

National Unity in the Face of Conscription: The Wartime Policies of Mackenzie King
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Examining the depths of Canadian political history unveils the wartime legacy of prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King as a complex and defining chapter of the nation's history. Across twenty-one inconsecutive years, King's tenure, notably during the years of the Second World War from 1939-1945, stands as a testament to his profound impact on shaping Canadian society amidst grave wartime challenges and economic distress. His leadership can largely be characterized by his unwavering commitment to maintaining national unity at all costs, and his wartime policies consistently reflect this. Recognizing the historical fracture caused by the Conscription Crisis of 1917 during the First World War, King strategically navigated the complexities of wartime leadership, determined to avoid the mistakes of his predecessor, Sir Robert Borden. Mackenzie King's commitment to national unity during the Second World War shaped his opposition to overseas conscription, guided strategic initiatives like the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and the Natural Resources Mobilization Act to keep military efforts within Canada, and underscored his dedicated efforts to foster harmonious relations with French Canada, recognizing the potential threat their isolation posed to national unity.

Recognizing the historical disunity during the First World War, Mackenzie King had a keen understanding that the isolation of Quebec posed a significant threat to Canada's cohesion. French-Quebec strongly opposed involvement in foreign affairs, particularly with Great Britain, as they generally believed that Canadian loyalties would drag them into a war that did not serve Canadian interests. Mackenzie King deeply considered this in September of 1939, when his dominating concern was to persuade Quebec isolationists and other Canadian neutralists that the impending declaration of war against Germany in support of Great Britain would be of national

interest.¹ To King and his government, the key factor in maintaining national unity was ensuring harmonious relations between English and French Canada.² Evidently, as concerns over conscription emerged with the whispers of war, he was faced with the largest threat to national unity since the Conscription Crisis of 1917.

To navigate this delicate situation, King enlisted the help of his trusted advisor, the Minister of Justice, Ernest Lapointe, a respected Quebecois politician with whom King had collaborated with for two decades in fostering inter-provincial relations. Both men knew that Quebec would never agree to another European war out of fear of conscription, especially when fourteen European countries, who faced more direct of a threat from Germany, remained neutral.³ In King's recommendation of war to Parliament, he idealized limited participation, ensuring that Canada's involvement would be providing arsenal and food supplies to the Allies, and that the one division to be sent overseas would be comprised of volunteers only.⁴ General McNaughton was to command the First Canadian Division, and he shared the same sentiment as King that Canada's war effort needed to largely revolve around the arming and equipping of the troops to spare human lives, for casualties would become the forerunner to overseas conscription.⁵ King's address, however, was wearily received by the Quebecois, which is why Lapointe was so crucial in managing Quebec-Parliament relations. Only he could appease the Quebec isolationists that insisted on neutrality.

¹ H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1932-1939: The Prism of Unity* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976), 294.

² J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 42.

³ Lita-Rose Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe: Mackenzie King's Great Quebec Lieutenant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 277.

⁴ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 279.

⁵ Granatstein, *Canada's War*, 25.

Lapointe's guidance was imperative in shaping King's approach to the matter as he was able to understand why Quebec would resist foreign entanglement and recognize why internal divisions would be the consequence of such actions.⁶ Despite facing inevitable backlash from the French constituents of his own party, Lapointe courageously addressed the House of Commons in support of the war. Aware of the threat that the Quebec Bloc posed to both himself and King, Lapointe strategically reminded them that King would be defeated by a coalition government, comprised of English-Canadian Liberals and Conservatives, if the Quebecois members of his party turned against him.⁷ This would be disastrous for Quebec, and the resurgence of a conscription crisis would be inevitable.⁸ For the cause of national unity, he urged them to reconsider, and by leveraging the trust his province had in him he promised that he and fellow Quebecois cabinet members would "never agree to conscription and never be members or supporters of a government that will enforce it."⁹ This calculated strategy proved successful when the Senate voted unanimously in support of the war, motivated by the pursuit of unity.¹⁰ This collaboration between King and Lapointe was ultimately driven by their desire for the unification of Canada and played a significant role in managing a cohesive relationship with Quebec during this critical time.

King's devotion to contributing to the war effort while simultaneously upholding national unity materialized through the initiation of the British Commonwealth Air Training Program (BCATP) in 1939. This initiative, designed to meet the escalating demand for skilled pilots, aircrew, and ground personnel during the conflict, involved the construction of bases, training

⁶ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 280.

⁷ Neatby, *Prism of Unity*, 288.

⁸ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 278.

⁹ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 281.

¹⁰ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 282.

facilities and airfields nationwide. It catered to diverse training needs, encompassing pilot and navigational training, as well as air-gunnery.¹¹ While the BCATP played a crucial role in providing air power for the Allied forces, King's motivations went beyond mere assistance to Britain. Notably, the program provided a haven from the violence unfolding in Europe, and its most enticing aspect was the preservation of Canadian troops on home soil. This strategic move significantly minimized the necessity of conscription, as Canada became more of an economic force in the war rather than be involved in combat.¹² The BCATP emerged as a source of national pride, showcasing Canada's substantial contribution to the overall war effort. King's policy of limited liability, however, ensured the conservation of manpower. In essence, King adeptly addressed two vital concerns. Firstly, he strategically positioned Canada in the war, recognizing that the program served as a shield against the fractures in national unity that conscription would induce. Secondly, by simultaneously supporting the war effort and maintaining national unity, King killed two birds with one stone, skillfully navigating the complexities of wartime policy making.

In the early stages of the Second World War, Mackenzie King's commitment to national unity was characterized by his assurance that only volunteers would undertake overseas service, maintaining a unifying front across Canada. However, by June of 1940, the viability of sustaining this policy became increasingly challenging. Winston Churchill's extension of the Emergency Powers Act, due to arising possibilities of invasion, allowed for government control over manpower and production, inciting pressure from English Canada for King to adopt similar measures.¹³ In a pivotal Liberal caucus on June 5th, a Toronto Member of Parliament proposed

¹¹ C.P Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Policies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 221.

¹² Stacey, *Age of Conflict*, 222.

¹³ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 312.

national registration.¹⁴ As this would mirror conscription precedents from the First World War, King and Lapointe adamantly resisted such measures over fears of disunity. These measures may have not yet been warranted, but King's indecisiveness over Canada's role in the war would soon become problematic. On the 18th of June, King introduced the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA), modelled on the British Emergency Powers Act, which would become one of his most important wartime policies pertaining to unity. This Act came only four days after the fall of Paris, as the inadequacy of King's hesitation towards deepening Canada's involvement in the war became apparent. The urgency for a more decisive stance emerged with the loss of France, as Canada was now Britain's closest ally.¹⁵ Discussions during this period were marked by heightened concerns over a potential an attack on Canadian soil, given its position in the Commonwealth, or if Britain was to suffer the same fate as France.¹⁶

King was distraught over the heightening expectations of Canada's war effort, expressing in his diary the day before he introduced the NRMA that, "for the sake of the country, would I not feel that I could change my view on conscription, I believe it would create a worse situation in Canada than it would remedy."¹⁷ If it became necessary to introduce overseas conscription, King wrote that he "would be ready to step out."¹⁸ It is clear that the center of King's policy was his devotion to national unity. He believed at this time that overseas conscription would not be worth the sacrifice of division, regardless of public opinion and pressure from English Canada.

The NRMA was a strategic maneuver to respond to the demands of English Canada for military action while upholding his pledge to French Canada against overseas conscription. This

¹⁴ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 312.

¹⁵ H. Blair Neatby, "Mackenzie King on National Unity," *Empire and Nations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 64.

¹⁶ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 313.

¹⁷ J.W Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record*, Vol. 1: 1939-1944 (Toronto, 1960):95, In, Granatstein, "Canada at War," 58.

¹⁸ Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record*, 58.

legislation facilitated the expansion of Canada's military forces through conscription for home defense or involvement in war-related industries, effectively mitigating national tensions.¹⁹ Mandating national registration for citizens aged sixteen and older, the bill also required men between nineteen and forty-five to undergo a thirty-day training period, positioning Canada for immediate defense in the case of emergency.²⁰ However, this registration caveat stirred unease in French Canada as it was a predecessor to conscription during the First World War, and King had openly opposed it only two weeks earlier. King, driven by his commitment to unity, assured Quebec that "this registration will have nothing whatsoever to do with the recruitment of men for overseas service."²¹ This sentiment was met with resistance from Montreal Mayor, Camillien Houde, who viewed it unequivocally as a pre-conscription measure.²² Houde was imprisoned for this resistance for four years, underscoring the gravity of King's national unity policy. To further demonstrate his commitment to this policy, Section 3 of the NRMA explicitly stated that the government could not exercise their powers to require Canadians to serve in the military, naval, or air force outside of Canadian territory.²³ A provision that would later contribute to the near downfall of the King government, as discussed subsequently.²⁴

King foresaw the inevitable need for overseas conscription as Canadian forces became engaged in Europe, highlighting the critical role the transformation of wartime production industries played in averting a crisis reminiscent of 1917. While the Canadian Expeditionary Force's overseas volunteers actively contributed to home defense for Britain, mitigating the

¹⁹ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada at war: conscription, diplomacy, and politics*. 1st Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 56.

²⁰ Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe*, 313.

²¹ William Lyon Mackenzie King, House of Commons *Debates* (18 June 1940): 854, In, Granatstein, "Canada's War," 100.

²² William Lyon Mackenzie King, House of Commons *Debates*, quoted by Mr. Hanson (3 August 1940): 240, In, Granatstein, "Canada's War," 100.

²³ Granatstein, "Canada's War," 100.

²⁴ Stephen Henderson, "Angus L. MacDonald and the Conscription Crisis of 1944," *Acadiensis* 27, no. 1 (1997): 85.

immediate demand for additional soldiers, King's emphasis on placating French Canada resulted in Senate conflicts, particularly from conservatives. Arthur Meighan, the party leader, vehemently opposed the NRMA, labeling it a "colossal waste" as "Canada's only defense was in Britain."²⁵

In January 1941, conservative pressures partially succeeded in extending conscripted men's training to four months, with the commitment for their service duration.²⁶ Meighan's persistence for conscription, however, seemed paradoxical, given that, by mid-1941, 330,000 Canadians had volunteered for the military, 218,000 in the Army, nearly 90,000 in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and 20,000 in the Navy.²⁷ Furthermore, the CEF overseas had not yet seen the front lines, and there was no apparent surge in demand for additional manpower. The divide between conscriptionists and anti-conscriptionists, as noted by esteemed historian J.L. Granatstein, can be attributed to conservative underestimation of French Canadians' loyalty to Britain and a belief that conscription was absolutely necessary during The Great War, and therefore only similar legislation could produce the same results.²⁸ Importantly, the Canadian government acknowledged that the circumstances of 1941 differed significantly from the wartime necessities of the past.²⁹ Despite a nation divided on the necessity of conscription, King steadfastly clung to his conviction that the potential gains did not warrant the divisive means, emphasizing that jeopardizing national unity for the sake of deploying Canadian forces overseas was an unjustifiable proposition.

²⁵ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 103.

²⁶ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 103.

²⁷ Granatstein, "*Canada at War*," 58.

²⁸ Granatstein, "*Canada at War*," 58.

²⁹ Neatby, "National Unity," 65.

In 1941, Colonel J.L Ralston, the Minister of National Defence, voiced increasing concerns about the insufficient recruits for overseas service, prompting contemplation of the impending need for conscription. That same year, a nation-wide recruiting campaign was underway with each military district being assigned a quota to total 32,000 men.³⁰ Despite a slow start to the campaign, King's commitment to increasing Canada's infantry voluntarily proved to be successful as his speaking tour across the country sparked volunteerism and produced over 34,000 recruits.³¹ While this temporarily alleviated the pressure, the growing influence of conscriptionists in Parliament and across the nation raised questions about the viability of volunteerism in sustaining an army for a war surpassing the scale of the Great War, where conscription had proven necessary. King, maintaining his belief that conscription could be averted, recognized the military context necessitating the government's flexibility to assess the need for conscription.³²

In April 1942, he took a significant step by issuing a plebiscite, allowing the Canadian people to vote on releasing the government from prior commitments regarding military service recruitment. Despite anticipating resistance from Quebec, King emphasized that this did not guarantee impending conscription but empowered the government to protect Canada's war effort. His use of a referendum in this context truly illustrates his devotion to national unity. It was not solely conscription he was afraid of; it was the disunity that conscription would inevitably cause, hence why he believed it important to put the power into the hands of the people. Further, his avoidance of the term 'conscription' on the plebiscite highlighted his sensitivity to the fragile nature of unity, especially given the fears around conscription. In

³⁰ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 203.

³¹ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 204.

³² Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 228.

Quebec, only 27% voted to release the government from prior commitments, most being from English-speaking Quebec, but the rest of the country overwhelmingly voted yes in supporting the measure.³³

Mackenzie King, seemingly managing the tensions between pro- and anti-conscriptionists by entertaining the possibility of compulsory service, confronted the fragility of national unity as casualties escalated in 1944. Lieutenant General Keith Stuart, the Chief of Staff at the Canadian Military Headquarters in London, spoke to the War Committee in Ottawa in August of 1944, reporting that there was no issues with recruitment and that there were “enough reinforcements for three months at the intensive battle casualty rate.”³⁴ This statement served as justification for King’s policies – he was correct in not enforcing conscription, and Canada would remain unified as a result. Unfortunately, by October the attitude had shifted, and Ralston and Stuart returned to Canada with the news that infantry casualty rates were thirty-percent higher than anticipated in Normandy, and that the Canadian Army required an additional 15,000 infantry reinforcements by the end of the year to sustain the war effort in Europe.³⁵ Despite recommendations to Transfer NRMA personnel to General Service, King steadfastly rejected conscription as the sole solution, highlighting his unwavering commitment to keeping English and French Canada united.

King’s refusal to accept Ralston and Stuart’s urgent requests, even in the face of Cabinet revolt led by prominent figures like C.D Howe and J.L Ilesley demanding conscription, showcased his single-minded determination to explore every alternative before resorting to compulsory service.³⁶ King was even willing to lose the last shred of respect the Canadian Army

³³ Granatstein, “*Canada’s War*,” 277.

³⁴ Granatstein, “*Canada’s War*,” 339.

³⁵ Granatstein, “*Canada’s War*,” 343.

³⁶ Frances Harbour, “Conscription and Socialization: Four Canadian Ministers,” *Armed Forces and Society* 15, no. 2 (1989): 236.

and his Cabinet had for him as he essentially fired Ralston for his demands of conscription by finally accepting his letter of resignation from 1942. King was characteristically indecisive, but his handling of Ralston demonstrates that he was capable of being decisive when it truly mattered – when national unity was at stake. It was more than clear to King that the war would soon be over, and conscripting NRMA men would do nothing but disunify the nation during a moment of victory.³⁷

Deciphering whether King was genuinely oblivious to the overseas war effort's needs or if he just believed that national unity held paramount importance over anything else remains challenging. However, his choice of Andrew McNaughton as Ralston's successor suggests the latter. He understood the need for more reinforcements, but he was unwilling to accept that conscription was the only way to get them. McNaughton's appointment hinged on the belief that he could generate sufficient recruits to meet Stuart's infantry projections for the year. Yet, as November unfolded, it became evident that McNaughton's influence on NRMA men fell short of expectations.³⁸ Additionally, King's refusal to help the Army sparked disunity across English Canada, as many believed that he was allowing for the pointless slaughter of weakened troops overseas for the purpose of maintaining political favour in Quebec.³⁹ Despite this, a November 1944 poll by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion showed that the Liberal Party was not greatly hurt by the conscription crisis, with 36% of voters still held in their favour.⁴⁰ However, as the month progressed, the growing necessity of conscription became increasingly apparent.

³⁷ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 351.

³⁸ Harbour, "Conscription and Socialization," 240.

³⁹ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 359.

⁴⁰ Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 360.

On November 22nd, 1944, Mackenzie King's worst fear materialized with the announcement of conscription.⁴¹ However, this moment marked the culmination of King's exhaustive exploration of alternatives, underscoring his unwavering commitment to the unity of Canada. Quebec, largely aware of King's staunch opposition to conscription, recognized that this decision came only when his government faced imminent collapse and out of desperation to aid suffering troops overseas, for whom no other viable solution existed.⁴² King's adept navigation of these complex circumstances is illuminated by his securing of the Quebec vote in 1945, winning the election despite the controversial implementation of conscription. Their continued support, even in the face of this betrayal, serves as a powerful testament to the imperative necessity of conscription at that critical time.

With all things considered, Mackenzie King's wartime legacy during the Second World War is a testament to his unwavering commitment to national unity, a principle deeply embedded in his policies and strategic decisions. Faced with a colossal national fracture, akin to that of the Conscription Crisis of 1917, King navigated the complexities of wartime leadership with determination to avoid the mistakes of the past. His strategic and meaningful collaboration with Ernest Lapointe, emphasizing limited participation and volunteerism, showcased his dedication to upholding relations between English and French Canada, essential for maintaining national unity. The introduction of the BCATP and the NRMA were crucial in responding to English Canada's demand for military action while protecting the interests of French Canada. King truly opposed overseas conscription, highlighted in his determination to exhaust every alternative before resorting to compulsory service in November of 1944. Mackenzie King was not a perfect Prime Minister, but his ability to recognize the significance of maintaining national unity for

⁴¹ Harbour, "Conscription and Socialization," 238.

⁴² Granatstein, "*Canada's War*," 361.

efficient and prosperous wartime and post-wartime societies made him the necessary choice during this pivotal time in Canadian history.

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