The Conscription Crisis, 1917

Because of the terrible casualty rate on the European battlefields, the demand for manpower rose sharply. By late 1916, volunteers were no longer enough.

Enlistment/Casualty Rate for 1917		
Month	*Enlistments*	*Casualties*
January	9,194	4,396
February	6,809	1,250
March	6,640	6,161
April	5,530	13,477
May	6,407	13,457
June	6,348	7,931
July	3,882	7,906
August	3,117	13,232
September	3,588	10,990
October	4,884	5,929
November	4,019	30,741
December	3,921	7,476

Conscription, unthinkable to Canadians short years before, began to gain public support, at least among many English Canadians. They identified with Britain. They saw a threat to Britain as equivalent to a threat to Canada itself. Germany was the enemy, to be defeated at whatever cost. French Canadians, though many had enlisted from the first weeks of the war, had a different opinion. Cut off from France for 150 years and lacking sentimental attachment to Great Britain, French Canadians felt somewhat isolated from Europe's tragedy. Influential speakers, like Henry Bourassa had restrained themselves at first but eventually they were provoked to declare their opposition to Canadian participation in the fighting.

Bourassa and his supporters had plenty of ammunition for their position. In 1913, the Ontario Department of Education laid down Regulation 17, denying the use of French as a language of instruction in the province's primary schools. Manitoba, in 1916, abolished French, which had been provided for in the creation of Manitoba as a province. The campaign to encourage French Canadians to enlist was vigorous, but once they joined the army they were scattered among English-speaking units. Training was done entirely in English. Furthermore, that a relatively small number of French Canadians were appointed as officers was seen as discrimination. French-Canadian critics of the war effort could ask: Why fight for a future dominated by English Canadians? To English Canadians, Quebec's feelings of alienation could be interpreted as a failure to carry out obligations, even as disloyalty.

In February 1917, Borden went to the Imperial Conference in Britain. There he was subjected to considerable pressure to adopt conscription, the only way, it was argued, to replace the heavy losses suffered by the Canadian Corps. In Canada, agitation for conscription increased. In the spring of 1917, Borden invited Laurier and the Liberals to join a union-coalition-government, However, Laurier would not agree to imposing conscription without a referendum or an election, and thus refused Borden's proposal.

Events moved swiftly in the summer of 1917. Conscription, in the form of the *Military Services Act*, was introduced in June and passed in August, This split the Liberal Party, many of whose English-speaking members voted with the Conservative Government. The Conservatives followed up their advantage with the *Military Voters Act*, giving the vote to all men and women serving in the armed forced, and denying it to conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors were those who refused to fight on the grounds that war was contrary to their religious and/or moral principles. Another measure the *Wartime Elections Act*, gave the vote to the wives, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters of Canadians serving overseas. Citizens from the enemy countries who had been naturalized since 1902 were denied the right to vote in the wartime

election. Since the Conservatives now appeared as the patriotic party, they stood to gain in the upcoming election.

Emotions were running high, and the country was split along ethnic lines. French Canadians denounced conscription as a conspiracy to force their young into foreign wars English Canadians, who believed French Canadians were not "pulling their weight", generally backed conscription as a way to equalize Canadian sacrifice in defence of freedom. Though there were exceptions on both sides, these were ignored in the irrational atmosphere of the time, and Canada was deeply divided.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier tried to occupy the middle ground. He contended that conscription would drive French Canadians into the arms of political extremists, and proposed a nation-wide referendum so that all Canadians could express their views. When the Borden government decided to proceed with conscription, however, it had the support of English-speaking liberals, who joined the Conservatives in a Union Government, In the election of December 1917, the "Win the War" slogan of the Union coalition resulted in 153 seats to the 82 elected by the Laurier Liberals.

Conscription was promptly enforced, and close to 100,000 men were called up. The Conservative party claimed success, in spite of many who were granted exemptions on medical or other grounds. In the end, only 45,000-conscripted soldiers reached the battlefield. But the bitterness in Quebec, where anti-draft meetings and riots took place, was to remain long after the war. Although Liberals would eventually regain English-speaking support, the Conservatives were remembered by French Canadians as the party who forced them to support a hated war against their will.

Military Voters Act

The vote was granted to all British subjects serving in the Canadian armed forces. Provisions were made to conduct voting overseas.

War Time Election Act

The vote is granted to all wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters of soldiers who are serving or had served overseas.
The vote is denied to or taken from:
    Those of enemy birth
    Those of European birth speaking the enemy tongue
    Conscientious objectors

Military Service Act

All males between 18 and 45 are eligible for compulsory military service
Exemptions were possible for:
    Conscientious objectors
    Persons working in essential war occupations
    Those doing work for which they had special qualifications
    Those for whom military service would cause special hardship.

Whether 45,000 soldiers was worth the price of a divided nation remains a debatable questions. Canada gained some manpower, but the feelings of hostility between French and English Canadians were to linger for many years.