

*“Our first duty is to win, at any cost”
Sir Robert Borden during the Great War*

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“Sir Robert Borden may have been an outstanding figure in Canadian public life, being even a leader in Imperial councils during the war, but he seems to have lacked the arts which most appeal to the popular imagination,” wrote one journalist after Borden’s retirement in 1920. “For example, one never hears and never will hear a personal anecdote about Borden. His biography, when written, will be dull. It will ... bore the people to death.”¹

Boring Canadians to death seems more than a little harsh, but it would be fair to write that his service to country has never caught the imagination of Canadians in the same way that Sir John A. Macdonald or Sir Wilfrid Laurier have become political icons. Moreover, his reputation has slipped steadily from the war years. In a 1926 public opinion poll in *MacLean’s* magazine, Borden was one of Canada’s most popular and respected living Canadians, although this must be qualified that the voting was likely carried out by English Canadians.² But by 1964, historians and political scientists, engaging in an exercise of judging the effectiveness and impact of Canada’s prime ministers up to that point in the nation’s history, ranked Borden as fourth, a “near-

¹ Robert Craig Brown, “Whither are we being shoved?” *Political Leadership in Canada during World War I*, in J.L. Granatstein and R.D. Cuff (eds.), *War and Society in North America* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1971), p. 106.

² “Who is the Greatest Living Canadian?” *MacLean’s Magazine*, 15 May 1927. The magazine later changed its name to *Maclean’s*.

great” along with William Lyon Mackenzie King, with Macdonald and Laurier taking the top two spots as “greats.”³ He has slipped steadily from that time.

The last significant poll that ranked prime ministers involved 26 historians in 1997, and was also published in *Maclean's*. King had shot up to number one here and Borden had sunk to seventh, bottom of the “high-average.” The drop for Borden, it would appear, coincided with how society and historians increasingly viewed the challenges of ensuring unity in times of war.⁴ While these polls are useful in gauging the faults and successes of individual prime ministers against a fixed set of criteria, the “judges” are likely influenced by the present as much as the past. Borden needs to be understood in the context of his times, and measured against actions taken or neglected, with an eye on placing such decision in their historical time and place.

Borden underwent a tremendous transformation during the course of the Great War, which echoed that of the nation. During the difficult period of 1914 to 1918, with the war’s continuous demand and then drain of men and materiel, there was no guide book to follow. Borden faced a bitterly divided nation, with many parts in a crusading mentality and unwilling to compromise. Throughout this time, Borden was guided by his principles and his willingness to sacrifice all to support the Canadian soldiers overseas. In this belief, he was like many Canadians, perhaps the majority of Canadians. For Borden it was single-minded victory and damn the costs.

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Borden’s prewar political career might be summed up as disastrous. He was a successful and wealthy lawyer from Nova Scotia, who was recognized as intelligent, hard-working, and self-disciplined. He was just the sort of man the Conservatives were looking for to renew the desiccated party as it went into the 1896 election. Unfortunately for the Tories, there were not enough Bordens among the rank and file.

³ See the forthcoming, Stephen Azzi and Norman Hillmer, “Cautious Transformation: The Paradox of Canadian Prime Ministerial Leadership,” in Paul Strangio, Paul Hart, and James Walter (eds.) *Prime Ministerial Leadership: Power, Party and Performance in Westminster Systems* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer, *Prime Ministers: Ranking Canada’s Leaders* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1999) and Norman Hillmer and J.L. Granatstein, “Historians Rank the Best and Worst Canadian Prime Ministers,” *Maclean's* (21 April 1997), pp. 34-39.

The Liberals broke the Conservative stronghold over the nation, which they had held since 1878. Wilfrid Laurier swept into power, and most Conservatives were ousted. Not Borden. He survived. But he disliked being a politician, hated Ottawa, and generally found the cut and parry of the House of Commons to be a “waste of time.”⁵

Borden promised himself and his wife that he would only serve one term. But the party needed him and so he did his duty and ran in the 1900 election. The Conservatives were blown away again, but Borden held his seat. With the party desperately needing a change, in the age before party leadership conventions, Borden was picked by the outgoing Conservative leader, Charles Tupper. Tupper, a former prime minister, thought highly of Borden but he had also seen the internecine battles over who would lead the party in the period after Sir John A. Macdonald’s death, and he refused to put the party through that turmoil. Nonetheless, when Tupper chose Borden, it was a shock. “It would be an absurdity for the party and madness for me,” was Borden’s first reaction to the offer.⁶ But he was talked into leading the Tories, and again duty to country was invoked. However, pleas of duty could not match the experienced, charismatic, and lyrical Laurier. How would the slightly stuffy and deadly earnest Borden fare against Laurier, who was also blessed with a strong Cabinet? Not well.

The next eleven years were a frustrating time as party leader. The Liberals were unstoppable. The economy was booming and immigrants flooded the country. Canada was stepping into the 20th century with confidence. While Borden and the Conservatives chipped away at the Liberals, they were trounced in 1904 and 1908. With a string of defeats, Borden had to keep one eye on the Liberals and one on his own party, with more than a few mutinous factions trying to force him out of power. Borden was competent but staid. He led but he did not inspire. Perhaps one of Borden’s colleagues summed it up best: ruthless brawler Sam Hughes liked Borden but gauged him to be “a lovely fellow, very capable, but not a very good judge of men or

⁵ Robert Laird Borden, *His Memoirs, volume I* (Toronto: The Macmillan company of Canada, 1938), p. 47.

⁶ Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Robert Craig Brown, Sir Robert Borden.

tactics and is gentle-hearted as a girl.”⁷ Borden was indeed cut from a different cloth than Hughes, but he had steel in him and he survived, learned from his mistakes, and improved.

It was the Liberals who eventually did themselves in. They had been in power too long and there was deep rot, with political scandals and the constant suction from the money-pit railways lines. Two issues eventually brought down the government. The first was negotiations of a trade deal with the United States in 1911, which left the Liberals vulnerable to attacks for getting too close to the Americans. Secondly, there was a clash with Quebec nationalists who turned on Laurier because of his establishment of an independent navy the previous year, which was branded as a imperial vehicle that would drag Canada into the British empire’s wars. The wooden Borden – who always seemed too reserved, too analytical, too rational – led the fiery charge that Laurier had betrayed the empire, and in Quebec he made a strange alliance with nationalists like Henri Bourassa, who, in his attempt to punish Laurier, allied himself with the party of empire. The Conservatives surprised the Liberals, the nation, and perhaps themselves by winning the 1911 election. Borden became Canada’s 8th prime minister.

Borden’s party had come in from the wilderness after a decade and a half and there were few qualified candidates for cabinet posts. More troubling was the Liberal control of the Senate. Laurier was soon fighting hard against all Conservative legislation, including Borden’s plan to scuttle the nascent Canadian navy and instead send money to Britain so that it could more rapidly build battleships that would protect Canadian waters and defend against the Germany navy. The Tories made little headway against the Grit delaying tactics and after they invoked closure over the naval bill in April 1913, the Senate sent the bill back to the House.

Borden and Sam Hughes, his minister of militia and defence, continued to predict and plan for a coming war between Britain and Germany, but their attempts at military reform were often stifled or even outright rejected by the Liberals and the

⁷ Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989) 8; LAC, MG 26 G, Sir Robert Borden papers [hereafter Borden papers], v., pp. 134, 7829-35, Hughes to MacArthur, 23 March 1911.

Senate.⁸ With the nation in a recession from early 1913, the Conservatives seemed stumbling hopelessly towards their defeat. There could be few in Canada, save the die-hard or delusional, who believed that Laurier would not return from the electorate's light spanking, and again right the ship of state.

Borden was saved by the war that plunged his country into crisis. When Britain went to war against Germany on 4 August 1914, the Dominion of Canada also found itself at war. For those who read the papers, it was not a bolt from the blue, especially with Europe spiralling towards conflict throughout the summer, after years of rival economic interests, compounded by grievances, sabre-rattling, and military rearmament. But many in Canada were nonetheless taken by surprise. In response, however, tens of thousands of Canadians flocked to the colours. With almost no professional army, little bureaucracy, and absolutely no precedent upon which to draw, Borden's government was carried forward by the tide of war, and the fervent desire of Canadians to support Britain.

Yet Borden seemed an uninspiring war leader. The gossip in political circles, as recounted by Liberal Newton Rowell, was that "Sir Robert Borden is an amiable man with good ideals but without decision of character, the courage or the outlook to fill the position of premier at this time....It is almost a tragedy that Canada should be afflicted with such a government at this time."⁹ Timid, vacillating, and uninspiring, or so Liberals classified Borden, he was also saddled with a weak Cabinet. But the war, it was said by most military experts and pundits, would be short, and hopefully Canada and its prime minister would not be tested.

One of Borden's most important acts was to consolidate power, and quickly. A special emergency war session of Parliament met on August 18th. Laurier used the opportunity to express his loyalty to the war and the Empire: "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."¹⁰ The next day, the Emergency War Measures Bill was

⁸ See R.G. Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1986); William Johnston, et. al., *The Seabound Coast: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, 1867-1939, volume I* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), pp. 141-210.

⁹ Margaret Prang, *N.W. Rowell: Ontario Nationalist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 160.

¹⁰ Hansard, 18 August 1914, p. 8.

introduced. It was the most extraordinary bill ever to be presented before Parliament and it offered sweeping powers to the government, including the right to censor and even suspend *habeas corpus*. In the patriotic climate, there was very little substantial debate; the government had wide-ranging authoritarian power to prosecute the war, with most checks and balances buried for the duration of the crisis.

Canada also sent an expeditionary force overseas, although it would be a voluntary one. Borden claimed in a December 1914 speech in Halifax that “There has not been, there will not be, compulsion or conscription.”¹¹ At the start of the war, no one dreamed of the need for compulsory service, as thousands of young and middle aged men, many of them with previous military experience or having served in the militia, flocked to the new training camps. The initial force of some 33,000 was made up of mostly English Canadians and the vast majority had been born in England, and they would be followed another 420,000 from across the dominion.

While Borden was not comfortable as a war leader, few would mistake the mercurial Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes as anything other than a war lord. Hughes had been a militia soldier for almost 50 years, was aggressive in tone and action, and was dead-set to lead the country into war. The strutting, swearing, bundle of energy that was Sam Hughes took control of raising Canada’s military force. Borden deferred to him on many matters, remaining above the fray.

The government estimated in August 1914 that to put a soldier in the field would cost about \$1,000 per man.¹² Sam Hughes, with the full backing of Borden and the Cabinet, ensured that the new expeditionary force was equipped with Canadian-made kit. Hughes encouraged, browbeat, and pleaded with industry to meet the new need for everything, from boots to horses, and from razors to machine guns. Yet outfitting an army from scratch was no easy task. Much of the kit was soon found to be substandard, with the boots dissolving in the mud and the Ross rifle failing on the battlefield. While these military contracts were important economic stimulus for producers, many of the scandals centred on Hughes and his cronies’ propensity to dish out contracts only to Conservatives. While this patronage did not aid the war, it is not

¹¹ Borden papers, Address, 18 December 1914, p. 17702.

¹² J. Castell Hopkins, *Canadian Annual Review [hereafter CAR] 1914* (Toronto: The Annual Review Publishing Company Limited, 1915), p. 152.

certain that Liberal companies would have been any more competent in delivering the goods, or that a Liberal government would have done anything differently. Nothing on this scale had ever been done before. There were few guidelines and inspectors; everything was rushed and required immediately.¹³

Scandals there were, but also great success, like the Shell Committee, a loose group of industrialists brought together by Sam Hughes. Fighting on the Western Front demanded the enormous expenditure of small arms and artillery shells. While Hughes has been much maligned in the literature surrounding the Shell Committee, the minister used his considerable influence to drive the industry, offering up large contracts and reminding its leaders that it was their responsibility to support the war effort.¹⁴ Hughes has often been condemned for the slow production of these complicated shells, but that is surely the worst form of hindsight history; instead, Hughes should be lauded for keeping the contracts in Canada, dragging the nation's industries into production mode, and encouraging the conditions by which almost a quarter million jobs were created. Hughes laid the ground work for this, even though more credit must go to the excellent organizer, Sir Joseph Flavelle, who replaced Hughes in late 1915 and established the Imperial Munitions Board, which oversaw the production of shells, but also ships and planes.¹⁵

There remained many problems with Sam Hughes. By May 1915, Borden established the War Purchasing Commission to ease Hughes's overworked department. Tenders were opened and competitive bids were assessed, often with the assistance of experts from responsible government departments. Inspections were also carried out and contracts were amended or cut accordingly. This was a significant step towards professionalisation. The prime minister had begun to realize that the expanding war

¹³ Tim Cook, *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2010), pp. 104-6.

¹⁴ See David Carnegie, *The History of Munitions Supply in Canada, 1914-1918* (London: Longmans, Green and co, 1925); Sir Sam Hughes, "The War and Our Duty," *Address Delivered before the Canadian Clubs of Ottawa, 1915-1916* (Ottawa: The Davidson-Merrill Press, 1916), pp. 50-1; for some of the challenges of the committee, and its internal workings, see LAC, Sam Hughes papers, MG 27 II-D-23, v.3, file 6, Minutes of the Shell Committee.

¹⁵ For the work of the IMB, see Michael Bliss, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1858-1939* (Toronto, 1978).

effort required an expanded bureaucracy and the old ways of doing things – through rewarding the party faithful – was no longer responsible in the increasingly unlimited Canadian war effort, and with tens of thousands of Canadian lives on the line.

The Crusade

The Canadian overseas forces missed the 1914 campaigns that had shattered the European armies, but when the Canadians arrived on the Western Front they were soon engaged in the costly April 1915 Battle of Second Ypres.¹⁶ The Canadians fought desperately and with enormous bravery, but the losses during a week of battle – some 6,000 killed, wounded, and lost as prisoners – were a shock to the nation. Canadians braced themselves for a long war.

As the war dragged on and as the casualties climbed to shocking figures, many Canadians came to view the war as a crusade against the militaristic German people, the barbaric Hun, who sought to enslave Europe and shatter the British Empire. Borden, too, believed that this was a war of good against evil. “In this struggle against the Prussian oligarchy and against its ideals, Canada, in common with all the Empire, is prepared to fight, and intends to fight, to the death.”¹⁷

Fighting the enemy overseas provoked Canadians to engage in new battles at home. They thought they found a hidden enemy in the roughly half million German and Austrian Empire immigrants (which included Ukrainians) spread across the dominion. The racist and nativistic called for the internment of these “enemy aliens,” only a few of whom were German or Austrian reservists, and who should have been prevented from returning to the national armies in Europe. Borden appealed for calm.¹⁸

¹⁶ Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*, volume 1 (Toronto: Viking, 2007).

¹⁷ Sir Robert L. Borden, “Speech to the Winnipeg Canadian Club December 29th 1914,” Brian Busby (ed.) *Great Canadian Speeches: Words That Shaped a Nation* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2008) 59; Robert Craig Brown, “Sir Robert Borden, the Great War and Anglo-Canadian Relations,” in John S. Moir (ed.), *Character and Circumstance* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 204-5.

¹⁸ Borden papers, speech to Canadian Club of Montreal, 7 December 1914, pp. 177074-5; Borden, *Memoirs*, I/456-7; Greg Kealey, “State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914-20: The Impact of the First World War,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 73.3 (1992), pp. 284-5.

But his government was driven to more aggressive action from widespread fear of a supposed German-American invasion force pooling secretly on the border, as well as a handful of high-profile, although totally ineffectual acts of sabotage. About 8,000 Canadians were eventually interned under the War Measures Act in more than twenty isolated camps across the country. By 1916, however, these numbers had been reduced to about 2,000.¹⁹ Racism, fear, and a willingness to demonize the enemy, in his many forms, led to intolerance against fellow Canadians.

In this crusade against the Hun, Canada had committed about 100,000 soldiers overseas by the first full year of the war, with tens of thousands enlisting month after month. Four Canadian divisions would eventually be fielded by mid 1916, which formed the Canadian Corps, the dominion's primary land formation. But Britain needed more troops and recruitment slowed by late 1916, when about 350,000 Canadians were in uniform, as war-related employment created high-paying jobs and the terrible nature of the fighting was increasingly revealed to all at home.

In Quebec, recruitment in 1916 was almost non-existent. Neither Hughes nor Borden had much affinity with Quebec, and with the nationalists having pulled their support from the Conservatives before the war, there was little hope of rallying young French Canadians to serve in an English army fighting in what many viewed as an imperial war.²⁰ Like Macdonald before him and King afterwards, Borden spoke little French, and he did not really understand Quebec as a society.²¹ Unlike those two prime ministers, he never had trusted Quebec lieutenants to help guide the party. Quebec was left on its own and voluntary enlistment remained low from that province.²²

Much of the English-speaking nation was nonetheless behind Borden. On 30 December 1915, Borden sent for a number of his ministers and told them that Canada had to do more for the war effort. With Britain on the verge of bringing in conscription, Borden

¹⁹ David Edward Smith, "Emergency Government in Canada," *The Canadian Historical Review* 50.4 (December 1969), p. 436.

²⁰ See Desmond Morton, "French Canada and the Canadian Militia, 1868-1914," *Social History-histoire sociale*, (April 1969), pp. 32-50.

²¹ For a bleak assessment of the Conservative political machine in Quebec before the war, see Borden papers, v.28, Casgrain to Borden, 17 September 1913, p. 11084.

²² J.L. Granatstein, "Conscription in the Great War," in David Mackenzie (ed.) *Canada and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 65.

announced that he would issue a New Years Day message and increase the size of the Canadian military overseas forces to half a million. "This announcement is made in token of Canada's unflinchable resolve to crown the justice of our cause with victory and with an abiding peace."²³ Borden's call was greeted with wild excitement in many parts of English Canada, where the supporters of the war continued to demand that more be done to aid the soldiers overseas. Yet Borden's friend and confidant, Finance Minister Thomas White, later remarked that he had no idea how Canada would field such a large force, and the Cabinet "simply went on faith."²⁴ The decision was Borden's alone, and he placed faith in Canadians that they would rise to the momentous occasion.

As part of the creep from limited to total war, Borden established wartime organizations. While these new administrative bodies brought greater efficiency, it left some of the wartime leaders, like Sam Hughes, with fewer opportunities to dispense patronage or influence the war effort. While Hughes is not the clown of history books, his enormous energy and drive was offset by his instability. Flavelle summed up Sir Sam with a not uncommon appreciation of those who were around the minister for any length of time, "I believe him to be mentally unbalanced, with the low cunning and cleverness often associated with the insane."²⁵ Even as tens of thousands continued to enlist under his watch, Hughes had become increasingly erratic, his health eroded by overwork and insomnia. He was drawing fire from the Liberals and most of Borden's cabinet ministers wanted to see him removed by early 1916. Realizing that Hughes had many powerful friends in the Ontario wing of the party, Borden built his case against Hughes and then cut him loose at the end of 1916.²⁶ Hughes was devastated, but Borden continued onward, almost as if nothing had happened. He was no longer that "gentle hearted girl" that Hughes had known. While others replaced Hughes, it was Borden who stepped into the breach. He would be Canada's war leader.

²³ Borden, *Memoirs*, I/528.

²⁴ Thomas White, *The Story of Canada's War Finances* (Montreal, 1921), p. 31.

²⁵ Michael Bliss, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1858-1939* (Toronto, 1978), p. 273.

²⁶ LAC, Sir Robert Borden, MG 26 H, R6113-46-1-E, personal diary [hereafter Borden's diary], 3 April 1916; LAC, Sir Sam Hughes papers, MG 27 II-D-23, v. 1, file 9, Borden to Hughes, 9 November 1916; Borden, *Memoirs*, II/568.

Win At Any Cost

As Canada was hardened under the strain of war, the reserved and patient Borden was increasingly revealing flashes of anger at the lack of consultation from Whitehall. Not only was Borden shut out from the larger direction of the war, but the British withheld even basic information from the front, with the Canadian prime minister often only finding out about major military decisions, some involving Canadian troops, through newspaper accounts. Borden felt like a colonial, despite the nation's considerable sacrifice.

Borden made his first wartime trip to Britain in early July 1915, anxious to see the troops but also consult with his counterpart, Herbert Asquith, who had recently formed a coalition government to better prosecute the war. Asquith, for the most part, kept him at arm's length, unwilling to share much information and none of the decision-making powers. This was frustrating for Borden, but the prime minister also took it upon himself to meet with wounded and maimed Canadians. He wanted to see first-hand the effects of the war on his countrymen. In visiting 52 hospitals, Borden was inspired and shattered by his experience of talking with amputees and even the critically wounded, men who would never recover from their injuries and who would be buried for King and country. The tours were emotionally and physically exhausting for Borden, and he recounted publicly, "it was the most deeply-moving experience of all my life."²⁷ This terrible war was laying waste to the best and brightest of the dominion; Borden brooded over the thought, and wondered if anything good could come of such horrendous slaughter.

Borden returned to Britain in February 1917 with a new determination. The British needed more troops from the dominions, and seemed willing to share power and influence, although this, in practice, proved to be quite limited. While in London, Borden was impressed with the new prime minister, David Lloyd George. He had drive and energy; gone, in Borden's mind, was the "timidity, vacillation and inertia" of the Asquith government.²⁸ With access to the war records, Borden learned of the situation

²⁷ *Canadian Annual Review 1915*, p. 181.

²⁸ Robert Craig Brown, *Robert Laird Borden: A Biography, volume II* (Toronto, 1980), p. 77.

at the front.²⁹ With Russia succumbing to revolution, and Germany fending off most of the Allied offensives on the Western Front, the situation looked grim. Borden was tired and dispirited, but he was not disillusioned. He believed there was no other option than victory.

The imperially-minded Borden increasingly saw Canada's sacrifice in the war – some 70,000 killed and wounded at this point – as the impetus for greater Canada autonomy. Duty to Empire drove Borden, but he also believed that such a sacrifice must lead to Canada's full control over its national destiny. The most important constitutional decision reached during the meeting of the dominion prime ministers was Resolution IX, of which South African Jan Smuts and Borden were considered the lead authors. Despite its anodyne name, Resolution IX was a profound statement that unequivocally stated that when the war ended negotiations would begin to determine "full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth ... [which would give them] an adequate voice in foreign policy and in foreign relations."³⁰ In short, once the war was won, the dominions would begin negotiations for full control over their foreign policy. As Borden wrote after attending these conferences, Canada was now walking the road "from colony to nation."³¹

Yet with this new drive for autonomy came responsibility. Canada was pressured to send more men. With more than 400,000 Canadians having enlisted by April 1917 and over 30,000 killed, from where would the men come? The farms had to be worked, munitions manufactured, and wartime goods produced. Those who wanted to enlist had gone, but more than a million additional men aged 18 to 45 had decided not to go. Most of these Canadians likely supported the war and made valuable contributions to the war effort, but not to the point of giving up their jobs or leaving their families, or simply of putting themselves in harm's way. With Canada relatively unthreatened across the Atlantic, these men, at some level, simply did not believe that the war was the urgent crusade that many called it.

²⁹ See Brock Millman, "A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917-18," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 36. 2 (April 2001), pp. 247-248.

³⁰ R. Craig Brown and Robert Bothwell, "The Canadian Resolution" in Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell (eds.) *Policy by Other Means: Essays in Honour of C.P. Stacey* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 163-77.

³¹ Stephen Harris, "From Subordinate to Ally: The Canadian Corps and National Autonomy, 1914-1918," *Revue Internationale d'Historie Militaire* 51 (1982), p. 116; Robert Borden, "The Imperial Conference," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 6.4 (July 1927), p. 200.

For the hundreds of recruiting leagues and tens of thousands engaged in the work of finding men to fill the ranks, there was an increasing and vocal call to invoke conscription. If the able and young would not enlist voluntarily, could these slackers not be forced?³² Yet conscription seemed to go against everything the war stood for: a just war to free the oppressed and restore liberal ideals. It was the enemy, Canadians had been told time and time again, who conscripted men within their blood-crazed, militarized society built upon subjugation and oppression. Would Canada's fight for liberty and justice become a war that enslaved its own people in a militaristic Canadian-kultur? Borden agonized over this discordance, putting off calls for conscription, hoping to find a solution based on voluntary enlistment. None was to be found.

"The battle for Canadian liberty and autonomy is being fought today on the plains of France and Belgium," intoned Borden as he announced to the House of Commons on 18 May 1917 that his government would bring in conscription.³³ Borden had delayed this action for months, but with mounting pressure and with voluntary recruitment all but ended, he felt he had no choice. His one hope to avoid a traumatic break with Quebec was if Laurier and the Liberals might somehow be brought into the political fold, to form a new party, similar to what had occurred in Britain. Borden initiated negotiations with Laurier, and offered him enormous power and influence, including the right to veto cabinet appointments. This did not bode well for Conservatives like Robert Rogers of Manitoba, who was hated by the Liberals, and Borden quickly contrived a means to remove him from the cabinet, hoping it would entice other wavering Liberals to the party.³⁴ Like the influential Hughes before him, Rogers learned too late that Borden had no compunction in throwing him under a bus to achieve his own goals.

The 75-year-old Laurier was extremely cautious. He did not want to see civil war but he felt he could not accept Borden's offer. It would hand Quebec over to the

³² Borden papers, Borden to Kemp, 22 March 1917, 43479; LAC, A.E. Kemp papers, MG 27 II-B-9, v. 120, file 26 (a), Memo, Department of Militia and Defence, 7 July 1917.

³³ See Hansard, 18 May 1917; also see R.C. Brown and D. Loveridge, "Unrequited Faith: Recruiting the CEF 1914-1918," *Revue Internationale d'Historie Militaire* 51 (1982), p. 63.

³⁴ Borden papers, Borden to Rogers, 17 August 1917, pp. 40890-94; and *Ibid*, Rogers to Borden, 18 August 1917, pp. 40896-40897.

extremists who were screaming race annihilation.³⁵ Yet was that true? The most vocal of the nationalists do not appear to have significant representation in the vast rural communities across the province, although there was widespread ambivalence to the war and outright anger to domestic language policies like Ontario's Regulation 17, which sought to remove the teaching of language from schools. Perhaps a younger Laurier might have had the energy to find a compromise and work from within the new Unionist party, but he chose to turn down Borden's offer in early June.³⁶

Both men realized that the only course of action was an election. A vote for Borden was a vote for conscription; a vote for Laurier was against such intrusive legislation, although Laurier had promised to find other voluntary methods of raising the necessary soldiers. Borden spoke of the need to keep faith with the soldiers overseas: "If we do not provide reinforcements, if we do not keep our plighted faith, with what countenance shall we meet them on their return?"³⁷ Borden took the summer to pass the Military Service Act – the legislation that would bring in conscription -- and to siphon off Liberal strength, as many of the MPs in English ridings were under enormous pressure to support conscription. Borden used his patience and skill to dislodge them, offering prizes and ministerial positions, to form the new Unionist party. Borden's skill in enticing the conflicted and wavering Liberals revealed a masterful control of partisan politics, for as he managed the dissenting Liberals he also had to deal with his own party, including snarling prominent cabinet ministers who would be displaced to make room for the rebel Grits. Borden carried all of this out with devastating skill.

In the fight over conscription, there were no easy answers, but for Borden it came down to supporting the soldiers overseas. He would not abandon them to the fate of being wounded and forced back to the front because of a lack of men, and he would not let Canada's allies down. As Borden wrote in his diary: "Our first duty is to win, at any

³⁵ H.S. Ferns and B. Ostry, *The Age of Mackenzie King: The Rise of the Leader* (London: William Heinemann, 1955), p. 227.

³⁶ LAC, Borden papers, Laurier to Borden, 6 June 1917, 40047A; Prang, *N.W. Rowell*, p. 190.

³⁷ Hansard, 11 June 1917.

cost, the coming election in order that we may continue to do our part in winning the War and that Canada not be disgraced.”³⁸

The Conservatives framed conscription as a desperate measure in a desperate war that could aid the war economy to determine who would be drafted to serve and who was already in a critical war job. While initially all 20- to 24-year-olds would be eligible to be drafted, there were local tribunals established to ensure that young men who were called up had a chance to plead their case for exemption. While this process was later abused, it was an attempt to ensure that the disruption to Canadian society was minimized, although the pulling of 100,000 conscripts from the work force would have ramifications on the farms and cities.

The Military Service Act was passed at the end of August, but it would not be enforced until after the election. But Borden and his new party, the Unionists, were by no means assured a victory. Party strategists told Borden that the votes of the 400,000 or so overseas soldiers were needed, as the Conservatives were deeply unpopular in Quebec, but also among disenchanted farmers, elements of labour, and newly arrived immigrants. A new Soldiers Voting Act was introduced to ensure that all soldiers could vote in the coming election, including those that were underage and even British subjects who had enlisted from the United States.³⁹ The Liberals objected but found no traction.

However, a second piece of legislation, known as the Wartime Elections Bill, had the Liberals screaming bloody murder. The bill delivered two profoundly different actions that would shake the political landscape of the dominion in the form of enfranchisement for women and disenfranchisement of recent immigrants. One of the many uncomfortable paradoxes facing Canadians in the Great War was the limited political rights of women. The traditional arguments against enfranchisement rang increasingly hollow – that women could not handle the strain, or make informed choice through defects of mind, breeding, or education – since women had proudly and visibly stepped up to fill the gap in the paid work force, raised millions for soldiers’

³⁸ Borden diary, 25 September 1917.

³⁹ See Desmond Morton, “Polling the Soldiers Vote: The Overseas Campaign in the Canadian General Election of 1917,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 10.4 (November 1975), pp. 39-58.

dependants, and had generally thrown their weight behind the war effort. Under the new bill, women with a link to a soldier overseas – widows, wives, and female relatives – would have the right to vote. Enfranchisement had come to women as a reward for their loyalty and, the more cynical remarked, as a deliberate attempt at scuttling the Liberal chances in the election. “If your husband or father is on the firing line,” scolded an advertisement in the *Montreal Daily Star*, “he will have less chance of being killed or injured if we send more men to help them ... Vote to save your kin.”⁴⁰

The disenfranchisement component of the Wartime Elections Act was far more egregious. In a shockingly brazen move, the act took the vote away from immigrants who had arrived since 1902 from wartime countries. While most German Canadians did not lose the right to vote in Ontario, as they were from long established communities, tens of thousands were disenfranchised in the west – where the 1916 Prairie Census revealed that 7.8 per cent of the west’s population was born in enemy territory. An estimated 50,000 males were disenfranchised.⁴¹

All of this led to the bitterest election in Canadian history, which culminated on 17 December 1917. There was open talk of insurrection in Quebec. Long time Liberal supporter, J.W. Dafoe, warned in the *Winnipeg Free Press* that Laurier was only supported by pacifists, socialists, and the unpatriotic; “they will come together in the polling booth to stab their country.”⁴² When Dafoe turned on Laurier, worried many Liberals, it was probably an indication that the electorate would follow.

It was the farmers who would tip the balance. And the farmers were not happy with either of the two parties, which they viewed as selling out their interests to the city folk.⁴³ Leaders in the rural community and farmers’ papers implored young men not to abandon their land in search of adventure and war, and they were vehement in their opposition to conscription. By late November, it appeared that the fear of conscription was driving farmers into the arms of the Liberals. The Unionists eventually saw the

⁴⁰ Tarah Brookfield, “Divided by the Ballot Box: The Montreal Council of Women and the 1917 Election,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 89.4 (December 2008), p. 475.

⁴¹ Brookfield, “Divided by the Ballot Box,” p. 488.

⁴² J.W. Dafoe, *Laurier: A Study in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Carleton Library No. 3, 1963), p. xviii.

⁴³ See W.R. Young, “Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario, 1917-19,” *The Canadian Historical Review*, LIII. No. 3 (September 1972), pp. 289-320.

danger and cravenly changed their policy, offering exemptions from conscription.⁴⁴ The Liberals howled at the deliberate vote-bribery. Unionist justifications must have sounded weak to even their own ears after all their fiery rhetoric about the need to share an equal burden.

While Labour seemed against the Unionists, which was generally labelled as the party of big business, one could not discount those labourers with fathers, sons, brothers, and neighbours in the forces. With little fanfare, one quarter of all of Western Canada's union members had enlisted for overseas service.⁴⁵ With the fighting forces formed largely from the working class, labourers could be against the war, but few were willing to sacrifice the interests (and possibly the lives) of their family members, co-workers, and comrades. There were no clear-cut lines in the open warfare at home.

In the Khaki Election, the Unionists swept the country, except for Quebec. Even without the soldiers' vote that would not be counted and applied until February – which revealed that 90% voted for the government and would switch the results in fourteen constituencies towards Borden's men – the Unionists captured smashing majorities in Ontario and the West, and split the Maritimes, although individual ridings were sometimes very close. Old voting patterns based on ethnicity and religion defined many races, but the rural vote had been essential for victory, and it was assumed that English-speaking women voted in favour of the Unionists.⁴⁶ A landslide of 153 Unionists were elected, yet with only three seats in Quebec; Laurier had returned eighty-two Liberals, sixty-two from Quebec.⁴⁷ The Unionists received tens of thousands of votes from their gerrymandering enfranchisement acts. While one can hardly object to giving soldiers the right to vote, the partial enfranchisement for women and disenfranchisement of recent immigrants from enemy countries seems to be the worst

⁴⁴ *CAR 1917*, p. 625.

⁴⁵ John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie. West, 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), p. 117.

⁴⁶ Marion McSheffrey, "The Khaki Election: A New Perspective, The Ottawa Valley in 1917 (MA thesis: University of Calgary, 2005), p. 57; Ray Argyle, *Turning Points: The Campaigns that Changed Canada* (Toronto: White Knight, 2004) 177; Brookfield, "Divided by the Ballot Box," p. 494.

⁴⁷ See J. Murray Beck, *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 148.

type of political skulduggery. If the Unionists did not steal the election, it was not for want of trying. As Borden had said, he would win at any cost.

International Statesman

Borden returned to England in June 1918. He was tired and spent, but hardened. It was a grim period, as the German Western Front offensives from late March had nearly punched a hole through the Allied lines. Lloyd George wrote a fear-mongering letter to Borden in the midst of the crisis, "the whole military future will depend upon our being able to refit and maintain our armies in time."⁴⁸ In Canada, with inadequate information and with a desperate series of communiqués from overseas, Borden had acted decisively to support the soldiers in the field.⁴⁹

Almost all of the conscripted men in Canada had sought exemptions. These had been applied unevenly and there was a sense, again, that Quebec was not sharing the burden, with most men there exempted by local tribunals. As well, the special deal that the Conservatives had made with the farmers now seemed unfair, as German forces threatened to end the war. In a dramatic move, in April 1918, Borden revoked the exemptions. There were cries of broken promises, with farmers demanding answers to how they were to bring in the food to feed the armies if the military conscripted their remaining sons.

A resolute Borden turned a blind eye to these complaints. However, he had been forced to act more decisively during the Quebec Easter Riots at the end of March 1918, which saw French Canadians in the streets of Quebec City attacking English militia units, throwing rocks and even firing small arms. After several days of provocative manoeuvres by the armed civilians, which saw at least one militiaman shot in the face, the militia eventually responded with force when threatened by a mob. Four Quebecers lay dead. Canadians were killing Canadians in the street. Borden was shocked but

⁴⁸ Brown, *Borden*, p. 133.

⁴⁹ George L. Cook, "Sir Robert Borden, Lloyd George and British Military Policy, 1917-1918," *The Historical Journal* 14.2 (June 1971), p. 381.

responded with an iron hand, invoking martial law and sending in more militia units.⁵⁰ There were no further battles in the streets, but the perceived repression left French Canadians smouldering with rage and a sense of injustice.

These two events had shaken the Borden government, but the prime minister had emerged with a renewed sense of purpose. "The supreme duty of the government," he wrote, "[is] to see to it that these men [overseas soldiers] are sustained by such reinforcements as will enable them to hold the line."⁵¹ In England, Borden was a hawk and refused to entertain ideas of a possible negotiated surrender. In one fiery speech to the Imperial War Cabinet, he condemned the British generals and stiffened the backbone of those politicians who were wavering under the onslaught. "We came over to fight in earnest; and Canada will fight it out to the end. But earnestness must be expressed in organisation, foresight, preparation. Let the past bury its dead, but for God's sake let us get down to earnest endeavour and hold this line until the Americans can come and help us to sustain it till the end."⁵²

Notwithstanding Borden's bellicose statements, the tide had turned on the Western Front. The German offensives had been ground out and their forces ravaged by the Spanish flu. The French and Americans counterattacked in July, at the Second Battle of the Marne, and the British and dominion forces in August, at Amiens. The German armies crumbled under the onslaught. But there were no easy victories. The Canadian Corps was in much of the heavy fighting and earned a reputation as a resolute force, but it suffered a crippling 45,000 casualties out of roughly 100,000 men during the last Hundred Days campaign.⁵³ With almost 50,000 conscripts arriving in England and half of them making it to the front, these soldiers were much needed

⁵⁰ Martin Auger, "On the Brink of Civil War: The Canadian Government and the Suppression of the 1918 Easter Riots," *The Canadian Historical Review* 89.4 (2008), pp. 503-540.

⁵¹ Borden diary, 3-4 May 1918.

⁵² Borden diary, 12 June 1918; *Documents on Canadian External Relations, volume I* (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1967), pp. 201-03.

⁵³ For the Hundred Days campaign, see Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, volume II* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), pp. 409-579.

reinforcements to keep the Canadian Corps up to strength, and would have been critical had the fighting continued into 1919, and possibly 1920, as most generals predicted.⁵⁴

The war on the Western Front sputtered to a halt on 11 November 1918. The hatred unleashed over four years of war – in demonizing enemy soldiers, leaders, and civilians – when added to the anguish and anger over the several million Allied dead and three times as many maimed in body, mind, and spirit, would not be easy to control. A reflective, but not optimistic, Borden wrote in his private diary: “The world has drifted far from its old anchorage and no man can with certainty prophesy what the outcome will be. I have said that another such war would destroy our civilization. It is a grave question whether this war may not have destroyed” it already.⁵⁵ While Borden’s own country was fractured and its people fearful of an uncertain future, the prime minister believed it more important to be involved in the war’s complicated process of assigning blame, dividing up the defeated enemy empires, and in forging the treaty to end the most horrible war in modern memory. Canada’s warlord would try his hand as international peacemaker.

Borden and the other dominion leaders demanded their own voice separate from Britain at the Versailles conference. The Americans remained wary of Canada having any independent influence, and thought the dominions would simply stack the deck for the British Empire, parroting their masters in London. Yet other small European nations had representatives, and Borden was quick to remind Lloyd George that Canada “had lost more men killed in France than Portugal had put in the field.”⁵⁶ The Americans were eventually won over when the French agreed. French Premier Georges Clemenceau, who, upon learning “that these [British] Dominions had put a million men in the field or in training,” wrote Borden, “said that this record was enough for him.”⁵⁷

While much of the important business at Versailles was carried out by the four great powers – Britain, France, United States and Italy – Canada was represented, even if it had limited impact. Waiting for scraps from the masters’ tables was offensive to

⁵⁴ On the MSA numbers, see G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1960), p. 551.

⁵⁵ Borden diary, 11 November 1918.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Borden*, p. 151.

⁵⁷ Stephen Harris, “From Subordinate to Ally: The Canadian Corps and National Autonomy, 1914-1918,” *Revue Internationale d’Histoire Militaire* 51 (1982), p. 110.

Borden, and he shared his frustration with his wife: Canada is “a nation that is not a nation.” The dominion’s participation in the international negotiations was “largely a question of sentiment.” Still, sentiment was important; in Borden’s mind, “Canada got nothing out of the war except recognition.”⁵⁸ And this Borden refused to relinquish.

Borden was deeply committed to the Paris Peace conference. Perhaps too much so. While the European delegates profited from his wise guidance and cool appraisal, his own country needed him more. Angry farmers, militarized labour, and war-weary Canadians lashed out against the government, and one another, in the difficult aftermath of the war, with economic slowdown and the challenging integration of veterans back into society further exacerbating the situation. It is tempting to see the frustrated Borden as running away from the country’s problems, but he viewed his actions overseas as the capstone to Canada’s war sacrifice.

Borden was proud that Canada neither had nor wanted colonies or disputed territory, and so he and the delegates could more freely offer support or play key roles in the multitude of meetings and tribunals. Lloyd George was pulled in many directions, and he often asked Borden to chair the British-led meetings or delegations. It was an honour for Borden and no doubt a reflection of his standing in the Empire. As Canada’s long-service war leader, and a politician recognized for having some influence with Lloyd George, Borden’s good nature, patience, expertise, common-sense and knowledge were all prized. Lord Milner, the British colonial secretary, wrote of Borden: “he is the only one of the Dominion P.M.’s, who, without ceasing to be a good Canadian, is capable of taking the wider view and whose judgment and influence are really useful on Imperial and International questions. He is not a showy man, but he is a man of weight.”⁵⁹

Would Borden’s newly acquired expertise on Greece and Albania mean anything to Canadians? Perhaps it showed maturity. Or a desire to engage in a world outside of the Empire? Whatever the case, Borden traded on it and pushed hard – with the generally unified influence of the other dominion prime ministers – for separate status

⁵⁸ DCB online, Sir Robert Borden.

⁵⁹ Margaret MacMillan, “Canada and the Peace Settlements,” David Mackenzie (ed) *Canada and the First World War* (University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 381.

from the British Empire within the emerging League of Nations. He succeeded and Canada also received its own signature on the Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended the war. Both the signature and the seat at the League were largely cosmetic, but they proved to be important milestones in Canada's march to maturity.

Borden returned to a fragmented and broken country, one mired in debt, suffering from the ravaging effects of influenza, and struggling with the return of several hundred thousand veterans. Labour unrest was interpreted by the government as evidence of a Bolshevik uprising.⁶⁰ The Winnipeg General Strike saw Canadians killed in the street. All of this went on with little guiding hand from the prime minister. While Borden had helped to put Canada on the world stage, the nation at home was wracked with uncertainty.

Borden, too, was exhausted and spent. Laurier had died early in 1919 and Borden's doctor told him he was working himself to death. His Frankenstein party, the Unionists, was bursting its rotting sutures, with Liberals, to use Churchill's phrase, re-rattling across the floor. While Borden had revealed himself to be a master political tactician during the war, he showed little desire to carry the Unionist party into the postwar years, and it quickly withered and died. The nation, too, was in turmoil. It needed a steady hand. Borden did not have it. He offered his resignation to the party but it was met with shock. They begged him to stay on. He did, but should not have. A year later, the ineffectual Borden, who had been out of the country resting for several months, retired for good and was replaced by Arthur Meighen.

Almost everyone who saw the sallow-faced and sickly Borden at his retirement would have expected to be at his funeral within a year. He surprised everyone again, living for another 18 years, where he monitored Canadian politics, wrote books and his two volume memoirs, and remained a figure of international repute. His funeral in 1937 was attended by throngs of Canadians, including over a thousand veterans.

⁶⁰ See Daniel Francis, *Seeing Reds: The Red Scare of 1918-1919, Canada's First War on Terror* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010).

Reputation

Sir Robert Borden had penned privately in his diary during the bitter 1917 campaign that he placed “winning of the war above every other consideration.”⁶¹ Could there be any other way when the nation was fighting for its very survival, as he and a majority of Canadians believed? Could Borden and the government implore young men to enlist and then abandon them to their fate when others did not join them in service to King and country? Borden did not automatically come to the conclusion that victory must subsume everything else in Canadian society, but the cumulative effects of the war drove him to that position. In the Great War for Civilization, as many called it, Borden would agonize over, but not be stopped, by a few thousand enemy aliens interned if they were seen as a threat to Canadian society, the considerations of French Canadians, or in forcing young Canadians to fight overseas against their will.

Looking back on the war, Borden wrote in 1933 that Canada entered “the portal of full nationhood...due to the valour, the endurance and the achievement of the Canadian Army in France and Belgium which inspired our people with an impelling sense of nationhood never before experienced.”⁶² The nation had taken important steps forward, but the path was not easy and it was a long way from colony to nation, and longer still to change the mindset of its people, politicians, and governments. But the nation had moved collectively, and it had been led by one man. A fellow international statesman, General Jan Smuts of South Africa, told Borden in 1927, “You were no doubt the main protagonist for Dominion Status.”⁶³

But what had been sacrificed in this pursuit; had the war’s costly victory torn the fabric of the nation? The enormous Canadian war effort, at home and overseas, had allowed the dominion to flex its muscles on the world stage and led to pride and an emerging sense of nationalism, but such feats must be balanced against a nation that reeled from the war, scarred and battered, grief-stricken and battle-haunted by what it had lost in the fight to the finish. In the aftermath of the Great War one thing became clear: Canada had changed forever. It was a far more difficult country to lead, and

⁶¹ Borden diary, 29 September 1917.

⁶² Robert Laird Borden, *Letters to Limbo* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971, p. 6.

⁶³ DCB online, Sir Robert Borden.

perhaps even to hold together, yet it was also one that had made a name for itself, and refused to return to its colonial past. Both of these legacies are irrevocably tied up in wartime leadership of Sir Robert Borden, and his relentless pursuit of victory.