

Conscription and My Politics

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When I graduated from the Royal Military College in 1961, I wanted to do American history in graduate school and to write about Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. But I was advised by my RMC professors that US history was too crowded a field and that Roosevelt had been overdone (amazing that they could have said that in 1961!).

"There was more room in Canadian history," they said. So, ever obedient, I went off to the University of Toronto on leave without pay from the Army to do an MA and was fortunate enough to find myself in John Saywell's superb class in Canadian political history. I didn't have a topic in mind and asked Saywell to suggest something. "How about the Communist Party in World War II?", he said, adding that no one had yet done that. I duly began to read into the subject and went to Party headquarters on Cecil Street in Toronto and asked if I could read their files. After some hesitation, the party officials agreed, and I began. It suddenly hit me that I was a young officer in the Canadian Army and it might not help my career to be spending afternoons on Cecil Street. So I telephoned the Intelligence officer at Central Command Headquarters in Oakville and asked him what to do. "Call Sergeant X at RCMP headquarters," he said, so I did. The Sergeant was not happy with me but promised to get back, and he soon did. I had been checked out and was OK; so had Saywell, and he wasn't a pinko, like so many professors at Toronto. And I could write on the Party providing that each time I came out of the Party headquarters, I was de-briefed.

This seemed a bit burdensome when all I wanted to do was to secure my MA, so I went to see Saywell, apologized for being the cause of his being investigated, and asked him to suggest a new subject. "How about the Conservative Party in the Second World War?", he shot back. "No one has done that either." So there I was, saved from being trapped in the sectarian ghetto of



Marxism, and the subject of the Tories led inexorably to conscription.

To look at the Tories meant examining how a party self-destructed over conscription, over the legacy of the Great War, and over the insistence of former Prime Minister, Senator and once and future wartime party leader Arthur Meighen on repeating past history. To Meighen and those who thought like him, French Canadians were slackers, and the Liberals were soft on winning the war, on conscription, and on Quebec. And, of course, working on the Conservative Party in World War II led necessarily to seeing just how Mackenzie King beat the Tories, kept Quebec behind him, and the conscription issue under control. King had learned from the Great War experience, and the Conservatives and Arthur Meighen had not.

Now this was in the early 1960s just as the Quiet Revolution was getting underway. I had some understanding of Quebec, I thought, because I had gone to College Militaire Royal de St-Jean and lived in the province for three years. I was even - briefly - bilingual. I was predisposed to be sympathetic to the modernization of Quebec then underway, and the work I had done on the Conservative Party during the war showed me how necessary it was for a Canadian party to understand Quebec and to come to terms with its reality.

Then from 1963 to 1966 I was in the United States at graduate school at Duke University. My PhD thesis topic was an expansion of the work I had done for Saywell - eventually published in 1967 as *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative party 1939-1945*. I was hired at York in 1966, the same year I left the Army where I had worked at the Directorate of History at National Defence Headquarters. As the author of a book on the Conservatives - there were few others - I found myself participating in the party

leadership convention of 1967, though I was never a party member. Nonetheless, I was against John Diefenbaker and against his idea of "One Canada" which I interpreted as a code word for putting Quebec in its place. And I supported the "deux nations" line that was espoused at the Tories' Montmorency policy convention and the Toronto leadership convention. I can remember trying to explain what this meant to skeptical Prairie delegates, and there is no doubt in my mind that it was my understanding of conscription and the Second World War that shaped my attitudes. And when Robert Stanfield, a moderate, intelligent man, was selected as leader and Diefenbaker was dumped, I rejoiced.

But Stanfield was not to become Prime Minister. The Liberals chose Pierre Trudeau in 1968, and he swept to power. I was not a supporter - I was resolutely NDP in my politics even though I had participated in the Tory convention of 1967 - but I was infuriated by the way some older Canadians complained about Trudeau's failure to serve in the military during the war, exactly the way Tories had complained about Mackenzie King's lack of military service during the Great War (but never Meighen's similar decision to stay in politics at home). This was anti-Trudeau, anti-Quebec racism, I was convinced. And even though I had gone to RMC and served in the peacetime Army, I was against the Vietnam War, then tearing the US apart. I have no doubt at all that this reinforced my anti-conscription attitudes. I had seen friends at Duke desperately seeking ways not to be drafted, and I had met many young US military officers there who were just as desperately eager for a chance to fight. I sided with those who did not want to go.

My attitudes were reinforced by my research on the King government during World War II, the research that eventually became *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945*, published in 1974. This research simply confirmed King's political genius for me because of the skillful way he had balanced the interests of English and French Canada during the hard days of war. Keeping the country together was his aim, and wartime pressures posed the worst threat to unity. He had succeeded, fending off the Opposition but also the unthinking - as I saw them - conscriptionists in his own party: Defence minister J. Layton Ralston and Navy minister

Angus L. Macdonald and others. All the Liberals had been shaped by their Great War experience - Ralston had been a battalion commander in Flanders - and clearly all the attitudes of the Second World War had emerged from the Great War. History lived, history repeated.

After that book on the King government, I decided to write a history of conscription with J.M. Hitsman (who regrettably died while the book was in process). Now it will not surprise you that as I turned to look in depth at the Great War for the first time, I was already convinced that conscription was a bad thing. Nothing that I turned up in my research convinced me otherwise. There was the country's colonial relationship with Great Britain - and no good reason why Quebec should buy into that; there was the generally poorer health and earlier marriage age of Quebec men; there were the recruiting bungles of Militia minister Sam Hughes; and there was what I saw as the straight-out racism of English Canada. The election of 1917 was to me the nadir - with the charges in the press that if Laurier won, he'd win leading the cockroaches of the kitchen of Canada to victory; the claims that the Kaiser would cheer if the Liberals and anti-conscription forces won; and the charges from otherwise intelligent men that French Canadians were, because of their failure to enlist in the requisite numbers, innately cowards. I found this simply repellent, and what I wrote reflected my distaste. Indeed, I said in the preface of *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, published in 1976, that I fervently hoped that my children would never be conscripted for anyone's war. And I meant it.

Now my position was unquestionably based on my research - and also on the era in which I was living. I didn't support Trudeau politically, but I agreed with the Official Languages Act, and I looked with some pleasure at the rise of Quebec's self-confidence. I shared the view that Quebec had real grievances in Confederation. Conscription, after all, was one, the attempt of English Canada to make everyone fight Toronto's view of what the wars should be. I had been on the editorial board of *The Canadian Forum* which took a benign view of the possibility of Quebec independence, and I had vehemently opposed the imposition of the War Measures Act in the October Crisis of 1970. The Vietnam War was over by the time I wrote *Broken Promises*,

but its effects were still being felt. There is no doubt that these things shaped my approach. Yes, I believe that the evidence also supported the view I took, but the times, I now think, were just as important.

What began to change my mind? The times, for one. I might be a bit slow, but I suddenly came to realize in 1980 that Rene Levesque, a man I thought the most attractive politician in Canada, wanted to split the nation. I still remember going on a trip to do research at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec in the Spring of 1980 during the Referendum campaign and suddenly realizing that those bastards wanted to tear apart my country. The times they were a-changing for me - and for Canadians.

But what definitively swung me around was the publication of *Tug of War: The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp*, by Denis and Shelagh Whitaker in 1984. Whitaker had been a brave and much decorated officer in the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry in World War II, and his book on the Scheldt campaign of the fall of 1944 opened my eyes. As an infantry officer, Whitaker understood, as I had not, that men serving in understrength units were in serious danger. I had jeered at the 24,132 conscripts who had arrived in France by the Armistice in November 1918 as meaning nothing when we had enlisted 625,000 volunteers in all. I had dismissed the 16,000 NRMA men sent overseas as result of the conscription crisis of 1944 as meaningless

when Canada had 750,000 men in khaki. I was wrong. The 24,000 Great War conscripts were enough to sustain the Canadian Corps for at least 6 months of heavy fighting; 16,000 home defence conscripts would have met First Canadian Army's reinforcement needs through the rest of the war.

The reason why this mattered only became clear to me after reading Whitaker's book. The casualties fell on the infantry in disproportionate numbers. An infantry battalion of 950 men could lose one-third of its men in a day, and every loss of trained soldiers, of brave soldiers - it was the bravest who suffered the most casualties - left the sections and platoons and companies understrength. A section often could be reduced to five in a second; a platoon of 30 could be at 15 in a day; a company of 120 could be reduced to 60. That understrength section, platoon, and company, that weakened battalion, had to cover the same ground and mount the same attacks. And with fewer men, the casualties increased. In other words, trained infantry reinforcements were essential to keep units up to strength and to minimize casualties. And as the army struggled in October 1944 to keep its units up to strength, it re-mustered men from other corps to the infantry. Whitaker was scathing as he explained that such men had forgotten or never knew much about infantry fighting - they simply didn't know how to arm a grenade or fire a Br en gun. They were a danger to the experienced infantry, and they were quick to

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An anti-conscription rally in Quebec.

become casualties. (Trained men, General Chris Vokes once said, had a 75 percent chance of survival; untrained had none.) This was especially hard on French Canadian units, which had to scrape even harder for men because of relatively lower enlistments - and had to take on English-speaking officers because there were so few French-speaking.

The Whitaker book changed my mind about conscription and removed the blinkers from my eyes. I was a (peacetime) soldier, but I had simply not factored in the risks to the men in the field. I had not made the connection between conscription and the front, between a hundred trained reinforcements and the success of a battalion in operations. It is also true that I was predisposed to have my mind changed. The Vietnam War was long over, and I had become interested again in current defence policy and appalled by the state of the Canadian Forces. I was remembering my RMC and army roots. Moreover, I was unhappy with the Quebec bargaining position on the constitution and increasingly unsympathetic - indeed, straight out opposed - to Quebec independentist ideas and arguments which I viewed as based on lies and misrepresentations. In other words, the new information - new to me - in Whitaker fed into my growing dislike for Quebec's aspirations. And that led me to re-appraise my position on conscription.

Now was this bad? I think not. It is a good thing for historians to constantly re-assess their interpretations, and I make no apology for that. But I do wish I had been as aware as I am now of the extent to which contemporary politics had shaped my attitudes and approaches.

I think my awareness of this is most evident in *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* which I published in 1993. This is, I think, just about the best thing I have written, and certainly it was the easiest - the book just about wrote itself. In it, I came to terms with the impact RMC had on my personality and life, and I wrote my most balanced interpretation of conscription. In one chapter, I looked at two generals who had served with distinction in the Great War - Maurice Pope and Ken Stuart. Pope was half-French Canadian and the military adviser to Mackenzie King, with two sons overseas; Stuart was the former Chief of the General Staff and senior officer at

Canadian Military Headquarters in Britain who many deem responsible for the conscription crisis of 1944. Pope saw that conscription could split the country, and he overcame his worries for his sons to argue strongly against it in November 1944. Stuart innately favoured conscription but had said it would not be necessary; then when casualties mounted and reinforcements dried up, he changed his mind and argued its necessity. Both men tried to act in good conscience; both put their definition of country and nation first; and both were correct. If I had fallen prey to the temptation to let contemporary events shape my history in the past, in *The Generals*, I think, I overcame it.

But the lesson you should draw from this is that the present shapes our understanding of the past. I am resolutely anti-ideological, and I dismiss Marxism and Marxist approaches to history as nothing but Groucho Marxism. I believe now as I have always done that the sole task of a historian is to try to understand what happened and why. But I know now that my politics, shifting and changing as I applied my analyses to events as I lived them, shaped what I wrote as a historian. I am not sure if I could have avoided this or even if this should be avoided. I only know what I did not in 1967, 1974, and 1976 - that events in which I was a participant or observer determined to some substantial extent what I wrote. I doubt we can protect against this; we can, however, be aware of it, and that at least should play a part in how we read what historians have written.

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