: *Canada, 1900-1945*, Toronto 1987, pp. 127-132.
10. ↑ See Cook, Ramsay: *Dafoe, Laurier, and the Formation of the Union Government*, in *Canadian Historical Review* 42/3 (1961), pp. 185-208; English, *Decline* 1977, pp. 136-185.
11. ↑ Brown, Robert Craig/Cook, Ramsay: *Canada 1896-1921. A Nation Transformed*, Toronto 1974, p. 273.
12. ↑ Beck, J. M.: *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections*, Toronto 1968, pp. 136-148.
13. ↑ Granatstein, J.L.: *Conscription in the Great War*, in MacKenzie (ed.), *Canada* 2005, pp. 70-72.
14. ↑ Auger, Martin: *On the Brink of Civil War: The Canadian Government and the Suppression of the 1918 Quebec Easter Riots*, in *Canadian Historical Review* 89/4 (2008), pp. 503-540.
15. ↑ See Vance, Jonathan F.: *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Vancouver 1997.
16. ↑ Graham, Roger: *Arthur Meighen: Volume II. And Fortune Fled*, Toronto 1963, pp. 25-33.

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