

"LAURIER AND THE LIBERAL PARTY, 1916-1919"

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Laurier's leadership of the Liberal party during the years 1916-1919. For both Laurier and the Liberal party this period was critical. Once the initial unity of mood which characterized Canadian politics in the first few months after the outbreak of war in 1914 had broken down, the Liberal party again assumed its normal function as the critic of the government in the House of Commons. While in opposition during the first two years of the war, Laurier, together with other Liberal leaders embarked upon a process of reorganization which was designed to prepare the Liberal party for the role of resolving the post-war problems that would face the Canadian people. By 1916-1917 however, the events leading up to and following the debate in the House of Commons on the Bilingual Schools Question and on conscription for overseas service not only cut short the Liberal process of reorganization but caused serious divisions within the Liberal party and evoked criticisms and challenges to Laurier's leadership. In the discussion that follows an attempt is made to explain Laurier's actions and decisions as they related to the Ontario Bilingual Schools issue and to conscription, to examine the nature of the challenges to Laurier's leadership, and to detail the attempts made on the part of Laurier and other Liberal

leaders to reorganize, reunify, and to some extent rejuvenate the party after its defeat in the 1917 election.

Laurier's decisions and actions during the period under consideration have been variously interpreted ranging from his over-all concern with the maintenance of national unity to his desire to regain the Prime Ministership of Canada and to remain the unquestioned leader of the French Canadians. This study views Laurier's actions and decisions as simply those of a party politician whose energies were directed toward maintaining a reasonable level of strength and unity within the Liberal party in order that it would be in a position to adequately cope with the multitude of problems that would confront the Canadian people once the war was over.

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Chapter One

Roots of Division

After controlling the reins of office for fifteen years Laurier and the Liberal party went down to defeat on September 21, 1911. Shortly thereafter, Liberals across Canada began performing a post-mortem on the defeated Liberal party. Honest introspection led some to conclude that the direction in which Liberalism was tending by 1911 was in serious need of reorientation. Moreover, as an instrument of political success the Liberal party apparatus was lacking in efficiency and vitality. No sooner had Laurier and the Liberal party initiated a programme of reform than the Canadian people were confronted with internal and external pressures which either retarded the process of reformation or caused serious divisions within the party.

The average political observer living in 1911 might very well have concluded that the Liberal party made some unfortunate decisions as to party policy. On the surface it appeared that a reciprocity agreement with the United States and the intention of the Laurier government to construct a modest Canadian naval force were most unpopular with large segments of the Canadian electorate. Protectionist Ontario viewed the reciprocity agreement with the United States as a prelude to the loss of Canadian sovereignty. Quebec was apprehensive that Laurier's naval policy was a stepping stone to compulsory military service. Throughout the various stages of the debate on the naval issue and after it became law, Laurier and the Liberal party were placed on the defensive in Quebec against the charges of Henri Bourassa, editor of the newly established nationalist newspaper Le Devoir. Although the Laurier Naval Bill contained a clause which excluded any possibility of compulsory military

service, the nationalists argued that Laurier, in order to remain in office, would submit to the pressures of English Canada and resort to conscription in time of war. Consequently, the main concern of the nationalists in Quebec during the 1911 election was to defeat Laurier and his naval policy. Despite this unrelenting opposition to Laurier in Quebec over the issue of conscription the Liberals were able to win 37 out of 65 seats in Quebec. But when this performance was compared to that of previous elections in which the Liberals held 49 or more seats, one may very well conclude that Laurier went down to defeat in Quebec. The Liberal defeat in Ontario however, was complete. Out of 86 seats the Liberals were successful in 13. Therefore, the Liberals were defeated in 1911 because they lost Ontario.¹

But the Liberal party in 1911 was suffering from a much greater malaise than merely falling victim to emotional attacks generated by the naval policy in Quebec and reciprocity in Ontario. In retrospect, Laurier lamented the fact that the Liberals were without a national organization² during their years in office. Such an organization would have kept the Liberal party in a state of readiness for an election and it would have performed to some degree the function of explaining and publicizing Liberal policies. For example, by 1911 the Liberal party organization in Ontario was virtually in a state of collapse.² In this province Laurier was without a competent lieutenant to take charge of the

¹ Paul D. Stevens, "Laurier, Aylesworth, and the Decline of the Liberal Party in Ontario", Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers, 1968, p. 113.

² Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.) A. K. Cameron Papers, M.G.27, III, F2, Cameron to J. A. Robb, July 3, 1917.

³ P.A.C. Laurier Papers, M.G. 26, G1(a), Vol. 694, A. Smith to Laurier, Nov. 16, 1911.

party organization and to successfully present a Liberal policy such as reciprocity to the Ontario electorate.¹

In an overall analysis, John W. Dafoe, editor of the Manitoba Free Press, and an individual who exercised considerable influence over Liberal thinking in Western Canada, felt that the Liberal party was in a state of decay by 1911. The party which Laurier led was Liberal only in name. In practice it catered to the powerful interests at the expense of the Canadian people. Moreover, the party was stagnant and not receptive to new ideas. All of these ills are perhaps characteristic of a party too long in power. Dafoe saw one redeeming feature for the Liberal party in 1911. It went down to defeat in an attempt to put "real Liberal doctrine into effect."²

At the age of seventy, Laurier was again leader of the opposition. This period of opposition afforded Laurier and the Liberals an opportunity to reform the party organization and to reassess the policies it had espoused since 1896. Not unexpectedly, on the question of reciprocity there existed divergent views within the party. Eastern Liberals cautioned Laurier that a continuance of reciprocity and a movement for lower tariffs would drive Liberals "directly or indirectly" interested in manufacturing to the tory camp.³ Meanwhile, Dafoe, speaking for Western Canada, saw no reason why the Liberal party should abandon reciprocity

¹ P. Stevens, Op. Cit., p. 113.

² Ramsay Cook, The Politics of John Dafoe, and the Free Press (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 47-48. See also Murray Donnelly, Dafoe of the Free Press, (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1968), pp. 66-67.

³ O. D. Skelton, The Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1921), II, 390.

in order to "expedite the return of the Liberals to power."¹ He argued that certain issues could be manufactured and presented to the electorate on an experimental basis. If rejected, such issues could be shelved. According to Dafoe reciprocity with the United States did not fall under this category. Admittedly, a large measure of trade with the United States evoked considerable opposition in Canada but at the same time it commanded "ardent support". Furthermore, once the Liberal party demonstrated in 1911 that it was firmly committed to reciprocity, it could not avoid the issue in the future. "What would be the moral effect of a public admission" asked Dafoe, "that the party was wrong in attempting to pass the reciprocity pact in 1911"? He concluded that such an admission would destroy the "prestige and morale of the party" for many years to come. Furthermore, any attempts by the eastern Liberal leaders to force the party to abandon reciprocity would have the effect of creating within the party "an advanced Liberal group which would formulate a very radical fiscal policy." But Dafoe and W. S. Fielding, the minister of finance in the Laurier cabinet, and the minister responsible for the negotiations which culminated in the 1911 reciprocity agreement, concluded that the future Liberal stand on reciprocity should be one of constantly making the Canadian electorate aware that the principles underlying reciprocity, namely, a moderate tariff as opposed to "adequate" higher protection,² and the continuing urgent need for wider markets were sound and would be vindicated in the future. Like J. W. Dafoe and W. S. Fielding Laurier had no regrets that the Liberal party championed

¹ ¹ P. A. C. Dafoe Papers, M. G. 30, D17, J. W. Dafoe to Laurier, Nov. 18, 1912.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 692, W. S. Fielding to Laurier, Dec. 23, 1911.

the cause of reciprocity in 1911.¹ He argued that a political party could not sustain a hostile economic attitude toward a neighbouring great power such as the United States without developing "a dangerous estrangement between the two nations." Furthermore, Laurier considered Ontario's rejection of lower tariffs as a prelude to a serious division between Eastern and Western Canada.

The question of the tariff was, and always would be, a source of division within the Liberal party. But in addition to the tariff there was another divisive issue which loomed large in the thinking of Federal politicians between 1912 and 1914, namely, the conflict over "bilingual" schools in Ontario. The sources of this conflict had their roots deeply implanted in the political history of Ontario.² The system of bilingual schools established by the Liberal Government under Sir Oliver Mowat, premier of Ontario from 1872-1896, was predicated on the assumption that English was to be the language of instruction and communication except in cases where the pupils could not understand English. Such an assumption implied that "bilingual" schools were "English language schools in which French could be used in the early years of school and could be taught as a supplementary subject."

The above provisions for "bilingual" education were not entirely acceptable to the French or English of Ontario. Although the French Canadians of Ontario saw the advantages of their children learning the English language there was always the qualification that English was not

¹ Dafoe Papers, Laurier to Dafoe, Sept. 27, 1911.

² See ^{Marilyn} ~~Marilyn~~ Barber, "The Ontario Bilingual Schools Issue: Sources of Conflict," Canadian Historical Review, XLVII(1966), 227-248.

to be taught at the expense of French.¹ The English-speaking residents of Ontario on the other hand tolerated the teaching of French in Ontario schools but there was always a fear that French taught in the schools of Ontario would "undermine the Anglo-Saxon character of the province." These two opposing and conflicting attitudes culminated in an investigation into the state of the English-French schools by Dr. F. W. Merchant. His report indicated that bilingual schools were "lacking in efficiency" and that the "atmosphere" and education in the lower forms "was exclusively in French."² Consequently, in 1912 the Ontario Department of Education issued a directive, Regulation 17, which made English the sole language of instruction after the third year and the study of French was limited to one hour a day. Naturally, the reaction to Regulation 17 in the province of Quebec and from Ontario's substantial French-speaking population was one of strong protest. The Quebec legislative assembly immediately passed a motion which expressed deep regret over Ontario's action in the field of education.³ This expression of regret was the beginning of a vigorous and persistent agitation in Quebec which built up to a crescendo until it could no longer be ignored by the Federal politicians.

It was unfortunate that the critical stage of conflict over bilingual schools in Ontario coincided with the outbreak of World War I in August, 1914. Although these two issues were seemingly distinct and unrelated in 1914 their interrelationship became more evident as the war progressed. In the first year of the war, however, a domestic problem

¹ M. Barber, "The Ontario Bilingual Schools Issue", p. 227.

² Ibid., p. 237.

³ R. Rumilly, Histoire De La Province de Quebec, (Montreal, n.d.), XIX, 139.

such as bilingual schools in Ontario momentarily receded into the background. Laurier took the initiative in suggesting that domestic political differences be subordinated in favour of illustrating to Great Britain that in Canada there was "but one mind and one heart."¹ In the emergency session of the House of Commons which opened on August 19, 1914, Laurier pledged his party's support and immediate assent to any measures which were necessary for the defense of the Mother country.² He outlined the legal position of Canada in international diplomacy - when Great Britain was at war, Canada was at war. Furthermore, Laurier remarked that "it would be the duty of Canada to assist the motherland to the utmost of Canada's ability." Later outside of the Commons Laurier emphasized that this assistance was to be on a voluntary basis.³ In the emotionalism of the first few weeks of the war these particular statements did not attract much notice. As the war progressed, however, the Liberal party would have to decide whether Canada was in the war as a principal or merely as a colony assisting England. But in August 1914, the Liberal press and the Liberal leaders applauded Laurier's stand. "On such an occasion" wrote the Globe, "Sir Wilfrid Laurier is in a class alone...In an atmosphere surcharged with emotion Laurier was excellent as an orator and a statesman."⁴ W. S. Fielding was gratified by Laurier's desire to suspend party strife during the war and suggested that he go a step further by arranging with

¹ A. B. Keith, ed. Speeches and Documents On British Colonial Policy, 1763-1917, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 358.

² Canada House of Commons, Debates, Aug. 19, 1914, p.8.

³ The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1914, J. Castell Hopkins, ed. (Toronto: The Annual Review Publishing Co. Ltd. 1915), p. 142.

⁴ Toronto Globe, Aug. 21, 1914.

Sir Robert Borden for the elimination of all by-elections. It was hardly fifteen days after the emergency session that Laurier had misgivings about the suspension of party strife in the manner which Fielding suggested.¹ Laurier had reliable evidence to indicate that the Militia Department was "shamefully abusing its opportunities to make the necessary militia equipment a matter of party patronage." Very early in the war political observers were aware that the Conservatives were exploiting the war in the interests of the party.

Throughout the latter half of 1914 and all of 1915 Laurier's main concern was the Canadian war effort. He made many recruiting speeches in the province of Quebec. At the same time, however, he led the parliamentary Liberals in performing their normal and proper function of criticizing the government in areas where they were mishandling the war effort. Before these attacks became more severe and damaging to the Conservative party image, it was understandable that the government would debate whether or not to call an election that was due in late 1915 or early 1916.² Although there were segments in both the Conservative and Liberal camps eager for an election Borden and Laurier agreed to an extension of parliament for one year.

By the end of 1915 Laurier was prepared to wait until the war was over to have another contest with the Tories.³ Indeed, future events would alter this view. But in 1915 Laurier was concerned that Canada do everything possible to aid Britain in the war effort.

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 695, Laurier to W. S. Fielding, Sept. 1, 1915.

² R. Graham, Arthur Meighen: Door of Opportunity, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1960), pp. 89-91.

³ P. A. C. Charles Murphy Papers, M. G. 27 III, B8, Laurier to Charles Murphy, Nov. 17, 1915. (Confidential and not for Publication.)

Laurier was equally concerned about the state and future of the Liberal party. Although he was prepared to see the Liberal party perform the duties of an efficient opposition during the war, he was convinced that a Liberal government should assume the responsibilities of resolving the multitude of problems arising from the war. In 1915 the Liberal party was not strong enough to assume such a task. Since an efficient organization was lacking in 1915 Laurier in consultation with other members of the party outlined a plan which was to guide the future of the party. One of the major features of this plan was the creation of a "National Liberal Committee of the Liberal Party." The function of such a committee, made up of about forty-five members, was to perfect the party organization and "to assist the Federal leader and his colleagues in shaping policies." Most important, Laurier felt that such a committee would bring about a "cohesion of the interests of the party in the various provinces" and that it would weld "Liberalism into a strong, effective, fighting ^{force} ~~force~~ for the good of the country." Furthermore, in order to ensure a constant dialogue between Liberals from the various regions of Canada and to ensure a continual flow of new ideas into the party, Laurier was intent upon decentralizing the decision-making process of the party. Although the National Committee was not designed to curtail the authority of the parliamentary caucus, it was desirable that Liberals outside of parliament be given a voice "in the active councils and direction of the party." In this way the party would capitalize on the "best Liberal thought throughout the country in guiding and directing the destinies of the party." Laurier concluded very forcefully by stating that a Liberal government during the post-war period was indispensable to the future well-being of the nation.

"Great problems are now before the country, and greater ones will develop after the war, which can only be

solved by the wisest statesmanship. It was given to our party to lay the foundation of the country's material progress of the past, and the strong probability is that before long we may be entrusted with the serious task of repairing the fortunes of Canada which have been so badly damaged by the ineptitude and lack of instinct as to what true Government for the people means which are constantly displayed by the present Conservative Government. Though we are passing through the most strenuous time of all history - brought about by the war - Liberalism would be derelict in its duty to its country, if it did not look into the future and be prepared for the solution of the difficulties which Canada will have to face. Apart too from the problems created by the war, reforms of many long standing abuses are necessary. In times of war let us prepare also for the conquests of peace, so that the nation may be thoroughly equipped to take its proper place in the great era of reconstruction which will come after the war. There never was a time in the history of Canada when it was more necessary that the best minds of the community should give the most serious thought to our political and financial Liberalism, which has brought about all the genuine political reforms accomplished in Canada, must be in the van, otherwise chaos and confusion may result."¹

The above statement reveals one of those instances, not unknown in the political history of Canada, where the interests of the nation were identified with those of the party.

As the year 1916 approached, the Liberal party, while performing the function of the opposition, was also consolidating its organization for the future. Laurier's career in opposition, particularly the period from 1916-1917 has been variously interpreted. J. W. Dafoe contended that Laurier's leadership in opposition could be explained in terms of two aims: he again wanted to be Prime Minister of Canada, and if this seemed impossible, he wanted "to establish his position forever as the unquestioned,

¹ J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1922), pp. 156-157.

unchallenged leader of his own people." The first contention is an understandable ambition for any party leader who once held the reins of office. The second would not only be an oversimplification but it would also attribute a very narrow horizon to Laurier's political ambitions. H. Blair Neatby on the other hand argues¹ that Laurier's actions as leader of the opposition were consistent with those followed during his tenure as Prime Minister, that is, they were guided by his desire to maintain national unity. That national unity was a fundamental concern of Laurier was demonstrated by his bi-partisan attitude in August, 1914 and later by his stand on the bilingual schools issue in Ontario. By 1916, however, as the war entered its most critical stages, Laurier and the Liberal party were forced to come to some conclusions concerning the extent of Canada's involvement in the war. This problem preoccupied the minds of all Liberals to the exclusion of virtually every other consideration. On such a question a consensus was impossible within the Liberal party. Nevertheless, Laurier's energies from 1916-1919 were directed toward maintaining a reasonable level of strength and unity within the Liberal party in order that it would be in a position to adequately cope with the multitude of problems that would confront the Canadian people once the war was over.

¹ H. B. Neatby, "Laurier and a Liberal Quebec", (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1956), p. 387.

Chapter Two

The Lapointe Resolution

In the spring of 1916 the attention of federal politicians was momentarily directed away from the war effort and focused on a long-standing contentious issue in Canadian politics, the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question. The individual chiefly responsible for bringing this issue into the federal area, despite all suggestions by leading liberals across the country not to, was Sir Wilfrid Laurier. This questionable act from a political point of view created lines of division in the ranks of the Liberal party. What prompted Laurier to bring such a delicate provincial problem before the House of Commons for debate? Was he "out to demonstrate that he was the true champion of Quebec's views and interests?"¹ Or, was he sincerely attempting to lessen the detrimental effects which the agitation over bilingual schools would have on national unity? Whatever the motivation, Laurier's actions in the spring of 1916 become more intelligible once his private and public statements are viewed in a more dispassionate manner than some of Laurier's contemporaries viewed them in 1916 or shortly thereafter.

The ~~agitation~~^{agitation} over Regulation 17 assumed a more militant stage by 1916. It was not only characterized by emotional attacks in English and French newspapers but it also took ^{the} form of direct action on the part of Quebec Bishops, Federal French Canadian M. P.s, and members of the Quebec provincial legislature to defy the Ontario law and to remove it from the statute books. At the Third Biennial Congress of the French Canadian

1J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, p. 158.

Educational Association held on February 15, 1916, Bishop Latulippe of Temiskaming claimed that his recent presentations of the claims of the Franco-Ontarians had received the entire support of the Pope.¹ At this same meeting, it was reported that funds were being collected from all over the province of Quebec for the cause of the French in Ontario. In order to give this financial assistance an official status, a bill was drawn up by Antonin Galipeault, member from Bellechase, which was passed two weeks later in the Quebec legislative assembly allowing local Catholic school commissions to contribute to the fund.² In late February, a petition signed by Cardinal Begin and fourteen French Canadian Bishops from across Canada was presented to the Borden Government, through Senator ^{Laundry} ~~Laundry~~, urging disallowance of the Ontario Legislation and declaring that minority rights under the B. N. A. Act were being violated.³

This agitation had the immediate effect of evoking the disapproval of the Liberal press in Ontario. In the face of this agitation, the Liberal Globe looked upon Regulation 17 as a sound basis from which a modus vivendi could be arrived at between the English and French speaking elements in the bilingual areas of Ontario.⁴ Furthermore, the Globe proceeded in an incisive manner to outline the status of the French language in Ontario. Contrary to the belief of some newspapers in the province of Quebec, the Globe emphasized that Ontario was not officially bilingual and that it never would be. There was one official language in Ontario and that was

¹ Robert Rumilly, Histoire De La Province De Quebec, (Montreal Editions, n.d.), XXI, pp. 45-46.

² Ibid., pp. 48-51.

³ Canadian Annual Review, 1916, p. 394.

⁴ Toronto, Globe, February 26, 1916.

English. French should be taught in Ontario "because that would make for national good-will" in a country where one quarter of the population were French-speaking. This editorial caused Laurier some concern. Not only was the most influential Liberal newspaper in Ontario endorsing Regulation 17, more significantly, it was undoubtedly expressing the position of the Ontario Liberals. It appeared inevitable then, that Laurier would come into conflict with this segment of the party.

Privately, Laurier informed Stewart Lyon, the editor of the Globe that he was deviating from traditional Liberal principles as set down by Oliver Mowat.¹ This principle was predicated not on the existence of exclusively English or French schools but on an educational system which would permit those, who so desired, to be taught in French as well as in English. According to Laurier, Regulation 17 ran counter to this principle and consequently it merited immediate consideration if he was to remain leader of the Liberal party. This sense of urgency which was to be so characteristic of Laurier's statements and actions on the Bilingual Schools Question in 1916 prompted Stewart Lyon, in deference to Laurier's wish, to refrain from saying anything in future Globe editorials which would be an "endorsement of Regulation 17 as an official solution to the English-French problem in the schools of Ontario."²

While the editor of the Globe was unsettled over the claims made in the French Canadian press that the French language was official in Ontario, N. W. Rowell, the leader of the Liberal party in Ontario was equally disturbed over the fact that an act was passed in the Quebec legislature which

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 696, Laurier to Stewart Lyon, Feb. 29, 1916.

² Ibid., Stewart Lyon to Laurier, March 6, 1916.

authorized municipalities in that province to make contributions to a fund purposely set up to carry on bilingual education in Ontario.¹ He viewed this action as an unwarranted intrusion into the affairs of Ontario and stood firm on the position that the schools controversy would have to be resolved by the people of that province. Rowell agreed with the principle that a child should be able to receive an education in French as well as in English but the practical difficulty as he saw it was "to ensure the first without appearing unduly to interfere with the second."

In their private exchange of views Laurier admitted to Rowell that in the past (i.e. up to 1912) the English language in Ontario was subordinated to the interests of the French language for in some bilingual schools education was conducted almost entirely in the French language.² Laurier also contended that this situation should not have been permitted to continue. He claimed that it could have been rectified by enforcing the law established by the Mowat government which would have made it mandatory for every child to have an English education in the province of Ontario. In Laurier's view Regulation 17 placed serious restrictions on the teaching of French in Ontario schools to the extent that in the future education would be carried on exclusively in English. The most detrimental effect of Regulation 17, however, was that this apparent injustice to the Franco-Ontarians caused serious agitation in the province of Quebec. It was being exploited by Bourassa and the Nationalists to foster a resentment on the part of the French Canadians towards the English of Ontario. More

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 696, N. W. Rowell to Laurier, Feb. 29, 1916.

² Ibid., Laurier to N. W. Rowell, March 1, 1916.

significantly, the Nationalists were using the bilingual issue as propaganda against recruitment of troops in Quebec. Laurier felt that these nationalist tactics not only made a satisfactory solution to the Bilingual Schools issue in Ontario all the more difficult, but it also had the possibilities of seriously dividing Canada along racial and religious lines at a time when national unity was so important.

The growing antagonism between Ontario and Quebec over the Bilingual Schools Question was equally disturbing to the Borden government as it was to Laurier. For constitutional and political reasons, however, the Conservatives adopted a "hands-off" policy and therefore decided to do nothing. This stand was not without its disruptive effects on the party but generally speaking the undesirable consequences were of a minor character.

Laurier, however, could not justify to himself a "hands-off" policy. He felt compelled to explore some avenues in an attempt to reduce the detrimental effects of the nationalist agitation in Quebec. Consequently, by mid-April 1916 Laurier began considering the possibilities of a discussion of the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question in the House of Commons.

Up until this time Laurier's private exchange of views with the Liberal leaders of Ontario were primarily based on principle, and on principle there was general agreement. Both Laurier and Rowell were in agreement that every child in Ontario should have a sound education in

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 695, Laurier To D'Hellencourt, Feb. 15, 1916.

² For the Conservative reaction to the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question in 1916 see Roger Graham, Arthur Meighen: Door of Opportunity, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1960), I, 98-104. See also Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, ed. Henry Borden, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1938), II, 573-591.

English, and if there was a desire, in French as well. Furthermore, both Laurier and Rowell were in agreement that "provincial rights" and "just and fair treatment of minorities" were the cardinal features of Liberalism established by Mowat and Blake. When it came to ensuring that these principles were upheld in practice, however, Laurier came into conflict not only with his lieutenants from Ontario, but with other leading Liberals across Canada as well.

As soon as Rowell was aware of a movement on the part of the Liberal caucus at Ottawa to bring in a resolution dealing with Regulation 17, he expressed a strong desire that any such movement be stopped.¹ Rowell, undoubtedly very sensitive to the prevailing mood in Ontario against the French Canadians, feared that a discussion of Regulation 17 in the Commons would be misinterpreted as interference in Ontario politics and would serve no other purpose than to "further inflame public opinion." Laurier, however, would not stand in the way of discussion of the schools issue in the House of Commons.² He argued that if the Federal Liberal party was impotent to act in the defense of a Liberal principle such as "the just and fair treatment of minorities" then his role as leader of the party had outlived its usefulness. Because Laurier was convinced that the French minority in Ontario were unjustly treated by the Conservative government of that province³ he felt justified in bringing the issue into the federal arena with the hope that the provincial legislature would re-examine its treatment of the French minority in the field of education.

It would appear from the above arguments that Laurier's method

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 697, Rowell to Laurier, April 15, 1916.

² Ibid., Laurier to N. W. Rowell, April 18, 1916.

³ Ibid., Laurier to Rowell, April 28, 1916.

of ensuring that the principles of fair treatment of minorities was sustained in practice was to use the House of Commons not in the capacity of an instrument of disallowance of provincial legislation but rather as an advisory body cautioning against a particular course of action. It may be argued, as Blair Neatby does,¹ that Laurier tended to place "minority rights" in a more important position than provincial rights. Since many French Canadians lived outside the province of Quebec "minority rights" were more important than provincial rights in attempting to bring about racial harmony.

Understandably, the Liberals of Ontario placed more emphasis on provincial rights. There was the belief that the minority in any province had to place a great deal of trust in "the sense of justice and fair play of the majority to effect a redress of their grievances."² Consequently, there was no justification for any type of federal action, no matter how moderate, which would seek to rectify any grievance which minorities might have. Even an advisory resolution would be resented as an unjustifiable restriction on the part of the province to deal with its own problems.

A discussion of Regulation 17 in the House of Commons might or might not have been construed as an invasion of provincial rights. But how would such a discussion, initiated by the Liberal party, affect its political future? W. S. Fielding felt, as many other Liberals did, that in 1916 the Conservative government under Borden was most unpopular. Consequently, the ~~prospects~~^{prospects} of an early return of the Liberals to power was

¹ H. B. Neatby, "Laurier and a Liberal Quebec," (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1955), p. 359.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 697, N. W. Rowell to Laurier, April 26, 1916.

very promising.¹ "There is an imminent danger," cautioned Fielding, "that the advantage gained may be lost through the unnecessary introduction" of the bilingual question into the House of Commons. Moreover, if the Liberals at Ottawa took this step, would it not embarrass the Ontario Liberals under Rowell who, except for a few French Canadian members, supported the provincial government on the school question? From the point of view of the practical politician a discussion of the bilingual issue in the Commons would only benefit the Conservatives "who would rejoice over the prospect" and sit back patiently and watch the Liberal party split over a discussion of principle. "To my mind," concluded Fielding, "it is the clearest possible case for non-interference at Ottawa. No Liberal should raise the question here."

Laurier did not have to be reminded of these political dangers for he realized the forcefulness of Fielding's arguments. He was very conscious of his personal dilemma as his reply to Fielding makes clear:

"...If I were to remain silent under such circumstances I would certainly lose my own self-esteem and respect and, on the other hand, I know that the moderate action which I propose will be construed against the party, so long as I remain the head of it.

...My opinion is still very strong that I should step down, as I feel that in the present emergency the attitude which I must take will be detrimental to the party, though we must recognize that Toryism has made strong headway in Ontario, and that the policy of Mowat is now at a discount."²

Both Rowell and Fielding viewed Laurier's resignation as an "unthinkable" and disastrous eventuality.³ Fielding begged Laurier not

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 697, W. S. Fielding to Laurier, April 23, 1916.

² Ibid., Laurier to Fielding, April 26, 1916.

³ Ibid., Fielding to Laurier, April 27, 1916. N. W. Rowell to Laurier, April 26, 1916.

to think of resignation at this time for "whatever the outcome of the matter I do not believe that there is a Liberal anywhere in Canada who does not feel as I do on this point." Although Fielding did suggest that there was some room for debate on whether the bilingual question would be raised in the House of Commons, there was certainly no debate on Laurier's leadership. Similarly, Rowell felt that there was only one place for Laurier and that was at the head of the Liberal party. There appeared to be an honest attempt on the part of Rowell to understand Laurier's difficult position as leader of the Liberal party particularly when he was confronted with the Nationalist movement and propaganda. "It may be" wrote Rowell, "that the greatest work of your life is that which you will do during the next few years in seeking to break the force of the Nationalist movement and thus establish conditions for a better understanding between the races in the days that lie before us."

The concern of J. W. Dafoe, editor of the Manitoba Free Press was that in the process of trying to "break the force of the Nationalist movement" Laurier would seriously jeopardize his own position as a national leader and destroy the Liberal party as well.¹ Dafoe reasoned that if Laurier succeeded in carrying the entire party with him on a resolution censuring Ontario for Regulation 17 then the entire party would be destroyed. If, on the other hand, only the French followed him, Laurier would be "gone as a national leader." Because Dafoe recognized the seriousness of Laurier's proposed action he made a last attempt to dissuade him from introducing such a resolution into the Commons. In a personal interview with Laurier during the first week in May of 1916, Dafoe found Laurier as "stubborn as an army mule." There was little that any member

¹ P. A. C. Sifton Papers, Microfilm, Roll C-1160A, J. W. Dafoe to C. Sifton, May 7, 1916.

of the Liberal party could have said that would have caused Laurier to alter his course of action. On May 8, 1916 Laurier presented the Prime Minister with a notice of motion to be moved by Ernest Lapointe on the Ontario Schools Question. He explained to Borden that he was very much alarmed by the conditions in Quebec and consequently he had to have "some sheet anchor with which to fight the Nationalists."¹

On May 9 Ernest Lapointe introduced the following resolution into the House of Commons:

"That this house especially at this time of universal sacrifice and anxiety, when all energies should be concentrated on the winning of the war, would, while fully recognizing the principle of provincial rights and the necessity of every child being given a thorough English education, respectfully suggest to the Legislative Assembly the wisdom of making it clear that the children of French parentage of being taught in their mother tongue be not interfered with."²

This resolution was moderate and conciliatory in tone and its supporters saw it as essentially "a plea for better mutual understanding of the law by which French children may be taught French in their own schools."³ Even though this resolution was moderate, one would expect that it would generate a heated debate in which appeals to emotion and racial and religious prejudice would predominate. There was also the danger that English-speaking M. P.s would use this occasion to remind Quebec that she was dragging her feet in the war effort. However, this was not the tenor of the debate. Most speakers were careful not to base their speeches on the emotional issues which surrounded the Ontario schools question.

¹ Borden Memoirs, II, 588-89.

² Canada. House of Commons, Debates, May 9, 1916, II, 3618.

³ The Canadian Liberal Monthly, June, 1916, p. 114.

The debate in the Commons revolved around several questions. Was a discussion of provincial education in Ottawa likely to produce profitable results? What was the status of the French language in the Dominion of Canada? And finally, did the Liberals introduce this resolution solely to make political capital? The Lapointe Resolution, to which Laurier gave his fullest support, pointed to a direct relationship between the war effort in Canada and the crisis over bilingual schools in Ontario. Most Conservatives and many English-speaking Liberals either could not see or understand this relationship, or chose to ignore it. The Prime Minister for example, took the position that a discussion of this question in the Commons could "do no possible good" but an "indefinite amount of harm." Laurier disagreed as the following statement indicates:

"As to the wisdom, or otherwise, of this motion, may I say to the right honourable friend the Prime Minister that for my part I have another and totally different view from the one he has expressed. Everybody knows that there is in this province (Quebec) at the present time a widespread agitation with regard to the rights of the French language in this Dominion. It is never a wise thing to run away from a question... Let us discuss it; let us hear both sides of it; and then, Sir, I believe from this discussion we shall rise wiser and better men, knowing better what our position is, knowing better what the rights of the minority are; and I venture to say that when the question has been settled, as it ought to be settled, the minority will accept the situation whatever it might be."

From this statement and the Lapointe Resolution itself it would appear that Laurier was intent upon initiating discussion which would begin to lay ground rules for the status of the French language in Canada. That such a hornet's nest should be opened during a time of war may be par-

House of Commons, Debates, May 9, 1916, p. 3619.

Ibid., p. 3619.

tially explained by the fact that the agitation in Quebec and the campaign against recruitment, both of which were causing serious strains on Canadian national unity were, in the view of the Quebec leaders at least, largely based on the unresolved problem over bilingual schools in Ontario.

This attitude was not shared by other Liberal members of the Commons. George P. Graham, a leading Liberal from Ontario, although he did not approve of Regulation 17, admitted freely that he would have preferred that this matter was not discussed in the Commons.¹ Frank Oliver, the only Western Liberal to speak on the Lapointe Resolution, took a very indeterminate stand on the principle of provincial rights as it applied to the resolution.² Oliver conceded that the Commons was the proper place to discuss legislation or any matter where substantial injustice was involved in the field of education. But did the Ontario Schools Question fall into this category? Frank Oliver was not certain.

The Liberal members in the House of Commons may have evaded the question of provincial rights by remaining silent or by choosing to stress other issues of the bilingual problem, but the Globe was unequivocal on this question.³ It considered the Lapointe Resolution "as a suggestion on a matter entirely beyond the jurisdiction" of the House of Commons. The effect of Laurier's address, concluded the Globe, would have been much greater if it was made directly to the people of Ontario either in Toronto or in some other populous part of the province. Similarly, the Toronto Star

¹ House of Commons, Debates, May 10, 1916. p. 3786.

² Ibid., May 11, p.3774.

³ Toronto, Globe, May 11, 1916.

argued that the "Liberal Opposition ought to grapple with the railway question, declare boldly and clearly for nationalization, and leave bilingualism to Bourassa and his fellow-cranks.¹ It ought to declare for federalism in the broad sense. The Dominion Parliament ought to do its own business and the Provincial Legislatures to do their own business. As we understand it, that is Federalism, and that is Liberalism. At any rate, it is common sense."

As was the case in his private exchange of views, Laurier could not understand this position taken by the Ontario Liberals. He was not challenging the contention that Ontario had paramount power in the field of education. Nor was he suggesting that the House of Commons set in motion machinery by which Regulation 17 would be disallowed.² Laurier could not understand how the Lapointe Resolution - which in his words was "a prayer offered for a reconsideration of the present regulations on bilingualism" - could be misconstrued as an invasion of the rights of the province of Ontario.³ But since this was the case, Laurier concluded that the concept of provincial rights had undergone a change in meaning from that laid down by Mowat and Blake. He could not help but feel that the Liberal party had taken a backward step "abandoning position after position before the haughty onslaughts of Toryism."

Along side the problem of provincial rights, Laurier and several French Canadian M.P.s embarked upon a discussion of the status of the French language in Canada. Essentially, Laurier did not say anything different on this question than he did when writing to Liberal leaders privately before the

¹ Toronto Star, May 10, 1916.

² House of Commons, Debates, May 10, p. 3707.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 697, Laurier to N. W. Rowell, May 11, 1916.

debate. He re-stated his position in the Commons that his countrymen should have the privilege "of being taught in the French language untrammelled", a privilege they possessed for at least one hundred and fifty years.¹ In his Commons speech, however, Laurier went a step further by implying that the Lapointe Resolution had a much broader base than merely applying to the province of Ontario. To Laurier's deep regret,² the Liberal government of Manitoba passed an act abolishing the system of bilingual schools which had been in existence in that province ever since its entry into Confederation. Therefore, the principle which would allow children of French ancestry to be taught in French should apply to the province of Manitoba as well as to the province of Ontario.³

Laurier's oblique reference to the Manitoba situation struck a responsive chord among the Western segment of the Liberal party. Frank Oliver, presumably speaking for the Western Liberals in the Commons, rose to give a clear exposition of the difference between conditions in Eastern Canada and Western Canada with respect to educational affairs.⁴ He cautioned Laurier and the supporters of the Lapointe Resolution, not to apply principles and standards pertaining to the status of the French language - which were perfectly acceptable to Eastern Canada - to Western Canada, where the conditions were entirely different and had drastically changed since 1870. Frank Oliver concluded by saying:

¹ House of Commons, Debates, May 10, p. 3707.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 696 Laurier to T.C. Norris, Feb. 22, 1916.

³ House of Commons, Debates, May 10, pp. 3702-3703.

⁴ Ibid., May 11, 1916, pp. 3773-3780.

"Let the problems of eastern Canada be dealt with as they may be, but let the problems of Western Canada be dealt with as they may be; that is all we ask. If we cannot agree, all I suggest is that we agree to disagree."¹

It was this issue, the status of the French language in Canada, which more than any other issue, began to divide the Liberal party in 1916. Laurier appeared to be standing up for a principle which the majority within his party were not prepared to accept; a principle upon which a later generation were also to become divided. It may be argued that Laurier raised this issue at a most inopportune time, a time when English Canadians at least, were more preoccupied and concerned with the problems created by Canada's involvement in the war. Perhaps Laurier was exaggerating the extent to which the agitation in Quebec over the Ontario Bilingual Schools issue contributed to racial divisions in Canada or to the lack of enlistment in the province of Quebec. And yet, very few would deny that racial tensions in Canada were heightened by the spring of 1916.

Throughout the debate on the Lapointe Resolution the performance of Laurier was viewed by his contemporaries as one of the least creditable episodes of his political career. In the House of Commons English and French-speaking Conservative M.P.'s did not concede that Laurier had any altruistic motives in supporting the Lapointe Resolution. The government contended that it was not the defense of the principle of minority rights which motivated Laurier and the Liberals to introduce this motion into the House but rather the desire to make political capital out of this issue. Why was it for example, that the Federal Government was not faced with such a resolution during the sessions from 1912 to 1916 when Regulation 17 "lay on

¹ House of Commons, Debates, May 11, p. 3780.

the table of the House of Commons undisturbed?¹ Could it be that a discussion of the Lapointe Resolution was timed so that it would just precede the Quebec provincial elections?* As T. Chase Casgrain, the Postmaster General in the Borden cabinet put it, "the introduction of this resolution at this time was considered necessary to supply a battle cry for the Liberals with which to defeat the Conservative party in the province of Quebec and thus make way for my right hon. friend and his followers when the Federal elections came."² Moreover, the Government made Laurier and the Liberals aware of the fact that the Lapointe Resolution was introduced as an amendment to go into committee of supply, which made the approval of this resolution a refusal to grant supply, and consequently a declaration of want of confidence in the government. "This," wrote the Globe" gave party flavour to the situation which lessened its value as an expression of opinion."³ J. W. Dafoe, editor of the Manitoba Free Press, writing in 1922 recalled an interview with Laurier just prior to the introduction of the Resolution into the Commons. He reminded Laurier "that it was not desirable that the Liberal party should identify itself with a resolution the carrying of which meant a general election in the height of war upon a race and religion issue."⁴ Thus, the timing of the introduction of the Lapointe Resolution into the Commons seemed to point to the Liberal party's use of the res-

¹ House of Commons, Debates, May 11, 1916, p. 3757.

² Ibid., p. 3710

³ Toronto, Globe, May 11, 1916. See also House of Commons Debates, May 11, 1916, p. 3757.

⁴ J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, p. 161.

* The 1916 elections in Quebec were to be held on May 22, 1916.

olution for purely political reasons.

From the point of view of the student of history several other reasons may be suggested for the Liberals introducing the Lapointe Resolution into the Commons when they did. Laurier had expected N. W. Rowell to oppose Regulation 17 and hoped that this opposition would bring about some modification in the treatment of the French minority.¹ Since this was not done Laurier felt compelled to act on behalf of the French minority in Ontario. Moreover, the French language came under further attack in 1916 when the Liberal government of Manitoba introduced a bill abolishing the system of bilingual schools. The year 1916 then, seemed to be a high point in the crisis over bilingualism in Canada.

The suggestion that the Lapointe Resolution was purposely timed to coincide with the General Elections in Quebec so that a Liberal victory in that province would be assured tends to greatly underestimate the strength of the Liberal provincial organization under Sir Lomer Gouin. Undoubtedly, the Liberal performance during the bilingual episode indirectly helped the Liberals sweep the province of Quebec. But even without the Lapointe Resolution the overwhelming victory of the Liberals over the Conservatives of Quebec was assured. "The Liberal gains...were not confined to French speaking constituencies and were as great, proportionately, in those not concerned with bilingualism - such as Brome, Compton, Sherbrooke, and other Eastern Township seats..."²

The more significant criticisms of Laurier's actions over the Lapointe Resolution came from within rather than from outside of the Liberal

¹ J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, p. 161.

² The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1916, J. Castell Hopkins, ed. (Toronto: The Annual Review Publishing Co. Ltd., 1917), p. 585.

party. The doubts expressed by leading Liberals in Ontario and in Western Canada from the very outset of Laurier's decision to support a resolution on Regulation 17 in the Commons manifested themselves in the final vote on the Lapointe Resolution. As O. D. Skelton relates it,¹ the Liberals met in caucus by province to decide on the Lapointe Resolution. The results were what one might have anticipated. The Liberal M.P.s from Quebec and the Maritime provinces supported the resolution without reserve. Eleven Western Liberals opposed. The Ontario members sympathized with the aim of the motion but doubted "its expediency." However, they were prepared to vote for the resolution if Laurier wanted them to. In Laurier's eyes this would not do. He refused to ask them to vote for the resolution - "they should not expect that after all these years." Laurier, very disturbed at the manner in which the Liberal party had voted on the Lapointe resolution, offered his resignation to the Ontario Liberals. Faced with this possibility, the Ontario Liberals announced that they would support the resolution, and asked Laurier not to resign. Laurier, apparently moved by this show of affection, agreed to remain leader of the party.

The Globe censured the Liberal members representing Ontario constituencies for voting in favour of the Lapointe Resolution and suggested that if they consulted their constituents before the next session on the question of bilingualism as it related to provincial rights they would find that "the people of Ontario stand firmly upon the ground taken by Mr. Rowell. The Province must settle its own educational problems without interference from Ottawa in any shape of form."²

¹ O. D. Skelton, Laurier, II, 484.

² Toronto, Globe, May 13, 1916.

In private, N. W. Rowell candidly expressed his grave disappointment at the course Laurier had followed with regard to the Ontario Bilingual Schools issue. The Ontario Liberal leader saw a distinction between "a resolution making an appeal" and a disallowance proceeding.¹ Nevertheless, both of these procedures involved "a certain supervisory relation on the part of the Federal Government of Provincial legislation." If Rowell was unable to stand firm to his convictions on the schools question and at the same time enjoy the "confidence" and co-operation of Laurier then a split between ~~two~~^{the} men was inevitable for as Rowell stated: "I cannot surrender my convictions without surrendering my right to the leadership of the Provincial Liberal party." On a question as vital as the province's control over its educational affairs, a provincial Liberal party should not be expected to subordinate its views to those of the Federal Liberal party at Ottawa. Such a step would not only be unfair to the province of Ontario but it would also mean "committing political suicide."

Rowell's criticisms of Laurier's stand on the bilingual issue in Ontario were sound. Instead of clearing the ground and establishing correct principles the debate on the Lapointe Resolution merely served to bring to the surface for all to see, a fundamental area of disagreement within the Federal Liberal party. The Western Liberals disagreed with Laurier in a more basic way than ever before. The vote in the House of Commons on the resolution made this abundantly clear. The Ontario Liberals also disagreed with Laurier over provincial rights and the status of the French language in Canada but voted for the resolution as "a tribute of affection to a leader who has earned their affection as well as their

¹ P. A. C. Rowell Papers, M. G. 27 II, D13; Vol. 12, File # 51, N. W. Rowell to Laurier, May 17, 1916.

confidence."¹

John W. Dafoe and Clifford Sifton, owner of the Manitoba Free Press, two men whose influence in Western Canada could not be ignored, began to develop a completely different view of Laurier's leadership and the Liberal party itself. Sifton suggested to Dafoe that because of Laurier's performance during the bilingual episode Laurier should resign.² Similarly, Dafoe was gratified that the Western Liberals had taken an independent stand on the Resolution, and he proceeded to express his disenchantment with Laurier and the Liberal party in this way:

"...Western Liberals need not look to the East, at present, for effective and progressive leadership. The time is ripe for Western Liberals to decide that they will rely on themselves - and thus to do their own thinking, formulate their own policies and provide their own leaders."³

There are, however, several explanations for Laurier's decision to bring the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question into the Federal arena. It was not a desire to "demonstrate that he was the true champion of Quebec's views and interests." At least, his private correspondence and public statements do not point in this direction. Nor can his actions be dismissed as simply an attempt to gain political capital. Laurier remarked to a friend in 1914 that many political problems were subordinated or pushed aside as a result of the outbreak of the war. Undoubtedly, he considered the status of the French language in Canada to be one such problem.⁴ In Laurier's view, however, this problem was not only being subordinated to

¹ Toronto, Globe, May 15, 1916.

² P. A. C. Dafoe Papers, M. G. 30, D17, Vol. 1, Clifford Sifton to J. W. Dafoe, May 11, 1916.

³ Manitoba Free Press, May 12, 1916.

⁴ Laurier Papers, Vol. 695, Laurier to Joseph Martin, Sept. 29, 1914.

the interests of the war but it was seriously being undermined from the position it had held since Confederation. The actions of the Ontario and Manitoba governments in 1912 and 1916 appeared to convince Laurier of this. And yet, Laurier perhaps did not recognize or would not accept the fact that the situation, particularly in Western Canada, had changed since 1867. The Manitoba government abolished the system of bilingual schools because the large majority of the people in that province demanded such a change.¹ This apparent attack on the French language, however, prompted serious agitation in Quebec which was viewed by Laurier as a threat to the national unity of Canada.

Laurier also justified his actions in the spring of 1916 as being in the future interests of the Liberal party. He looked with some apprehension on the actions of the Quebec Bishops to seek the disallowance of Regulation 17. If the Liberals did not assume the position they did in the Commons over the Bilingual Schools issue "encouragement would have been given to the policy of disallowance, and, when in office, the Liberal party would have had to face a more determined agitation on that question."²

Indeed, all of the above reasons were honourable motives, either in the interests of Canada or in the interests of the party. But the discussion of the Lapointe Resolution pointed to difficult days ahead for the Liberal party. There were those, notably John W. Dafoe, who lost faith in the Liberal leadership, and who were going to be instrumental in encouraging the independent action of the western wing of the Liberal party. In

¹ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to Thomas Côté, March 27, 1916.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 699, Laurier to G. Broadly, July 14, 1916.

addition, the vote on the Lapointe Resolution exposed the lines upon which the Liberal party was to split in 1917. Laurier's desire to maintain a united party throughout the war was given a serious check as a result of the Lapointe Resolution. And yet, the deep respect and affection which had been built up over the years for Laurier was to prove to be a constant factor of unity within the party among the many variables over which disagreement was inevitable throughout the remaining years of the war. In 1917, like 1916, the Liberal party split over principle, that is, they divided on the question of coalition government which had conscription as its raison d'etre.

Chapter Three
Rejection of Coalition
Government

The discussion of the Lapointe Resolution in the House of Commons and within the Liberal party soon gave way to a consideration of a more pressing, although more transitory problem of whether the Liberals would agree to a further extension of the Parliamentary term. Parliament had been extended for one year in 1916 which made an election probable in the winter of 1917. The questions of the extension of parliament, coalition government and conscription are so interrelated that it is difficult to discuss any one of them without reference to the others. These questions were not presented to the people of Canada simultaneously, and yet, they became the focus of attention during the winter of 1916-1917.

The flow of voluntary recruits for overseas service began to fall off sharply by mid-1916. This prompted the Borden Government to set up a National Service Board which was to gather information as to manpower location and distribution. There were suspicions, particularly from the Labouring class, that the main purpose behind this national registration was the eventual introduction of conscription. The decline of voluntary recruitment had another effect. It prompted the English press to level attacks against the "slackers" in the province of Quebec. Consequently, the feeling that conscription was more than a remote possibility and the charges that Quebec was not doing her share in the war effort, created an atmosphere of tension.

Such an atmosphere prompted movements within the Liberal party, originating mainly in Toronto and Winnipeg, for an extension of parliament and for a coalition government. Perhaps it was felt that such political

alterations would prevent further national discord and would bring about a more vigorous prosecution of the war effort. Even if conscription was deemed necessary it would not be implemented by a party government. As each of the above questions arose, Laurier and the Liberal party found it increasingly more difficult to find common ground upon which the party could act in unison.

The situation which many Liberals had foremost in their minds when debating whether or not to agree to an extension of parliament was the unpopularity of the Conservative Government in the administration of the war effort. This unpopularity of the government was significant in Liberal thinking particularly if it was interpreted to mean more support for the Liberals. There were several reasons for the declining popularity of the government. Although there was no official inquiry into the extent of war-time profiteering and patronage, the Liberal opposition had plenty of support from people outside of parliament for their constant criticisms and charges of the laxity of the Government of these problems. Furthermore, the government was held responsible for the ever increasing cost of living. Most important, the Borden Government had to carry the heavy burden of two unpopular personalities - Sir Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia (1911-1917), and Robert Rogers, the Minister of Public Works (1912-1917). The latter was a central figure in an adverse report delivered by Judge Galt in connection with government contracts in Manitoba while the recruiting methods of Sir Sam Hughes in Quebec made the Conservative party extremely unpopular among the French Canadians. Finally, the increasing failure of voluntary recruitment tended to further diminish any confidence people may have had for the Borden government.

This unpopularity manifested itself in the outcome of several provincial elections between August 1915 and June 1917. During this period

seven provincial elections were contested. The Conservatives were successful in one. In three of the Provinces (Manitoba, New Brunswick, and British Columbia) Conservative governments were unseated, and in all other contests the Conservatives lost heavily. The elections in Manitoba and British Columbia were overwhelming defeats for the provincial Conservative parties. In the latter province the Liberals were without a seat in the provincial legislature in 1916 but by the end of the same year ended up with 37 out of 47.¹ In 1915 the Manitoba Conservatives lost 22 seats, giving the Liberals an over-all majority of 32.² Although provincial elections do not always reflect the relative strengths of the Federal parties, these particular upsets for the Conservatives at the provincial level prompted some to draw a cause and effect relationship between the popularity of a Federal party and the success of the provincial wing of that party in provincial elections. John W. Dafoe for example, felt quite justified in concluding that the major reason for the Conservative downfall in Manitoba was due to the hatred of Robert Rogers in that province.³ He also suggested that in the event of a Federal election the Conservative party "could not hope to carry many seats" in Manitoba. Similarly, two years later, Dafoe commented that the Federal Conservative party must have been disheartened at the Liberal victory in New Brunswick because that particular provincial contest was viewed as a "trial of strength between the Dominion parties."⁴

From the Conservative disasters in Quebec, Manitoba, and British

¹ Canadian Parliamentary Guide, E. J. Chambers, ed. (Ottawa: Mortimer Co., Ltd., 1917), p. 437.

² Ibid., 1916, p. 398.

³ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to S. Fisher, Aug. 20, 1915.

⁴ Ibid., Dafoe to C. Sifton, Feb. 27, 1917.

Columbia, it was understandable that some Liberals might infer that a tremendous Liberal movement was sweeping over Canada. But when the political situation was analyzed more closely, it led some to the conclusion that the victory of the Liberals in many provincial elections was due to "the mistakes, corruption, and incompetence of the Conservatives."¹ Dafoe supported this contention in 1915 with specific reference to the Manitoba situation and later with reference to the national scene. According to Dafoe, the 1915 Liberal victory in his province was not symptomatic of Liberal strength and popularity.² Because the Liberal party did not have a strong federal leader in Manitoba and because Manitoba was one Canadian province "in which the name of Sir Wilfrid Laurier has never been one to conjure with," the Federal Liberal party was no more popular in that province than the Conservatives were. If the Liberals were to win the province of Manitoba in a general election it would do so on a negative basis, that is, because the people of that province hated the Conservatives more than the Liberals.

Liberals generally in favour of an extension of the parliamentary term were quite certain that this negative attitude toward the Liberal party was not restricted to one or two provinces but to the whole of Canada. A. K. Cameron candidly expressed this feeling to Laurier "that while people of the country hate and loathe and despise this Government and the Conservative party they were not enthusiastic over the Liberal party."³

Meanwhile, there were logical arguments expressed in the winter of 1916-1917 in favour of having an election. In speaking for Laurier and the

¹Laurier Papers, Vol. 702, E. M. Macdonald to Laurier, Sept. 28, 1916.

²Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to S. Fisher, Aug. 20, 1915.

³Laurier Papers, Vol. 708, A. K. Cameron to Laurier, April 28, 1917.

Liberal party, the Globe contended that as a result of the "dissentions and disputes" within the Borden administration government efficiency was an impossibility.¹ Consequently, if a war-time election was found to be necessary, it would be because the Liberal Parliamentary Party believed that the Conservative administration under Borden no longer had the confidence of the people and could no longer be entrusted with the prosecution of the war. Moreover, Liberals in parts of Western Canada wanted the Conservatives out of office in order that lower tariffs would be brought about. Where such an economic policy would be a strong likelihood under a Liberal administration, it was virtually an impossibility under the existing Conservative government.²

By the end of 1916, Laurier and the parliamentary Liberals, along with some of the older members of the party outside of the Commons, were not inclined to favour an extension of parliament. What good, asked Laurier, did the Conservatives make of the extension granted in 1916? Was constitutional government to be carried on or not? If elections were not held in 1917 when were they to be held? Would another extension of parliament be in the best interests of the country and the war? From his conversations and correspondence with those outside of the parliamentary group, Laurier concluded that they were essentially opposed to an election for fear of an adverse expression of public opinion.³

Laurier may have accurately assessed the feelings of many within

¹ Toronto Globe, Nov. 18, 1916.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 704, W. A. Buchanan to Laurier, Nov. 17, 1916.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 704, Laurier to A. Aylesworth, Dec. 29, 1916.

the party, but this is not to suggest that these fears of an adverse public opinion were ill-founded. There were those who went so far as to suggest that the fate of the Liberal party "for years and possibly generations to come" would be contingent upon the decision taken by the Liberal party with regard to the extension of parliament.¹ If the Liberals insisted on an election during the most critical stages of the war it might prove difficult for them to overcome a charge of disloyalty. It did not matter if this charge was true or not. What did matter, however, was the fact that if the Conservatives were successful in implanting this idea in the minds of the electorate, the Liberals would certainly meet disaster. More important still, the aversion to an election was based on the belief that it would be "the dirtiest election the country has ever seen, and the strife, the rancour, and the divisions that would result, would be a serious menace to the country!"²

Prior to the opening of the new session of parliament on January 19, 1917 the discussion of a further extension of the parliamentary term was based largely on speculation that the Borden government would make such a request. Once the session opened, however, the speculation ceased and the discussion on the extension of parliament gained momentum. In the speech from the throne the newly appointed Governor General, the Duke of Devonshire, announced that the government would introduce a resolution calling for a further extension of the life of parliament "in order to avoid the distraction and confusion consequent upon a general election as so critical a time."³

¹ P. A. C. Cameron Papers, M. G. 27 III, F2, Vol. 2, A. K. Cameron to G. Bain, Nov. 13, 1916.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 708, A. K. Cameron to Laurier, April 28, 1917.

³ House of Commons, Debates, January 19, 1917, I, 6-7.

There was no mention of conscription or the intention to bring about a coalition government. The first session of parliament opened by the Duke of Devonshire was of a brief duration. There was agreement between the Government and Opposition to adjourn the proceedings of the House in order that the Prime Minister could attend the meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet. The House of Commons was to resume its sittings on the seventeenth of April.

The adjournment of parliament from the seventh of February to the twenty-seventh of April was of vital importance to the Liberal party. Liberals, mainly outside of the parliamentary party, were quick to seize upon the various problems that would face Laurier and the Liberal party if a war time election became a reality. These problems may have been slightly exaggerated with the hope that Laurier would be discouraged from insisting on an election, but it would be difficult to argue that they did not exist.

One problem presented itself immediately. What platform would the Liberals adopt in a future election? Most Liberals, including Laurier, agreed that the contest should be fought on something more positive than merely criticisms of the Conservative administration.¹ If the Liberals were incapable of presenting to the electorate a constructive platform in the direction of extensive reforms on such issues as the tariff then they would only be creating problems for themselves when in office. There was general agreement that the past record of the Liberal party while in office was not good enough. The people would have to be informed and convinced of what the Liberal party was prepared to do for them in the future.

¹ P. A. C. King Papers, M. G. 26, J., W. L. M. King to H. Cane, April 25, 1917. See also Laurier Papers, Vol. 702, Laurier to E. M. Macdonald, Sept. 25, 1917.

The laying down of constructive policies for the future was not going to be an easy task for the Liberal party particularly in the face of the ever increasing radicalism of the Western wing of the Liberal party. Anyone who was at all familiar with the political situation in Western Canada would predict with some degree of confidence that future representatives from the West would be strong supporters of such economic reforms as reciprocity with the United States, a sharply graduated income tax, and in fact most of the items enumerated in the Farmer's Platform.¹ If these Liberal representatives were to remain within the ranks of Liberalism it would have to be on the basis of a radical wing within the party "which would... run its own show without much regard to the caucus at Ottawa or the desires of the Eastern leaders."

One of these Eastern Liberals was afforded the opportunity of coming into contact with this Western Liberal attitude. In March 1917, the Saskatchewan Liberals met in Regina to formulate a platform for a future election. E. W. Nesbitt, insurance agent, and Liberal M. P. for North Oxford since 1908, was asked to attend as an Ontario member. According to Nesbitt, the western Liberal candidates from Saskatchewan were capable speakers and reasonable in their views.² At the same time, however, he did not think they were sufficiently aware of what was involved in governing a nation composed of so many diverse elements. As he expected, they were aggressively in favour of a low tariff policy and were determined to have their programme adopted by the Liberal party. Nesbitt cautioned Laurier that "these Western fellows would require careful handling."

¹ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to C. Sifton, Feb. 12, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 707, E. W. Nesbitt to Laurier, March 14, 1917.

"If they were not so far away and not surrounded by all the lonesomeness of the prairies, and by men who have got themselves worked up into a great state of excitement as to their wrongs, there would not be so much difficulty in getting them to listen to reason...I have no doubt that according to the present feeling they will probably elect representatives that will adopt the Council of Agriculture platform, but it is up to us to try to overcome, to a certain extent their prejudices."

Nesbitt's impressions of the Western Liberals was a revealing one, reflecting his southern Ontario outlook and his inability to recognize the fact that prejudices were existent in eastern as well as in western Liberalism as far as the tariff was concerned.

On the question of Western fiscal policy Laurier pointed out that momentarily the Liberal party was committed to free trade as far as farm implements were concerned and although he was sympathetic to the views professed by the western Liberals and recognized that their platform was "the policy of the future", it would be a long time before their entire programme would be fully realized.¹ Laurier was not unaware of the growing radicalism in Western Canada and apparently had no objection to the development of a radical wing within the party.² He was confident, however, that when the representatives from Western Canada came to Ottawa they would encounter so many difficulties that they would "have to modify their too petulant radicalism."

This growing independence and radicalism of the Western Liberals was a fundamental problem which had to be adequately dealt with by the Liberals preferably before an election and most certainly prior to the Liberal assumption of office. Co-operation between these two elements within the

¹ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to C. Sifton, Feb. 12, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 707, Laurier to E. W. Nesbitt, March 16, 1917.

party would appear to be more likely if the party was in opposition. A party in opposition, freed from the responsibilities of office which were especially heavy and demanding during a time of war, would have time, through discussion, to establish some common ground between the diverse elements within the party. More important still, a period of opposition during the war would also afford the party an opportunity to attract new blood into its ranks, particularly men who would be in a position to bridge the gap between the diverse interest groups within the party. If the Liberal party was to assume office before laying the firm foundations of co-operation between the various elements of the party, the radicals would, as Dafoe expressed it, "be a thorn in the side of the government" since they would be more radical in their views than what would be expected from "the official Liberal members."¹

But despite the radicalism within the Liberal party, and the charges of disloyalty which the Liberals would have to face if a contest were held, Laurier was still convinced that an election was the only course open in the face of the increasing "Rogers influence" in the Borden cabinet. Dafoe agreed with him that the government was in a "bad way" and that if they went to people under the present circumstances their defeat would be certain.² However, Dafoe made a last attempt to discourage Laurier from insisting upon an election. He stated that it was most important that a Liberal government be formed after the war was over. The chance of this becoming a reality would be endangered if, "by forcing an election," the "Liberals throw control of the situation into the hands of the Conservatives."

But to Laurier a victory for the party in a future election was a

¹ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to S. Fisher, Aug. 20, 1915.

² Ibid., Dafoe to Laurier, April 26, 1917.

secondary consideration.¹ "If we have to take office," wrote Laurier, "we should do so with a firm heart and try our best. But taking office for the sake of office is a thing not to be thought of, especially under existing circumstances." In Laurier's view, if constitutional government was to be maintained, an election could not be postponed indefinitely particularly if the existing government was mismanaging the affairs of the country.

However, Laurier was beginning to sense a problem more closely associated with the war, and one which would inevitably arise in any future election, namely, the anti-French feeling that was developing in Ontario and Western Canada. This anti-French feeling within the Liberal party was a reaction to the lack of recruitment in the province of Quebec. Consequently, there were those who candidly expressed to Laurier that although there was "a splendid and loyal body of Liberals in the province of Ontario" confident in his leadership, there was nevertheless a serious need to demonstrate to those in Ontario that the French Canadian Liberals were earnest in their attitude to the prosecution of the war.² Similarly, in Western Canada, because there was a suspicion of the limited commitment which the French Canadians had displayed to the war effort, people were reluctant to entrust the prosecution of the war to a French Canadian.³ J. A. Calder, Minister of Railways in the Liberal Administration in Saskatchewan, considered Laurier's chances in an election to be doubtful. Any success that came his way would be contingent upon his ability to step up recruitment in Quebec.

Laurier was never more sensitive about the fact that he was a French Canadian leading the Federal Liberal party than he was in 1917. During the

¹ Laurier Papers; Vol. 708, Laurier to A. K. Cameron, May 5, 1917.

² P. A. C. Dewhart Papers, M. G. 27, II F1, H. H. Dewhart to Laurier Jan. 16, 1917.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 705, J. A. Calder to Laurier, Jan. 29, 1917.

winter of that year Laurier wondered, as he had done many times in the past, whether it would have been better for an English Canadian, a member of the majority race in Canada, to have assumed the leadership of the party after the 1911 election. He was understandably suspicious of the appeals received from various correspondents¹ in favour of an extension of parliament and coalition government. To him, the fact that such requests were made was a clear indication that these people wanted to prevent a French Canadian from coming to office during the war.² Rowell, one of the strongest supporters of coalition government by 1917, assured Laurier that the many proposals for such a political alteration did not imply that his usefulness as leader was gone.³ In fact, it was "predicated" on Laurier remaining as leader in order that he could bring about "a better understanding and closer co-operation between the races."

The questions of the extension of parliament and coalition government were momentarily thrown into the background when the Prime Minister, after his return from the Imperial War Conference, announced to the House of Commons his intention to introduce legislation which would provide for "compulsory military enlistment on a selective basis."⁴ Laurier was very non-committal in his reply to the Prime Minister's statement.⁵ Although he re-affirmed his belief that Canada should remain in the war until victory was certain, a good deal of consideration would have to be given before the traditional voluntary policy

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 703, C. B. Sissons to Laurier, Nov. 24, 1916; N.W. Rowell to Laurier, Jan. 20, 1917.

² Rowell Papers, Microfilm Roll C-931, Laurier to Rowell, Jan. 23, 1917. Laurier Papers, Vol. 706, Laurier to A. E. Ames, Feb. 12, 1917.

³ Ibid., Vol. 705, Rowell to Laurier, Jan. 25, 1917.

⁴ House of Commons, Debates, May 18, 1917, II, 1542.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1547.

was abandoned in favour of compulsion. Laurier assured the Commons that the conscription bill would receive "due and fair consideration."

However, it was well known to all members of the Liberal party that Laurier could not and would not support conscription under any circumstances. Prior to the official announcement of conscription in the Commons, the majority of Liberals had already assumed positions either for or against compulsion. In the process they were forced to choose between their continued loyalty to Laurier or their support of conscription. Some were prepared to follow Laurier even though they did not agree with his stand on compulsory military service. In June and July of 1917 the number of Liberals in this category were in a minority.

The general basis upon which Laurier opposed conscription was on the question of principle.¹ His constant aim from the time he assumed the leadership of the Liberal party was "to maintain its actions purely upon principles." It was only in this way that a national party could survive among the "heterogenous elements" that made up the Canadian electorate. Laurier tended to use the term "principle" rather loosely. He may have meant "party policy" or "Liberal doctrine." In any case, Laurier argued that if the Military Service Bill was based on well known and well established principles, he would support it without question and "fight those who opposed it" - in Quebec or elsewhere. "But conscription", wrote Laurier, "has never been acknowledged as a Liberal principle."

More specifically, Laurier opposed the policy of compulsory military service on political grounds. In order to explain his reasons in this regard Laurier emphasized the fate of the Liberal party as a result of the 1910 Naval Debate and the 1911 election in Quebec. At this time, he made a commitment to the people of Quebec that his Naval Bill did not mean conscription and that he himself was unalterably opposed to such a policy. Laurier explained his

¹ ~~Dewart~~ ^{Dewart} Dewart Papers, Laurier to H. H. ~~Dewart~~, May 29, 1917.

difficult position in relation to the province of Quebec in this way:

"If now I were to deviate from this policy, I would again be attacked by the extremists in Quebec and represented as a deceiver; I would be put at once on the defensive as a Jingoist, which is the choice epithet with which they fought me before..."

"There is a very serious agitation now in Quebec. My attitude during these last days has been uniquely devoted to prevent violence in language and action. I think for the present we have seen the worst of this, but if this bill of conscription is forced upon the people of this moribund Parliament that we now have, the consequences will be more serious than people realize. My duty will then be to quell an indignant people and it will be no light task."

"Moreover, if at this juncture I were to depart from the policy which I have hitherto maintained in all the provinces, I would hand over the province of Quebec to the extremists and the condition of things will be still more serious than even they will be if the bill is passed by the existing parliament."¹

The above statement reveals the various levels on which Laurier opposed conscription. If he abandoned the commitment he made to the people of Quebec in 1910-1911 it would have serious personal and political implications for Laurier. On the personal level Laurier would lose his own self-respect and the respect of the French-Canadians. In 1911, the nationalists popularized the idea that Laurier would, for the sake of maintaining himself in power, compromise his own views and ideas to those of the English. His acceptance of conscription in 1917 under any circumstances would serve no other purpose than to further implant this image of Laurier in the minds of the French Canadians. Only this time Laurier would be compromising to regain power. If this attitude was made prevalent in Quebec Laurier's chances of political success in that province were indeed limited.

The statement quoted above also suggests a paternal attitude on the

¹ ~~Dewart~~ ^{Dewart} Papers, Laurier to H. H. ~~Dewart~~ ^{Dewart}, May 29, 1917. See also Laurier Papers, Vol. 708, Laurier to A. C. Hardy, May 29, 1917; Laurier to N. W. Rowell, June 3, 1917.

part of Laurier to the province of Quebec. If conscription were to have an adverse affect among the poeple of this province, Laurier assumed that he alone could shoulder the responsibility of quelling "an indignant people." If taken alone the above statement would reinforce Dafoe's contention that Laurier's unbending attitude to conscription was decided solely with the reaction of Quebec in mind.¹ There is no question that this was one of the motives in Laurier's decision to oppose conscription but not the only one.

In attributing reasons for Laurier's rejection of conscription one cannot disregard his personal views of Canada's relationship to England and of Canada's role in the war generally. His position fell somewhere between the English point of view as expressed by Dafoe or N. W. Rowell and the Nationalist point of view as expressed by Henri Bourassa. It is curious, however, that two journalists - Bourassa, a nationalist of Le Devoir and Stewart Lyon, a Liberal of the Globe - both tended to place little emphasis on the legal status of Canada in the war but for different reasons. Bourassa on the one hand argued that Canada was not obliged to help Britain in the war.² He felt that all Canadian statesmen after Confederation had as their major aim the development of Canadian nationalism with a view of complete Canadian independence, "either under the British Crown or without it." Until such time as Canada was independent Bourassa considered it "unjust" to make her "assume a share of the burden borne by the people of the United Kingdom."³ In 1917, he went further and argued that Canada had done enough. Meanwhile, the Globe argued that Canada should not feel constrained because of her legal status and that her colonial status was no justification for limited action.⁴ Similarly, N. W. Rowell

¹ J. W. Dafoe, Laurier, p. 155.

² P. A. C. Bourassa Papers, Microfilm Roll M-721, Bourassa to J. S. Ewart, Jan. 17, 1916.

³ Ibid., Bourassa to J. S. Ewart, Jan. 29, 1914.

⁴ Toronto Globe, May 31, 1917.

expressed the feelings of many English Canadians when he said:

"I cannot look upon this war as any less our war than it is that of the United States or Great Britain or France. We are in it. We have staked everything on the issue. We must see it through. It may be that conscription is not particularly popular in any part of Canada. I do not know. But my view in reference to it is not determined by the question of its popularity but by what I believe to be its necessity."¹

Furthermore, many English Canadians tended to take the view that Canada was not in the war as a "fief of Great Britain, but as a self-governing nation whose liberties and free institutions were imperilled by Germany's declaration of war against the democracies of the western world."²

Laurier's position fell between that of the Quebec nationalists and the views expressed by the Globe. Laurier's stand was outlined at the outset of the war during the 1914 emergency session of parliament. He stated that this war was England's war and Canada's duty was "to assist the motherland to the utmost of Canada's ability."³ By 1917 Laurier's position had not altered. "We are not fighting to repel an enemy" - wrote Laurier, "we never were threatened by an invasion - but we fight to assist in a noble cause."⁴ Therefore, Laurier viewed Canada's role in the war as merely assisting England which implied a limited commitment falling short of compulsory military service. Many English-speaking Liberals, however, considered Canada to be in the war as a principal participant which involved a total commitment to the war effort.

Laurier's opposition to conscription then, was not entirely motivated by his fear of losing the province of Quebec. His belief that conscription was

¹ Rowell Papers, N. W. Rowell to R. Lemieux, May 26, 1917.

² Toronto, Globe, May 31, 1917.

³ House of Commons, Debates, Aug. 19, 1914, 8-9.

⁴ Laurier Papers, Vol. 712, Laurier to N. W. Rowell, July 23, 1917.

not in keeping with Liberal principles and his legalistic view of Canada's relationship to England which, when translated into practical terms meant a dutiful daughter helping the motherland, must also be considered. Moreover, Laurier was a product of the French Canadian milieu. From the time of the conquest Quebec had opposed any type of compulsory service. In this sense it may be suggested that Laurier did not go purposely out of his way to conform to the views of French Canada. He was a product of the French Canadian race and naturally looked at the war mainly through their eyes.

Shortly after Borden had introduced conscription, he proposed to Laurier that a coalition government be formed to implement compulsory military service. Since Laurier could not accept conscription he could not accept the Prime Minister's offer to enter coalition. The negotiations between the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition in an attempt to find some common ground upon which a coalition government could be effected were held between May 25 and July 6, 1917. Borden's initial offer in the negotiations was that a coalition government would be formed with the Conservatives and Liberals having an equal number within the cabinet.¹ Later, when Laurier inquired as to the composition of the Conservative portion of the cabinet, Borden was prepared to select members from his party that would meet the approval of Laurier.² After an interview with Borden, Frank Carvell, Liberal M. P. from New Brunswick, and later Minister of Public Works in the Unionist Cabinet, informed A. Kirk Cameron as to his view on the progress towards coalition government:

"...The only real progress that we have made up to the present time is a promise that should the Government abandon conscription, Sir Wilfrid would consent to a coalition. Perhaps I am not putting it even

¹ Borden Memoirs, II, 721.

² Ibid., p. 723.

fair in that sentence, because I am afraid he would not only require abandonment but absolute burial and from Borden's standpoint this is a pretty serious difference."¹

This observation of the negotiations was a fairly accurate picture of the relative positions of Borden and Laurier. The farthest Borden was prepared to move in Laurier's direction was to suspend the operation of the Military Service Act until after an election was held.² According to Borden, this proposal seemed to have impressed Laurier. Laurier's own correspondence suggests differently. In his opinion, Borden's proposal would not meet the wishes of the conscriptionists or the anti-conscriptionists within the Liberal party.³ Several conscriptionist Liberals were certain that if the Military Service Act was submitted to the people either in the form of a referendum or in a general election, it would be defeated.⁴ By the summer of 1917 it was well known that substantial segments of the Canadian population would oppose conscription such as the French Canadians, the large foreign element, organized Labour and the people in the rural districts of Ontario. On the other hand, if Laurier entered a coalition which passed the Military Service Bill first and then went to the people the Quebec wing of the party would be opposed. Moreover, Laurier was not blind to the other difficulties which coalition would have for the Liberal party. The military situation was not the only issue upon which a coalition cabinet would have difficulty in finding common areas of agreement. There was also the question of the tariff and the railway question and a "multitude of

¹ Cameron Papers, F. B. Carvell to A. K. Cameron, June 1, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 709, Laurier to J. W. Dafoe, June 2, 1917.

³ Ibid., Laurier to G. Murray, June 5, 1917.

⁴ Dafoe Papers, C. Sifton to Dafoe, June 5, 1917. Cameron Papers, F. B. Carvell to A. K. Cameron, June 1, 1917. House of Commons, Debates, July 24, 1917, IV, 3719.

other problems upon which there would be considerable variance."¹ Most important, Laurier was in politics long enough to realize that the party that makes the initial sacrifice in entering a coalition government is usually forced into a position of making further compromises even to the point of "political extinction."²

But according to Dafoe, Laurier should have accepted Borden's offer to enter a coalition accepting the principle of compulsion but insisting that it not become operative for a sufficient period of time "to permit a thorough ~~trial~~ ^{trial} of the voluntary system under the auspices of a competent national government."³ Dafoe later commented⁴ that this alternative to Borden's proposal commanded considerable support in the Liberal party and therefore Laurier should have given it serious consideration. Had this been the case, Borden might have been "premier in name but Sir Wilfrid would have been premier in fact and he would have closed his career secure in the confidence and affection, certainly of the English Canadians, and I believe also of the better half of his people."⁵ Laurier of course could not agree with this view. Consequently, Borden's formal offer to Laurier was rejected on July 6, 1917. Although there was a great deal of disappointment on the part of those who eagerly supported coalition, these same individuals agreed that Borden bungled the negotiations for a coalition government. Both Clifford Sifton and N. W. Rowell agreed that Laurier

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 709, Laurier to G. Murray, June 5, 1917.

² J. W. Dafoe, Clifford Sifton in Relation to His Times, (Toronto: The Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1931), p. 404.

³ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to G. P. Graham, July 30, 1917.

⁴ J. W. Dafoe, Sifton, p. 402.

⁵ Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to Graham, July 30, 1917.

should have been called in before the policy of conscription was decided upon.¹

Later, when conscription was thoroughly debated in the Commons, Laurier eloquently and sarcastically expressed this point of view:

"I may be told that I was asked...to be a party to a coalition government. Sir, I was asked to form a part of a coalition government when the policy had been framed, when the Bill had been prepared as a party measure, by a party government; and when it had been framed, deliberated on in Council, determined upon, and launched before the public. When the Government could not retrace their steps, my poor assistance, such as it might have been, was sought. If, Sir, the Government had been in earnest, they would have consulted me before they determined on their measure. But they did not consult me, they did not ask me what would be my opinion upon its possibilities, its results, and its dangers; they did not ask me to discuss with them the situation against which they were determined to close their eyes; but when they had concocted a measure, then they were kind enough to ask me to carry on what they had devised in their wisdom. As in the play of children, they asked me: close your eyes and open your mouth and swallow. I refused."²

No matter how forcefully Laurier defended his stand in rejecting coalition government, his absolute opposition to conscription caused him to admit to a friend: "Unfortunately, as a party we are almost hopelessly divided; I cannot support conscription and good many of our friends cannot oppose it."³ Laurier was well aware that this division would destroy the party. One possible salvation was a referendum amendment to the Military Service Bill. Laurier hoped that the party would unite on this common ground of action.⁴ "A referendum," wrote Laurier, "would permit us to accept in advance the will of the majority, and loyally accept it, whether on one side or the other.." Laurier was undoubtedly aware of

¹ Dafoe Papers, C. Sifton to Dafoe, June 5, 1917.

² House of Commons, Debates, July 24, 1917, IV, 3727.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 709, Laurier to W. T. R. Preston, June 12, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., Laurier to L. Thomson, May 22, 1917.

the extent of opposition to conscription, and yet he felt that the majority of people in Canada would vote in favour of compulsion.¹ Perhaps he reasoned that such a measure would postpone the actual enforcement of conscription which in turn might result in its entire abandonment.

When Laurier introduced this idea privately to the English segment of the Liberal party it was not well received. W. S. Fielding for example, "was not enamoured with that method of deciding public questions."² But if Laurier was intent upon following that course of action when the Military Service Bill came up for second reading in the Commons, Fielding cautioned Laurier to be careful as to the form the referendum amendment was to take. If the party was to introduce a motion to reject the conscription bill and demand a referendum before any action was taken on the manpower situation, this would antagonize those Liberals who were inclined to think that conscription was immediately essential. Consequently, a motion of this nature would be defeated. Instead of this plan of attack, Fielding suggested a procedure which he thought would be acceptable to the Quebec wing of the party and would not necessarily antagonize others. Would it not be possible, suggested Fielding, to accept the Military Service Bill under protest, and move to add a clause requiring the referendum before it became operative? Fielding concluded by emphasizing "that the difference between a Referendum motion which rejects the bill, and a Referendum motion which accepts the bill (even under protest) is very material, from the point of view of what may be called the English side of the question."

As Fielding anticipated, Laurier did not adopt his plan of action in the House of Commons when the Military Service Bill was up for second reading on June 11. Any kind of assent to the conscription measure was distasteful

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 709, Laurier to N. W. Rowell, June 3, 1917; Laurier to W. Kennedy, June 9, 1917.

² Ibid., W. S. Fielding to Laurier, May 31, 1917.

to Laurier and therefore he moved "that the further consideration of this Bill be deferred until the principle thereof has, by means of a referendum, been submitted to and approved of by the electors of Canada."¹ And as Fielding predicted, most of the English speaking Liberals in the commons broke with Laurier on this question.

The Liberal speeches on the Conscription debate did not reveal any new attitudes toward compulsory military service. Laurier's speech on the second reading was certainly not one of his best in terms of eloquence and lucidity. And yet, his speech had a definite purpose. After summarizing his reasons for opposing conscription and explaining the attitude of Quebec to the war, Laurier released however reluctantly - his fellow Liberals from voting with him on this referendum motion. As the debate progressed, most Liberals from English Canada rose to speak, and later to vote in favour of conscription.² Essentially the complete split in the ranks of the parliamentary Liberal party over conscription was not a reflection of a loss of confidence in Laurier's leadership. In virtually every instance where a Liberal member rose to support conscription it was emphasized that only the exceptional circumstances of war caused such a momentary separation with their leader. For example, F. F. Pardee, the Chief Liberal Whip in the Commons, found himself "politically in the most painful position of his life."³ Similarly, W. A. Buchanan, a Western M.P. from Medicine Hat voted in favour of conscription but accredited his adherence to Liberalism to Laurier in this way:

¹ House of Commons, Debates, June 18, 1917, III, 2404.

² Ibid., July 24, 1917, IV, 3736. The Military Service Bill passed by a vote of 102-44. 26 Liberals voted with the government.

³ Ibid., June 21, 1917, III, 2527.

"I was not born into the Liberal doctrine. I did not inherit my Liberalism, but became possessed of it because of my high regard of Sir Wilfrid Laurier back in the days when I first commenced to take an interest in public affairs. I love and respect him, always have, and always hope to do so. He has been an ideal to me in many respects, but in this particular matter I honestly differ with him."¹

Indeed, these are tributes and sentiments which every political leader would envy. Such bonds of affection as expressed in the Commons during the debate were more than momentary emotional outbursts of affection. These sentiments were sustained in the future even under the most trying circumstances.

By the middle of 1917 it may be argued that it was Laurier's personality and character which kept many individuals within the ranks of Liberalism. It was impossible for Laurier and the Liberal party to arrive at a consensus on conscription. The various alternatives that were presented to Laurier throughout the first half of 1917 were all unacceptable because they implied a conditional acceptance of compulsory military service. Because of Laurier's pledge to oppose conscription in 1910-1911, he could not give it even conditional acceptance.

The rupture between Laurier and those Liberals who supported conscription went even deeper than Laurier's commitment to the people of Quebec. He viewed Canada's role in the war from a completely different angle than his colleagues from Ontario and Western Canada. Consequently, these opposing views of Canada's position in world affairs caused each segment in the party to arrive at different conclusions as to the extent to which their country should become involved in the war.

¹ House of Commons, Debates, July 24, 1917. p. 2607.

Chapter Four

The Western Liberal Convention

Laurier's refusal to enter a coalition government made it imperative for the Prime Minister and those Liberals actively supporting conscription to initiate consultations with secondary Liberal leaders both in and outside of parliament. It soon became evident, however, that most of the parliamentary Liberals would not entertain overtures to join a coalition government. To vote for the Military Service Bill was one thing, to join forces with the Conservatives to enforce such a measure was quite another. The degree of support for conscription and coalition among the extra-parliamentary Liberals was difficult to assess. Therefore, there was a need for a party convention. Theoretically, a convention returns the control of the party to the rank and file, at least as far as policy and leadership are concerned. In this sense, the Western Liberal Convention held in August of 1917, was of vital significance to Laurier and the Liberal party. That there were elements within the Liberal party opposed to Laurier's leadership was certain. Moreover, there had been indications since the 1911 election that the Western Liberals desired to become increasingly independent from the Federal Liberal party. Would they use Laurier's stand on conscription and coalition government as an issue over which to force a complete break within the party and repudiate Laurier's leadership? Most important, would the Western Liberals present a united front in favour of conscription and coalition government thus splitting the Liberal party much more seriously than had been the case over the vote on conscription in the Commons? Both of these questions were resolved as a result of the Western Liberal Convention.

Prior to the Convention efforts to bring about a coalition government continued. Since Sir Robert Borden received considerable support for con-

scription from Ontario, it was not surprising that in mid-June of 1917 George P. Graham, leader of the English-speaking Liberals in the House of Commons, and Fred Pardee, Chief Liberal Whip, were both asked to enter a coalition government. Both refused. They argued that although a coalition government was desirable, the offer should not be made to select Liberals but to the entire wing of the Liberal party that supported the Military Service Bill.¹ Although Graham and Pardee were not inclined to enter a coalition government there was nevertheless considerable pressure put on them by influential and well-known Ontario Liberals to reconsider their views. For example, T. E. Irwie, Secretary of the Canadian Press Association, and J. F. MacKay, business manager of the Globe argued that if coalition was offered on fair terms it would be unwise for them to refuse.² If the offer was rejected Graham and Pardee ran the risk of discrediting themselves with the Ontario electorate. Moreover, such a refusal would cause influential individuals like T. E. Irwie and J. F. MacKay to leave the party .

But the pressure from influential quarters of Ontario Liberalism in favour of coalition was more than equally matched by an influence in the opposite direction - the personality of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. J. W. Dafoe and Robert Borden, both actively engaged in attempting to bring about a coalition government, were aware of this influence of Laurier over the Liberal party.³ The prestige and personal influence which Laurier commanded among the rank and file and among the influential Liberals throughout Canada was, as Borden expressed it, "unbounded." It was difficult for men like George Graham to

¹ Rowell Papers, Microfilm Roll C-931, Confidential Memorandum of Rowell, June 23, 1917.

² Ibid., Rowell to F. F. Pardee, July 11, 1917.

³ Borden Memoirs, II, 728; J. W. Dafoe, Sifton, p. 410.

sever relations with Laurier over coalition government particularly when he had enjoyed an intimate relationship with Laurier as a friend and as a close advisor throughout the entire Laurier administration.¹ It was largely this influence of Laurier which stood in the way of drawing parliamentary Liberals into a coalition government. In the early weeks of July when the Conscription debate was still in progress, Dafoe was in Ottawa and impatiently commented that Laurier was "quite determined that Liberals who belong to Parliament shall not join a Union Government." Even those who voted in favour of Conscription were "afraid to break with the old chief."² By August of 1917, the possibility of a Liberal victory in a future election was not ruled out by many Liberals. If they deserted Laurier, how would this affect their career in politics?

The ultimate proof that the parliamentary Liberals were not prepared to break with Laurier on any other issue but conscription was their almost unanimous opposition to Borden's resolution for a further extension of the parliamentary term.³ On the surface this vote gave the appearance that the parliamentary Liberal party was still a cohesive political force divided only on the issue of conscription. Nevertheless, to outside observers the Liberal party was without a sense of direction and leaderless. Dafoe remarked that the Liberals "don't want to play with the Tories; they can't follow Laurier and they don't want to break with him."⁴

The lack of direction which was exhibited by the parliamentary

¹ Rowell Papers, Microfilm Roll 931, G. P. Graham to Rowell, July 13, 1917.

² M. Donnelly, Dafoe of the Free Press. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, Ltd., 1968), p. 81. quotes Dafoe to his Wife, July 9, 1917.

³ House of Commons, Debates, July 17, IV, 3501.

⁴ M. Donnelly, Dafoe of the Free Press, p. 81.

Liberals near the end of the Conscription debate prompted the conscriptionist Liberals outside of parliament to organize regional meetings or conventions which would be representative of the rank and file of the party. Presumably it was hoped that the lower echelons of the party would arrive at a consensus in favour of coalition and conscription. This strong statement from the rank and file might reassure those parliamentary Liberals who had voted for conscription, prompt them to enter or support a coalition, and jettison Laurier's leadership. A meeting of the Ontario Liberal members and candidates for the House of Commons was held in Toronto on July 20 followed by the Western Liberal Convention held in Winnipeg from August 7 to August 9. Both of these meetings, particularly the Western Liberal Convention were considered to be of vital importance as a prelude to the formation of Coalition government.

The Toronto meeting of July 20, 1917 was composed of approximately 45 Liberal members and candidates for the House of Commons. The area of Ontario which they represented was mainly that surrounding Toronto. It was convened by F. F. Pardee, George Graham, and N. W. Rowell for the purpose of "considering" the questions of conscription and coalition.¹ That this meeting was organized with the express purpose of giving a lead to the Western Liberal Convention by declaring in favour of the above measures was the presumption of some of Laurier's closest supporters.²

Although the press was excluded from the meeting a document containing the speeches of the participants was published in the Toronto Evening Telegram on August 30, 1917.³ From the speeches contained in this document

¹ Rowell Papers, Rowell to G. P. Graham, July 21, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 712, Charles Murphy to Laurier, Memorandum on Ontario Meeting, Sept. 4, 1917.

³ See Toronto Evening Telegram, Aug. 30, p.16. The origin of this document is described in A. Ford, "Some Notes On the Formation of The Union Government in 1917," Canadian Historical Review, XIX(1938), 360-361. See also Laurier Papers, Vol. 712, C. Murphy to Laurier, Sept. 4, 1917.

(which were summaries rather than verbatim accounts) several conclusions may be drawn. The segment of the Ontario wing of the Federal Liberal party represented at the Toronto meeting was clearly in a state of confusion. To the surprise of those who had organized the meeting, the large majority of the representatives present turned thumbs down on conscription and coalition, and declared in favour of an election. Most important, without a formal resolution but by general consent, it was agreed that the press should be informed of the fact that there was "a unanimous feeling that Laurier should continue to lead the party."

N. W. Rowell was "surprised beyond measure" after reading the results of this meeting as they were reported in the Globe.¹ He was disturbed because there was no declaration in favour of compulsory military service and an "implied declaration against it in the pledge of support to Sir Wilfrid Laurier in getting back into power."² Rowell could not see how it was possible to support a win-the-war policy and at the same time support Laurier.

It was not only Rowell who disagreed with the conclusions of the Toronto meeting. Two Ontario M. P.'s, Fred Pardee and Hugh Guthrie who were present at the meeting, announced in the Commons that they wished to dissociate themselves from the decisions reached at the Toronto meeting and reaffirmed their position as conscriptionist Liberals.³ Pardee went a step further and announced his support for a coalition government.

As a result of the Toronto meeting little was accomplished in the direction of clearing the air on the issue of conscription and coalition

¹ Toronto, Globe, July 21, 1917. Rowell Papers, N. W. Rowell to J. W. Dafoe, July 21, 1917.

² Ibid., Rowell to G. Graham, July 21, 1917.

³ House of Commons, Debates, July 24, 1917, IV, 3721.

government. And yet, this meeting may have had one positive effect. Throughout the debate on conscription the Globe was careful not to attack Laurier directly although it gave its support to conscription and coalition government. But after the Toronto meeting the Globe set forth an explicit statement of its position against an "anti-conscriptionist Government" which meant an opposition to the return of Laurier to office.¹ The Globe argued that an anti-conscriptionist government "would mean that if a new recruiting campaign failed there would be no recourse to compulsory measures, and that Canada would be eliminated from the war..." If the Globe maintained this position, one could not discount the influence it would have on public opinion in Ontario.

Because of the negative result of the Toronto meeting Rowell saw an urgent need for co-operation between the "real win-the-war Liberals in Ontario and those in Western Canada."² Co-operation along these lines was essential in order to prevent the Liberal party from breaking up into separate factions or from failing to support the war effort. Both Rowell and Dafoe viewed this latter possibility as a potential disaster to Canada and to the Liberal party. "I think the most important thing to present" wrote Rowell, "is to keep the Liberal Party straight on the issue of winning the war. Coalition is of secondary importance, though very important."

Immediately following the Toronto meeting preparations were under way in Winnipeg for the Western Liberal Convention which was to represent the cream of Western Liberalism. On July 24 and 25 there was a meeting of three western premiers, namely, A. Sifton of Alberta, W. Martin of Saskatchewan, and T. C. Norris of Manitoba.* Each premier, accompanied by one colleague constituted a committee to make preliminary arrangements for the convention.³

¹ Toronto Globe, July 23, 1917.

² Dafoe Papers, N. W. Rowell to Dafoe, July 21, 1917.

³ Ibid, Dafoe to Rowell, July 25, 1917.

*Premier Brewster of British Columbia was absent. The Liberals of B. C. were divided as to whether they should participate in the convention.

At this meeting, the Federal political situation was discussed. Since Dafoe was present he was in a position to observe and analyze their attitudes and most important, to offer suggestions.

Dafoe observed that the premiers were lukewarm toward coalition with the Borden government. They realized that a coalition government might be inevitable if Canada was going to carry on a sound war effort but they questioned whether this coalition should be formed before an election had taken place. The preference of the premiers was to fight the next election as a Western group on the platform to be adopted at the convention in August. After proving their strength in an election, the Western Liberals would then "join with the Conservatives in a union government for the balance of the war." The Premiers were apprehensive about joining forces with the Conservatives prior to an election for fear of not carrying "the whole Liberal strength in Canada with them." But if the Western Liberals and Conservatives joined forces after an election "it would be possible to keep the party intact as a factor behind the war government." All three Premiers realized the danger that would present itself if anti-conscriptionist candidates ran in the election as supporters of Laurier. If this happened a three-cornered contest would develop in individual constituencies between the Western win-the-war candidates, the Conservatives and the Laurier anti-conscriptionists - with probable victory for the Conservatives.

The possibility of placing before the convention a resolution stressing the need for a coalition government was also a topic of discussion at the meeting. Although the premiers were inclined to favour this course of action, they had their doubts as to whether the convention would pass such a ~~resolution~~ ^{resolution}. If passed, it would constitute a major step in the direction of

the actual formation of such a government. Dafoe concluded by informing Rowell that before any active co-operation was possible between the win-the-war Liberals of Ontario and Western Canada they would have to await the outcome of the Western Liberal Convention.

Meanwhile, Laurier and his closest supporters in Western Canada were suspicious of the motives of the architects of this Western Liberal Convention.¹ Laurier had no objection to the Convention itself. He was always of the opinion that the Western provinces should put their programme "into concrete form" But was this to be the intention of the Western Convention? Laurier had his doubts. He felt that if Clifford Sifton was an influence behind the movement he would try to commit the western Liberals to conscription. If a conscription resolution was introduced at the convention, Laurier urged that it be "fought to the finish", and hoped that the convention would leave the problem of conscription an open question, that is, an issue on which every Liberal would be free to decide for himself. In Laurier's view, the resolutions at the convention should be confined "to the broad questions" which always preoccupied Western Liberals. Tariffs, railway legislation, and immigration, were the enduring questions to be faced by Western Canada whereas conscription would be a dead issue in the near future "not to be resurrected - certainly not for many years." Laurier concluded that since conscription was a transient issue, "it would be mischievous to make it the cause of a permanent cleavage in the ranks of the party."

On the eve of the convention tension was building up within both the conscriptionist and anti-conscriptionist wings of the Liberal party.

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 711, Laurier to A. Adamson, July 31, 1917.

Rowell of Ontario was going to watch the proceedings of the Western Liberal Convention with keen interest for he hoped that it "would be clear-cut on the issue of the war... and not weaken their ~~deklaration~~^{deklaration} by suggesting a period of voluntary enlistment" before the enforcement of conscription, as was the case with the Ontario meeting.¹ Similarly, the Globe, after presenting "the weighty reasons for National Government" argued that there was an urgent need for the convention because in view of the tangled situation at Ottawa there was an "impulse to break through the political barbed-wire entanglements into clear, open ground, with definite leadership and definite objectives."²

Meanwhile, the Laurier Liberals were expecting "an awful fight" at the Convention.³ There was some apprehension as to how much influence the activities of Sir Clifford Sifton in Western Canada would have on the delegates at the Convention. Just prior to the Convention Sifton was touring the West in an attempt to ascertain the various attitudes towards the Convention and to persuade delegates in favour of a coalition government. An even more serious problem for the Laurier Liberals was the fact that they were without a single newspaper backing them in Manitoba and had the Manitoba Free Press against them. In order to offset this situation editorials and cartoons were going to be distributed at the convention itself.⁴ For reasons which will be discussed later, the presence of Clifford Sifton in Western Canada and the presence of the Manitoba Free Press at the convention were aids rather than a detriment to the Laurier wing of the Liberal party.

Despite these apprehensions on both sides, there was a common awareness

¹ Rowell Papers, Rowell to Dafoe, Aug. 3, 1917.

² Toronto, Globe, Aug. 1, 1917.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 711, K. McLeod to Laurier, July 27, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., F. Wade to Laurier, Aug. 1, 1917. (Telegram)

of the vital position of Western Canada as it applied to the formation of Union Government and to a subsequent general election. As a result of a redistribution after the 1911 election, Canada from the Great Lakes to the Pacific was to be represented in the House of Commons by fifty-seven instead of thirty-five seats. This amounted to one-third of the total membership in the Commons. If the Liberals were united there was a good chance that they would carry virtually all the seats as was the case at the provincial level.¹ If a united Western Liberal group became allied with Quebec they would have made the feasibility of conscription something more than uncertain.²

The crucial problem of course was to keep the Western Liberals united. Once they became divided their sources of support would also be dispersed in several directions. In 1917 besides the large foreign vote in Western Canada, Laurier drew his support from the French and English Roman Catholic Churches, the C.P.R., the Bank of Montreal and "probably the majority of the big interests", and most important, from "the strong party Liberals" who were thirsty for power and saw their chances as being good in 1917.³ Consequently, in an election contest between conscriptionists and anti-conscriptionist forces, the chances of victory for the latter group were very good. Nevertheless, the hopes of the conscriptionist Liberals was that the Western Convention would unite behind conscription and coalition government.

The Western Liberal Convention opened on August 7. It was well attended with about one thousand delegates including all the M. P.'s from Western Canada. To some eastern observers, the delegations from all the

¹ Canadian Annual Review, 1917, p. 571.

² Ibid., p. 569.

³ Toronto Public Library, Main Johnson Papers, Diary, Main Johnson to N. W. Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917.

Western provinces, except Manitoba, were pro-Laurier.¹ On the first day of the Convention the speeches and resolutions did not concern themselves with the war but rather with problems and issues which were of particular interest to Western Canada such as Immigration, Land Settlement, and Tariffs.² During the speeches on these resolutions passing references were made to Laurier and in each instance these references "evoked enthusiastic cheers."

Significant observations of the first and subsequent days of the Convention were made by Main Johnson, a former journalist with the Toronto Star and in 1917 the private secretary to N. W. Rowell who sent him to Winnipeg to observe the proceedings of the convention. Main Johnson's general conclusion was that the "strength of opinion was against the Borden government rather than for Laurier."³ Because there was an intense feeling of "disgust with the Borden government, the delegates considered it to be their patriotic duty to help in some way to remove the Borden government from office. This anti-Borden feeling was of course "personified in his chief opponent, Laurier."

More important still in considering the pro-Laurier sentiment at this Convention was Sir Clifford Sifton's ill-timed Western pilgrimage. "His unpopularity", wrote Johnson, "among the rank and file of the Western Liberals seems to be unanimous..." It was most unfortunate for the Conservatives and for the conscriptionist Liberals that Sifton toured the West just when the delegates to the Convention were being chosen. That Sifton should lecture against Laurier and in favour of a coalition government to a part of the country which harboured a natural resentment against him for his betrayal of its interests in 1911 was unlikely to win him any converts. As one western Liberal

¹ Toronto, Globe, Aug. 7, 1917.

² Canadian Annual Review, 1917, pp. 572-573.

³ Main Johnson Papers, Diary, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917.

put it, "We want no more exploitation of Canada by special interests under the guise of ~~persecuting~~ ^{prosecuting} the war as it should be according to his (Sifton's) idea."¹ Similarly, A. B. Hudson, Attorney-General of Manitoba stated just prior to the Convention that "this is to be a Western Convention, and Western men and women are quite capable of doing their own thinking and their own acting. We will welcome Eastern press representatives, but they will be the only Easterners we expect or want to see at any stage."² This intense hatred of Sifton and his identification with eastern finance and capitalism may have helped Laurier at the Convention to a greater extent than most observers imagined.

The second day of the Convention was devoted to a consideration of the war problems which preoccupied the minds of most and which formed the basis of innumerable "conversations, conferences of leaders, and caucuses of followers."³ Most of the second day was focused on the "Win-the-War Resolution" which was a compromise between the positions of the conscriptionist and anti-conscriptionist forces within the resolutions committee. This resolution, introduced by Dr. Neely, M. P. from Humboldt Saskatchewan was drawn up by Dafoe who worked through Premier Norris and A. B. Hudson of the Manitoba delegation. Essentially, the resolution called for a maximum war effort on the part of Canada but it avoided any mention of conscription. A problem arose, however, when J. G. Turiff, a conscriptionist Liberal from Manitoba tried to have the phrase, "by compulsion if possible" added to the second clause of the resolution as an amendment. Main Johnson described the temper of the convention while it discussed the Turriff amendment "as most unpleasant."⁴ "There was a spirit of intolerance and unfair-

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 712, F. Barette to Laurier, Aug. 22, 1917.

² Canadian Annual Review, 1917, pp. 570-571.

³ Ibid., p. 574.

⁴ Main Johnson Papers, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 9, 1917. (A. M.)

ness to all speakers in favour of the amendment" wrote Johnson, "that was very disquieting." A decent hearing was denied to "earnest men expressing noble sentiments" on the amendment. The discussion of this resolution revealed sharp divisions within the Western Liberal ranks, and what was more significant, it revealed a most powerful anti-conscriptionist element at the convention. In his conversation with close friends from the West, Johnson was informed that this anti-conscriptionist feeling was high. In Alberta for example, he was told that three to one of the delegates were opposed to conscription. In addition to the factors which were present at the beginning of the convention which would account for this anti-conscriptionist feeling such as the hatred of the Borden government in Western Canada and the unfortunate visit of Sifton to the West just prior to the Convention, Johnson indicated that the Manitoba Free Press was "very unpopular among the delegates." An indication of this unpopularity was the presence of large crowds of newsboys at the exits of the Royal Alexandra Hotel where the Convention was being held, shouting as they sold the Winnipeg Tribune: "Independent Liberal paper, we won't sell the Sifton paper." This again was undoubtedly a reaction against Sifton rather than against Dafoe. Moreover, there was substantial opposition to conscription among "many and varied elements of the people."

Following the discussion of the "Win-the-War" resolution the climax of the convention was reached when the Laurier Resolution was presented to the delegates. In a hurried attempt to unite some doubtful elements, particularly the "Manitoba dissenters" within the party behind Laurier, there were some last minute negotiations before the Laurier Resolution was brought to the floor of the convention. Laurier supporters presented the "Manitoba dissenters" with a programme

to be followed by Laurier in the event of his return to power.¹ The major points of this programme as they applied to the war effort included consultations with Britain and the U. S. concerning the war, the supplying of food, munitions, ships, and men "having regard to our populations and the continuance of voluntary recruitment." C. M. Cross, member of the Alberta Legislative assembly, contacted Laurier by telegram stating that if he confirmed the above programme the "Manitoba dissenters" would come in.² "I believe", wrote Cross, "convention will endorse you anyway, but there will be part of Manitoba dissent." In reply to this request, Laurier was prepared to stand by his programme as outlined above but stated: "I cannot and will not say anything which would look like seeking endorsement from convention."³

On August 9 the following resolution was placed before the convention:

"That the Convention places on record its admiration of the life and work of the greatest of all Canadians, the Rt.Hon. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and of his earnest endeavour to carry out his duty as he sees it in the interest of all Canada respecting our part in the great world struggle. We express the hope that his undoubted ability, his long experience and matchless statesmanship may be utilized in re-uniting the people of Canada in this great crisis, in the successful prosecution of the War and in carrying out the platforms laid down by this Convention."⁴

All the Western premiers supported this resolution. Premier Brewster of British Columbia supported it on the basis of the "Win-the-War" resolution which, as passed meant "Conscription if necessary."⁵ His endorsement of Laurier "was on the assumption that he would carry out the resolution in its entirety." Premier Norris of Manitoba made it known that he was always in favour of coal-

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 711, E. M. Macdonald to Laurier, Aug. 8, 1917 (Telegram)

² Ibid., C. M. Cross to Laurier, Aug. 8, 1917. (Telegram)

³ Ibid., Laurier to C. M. Cross, Aug. 8, 1917. (Telegram)

⁴ Canadian Annual Review, 1917, p. 574.

⁵ Ibid., 1917, p. 575.

ition government and the best way to bring this about was under the leadership of Laurier. The position of Norris on Laurier's leadership was not always consistent. Prior to the Convention, Norris was critical of Laurier while at the Convention he gave the appearance of enthusiastically supporting the Laurier Resolution.¹ Main Johnson's explanation of this inconsistency was that since Norris was host to this Convention perhaps he wanted to appear as impartial as possible. But despite the various "vague reservations" on the part of the Western premiers on the Laurier Resolution, Johnson concluded their "main line was for Laurier without a doubt."²

The Laurier Resolution was interpreted in several ways by Liberals at the Convention and across the country. Some delegates at the Convention contended that the Laurier Resolution was such a weak approval of the Liberal leader, restricted almost entirely to an endorsation of his past record, that they could hardly oppose it. Perhaps the most adverse comment on this Resolution was made in the Manitoba Free Press which considered it to be "...the strangest endorsement ever given a political leader. As an epitaph this is highly felicitous, but as an endorsement and ratification of leadership it leaves much to be desired."³ A more balanced interpretation of the Laurier Resolution was given by Premier Brewster of B. C. who contended that

"...the resolution of "appreciation" of Sir Wilfrid has been misconstrued purposely, and probably by some intended to be misconstrued into one of endorsation of Sir Wilfrid's leadership. The resolution committee, however, meant it to be taken literally as phrased and put in it a hope that under the leadership of Sir Wilfrid, the program outlined in the Convention would be carried to success."⁴

¹ Main Johnson Papers, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917.

² Ibid., Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 9, 1917. (P.M.)

³ Manitoba, Free Press, Aug. 10, 1917.

⁴ Rowell Papers, A. C. Brewster to Rowell, Aug. 23, 1917.

If one takes the meaning of the resolution "literally" as Brewster suggested, there would be every possibility that it was a compromise in the same sense that the "Win-the-War" Resolution was a compromise between the elements in the party who were dissatisfied with Laurier's stand on coalition and conscription and those who saw in Laurier the only leader who was capable of bringing the Liberal party back into power. Nevertheless, to Laurier's most sincere supporters this resolution was a resounding endorsement of his leadership of the party. A. K. Cameron thought it was an "amazing spectacle" particularly in the face of the "defection" of most of Laurier's prominent supporters both in and out of the House of Commons.¹ Such an enthusiastic endorsement raised the hope of others such as Alan Aylesworth to the extent that he hoped that Laurier would soon assume the leadership of the country during the remaining years of the war.² Laurier was naturally gratified by the results of the Western Convention particularly since all appearances indicated that he had the confidence of the great bulk of the Western Liberals. Moreover, he was gratified by the fact that the Convention, on the surface at least, turned thumbs down on conscription and coalition government. As to the future Laurier was not certain for he said:

"I do not know how the elections may go, but this is the least of my concerns. I do not care to assume office under existing circumstances, and at my age. But as long as God keeps me in health I will endeavour to discharge the duties with which I may be entrusted in the light of the principles which have always guided my life... "³

It was not only the Laurier Resolution that was the subject of controversy but the outcome of the Convention in general. Of course, from the point

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 711, A. K. Cameron to Laurier, Aug. 9, 1917.

² Ibid., A. Aylesworth to Laurier, Aug. 10, 1917.

³ Cameron Papers, Laurier to A. K. Cameron, Aug. 10, 1917.

of view of those who supported coalition government and conscription the attitude of the Western Liberal Convention was "regarded as a national disaster, a national humiliation and disgrace."¹ More candidly, Dafoe referred to the Convention as a "bomb that went off in the hands of its makers."² This failure from their point of view was attributed to a lack of leadership at the Convention.³ Main Johnson in his overall analysis of the convention saw two forces at work. On the one hand there was the majority of the delegates who were "unreservedly" in favour of Laurier and anxious for the advancement of the Liberal party. This predominant attitude prompted Dafoe to refer to the Convention as a "Win-the-Elections" rather than a "Win-the-War" convention.⁴ Nevertheless, Main Johnson emphasized that in his view, although these delegates were opposed to conscription they were in favour of carrying on the war effort.

Along side the majority there was a very strong and influential minority in favour of conscription and most important, willing to make an honest effort towards the formation of "a war government" and "a break with Sir Wilfrid Laurier."⁵ This minority was present in the Resolutions committee but they were not personally present on the floor of the convention. For example, J. A. Calder of Saskatchewan and A. B. Hudson of Manitoba did not appear before the convention. Their activities and appearances were restricted to discussions within the Resolutions Committee.⁶ "The minority", wrote Johnson, "had for its spokesmen only a few courageous but obscure men unaccustomed to swaying crowds

¹ Manitoba Free Press; Aug. 11, 1917.

² Dafoe Papers, Dafoe to Augustus Bridle, June 14, 1921.

³ Main Johnson Papers, Diary, Notes on Winnipeg Western Liberal Convention, p. 2.

⁴ Manitoba Free Press, Aug. 15, 1917.

⁵ Main Johnson Papers, Diary, Notes on Convention, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid., Johnson to N. W. Rowell, Aug. 9, 1917. (P.M.)

and unable to command the hearing or following that a responsible public man advocating similar views would have done."¹ Dafoe argued very strongly that if such men as Premier Norris, J. A. Calder, Arthur Sifton, and T. A. Crerar, all active unionist supporters, were not able to carry the convention at least they should have made their views known which would have split the Convention up the middle.² Instead, these leaders, "compromised their position and were nearly lost in consequence."

It was paradoxical, however, that a convention which was originally designed to divide the party by declaring itself in favour of conscription and against Laurier actually succeeded in bringing various diverse elements within the party closer together. There was "a well defined rumour" that a bargain was arrived at between the Western and Quebec wings of the party. The basis of the bargain was that the West would respect Quebec opinion on the war in return for Quebec's support of Western fiscal policies.³ Furthermore, at the personal level, two Western Liberals, Charlie Cross and Frank Oliver who were long estranged from one another appeared at the Convention at least, to be "bosom friends again". In general, Premier Martin of Saskatchewan felt that the Convention greatly strengthened the Liberal party in the West.⁴

In order to explain the failure of the Convention to openly endorse conscription and coalition government, active Unionist supporters such as Dafoe tended to discount the decisions of this Convention because it was "machine made." Dafoe seriously questioned the representative nature of the Convention. With the exception of the Manitoba delegation which he believed to be "truly representative

¹ Main Johnson Papers, Diary, Notes on Convention, p. 2.

² Manitoba Free Press, Aug. 15, 1917.

³ Main Johnson Papers, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917. (A.M.)

⁴ Ibid., Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 9, 1917. (P.M.)

of the moral soundness and patriotic purposes of Manitoba Liberalism"¹ the delegates from the other Western provinces were hand-picked by their Liberal organizations. Main Johnson did not agree with this assessment.² "I should think," he wrote "that the decision of a convention as large as this must be fairly representative of public opinion." Moreover, the claim made by Dafoe that the Western Liberal Convention was "stacked" in Laurier's favour was counterbalanced by a charge in the opposite direction. "There is no doubt at all" wrote a pro-Laurier supporter in Manitoba, "that a conspiracy had been entered into by a number of the leading Liberals in the West to hand over the Western Liberal Convention to Premier Borden and the Conservative party."³ That the convention was not dominated by the forces in favour of coalition and conscription may in large measure be attributed to the fact that the Laurier supporters were "tremendously active in the West in preparation for the Convention."⁴ In this process it was understandable that "a great deal of money" would have been spent.

To some degree then, the rank and file of the Liberal party had been consulted on the all important questions. Although the Toronto meeting of July 20 was indeed a lesser event than the Western Liberal Convention, the conclusions that each meeting came to are at least worth considering. Both meetings endorsed the leadership of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Both pointed to a sharp division between the attitudes of the rank and file within the party and those of the leaders on the vital issues of conscription and coalition government. Furthermore, the end

¹ Manitoba Free Press, Aug. 15, 1917.

² Main Johnson Papers, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917. (A.M.)

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 713, C. M. Cross to Laurier, Sept. 3, 1917, J. E. Adamson to Laurier, Sept. 6, 1917.

⁴ Main Johnson Papers, Johnson to Rowell, Aug. 7, 1917. (A.M.)

result of both meetings prompted the leaders who had originally planned the meeting to dissociate themselves from the decisions reached and declared that the meeting or convention was not really representative of eastern or western Liberalism. Whatever the forces behind the conclusions of the Toronto meeting and the Western Liberal Convention both of these gatherings manifested the high point of the opposition within the Liberal party to Sir Robert Borden and his attempts to bring about a coalition government. More important still, the Western Liberal Convention demonstrated that beneath the surface appearance of unanimity among the Western Liberals, there was a deep division on the question of coalition and conscription. The majority, however, appeared to favour a general election and a party decision. Therefore, the contention that the Federal Liberal party was no longer a political force in Western Canada or the contention that the Western Liberal party was becoming increasingly independent seemed premature assertions in August 1917.¹

The Convention was indeed very depressing to those Liberals in favour of coalition. In this sense, it had one positive effect - N. W. Rowell accepted a position in the coalition government. Prior to the Western Liberal Convention Rowell was asked to enter a coalition but withheld his reply until the conclusion of the Convention. Because the results of the convention showed no possibility of a unified Eastern and Western Liberal endeavour to support a policy of conscription, Rowell decided in favour of entering a coalition government.

To the Laurier Liberals, the Convention was a source of encouragement. Laurier still had considerable support in Western Canada. And yet a division within the party in a future election was inevitable. There were many Liberals who sincerely believed in the necessity of conscription and who, at the same time

¹ W. L. Morton, The Progressive Party In Canada, p. 54.

wanted to maintain their fellowship with Laurier. Laurier, however, opposed conscription with just as much sincerity as some of his followers supported it. In the 1917 election, these Liberals would have to decide between Laurier and conscription.

Chapter Five

The Laurier Liberals and the Nineteen Seventeen Election

The events which followed the Western Liberal Convention were perhaps some of the most contentious not only in the development and future of the Liberal party but also in the political history of Canada. The passing of the War Times Elections Act, the final consummation of a Union Government, and the holding of a general election all within a period of four months seemed to preclude any possibility that the actions of political leaders would be consistent and rational. Laurier claimed that his actions from August to December 1917 were consistent; his critics did not always feel they were rational.

Laurier's wish that conscription not become a party issue at the Western Liberal Convention was, on the surface at least, carried out. To prevent conscription from further dividing the Liberal party in the 1917 election would place considerable stress on the political acumen of its leader. The results of the election would lead one to conclude that it was essentially "a one party election, one party in Quebec and one party in the other provinces."¹ And yet, the election results did not accurately reflect the degree to which the Liberal party was a potent force outside of Quebec. To a large extent Laurier was successful in maintaining the bi-racial nature of the Liberal party even though it was weighted very heavily in favour of French-Canadian representation.

Since the outbreak of the war the Conservatives had been apprehensive about a war-time election. This fear was in part founded on the certainty that the large foreign vote in Canada, particularly in the prairie provinces,

¹ A Party Politician: The Memoirs of Chubby Power, ed. Norman Ward, (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1966), p. 61.

would go to the Liberal party. A factor which the Tories could not ignore was the fact that the immigrant had a great deal of confidence in the Liberal party. Thousands of immigrants came to Canada under the guidance of the Laurier administration at the turn of the century and experienced some measure of security and prosperity during the first decade of their stay on Canadian soil. The provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan under the control of the Liberal party cautiously and judiciously nurtured the support of the immigrant in their favour. Consequently, the "new Canadian" consistently voted Liberal.

Once war broke out the "new Canadian" had an additional reason to support the Liberal party. The Europeans who emigrated to Canada and settled in the West were largely from Austria-Hungary and Germany. One would assume that these immigrants had relatives and friends fighting on the side of the Central Powers. Although the Canadian government could not make the claim that the foreign element exhibited signs of disloyalty, there was that constant suspicion that the foreign born in Canada would have natural sympathies in favour of their native land. Whatever the merits of this argument, the Conservatives felt that the "new Canadian" from Austria-Hungary or Germany would not be inclined to vote for a government intent upon prosecuting the war effort to the fullest.

The Conservative Government had for a long time recognized their weakness among the foreign element in Canada. Therefore, several precautionary measures had to be taken before the Conservatives could face the Canadian electorate with some assurance of success. And success for the Conservatives in 1917 was imperative. "It was one of those instances" writes Roger Graham, "where in Conservative eyes the interest of party and nation clearly coincided."¹

¹ R. G. Graham, Arthur Meighen: The Door of Opportunity, 1874-1920. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1960), I, 166.

The Conservatives, along with a good many Liberals, argued that in order to sustain a sound war effort and to maintain the honour of Canada it was fundamental that the Laurier Liberals be prevented from assuming office. To achieve this end, "unusual measures for the good of Canada were not only justified but necessary."

One "unusual measure" which the Borden government forced through the House of Commons was the War Times Elections Bill. The measure was introduced by Arthur Meighen, Secretary of State in the Borden cabinet. The principle behind this bill was that it gave the vote to one class and denied it to another. The close female relatives of the Canadian soldiers (i.e. wives, widows, mothers, sisters, daughters) were given the vote.¹ The vote was denied to all those "of alien enemy birth, or of other European birth and of alien enemy mother tongue or native language, who have been naturalized since the 31st March, 1902."² Meighen, as the spokesman for the government added that anyone disqualified from voting was at the same time "exempted entirely from combatant service in the war."

The introduction of the War Times Elections Bill into the House of Commons had a decided effect in momentarily unifying a previously divided Liberal opposition. Almost every Liberal member who participated in the debate criticized the bill severely for its open purpose of serving party rather than public interest. Naturally, the portion of the Bill which came under greatest criticism was the disfranchisement of "enemy aliens." Laurier could not see any justification for believing that the German population in Canada would turn traitor.³ He argued that they came to Canada because they were dissatisfied with

¹ House of Commons, Debates, Sept. 6, 1917, VI, 5416.

² Ibid., p. 5417.

³ Ibid., Sept. 10, 1917, VI, 5573.

the situation in Germany. Why did the United States, Laurier asked, a country with a far greater German speaking community than Canada, not adopt an act to disfranchise "enemy aliens."? "Should we not follow the example of the United States in this regard, rather than introduce legislation of such a retrograde character as this?"

The members of the Liberal party especially incensed at the government's introduction of this Bill were those who had previously supported the Conservatives on the conscription issue. W. A. Buchanan, a Western Liberal M. P., representing a constituency with a large foreign element, expressed his embarrassment and disappointment in this way:

"...This Government practically repudiates the independence of the western Liberal members who stood up for the Selective Military Measure in this house, and who broke with their party on that question..."¹

George Graham continued this line of argument with the comment that those who had credited the Borden government with "placing patriotism and the winning of the war above partyism"² were now left in no doubt as to the real intentions of the government. Similarly, the Globe which had been giving continuous support to the policy of conscription and Borden's efforts to form a coalition government referred to the Bill as "a party measure... more German than Canadian or British in its character."³

The War Times Elections Bill spurred vehement debate in the Commons and united the Liberal opposition in its attack on the government. Both the vehement debate and the united opposition were short lived. The government imposed closure and the Bill received Third Reading and passed on September 15.

¹ House of Commons, Debates, Sept. 10, 1917, VI, 5609.

² Ibid., p. 5589.

³ Toronto, Globe, Sept. 7, 1917.

Once the Bill became law it had immediate consequences for the Liberal party. The foreign vote which the Liberals could have marshalled to their support in the election was virtually wiped out. Moreover, the timing of the debate on the Bill undoubtedly worked against the Liberals. Since the Bill was introduced at the end of the parliamentary session it may be suggested that the strategy of the government was to bring such an important and controversial measure just at a time when the opposition was disorganized, deeply divided and too fatigued to put up any effective resistance to the measure. Even if it encountered resistance, the Government was not averse to imposing closure without restraint.¹ Most important, the War Times Elections Act was extremely effective in prying Liberals loose from their old associations.

Prior to the actual formation of Union Government, there was a movement among several prominent conscriptionist Liberals to have Laurier resign as leader of the Liberal party. The full details of this attempt to persuade Laurier to step down are difficult to ascertain solely from Laurier's correspondence. O. D. Skelton devotes one paragraph and a portion of a letter to this incident in his official biography of Laurier.² Several reasons may be suggested for such a cursory treatment. One may be that Skelton attached limited significance to this challenge to Laurier's leadership. On the other hand he may have decided to remain silent on the details of the episode in order to protect the future political careers of those involved in the mutiny or to protect the image of his dead hero. Whatever the reason, more light is shed on the incident by an examination of the Rowell and Dafoe papers and by an

¹ R. Graham, Meighen, I, 168.

² O. D. Skelton, Laurier, II, 530-532.

examination of other works published since the Skelton biography.¹ Early in October, Skelton relates that three Liberals approached Laurier and suggested that he step down "in favour of an English-speaking leader." They argued that there would be a chance of victory for Liberal candidates even with the War Times Elections Act in force if an English-speaking conscriptionist Liberal led the party in the election.² "The matter came to me somewhat as a surprise" commented Laurier "and I stated at once that if that was the view of the party, I would certainly resign immediately but that before coming to a conclusion I should consult the party."³ At this point, Laurier's decision to resign depended on consultations with Liberal leaders in Montreal and Toronto. Meanwhile, it was reported to the press "by some indiscretion" that Laurier's resignation was a fait accompli. On October 4 the headlines of the Toronto Globe read: SIR WILFRID LAURIER MAY RETIRE. "Laurier Offers To Quit Leadership." Similar reports in other newspapers across Canada presumably raised several questions in the minds of Liberals in the country. Who were the Liberals who asked Laurier to resign? How did the question of Laurier's resignation get in the press? What reaction would Laurier get to the suggestion that he resign when he visited Montreal and Toronto? And most important, how seriously did Laurier regard this challenge to his leadership.

An examination of Laurier's own correspondence together with the Dafoe and Rowell papers provide partial answers to the above questions. The group

¹ See for example A. R. Ford, "Some Notes on the Formation of Union Government in 1917," C. H. R., Dec., 1938, p. 362. Passing references to the incident are also given in F. A. McGregor, The Fall and Rise of Mackenzie King, 1911-1919, (Toronto: Macmillan Co., of Canada, 1962), pp. 295-296; and J. Schull, Laurier, (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1965), pp. 590-591.

² O. D. Skelton, Laurier, II, 530.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, Laurier to Senator L. G. Power, Oct. 12, 1917; Laurier to D. D. Mackenzie, Oct. 13, 1917.

which urged Laurier to resign included such prominent Liberals as Frank Carvell, E. M. Macdonald, Fred Pardee, W. S. Fielding, and J. A. Calder who acted as the spokesman of the group.¹ The consensus of this group was that Laurier should resign but not leave public life.² "My own fixed view" wrote Pardee "is that the Chief should resign. The time has come in my opinion when, if he does not and there is a Union Government formed,... the Liberal party will be simply annihilated." There were a number of suggestions as to whom should succeed Laurier. Frank Carvell, Premier Murray of Nova Scotia and W. S. Fielding were possible successors. Pardee considered Fielding to be the logical successor for two reasons: first, it would "be an easier pill for the Chief to take;" and second, many people had "undoubted confidence in Fielding." However, in writing to a friend Rowell stated "that it was the unanimous judgement of the leaders who conferred with Sir Wilfrid that he should pass over the mantle to Mr. Carvell or Mr. Murray."³ According to this account Pardee's preference was subordinated to the will of the others.

An explanation of the story of these private negotiations reaching the press is given by Arthur R. Ford, newspaper correspondent at Ottawa for The Times of London, England, the Toronto News, and the London Free Press. As F. B. Carvell emerged from the meeting with Laurier in the Chateau Laurier he said in answer to a question by Ford that Laurier had agreed to retire and was going to resign as leader of the party.⁴ Ford quickly passed this information on to newspapers which he represented.

Once the report of Laurier's intended resignation was published in the

¹ F. A. McGregor, Fall and Rise of Mackenzie King, 1911-1919, p. 195.

² Rowell Papers, F. Pardee to N. W. Rowell, Oct. 6, 1917.

³ Ibid., Rowell to J. J. Warren, Oct. 13, 1917.

⁴ A. R. Ford, "Notes on Formation of Union Government", p. 362.

press, letters began arriving appealing to him not to give up the leadership. Some felt that the Conservative and Liberal press were doing their utmost to force Laurier's resignation "in order that Borden and the profiteers may have full sway in the country."¹ Any success the party would have at the polls in the election would be contingent on Laurier's retention of the leadership. Others suggested that such a move by Laurier would only further weaken and divide the party.² The degree to which these letters protesting the possible resignation of Laurier were representative of the views of the majority within the Liberal party is difficult to say. Laurier thought they were and therefore had no intention of resigning and did not take this challenge to his leadership too seriously. "For the last two years" wrote Laurier "my resignation has been at the option of the party, and I would have been more than pleased if they had chosen to accept it, as nothing could be more agreeable to me now than rest and a quiet life. So far, however, I have yielded to the request of the great majority of the members of the party."³ Laurier also felt that in the face of so many defections from the party it was his duty to remain at his present position. "It would be cowardly to desert the ship. I will try to keep the old hull afloat or will sink with it."⁴

Laurier was not exaggerating the chaotic state of the Liberal party merely to justify to himself that he was needed as party leader. Although he and his closest colleagues were confident that the protest against his leadership was a minority view he was also made aware of the fact that he was not getting

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. C. W. Kerr to Laurier, Oct. 4, 1917.

² Ibid., Vol. 714, F. C. Wade to Laurier, Oct. 13, 1917 (Telegram)

³ Ibid., Vol. 714, Laurier to Alex Smith, Oct. 3, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., Laurier to F. C. Wade, Oct. 15, 1917.

the support from the leaders of the party that he should.¹ There was no doubt that opposition existed to his leadership. This was made clear when he visited the Toronto Liberal Association in the second week of October. Although the executive of the Association tried to have Laurier meet only those most favourable to him² others within the organization made certain that the Ward Presidents were present in order to express to Laurier that he should resign and that if he did not he would ruin the party.³

But would Laurier's resignation in October 1917 have been in the best interests of the Liberal party? If his resignation was brought about would this have made a Liberal defeat any less certain? Or, would it have altered appreciably the Liberal performance in the impending election? A change in leadership might have pleased many Ontario Liberals and it might have lessened somewhat the attacks on the Liberal party for being disloyal. But with the War Times Elections Act in force it is doubtful whether the Liberals would have had any better chance of being victorious in the election with an English-speaking leader. In addition, if a change of leadership was deemed necessary surely 1917 was not the proper time for such a change. As Mackenzie King suggested,⁴ a decisive change by means of a leadership convention was more preferable than a decision hastily arrived at on a transient issue like conscription by a small minority of the party. With Laurier as leader there was a reasonable certainty that a large bloc of Liberal members from Quebec would be represented in the House of Commons. Without Laurier this large bloc of Liberal seats from Quebec

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, A. G. Mackay to Laurier, Oct. 4, 1917.

² Ibid., R. R. Cromarty to Laurier, Oct. 5, 1917.

³ Dafoe Papers, V. T. Bartram to Dafoe, Oct. 15, 1917.

⁴ F. A. McGregor, The Fall and Rise of Mackenzie King, p. 296.

would no longer be a certainty any more than an English-speaking leader would ensure the election of more Liberals outside of Quebec.

After Laurier's refusal to resign from the leadership of the party in the first week of October, several Liberal leaders consented to join the Union Government which became a reality on October 12. Laurier was not surprised by the inclusion of Arthur Sifton, J. A. Calder, T. A. Crerar and N. W. Rowell in the Union Government.¹ The great disappointment for Laurier was the inclusion of Frank Carvell and Premier G. H. Murray of Nova Scotia. Laurier had the utmost respect for Murray's judgment and his action was considered by Laurier as a personal as well as a political loss. The ultimate disappointment, however, was W. S. Fielding's decision to run as a Unionist candidate. The Globe was jubilant that after consultation with Liberal leaders in Nova Scotia, Fielding had decided to support the Union Government.² "No man" wrote the editor of the Globe, "stood closer to Sir Wilfrid Laurier in the fifteen years of the Laurier administration.... Only an over-whelming conviction of public duty could have prompted Mr. Fielding to separate from Sir Wilfrid and take an opposite course."

As for the Liberal segment of the Union Government Laurier referred to it as a remarkable "patchwork," and "congregation of disparities."³ Of the ten Liberals in the Union Government* only four had seats in the House of Commons. Gideon Robertson, Minister of Labour had a seat in the Senate. Of the six members who were drawn from outside the Commons, J. A. Calder, A. Sifton, N. W. Rowell, and G. Murray had successful careers at the provincial level. However,

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, Laurier to F. Oliver, Oct. 12, 1917.

² Toronto, Globe, Oct. 25, 1917.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, Laurier to F. C. Wade, Oct. 12, 1917.

*This included A. L. Sifton, Hon. J. A. Calder, T. A. Crerar, Maj.-Gen. S. C. Mewburn, N. W. Rowell, C. C. Ballantyne, F. B. Carvell, G. H. Murray, Gideon Robertson and Hugh Guthrie.

T. A. Crerar, S. C. Mewburn, and C. C. Ballantyne, were all novices to politics.

One would not only question the diverse political backgrounds of the Liberal portion of the Union Government but also the remarkable change of heart exhibited by some Western Liberal leaders towards joining a Union Government with Borden as its head. At the Western Liberal Convention the Western Premiers along with the prominent Liberals apparently endorsed the leadership of Laurier. Later, in mid-September, Calder, Crerar, and A. L. Sifton made it known that they would not sit in any government with Borden. But by the middle of October these same men were Borden's colleagues. How does one explain this sommersault? Some contended that several Liberals were possessed of a selfish desire "to become ministers without delay."¹ O. D. Skelton felt that the primary reason for the Western defection was the fact that the Western Liberals gave in "as a result of the war Franchise threat."²

Whatever the reasons, the formation of Union Government made the difficulties for the Laurier Liberals in the 1917 election even greater than was anticipated when the War Times Elections Act was passed. In Saskatchewan for example, the entire Liberal organization was lost to J. A. Calder who went over to the Union Government.³ As a result, "everybody in the old Organization"⁴ with the notable exceptions of W. R. Motherwell and James G. Gardiner, who refused to transfer their allegiance⁵ were reluctant to come out against Calder

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, L. G. Power to Laurier, Oct. 11, 1917.

² Ibid., O. D. Skelton to Laurier, Oct. 18, 1917.

³ Ibid., Laurier to D. D. Mackenzie, Oct. 13, 1917.

⁴ Power Memoirs, ed. N. Ward, p. 62.

⁵ Laurier Papers, Vol. 714, C. Cross to Laurier, Oct. 12, 1917.

because of the public support he wielded in Saskatchewan. As a Laurier supporter wrote after the election, many Liberals within the Saskatchewan legislature were pro-Laurier "although like Peter, many followed afar off, and like Nicodemus, made their professions of loyalty secretly by night, for fear of Calder."¹ In Alberta, the situation was a little more hopeful. Although Arthur Sifton entered Union Government, the new premier, Mr. Charles Stewart, and A. G. Mackay, a member of the provincial cabinet, were strong Laurier supporters.² In Nova Scotia and British Columbia Liberals were divided between the Laurier forces and those supporting Union Government. In Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba the situation was clear, that is, the entire Ontario political organization went over to Rowell, Manitoba was almost solidly Unionist, and Quebec was unquestionably behind Laurier. In general then, the Laurier Liberals had to begin building new organizations in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia. Naturally, this process of reorganization was difficult because Laurier had to depend on individuals less experienced and less competent as organizers than the supporters he had lost. In addition, as Laurier was to remark later in the campaign that "on account of the desertion of so many friends a lot of work has been placed on my shoulders, work to which I never attended before."³

The formation of Union Government not only left the Laurier Liberals without an effective organization but the abandonment of the Liberal party by men like Calder, Fielding, and Carvell caused a chain reaction. Other Liberals across Canada chose to run as Unionist candidates or declined to run in the election

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 726, E. W. Knowles to Laurier, Nov. 1, 1918.

² Ibid., Vol. 714, C. Cross to Laurier, Oct. 12, 1917, See also Power Memoirs, p. 62.

³ Ibid., Vol. 717, Laurier to R. R. Harding, Nov. 26, 1917.

for fear of being defeated. For example, D. B. Neely, M.P. for Humboldt Saskatchewan, resigned as a Liberal candidate in 1917. The reasons for this resignation were revealing and characteristic of several Liberals who ran as Unionists in 1917.

"As you know the unfortunate situation brought about by the Military Service Act, has placed many of your followers in a most embarrassing position. We cannot support your platform, nor yet could we give support to the Borden Administration, because of its record. The Formation of Union Government gave us our only chance of remaining in public life, and being true to our conscience at one and the same time. It grieves me very much Sir Wilfrid to part company with you for the time being, but now that Union Government has been formed, I cannot but give it my support."¹

Similarly, F. F. Pardee resigned his position as Chief Liberal Whip because he was going to declare himself in favour of Union Government.² In his declaration Pardee emphasized that he was "a Liberal by faith and conviction, Liberal to the core."³ He argued however, that "the momentary fate of political parties" were of little consequence in comparison to defeating the Germans in the war and wiping out the profiteers at home.

Although many Liberals couched their reasons for not supporting Laurier in idealistic terms, it seems clear that the real reasons for running as a Unionist were far from idealistic: fear of adverse public opinion and fear of defeat as a consequence of the War Times Elections Act. The practical difficulty that Laurier was going to face was getting sufficient Liberal candidates to run outside Quebec. "I am convinced" wrote Kirk Cameron, "that if he could secure candidates he would sweep the country, but how he is to get candidates who will

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 715, D. B. Neely to Laurier, Oct. 20, 1917.

² Ibid., F. F. Pardee to Laurier, Oct. 22, 1917.

³ Toronto, Globe, Oct. 25, 1917, p. 1.

stand by and run in the face of the pressure that will be put on them no one seems to know."¹ Laurier was keenly aware of this problem. By the end of October he saw his party as being completely disorganized except in Quebec and Nova Scotia. Laurier thus concluded that "every riding must look after itself."² The best that he could hope for was that every riding choose a candidate.³ Laurier also thought it desirable for Labour and the Grain Growers Association to place as many candidates in the field as possible. To the latter group Laurier felt it was important to emphasize that although conscription was a paramount issue in the election campaign, the tariff was a more permanent issue and one which would be of even greater significance after the war. Lower tariffs would be a strong possibility under the Liberals but an impossibility under the Conservatives. In addition, Laurier saw a need for Labour candidates as well. He felt that the presence of a good many Liberal candidates in the field representative of labour and agriculture (40 by the end of November) was a result largely of repeated suggestions he had given to his colleagues.⁴

Laurier's attempts to lure as many labour and agriculture candidates in the field was given additional emphasis once he presented his Election Manifesto to the Canadian people on November 4. Laurier declared that if he was called upon to form a government he would "hope to include in it representatives of business, of labour and of agriculture."⁵ The purpose of this government would be "to devote the whole resources, wealth and energy of the country to the winning of the war." Although the primary responsibility of such a government would be

¹ Cameron Papers, A. K. Cameron to W. W. Wilkinson, Oct. 29, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 715, Laurier to W. G. Charlton, Oct. 29, 1917.

³ Ibid., Laurier to H. T. Harding, Oct. 26, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., Vol. 717, Laurier to L. O. David, Nov. 29, 1917.

⁵ Canadian Annual Review, 1917, p. 597.

to help win the war Laurier reiterated his stand on the Military Service Act. He announced that if elected he would not proceed further with this Act until the people of Canada had an opportunity "to pronounce upon it by way of a referendum."¹ After a referendum he would carry out the will of the majority. "I would at the same time" continued Laurier, "organize and carry out a strong appeal for voluntary recruiting."

To some Laurier Liberals, this official announcement was a disappointment. Prior to this official statement some Liberal candidates urged Laurier to adopt a military policy which the people could accept.² Some suggested that if voluntary enlistment failed Laurier should resort to conscription. Others wanted him to declare his "willingness to carry out the Conscription Act."³ Laurier's response to both of these suggestions was that he was not prepared to deviate from his initial position on conscription. "The last and only thing which I have left to me now" replied Laurier, "is my own record and consistency... I suggested a referendum as a reasonable ground upon which we could all stand. If I were to give up that now, after having lost half the battle, I would lose the other half."⁴ Since the Conscription Act was law it had to be respected "so far as it has gone or may go."⁵ If returned to office he would not repeal the Act but suspend it therefore "conserving" what was brought about by the Act.⁶

Laurier did not expect his followers to accept his position on con-

¹ Canadian Annual Review, 1917, p. 598.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 715, J. H. Sinclair to Laurier, Oct. 22, 1917.

³ Ibid., L. G. Power to Laurier, Oct. 11, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., Laurier to J. H. Sinclair, Oct. 26, 1917.

⁵ Ibid., Laurier to L. G. Power, Oct. 19, 1917.

⁶ Ibid., Vol. 716, Laurier to Mackenzie King, Nov. 22, 1917.

scription and accordingly he was prepared to allow them "every latitude" on the issue of conscription during the election campaign. Laurier would accept Liberal candidates under three categories: first, those who opposed both Union Government and conscription; second, those who opposed Union Government but supported conscription; and lastly, those who chose to run as independent Liberals.¹ Laurier naturally preferred that Liberal candidates follow the first alternative but he would accept the other two as well. It was hoped that this flexibility in allowing candidates to be guided by their own consciences during the election campaign would aid in giving the Liberals stronger representation in the House of Commons. Moreover, Laurier was desperately trying to avoid permanent cleavages within the party over the transient issue of conscription. Looking to the future, Laurier felt that in this way the reunification of the party would be a less painful process.

Meanwhile, the press, particularly in Ontario used Laurier's stand on the Military Service Act very effectively against him. In an editorial entitled "Bourassa Fully Endorses Laurier", the Globe interpreted Laurier's Election Manifesto as being identical to the Nationalist point of view which was essentially "hostility to the prosecution of the war upon any terms."² The Globe argued that any suspension of the Military Service Act until after a referendum was tantamount to an abrogation of the Act. Not unexpectedly, Laurier took great exception to this editorial. He contended that the Globe emphasized only those points upon which Bourassa agreed with the Election Manifesto but not those upon which he and Bourassa were in total disagreement.³ A reading of the articles in

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 716, Laurier to Adam Thomson, Nov. 15, 1917.

² Toronto, Globe, Nov. 13, 1917.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 717, Laurier to Stewart Lyon, Nov. 21, 1917.

Le Devoir¹ reveals that the basic difference between Laurier and Bourassa hinged on the fact that Bourassa considered further voluntary recruiting to be national suicide whereas Laurier was in favour of voluntary service. The Globe did point this out. However, in the opinion of Stewart Lyon this difference was not of great significance for he said:

"What scintilla of hope can you or anyone else have that under the present conditions men for voluntary service would be found in the Province of Quebec. It did not require three and a half years to discover that they are hell bent against further participation in the war. To tell the people of Ontario, that Mr. Bourassa and you are not in accord on the question of voluntary service does not mean anything at all, because the question of voluntary service has long ago been swept off the board.

I have tried fairly to state what was my conclusion after reading these articles. The fact that Bourassa asks all the anti-British extremists who have been following him for the last fifteen years in his attacks on the unity of this country to vote for your candidates in this election, is quite sufficient justification to warrant your old friends in the Province swinging every vote they can in the other direction." ²

As the election campaign drew to a close there was a variety of predictions as to how the vote would go on December 17. Dafoe predicted with some assurance that there would be a "unionist avalanche" in Winnipeg and throughout the province of Manitoba generally.³ The same assurances could not be given for Saskatchewan and Alberta. The danger to the Unionist cause in Saskatchewan stemmed from the fact that many members of the legislature were "lukewarm" in their support of Union Government while others were "secretly hostile". "A good many of the organization Liberals", wrote Dafoe, "who have been giving lip service to Union since Calder entered the Government, would be reconciled to the

¹ Le Devoir, Nov. 10, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 717, S. Lyon to Laurier, Nov. 22, 1917.

³ Sifton Papers, Microfilm, Roll C-1160B, Dafoe to C. Sifton, Dec. 6, 1917.

defeat of the Government and the destruction of Calder." Calder himself looked optimistically for at least twelve seats in Saskatchewan. Both Dafoe and Clifford Sifton however were expecting a hard fight in Alberta.¹ Throughout the election campaign Arthur Sifton was left on his own "in an attempt to rally the people around the Unionist cause." During his Western tour Laurier was assured by men "well competent to judge" that the Liberals would get at least half the seats in Alberta.² Generally, he was confident that the people in Western Canada were on the side of the Liberal party.³

Ontario Liberal organizers such as George Graham expected that Ontario would send twenty-five Laurier Liberals to the House of Commons. Laurier however, did not share this optimism. He was certain that the racial cry would work to the complete detriment of the Liberals. Similarly, Clifford Sifton felt that the predictions of the Liberal organizers of Ontario would carry if the Liberal opposition had been "well and capably led in Ontario." Since they were not the Liberals would be fortunate to get ten or twelve seats.⁴

The hopeful predictions for the Laurier Liberals in Western Canada and Ontario only made the defeat for the Laurier Liberals all the more unpalatable. Only 82 Liberals were elected to the House of Commons as opposed to 153 Unionists.⁵ Only 2 Laurier Liberals were elected West of Lake Superior. Ontario sent 8 Laurier Liberals to the House of Commons. The bulk of Liberal represent-

¹ Sifton Papers, Sifton to Dafoe, Dec. 10, 1917.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, Laurier to W. G. Charlton, March 2, 1918.

³ Ibid., Vol. 718, Laurier to George Graham, Dec. 20, 1917.

⁴ Sifton Papers, Microfilm, Roll C-1160B, Sifton to Dafoe, Dec. 10, 1917.

⁵ Canadian Annual Review, 1917, p. 643. The latter figure may be broken down into 115 Conservatives and 38 Unionist Liberals.

ation came from Quebec and the Maritime provinces.

Soon after the election George Graham asked Laurier if there was any answer to the question, "What happened?" One of the factors that worked against the Liberals particularly in Alberta and Ontario was the exemptions from military service which the Union Government granted to the farmers. Liberal hopes, particularly in the west had depended on the farmers' aversion to conscription. But the Union Government had granted generous exemptions to the farming group and had seen to it that the regulations were well publicized. For example, in Alberta a circular was sent around stating that farmers would not be conscripted.¹ Henry Wise Wood, President of the United Farmers of Alberta, issued this circular to every member of the U. F. A. in that province. In both Ontario and Alberta Unionist representatives "with apparently unlimited finances" went through every riding and district releasing "all and sundry" from the draft. Furthermore, the enumerators and election officials placed numerous difficulties in the way of those who would vote Liberal. In constituencies where a large segment of the vote was estimated to be Liberal a scarcity of ballots would immediately occur or the polling station would be so situated that electors would have to drive some thirty miles in order to vote. Such practises were no doubt more pronounced in Alberta than anywhere else in Western Canada since it was recognized that this province was strongly Liberal in sentiment.

Besides these "unfair methods" Laurier attributed the disastrous results to the "War Times Elections Act."² J. A. Calder was reported to have said "that with the Franchise Act and \$100,000 every follower of the Government,

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 719, A. G. Mackay to Laurier, Dec. 31, 1917.

² Ibid., Laurier to G. Graham, Dec. 20, 1917.

no matter what it was, could be elected west of the Great Lakes."¹ One could understand the extent to which Laurier would cling to this contention as an explanation for the results of the 1917 election. With the advantage of hindsight, Chubby Power, a Liberal candidate in Quebec, presented this rather temperate judgement concerning the extent of fraud in the election.

"I do not think any impartial student of history would give any verdict other than that very extensive frauds were practised. However, he would also come to the conclusion that these frauds were neither systematic nor effectively organized, and that, as far as the military voters were concerned, the tide of sentiment was running so strongly for what they really believed to be the patriotic cause that it is difficult to attach much condemnation to the acts of fraud that were undoubtedly committed."²

In assessing the reasons for the defeat of the Liberals in 1917 the greater emphasis must be placed on the fact that the Liberals were without an effective organization and without effective leaders. Because the party was rushed to put candidates in the field, the ones chosen were often extremely weak. Their organizations were not only weak but penniless.¹ In Ontario, one of the most important factors working against the Liberal party was the active support which the Protestant Church gave to the Unionist cause. Frantic appeals along religious lines were most predominant a fortnight before the election.⁴ Very rarely were the Conservatives known to hold political meetings in Toronto on Sunday, but a week prior to the election numerous political gatherings were held in the churches. Therefore, with no efficient Liberal organization to speak of outside of the province of Quebec, with limited funds to finance campaigns, with a hostile

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 719, Laurier to G. Graham, Dec. 20, 1917.

² Power Memoirs, p. 61.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 717, H. H. Dewhart to Laurier, Nov. 24, 1917.

⁴ Ibid., Tom King to Laurier, Dec. 18, 1917.

press in almost all provinces except Quebec, and with the Protestant churches actively supporting the Unionist cause, it is surprising that the Liberals emerged from the 1917 election as well as they did.

In fact it may be argued that "Laurier wrought better than he knew."¹ The Liberal party emerged from the 1917 election with a core of English-speaking Liberals within its ranks. This was not entirely reflected by the composition of the parliamentary party. However, this core was made up of individuals holding responsible positions in provincial governments and Liberals who unsuccessfully contested seats in the election. Although they were not bound together by a well-structured party organization, they were prepared to support Laurier in the process of reorganizing and reconstructing the party after the war. In this sense the Liberal party was still a national political organization after 1917. The same could not be said of the Conservative party whose support in Quebec was virtually non-existent. Of course, the 1917 election was not without its long-range detrimental effects on the Liberal party. The extent to which bitterness was created between Laurier supporters and Unionist Liberals was difficult to estimate in 1917. The degree and nature of this bitterness would become evident in the post-war years.

¹ H. B. Neatby, "Laurier and a Liberal Quebec", (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1955), p. 388.

Chapter Six

"Let us all be Liberals again"

The aftermath of the 1917 election imposed a tremendous burden on the shoulders of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. His task of reconstructing, reuniting, and to some degree rejuvenating the party was not enviable. The election shattered the very foundations of the Liberal party organization. With the exception of Quebec new organizations had to be built in almost every province. In addition the party found itself without the support of any major newspaper in the country. In some respects, because of a lack of finances, Liberal leaders were timid in their approach to these problems. Financial considerations however were not the only factors nor the most important which determined the strategy of Laurier in resolving the post-1917 problems of reunification and reconstruction. Reuniting a party which had split over such an emotional issue as conscription was a delicate process which required deft handling. Furthermore, an important question facing the Liberals throughout the remaining months of the war was whether the interests of the party would best be served by adopting aggressive measures in an attempt to strengthen their forces at a time when the attention of most Canadians was directed toward the war effort. Several prominent Liberals argued that time was the best solvent for the major difficulties confronting the party.

One of the factors which contributed to the total Liberal defeat in Ontario and Western Canada was the absence of an influential newspaper supporting the Liberal party. Since the outcome of the election was still fresh in the minds of the Laurier Liberals in the early months of 1918 it was understandable that their attention would be directed to the possibilities of establishing a new Liberal newspaper. Once they took stock of their newspaper support across

the country the problem became even more urgent.¹ In Manitoba for example, the Liberals were not only without the backing of a national newspaper such as the Manitoba Free Press but they also lost the support of most of the local press in that province.² Individually each newspaper might not wield a great influence but collectively they were a source of support which the party could not ignore. By 1918 most of these local newspapers combined with their conservative counterparts and were operating "as neutral local newspapers."

More important, the influence and position of John W. Dafoe and the Free Press was central to any decision of the Liberals to establish a Liberal newspaper in Manitoba. Dafoe's influence in Manitoba Laurier acknowledged to be "paramount",³ and the Liberal government under Premier Norris was recognized as being "nothing more or less than a Free Press Government."⁴ Since Dafoe was giving his complete support to the Union Government, the Laurier Liberals could expect no support from the provincial Liberal organization in Manitoba. There were those, however, such as A. McLeod, President of the Manitoba Liberal Association, who hoped that Dafoe would return his support to the Liberal party. Laurier did not place much hope in such an eventuality. "On many things" wrote

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 725, Laurier to A. Thomson, Sept. 18, 1918. In 1918 the Liberals had the support of only a few local newspapers. In Nova Scotia there was the Acadian Recorder and the Eastern Chronicle. In New Brunswick the Moncton Transcript and the St. John Telegraph supported the Liberal party. In Quebec the Liberals had a strong French press but no Liberal papers with the exception of the Weekly Witness. Even this local publication professed not to belong to any one party but did expound upon principles of British Liberalism. In Ontario the Liberals had the Brockville Recorder and the London Adviser. From Port Arthur to Victoria the only daily that was a Liberal paper was Frank Oliver's Edmonton Bulletin.

² Ibid., Vol. 720, A. McLeod to Laurier, Jan. 5, 1918.

³ Ibid., Laurier to A. McLeod, Jan. 24, 1918.

⁴ Ibid., A. McLeod to Laurier, Jan. 5, 1918.

Laurier, "he (Dafoe) has the most advanced ideas of Liberalism and even Radicalism; on others his horizon is the horizon of the sixteenth century."¹ Presumably, Laurier considered Dafoe's Protestant attitude to the Roman Catholic Church, that is, his suspicion of clerical influence in politics, as being sixteenth century. Some suggest that this attitude was more peculiar to the nineteenth-rather than the sixteenth century.² Leaving aside this basic difference between the Laurier and Dafoe brands of Liberalism, Dafoe and the Free Press could not return to the ranks of the Liberal party because they were totally committed to supporting Union Government.³ Therefore, the immense influence which the Free Press wielded in Western Canada and the unlikelihood of its withdrawing support from the Union Government, at least not until the war was over, made the need for a Liberal newspaper in Western Canada more urgent.

Such a need was recognized by Laurier. It was another matter, however, to turn this need into a reality. From past experience he was aware of the fact that the acquisition of sufficient capital and of a competent administrator would be the two chief stumbling blocks to the successful realization of a new party organ in Western Canada.⁴ Because of the scarcity of party funds the creation of a daily publication was impossible; a weekly publication for Western Canada alone was a more realistic goal. And if money was scarce, an able editor "who combined all the elements of success" was even more difficult to come by. Laurier recalled to himself and to others the painful process the Manitoba Free Press went through during the first two decades of its existence. It was not

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 720, Laurier to A. McLeod, Jan. 24, 1918.

² Ramsay Cook, The Politics of John W. Dafoe and the Free Press, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 83.

³ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴ Laurier Papers, Vol. 720, Laurier to A. McLeod, Jan. 10, 1918.

until Dafoe assumed the editorship of the Free Press that its success was assured. What Laurier wanted at the head of a Liberal publication out West was another John W. Dafoe. In his view there was no point in establishing "new organs of public opinion" with party funds only to have them crumble financially because a competent editor and administrator were lacking.

Sufficient capital and the proper personnel were constant problems in establishing new publications anywhere in Canada. In Ontario, however, immediately after the 1917 election, there was an added risk. Would a new Liberal paper receive the support of the Ontario public, and what was more significant, would it receive the support of the major advertisers? Laurier and George Graham, who was intimately associated with the newspaper business in Ontario did not think so. Laurier discouraged P. C. Larkin and other Toronto Liberals¹ from investing money in a new Liberal paper for he said:

"Public opinion has not sufficiently recovered from the shock which it has received in the last election to venture risking several hundred thousand dollars. But already, whilst I would not say that there is manifest a reaction, there is certainly evident a sense of growing irritation in the ranks of the Liberals who went Unionist(s). It is well, therefore, to have our eyes open, and I think well also to keep always the subject of a new paper before our eyes."²

Besides an adverse public opinion in Ontario against the Liberal party George Graham emphasized that the sympathy and support of the major Toronto advertisers

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, P. C. Larkin to Laurier, Feb. 1, 1918. Larkin, a wealthy Toronto merchant, resigned his position on the board of the Toronto Globe. He informed Mr. Jaffray, the proprietor of the Globe, that if his newspaper continued to support the Conservative government, he would be encouraged to invest money in a new newspaper.

² Ibid., Laurier to P. C. Larkin, Feb. 4, 1918.

would not be behind a new Liberal publication.¹ Instead, there was "a movement to kill off everything and anything in the shape of a Liberal paper-particularly a daily."² A new Liberal newspaper, if there was to be one in Toronto, would have to be postponed until a more favourable public reception was assured.

There was also the question of whether another Liberal newspaper was really needed in Ontario. Were the two major Toronto papers, the Globe and the Star as firmly committed to the support of Union Government as the Manitoba Free Press? Immediately after Union Government was formed the Globe announced that the only area of disagreement between itself and Laurier's leadership of the Liberal party was on the enforcement of the Military Service Act.³ In all other respects the Globe was more in harmony with the views of the Liberal party than with the majority in the Union Government. The editorial concluded by saying that "the Globe has not sold out its party. It has ceased to have any party until the war is over." Early in 1918, P. C. Larkin had a conversation with Mr. Jaffray, the proprietor of the Globe.⁴ In this conversation Mr. Jaffray stated that his newspaper would, as soon as the war terminated, support the measures which the Liberal party espoused in the past. Furthermore, George Graham felt that during the spring of 1918 the Globe was showing an inclination to veer around to the Liberal side once more. "My own view" wrote Graham optimistically, "is that Stewart Lyon is very unhappy, and that he will not continue to support Union Government a minute longer than he feels compelled to do so by the pledges given in his absence, or by exigencies of the war."⁵

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 722, G. Graham to Laurier, April 10, 1918.

² Ibid., _____ to Fred Hogg, copy, April 12, 1918.

³ Toronto, Globe, Oct. 31, 1917.

⁴ Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, P. C. Larkin to Laurier, Feb. 1, 1918.

⁵ Ibid., Vol. 722, G. Graham to Laurier, April 18, 1918.

The arrangements which the Globe made in its support of Union Government did not preclude its supporting the Liberal party in the future.¹ In the fall of 1917 when Union Government was about to be formed the Globe expressed its approval of such a government. It was made clear to Mr. Rowell, however, that once the policy of the Government was announced the Globe would reserve the right to adopt a course it deemed best. In other words, the Globe was not prepared to blindly support the Union Government. Nor was it pledged to give the Union Government support throughout the full term of the parliament elected in 1917.

There was no assurance either that the Globe would return to its pre-1917 status of giving the Liberal party its unqualified support. Because the Globe was strongly anti-protectionist it found itself supporting Liberal tariff policy. Just prior to Laurier's death in February 1919, it applauded the Tariff resolution presented at the Eastern Ontario Liberal Convention held on January 14, 1919. It described the convention as "forward looking" and welcomed its stand on the tariff question as being a "change from the rhetorical flourish with which some political groups" dismissed the subject.² On the other hand Stewart Lyon was aware that the Liberals had as many, if not more "corporate affiliations" as the Conservatives.³ The only hope for the Liberal party in Lyon's view was that a new generation of Liberals would come up through the farmers' movement which, by mid-1919, was tending more and more towards direct political action both in Ontario and Western Canada. Presumably because of the uncertainty as to the orientation that both of the traditional parties would

¹ Rowell Papers, Microfilm Roll C-933, S. Lyon to Rowell, June 17, 1919.

² Toronto, Globe, Jan. 15, 1919.

³ Rowell Papers, S. Lyon to Rowell, June 17, 1919.

take immediately after the war, Lyon was forced to conclude that the Globe could not assume the role of a party organ.¹ The best that the Liberal party could hope for in the future was that the Globe act in the capacity of an ally in which case it would be free to reserve for itself the right of "private judgement" on a variety of questions.

By the end of 1918 and the early months of 1919 the position of the Liberal party vis à vis newspaper support in Ontario was not as desperate as Laurier and some of his supporters suggested it was immediately after the 1917 election. By the beginning of 1919 the Globe appeared ready to return to the Liberal fold on the tariff issue, whereas the Toronto Star, as O. D. Skelton expressed it "will try to help Rowell by devising a modified protection with guarantees for the workingman, warranted to satisfy straddlers of Unionists."²

The regaining of the support of the Toronto Star presented a more difficult and complex problem for the Liberal party. Apparently the Star was prepared to support the Liberal party once more if the party would make room for Rowell in the future.³ J. E. Atkinson, the proprietor of the Star made it known to P. C. Larkin that if Rowell was going to be ostracized from the Liberal party, then this would mean keeping out the friends of Rowell as well. There were those within the party who felt that the acceptance of Rowell into the party was "too big a price to pay for the Star's support."⁴

The relationship of the Toronto Star and N. W. Rowell to the Liberal

¹ Cameron Papers, S. Lyon to A. K. Cameron, April 30, 1919.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 729, O. D. Skelton to Laurier, Feb. 7, 1919.

³ Murphy Papers, D. Kerr to C. Murphy, Dec. 18, 1918; Laurier Papers, Vol. 727, P. C. Larkin to Laurier, Nov. 14, 1918.

⁴ Murphy Papers, D. Kerr to C. Murphy, Dec. 18, 1918.

party after 1917 not only raised the important problem of getting the support of a Toronto newspaper along with the influential and wealthy entourage that went with it, but it also raised the question of the attitude the Laurier Liberals would take toward those who left the party in 1917 to run as Unionist Liberals. From the private correspondence of Laurier and from the correspondence of some of his closest supporters two distinct attitudes emerge. On the one hand there were the hard liners, that is, men like Charles Murphy and Frank Oliver who harboured a deep distrust and hatred for those who deserted Laurier and the Liberal party in 1917. Murphy for example, has no objections to the return of Unionist Liberals to the party but he did object to placing any of these individuals in positions of responsibility or trust within the party organization.¹ To Murphy this precaution was necessary for the future well-being of the party. He argued that if these same individuals were to desert the party again in the future they should not be in a position to inflict the damage they did in 1917. Presumably Murphy was referring to the loss of financial and organizational support that went with some of the more influential Unionist Liberals in 1917.

On the other hand there was the more conciliatory attitude toward the Unionist Liberals. Many Laurier Liberals took the stand that the decisions taken by the Unionist Liberals in 1917 were "a matter for their own consciences and determination."² It was felt that the door should not be closed to those who were conscientious in their support of Union Government. The only qualification for re-entry into the party was a willingness to subscribe to Liberal

¹ Murphy Papers, C. Murphy to O. D. Skelton, June 10, 1921.

² King Papers, W. L. Mackenzie King to W. H. S. Cane, Dec. 16, 1918.

principles.¹ Although these principles were important and were not to be compromised for the sake of reuniting the party, this group could not forget that numbers were also vital to the success of any political party.

Laurier's position with regard to the Unionist Liberals fell somewhere between the hard line and the conciliatory attitude. He drew a distinction between those Liberals who had entered the Unionist administration and the rank and file who ran as Unionist candidates. Laurier argued that there was no reason to believe that the former group would want to return to the party. With the exception of J. A. Calder and Frank Carvell, Laurier was certain that the remaining Unionist Liberal cabinet ministers would remain at their posts and gladly accept the "Tory policy of high protection."² Consequently, he and his closest associates would be spared the trouble of deciding whether or not they would be welcomed back to the Liberal ranks. As for the latter group Laurier agreed that they should be treated as "erring brothers."³

This attitude which Laurier assumed towards the Liberals sitting on the government side of the Commons was illustrated during the 1918 session which opened on March 18. Laurier was careful not to enhance ill-feeling between the Unionist Liberals and those Liberals sitting on the opposition benches. The opposition appeared so cautious in not prompting vigorous debate along party lines that one journalist referred to the Laurier Liberals as the "silent minority."⁴ Indeed there were other factors which prompted this "silence" other than the one mentioned above. Even if the Liberals wanted to become

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 728, J. R. Boyle to Laurier, Dec. 24, 1918.

² Ibid., Vol. 726, Laurier to D. Marshall, Nov. 5, 1918; Vol. 727, Laurier to G. H. V. Buglea, Dec. 23, 1918; Vol 728, Laurier to J. E. Adamson, Jan. 11, 1919.

³ Ibid., Vol 720, Laurier to L. G. Power, Jan. 22, 1918.

⁴ J. K. Munro, "Why Laurier Will Wait," Maclean's Magazine, Jan. 1919, p. 2

more aggressive in their parliamentary tactics they did not have many of their most competent debaters to successfully sustain such an attitude. George Graham, Frank Oliver and "Ned" Macdonald were momentarily absent from the front row of the opposition bench. Furthermore, the Laurier Liberals elected to the Commons in 1917 were relatively young and inexperienced debaters. Consequently, they were wary of crossing swords with such experienced and skilful debaters as Arthur Meighen or W. E. Foster.¹ Moreover, Laurier's strategy may very well have been to allow the Union Government as much freedom as possible to cope with the war-time problems with the hope that the Unionist Liberals would quickly become disenchanted with the government's method of handling the affairs of the country. If this disenchantment was strong enough a reunification of the Liberals would be much easier.

Once the war was over Laurier took a more positive step in the direction of reuniting the party. At the Eastern Ontario Liberal Convention held in Ottawa on January 14, 1919 he made his first public overture to the Liberal Unionists. The Ottawa Journal Press quoted Laurier as saying:

"We have differed in the past; but let the past be forgotten. Let us all be Liberals again, actuated only by conscience. If a Liberal who has been a Unionist comes to me, I shall not rebuke him. I will say, "Come, put your hand in mine, we must not look back, but ahead, not at the past, but to the future, for that is the only horizon for us."²

To Laurier and his supporters this was a sentiment of reconciliation. And yet Liberal Unionists interpreted this statement differently. For example, in an editorial the Globe suggested that the above remarks made by Laurier carried the implication, perhaps unintentionally, that the Liberals who broke with him

¹ Power Memoirs, p. 71.

² Ottawa Journal Press, Jan. 15, 1919 quoted in R. M. Dawson William Lyon Mackenzie, King, p. 274.

had something to be ashamed of.¹ The Unionist Liberals, suggested the Globe, "have no regrets and no apologies," and Laurier's forgiving and patronizing attitude would have little effect in healing the breach between the Laurier and Unionist Liberals. The latter group would neither ask for nor want forgiveness. "He must dismiss from his mind," concluded the Globe "the idea that Liberals who were true to their conception of what Canada should do to aid in defending Liberty and civilization inflicted on him a personal injury for which they should make some atonment."

Where Laurier extended an open hand to the rank and file of the Unionist Liberals, the same sentiment was not accorded to a former Liberal like N. W. Rowell. Laurier and other members of the party were aware that Rowell had carried with him into the Union Government a small, but very powerful and wealthy minority from the large urban centres.² It was this factor which perhaps made Laurier suspicious of Rowell for he said:

"Rowell is a man of eminent parts and abilities, but his personality does not seem to have gone deep into the community. What he has of influence seems to arise from the fact that the big interests have pinned their faith in him and push him on; and in return he will be the champion of the big interests."³

Because the "big interests" were supporters of Imperial preference and high tariffs, Laurier immediately assumed that Rowell was identified with this policy as well, and consequently he considered Rowell "to be a Tory in his very bones."⁴

¹ Toronto, Globe, Jan. 16, 1919.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, Laurier to G. Graham, Feb. 22, 1918.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., Vol. 726, Laurier to P. C. Larkin, Nov. 11, 1918.

Laurier was the first to recognize that his assessment of Rowell was a prejudiced one. "His last campaign," wrote Laurier, "and his appeals to the passions of his audiences against Quebec was vile, and this perhaps may have biased my judgment." Indeed, there were those who were certain that Laurier's assessment of Rowell's economic position was wrong. According to J. E. Atkinson, Rowell was an opponent of Imperial preference.¹ Moreover, as a minister in the Unionist Government Rowell displayed a willingness to act against excessive profits being made by the big interests, and to lower tariffs in order to establish "a good understanding between the East and the West."²

Whatever the relationship of Rowell to the big interests there was no doubt that he was persona non grata among many members of the Liberal party. Charles Murphy for example, attacked Rowell mercilessly at the opening of the 1918 session of parliament. He accused Rowell of trying to unseat Laurier as leader of the party and stated that he contributed to the racial and religious prejudices that were so prevalent in the 1917 election.³ In a letter written sometime after Laurier's death Murphy argued that if Rowell and Atkinson were admitted back into the Liberal party there would be a considerable "stampede" from the party ranks.⁴ To some historians this attitude on the part of the Liberal party towards Rowell was a serious blunder.⁵ If the abilities of Rowell were recognized it was a pity that the party did not adopt a more forgiving attitude in order to direct this man's talents into the common cause of

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 727, P. C. Larkin to Laurier, Nov. 14, 1918.

² Borden Papers, N. W. Rowell to Sir Robert Borden, July 4, 1919. cited in R. M. Dawson, W. L. Mackenzie King, p. 282.

³ House of Commons, Debates, March 19, 1918, I, 39.

⁴ Murphy Papers, Charles Murphy to O. D. Skelton, June 10, 1921.

⁵ R. M. Dawson, Mackenzie King, p. 282.

uniting the various diverse elements of the party. Admittedly, Rowell possessed qualities which would have aided in welding Eastern and Western Liberalism closer together but unfortunately he did not command the respect and trust of many Liberals.

If the problem of attracting Unionist Liberals back into the Liberal party was a delicate and uncertain process during 1918 the much needed reorganization of the party was even more so. Laurier considered it essential that the Liberal party organization be kept up where it already existed and that it be recreated where it had ceased to exist.¹ Therefore, at a meeting of the parliamentary Liberals in September 1918, it was decided that attempts should be made to reform the party apparatus, particularly in Western Canada and Ontario.² Most of the Western Liberal leaders, provincial and federal, were of the opinion that any organizational activity, in Western Canada at least, which would be carried on while the war was in progress would be a detriment rather than an aid to the future of the party.³ Since the main preoccupation of the Canadian people was the war effort and since the allies appeared on the brink of victory by the latter half of 1918 several Western Liberals argued that active party organization would not be well received.⁴ Furthermore, there was some concern that any reorganizational measures would have a tendency to drive a deeper wedge between the Laurier and Unionist Liberals.⁵ Others contended that since

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 725, Laurier to A. B. Copp, Oct. 3, 1918.

² Ibid., Vol. 726, Laurier to H. M. Arnaud, Sept. 25, 1918.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 726, Duncan Marshall to Laurier, Oct. 2, 1918; W. E. Knowles to Laurier, Nov. 1, 1918.

⁴ Ibid., J. E. Langley to Laurier, Oct. 30, 1918.

⁵ Ibid., W. E. Knowles to Laurier, Nov. 1, 1918; Vol. 727, W. S. Fielding to J. H. Sinclair, Copy, Dec. 1, 1918.

the latter group could not participate in the reorganization of the party while Union Government was in existence it would be wiser to allow them to break away from the Union Government of their own accord rather than stir up public discussion in favour of reunification.¹ On the other hand it was suggested that this feeling of estrangement on the part of the Unionist Liberals would always exist and consequently the unification of the Liberal party would be prolonged indefinitely. With or without measures taken toward reorganization, the reunification process would be unpredictable.

Although there was reluctance to embark upon organizational work in Western Canada, preparations were under way in parts of Ontario to lay the ground work for a new organization. Under the direction of Charles Murphy, George S. Gibbons, and William, C. Kennedy, M.P. from Essex South, Ontario was to be divided into three districts each with a separate association that is, a Western, a Central, and an Eastern.² Kennedy was particularly active in visiting the various constituencies with the purpose of discussing the possibilities of forming a Liberal organization for some thirty constituencies in Western Ontario.³ In order to stimulate local interest in the Liberal party and to prompt discussion, it was planned to have every constituency visited by a member or members of parliament. Even though this type of organization was still in the discussion stage it was a necessary prelude to a more positive and aggressive campaign to be carried on once the war was over.

In 1919, with the war over, the more positive steps toward reorganizing the party took the form of holding provincial party conventions. Prior to

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 726, A. G. Mackay to Laurier, Oct. 3, 1918.

² Ibid., Vol. 721, Charles Murphy to G. S. Gibbons, copy, Feb. 11, 1918.

³ Ibid., Vol. 725, W. C. Kennedy to Laurier, Sept. 10, 1918.

Laurier's death three conventions were held: two in Ontario (in the Eastern and Central districts) and one in Calgary Alberta. (Jan. 17, 1919). Another was planned in Saskatchewan for June, 1919. In two of the Western provinces, namely Manitoba and British Columbia, the organizations were so weak that conventions were impossible.

Prior to the convention held in Alberta there was some apprehension on the part of the organizers that Frank Oliver, because of his bitter feelings towards the Unionist Liberals, would ruin the convention by introducing a resolution condemning both the Liberals who entered the Unionist administration and the Unionist Liberals elected to the House of Commons.¹ However, this alleged attitude on the part of Frank Oliver did not prevail in the organization of the convention. There was no restriction placed on the attendance of delegates. Any man who wanted to vote and work for the Liberal party was invited by a public advertisement to attend. Once present all delegates had equal rights.² There is no evidence as to how many Unionist Liberals attended this convention, but according to Frank Oliver they were not present "in appreciable numbers."³ He interpreted their absence as meaning that they would remain with the Unionist party and "that Liberals have nothing to expect from them except opposition."

The resolutions passed at the Alberta Convention were of a general nature and not detailed on such issues as the tariff and taxation. There were resolutions demanding the repeal of the War Times Elections Act, condemning the Union Government for "transgressing on the fundamental principles of Liberalism,"

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 728, J. R. Boyle to Laurier, Dec. 24, 1918.

² Canadian Annual Review, 1919, p. 753.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 728, F. Oliver to Laurier, Jan. 18, 1919.

and a resolution sanctioning prohibition.¹ An important aspect of the convention however was the declaration on the part of Premier Stewart of Alberta in favour of Laurier and Liberalism. Throughout 1918 he had "been sitting on the fence" refusing to declare himself for Liberalism or Union Government. W. R. Motherwell, who attended the Alberta Convention personally felt that Premier Stewart "found it convenient to climb on to the Liberal bandwagon" not by choice but because of the pressure from within his party to do so.²

While Liberals in Alberta and Saskatchewan were attempting to consolidate and reorganize the party through party conventions, British Columbia and Manitoba were virtually unknown quantities to the Liberal party in early 1919. In the latter province a convention was an impossibility. According to one Manitoba Liberal the provincial organization did not amount to much, it was a "mere shell."³ The organization was controlled by a small clique "very limited in numbers and authority." Furthermore, this clique was not interested in provincial politics. What made a convention even more impossible was the complete estrangement of this small group from any Liberals who went unionist in 1917. It was argued that if the Liberal organization in Manitoba was to make any headway it would have to adopt an attitude of conciliation toward the actions of the Unionist Liberals. Similarly, in British Columbia the Liberal party was too weak to organize a convention. According to one correspondent Liberalism in British Columbia was "dormant"; it needed "leadership and rousing."⁴ Rather than holding a convention it was suggested that it would be in the better

¹ Canadian Annual Review, 1919, p. 754.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 729, W. R. Motherwell to Laurier, Feb. 7, 1919.

³ Ibid., Vol. 728, J. E. Adamson to C. M. Goddard, copy, Jan. 6, 1919.

⁴ Ibid., F. A. Cauydon to Laurier, Jan. 24, 1919.

interests of the Liberal party to seek ways of communicating with the labour class and to very judiciously nurture their support. "I think it is wise" declared F. A. Cautydon "to remain quiet, improving acquaintances, and enlarging knowledge of the Province until suitable occasions present themselves for taking a more active part."

It appeared that whether conventions were held or not, in Western Canada at least, there was an urgent need for leadership by both Federal and provincial Liberals. Immediately after the Alberta Convention Frank Oliver made a strong suggestion that the Liberal party had to be advertised and brought to the forefront of Canadian politics.¹ The "wait and see" policy which the Liberal party was following could not be continued. Moreover, if the Liberals did not take the lead in Western Canada perhaps a political vacuum would develop. "I am afraid" declared one prominent Saskatchewan Liberal "that if a strong lead is not taken by Liberalism in Canada there may be a division brought about in the West by the entry of the Grain Growers' Associations, as such, into the political arena."² The individuals that would run under the Grain Growers' banner would undoubtedly be Liberal in sentiment. Nevertheless, the entry of such a group into a political contest would split the Liberal vote and would result in a far greater number of Conservatives being elected in Western Canada than would normally be the case. In order to temporarily fill this vacuum the Liberal party in Saskatchewan was introducing into the provincial legislature questions of Federal jurisdiction but which were of particular concern to that province. For example, such issues as the "necessity for a declaration of railway policy on the part of the Federal authorities", the tariff, and natural

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 728, F. Oliver to Laurier, Jan. 18, 1919.

² Ibid., Charles Dunning to Laurier, Jan. 14, 1919.

resources were discussed in the provincial legislature. It was hoped that such discussions, like the provincial conventions, would consolidate Liberal attitudes in the province and set the stage for more "definite action along organizational lines" in the future.

Just as the Liberal party was setting its sights on more aggressive steps in trying to reconstruct and reunite the party, the process was made somewhat uncertain by the activities of the Canadian Council of Agriculture which represented the organized farmers of Ontario and Western Canada. The Canadian Council of Agriculture adopted a comprehensive platform¹ in 1917 the major features of which were the gradual reduction of the tariff on British imports to the point where free trade would exist between Canada and Great Britain, and the adoption of a reciprocity agreement with the United States somewhat similar to that arrived at between the two countries in 1911. This platform was adopted by the United Farmers of Ontario, the Saskatchewan and Manitoba Grain Growers, and the United Farmers of Alberta.²

Some speculation naturally existed as to the purpose of the above platform. Was it designed to form the basis from which a third party was to be launched? Or, were the agricultural interests aggressively making known their demands in order that the old line parties would take serious notice and incorporate these measures into their own platform? It was well known that many members of the Canadian Council of Agriculture were Liberal in sentiment and it was thought that if the Liberal party adopted the above tariff program their position would be considerably strengthened in Western Canada.³ Admittedly, Laurier had

¹ The entire platform is reprinted in W. L. Morton, The Progressive Party in Canada. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), Appendix C. pp. 302-305.

² Ibid., p. 64.

³ Ibid., p. 66.

this in mind when he reaffirmed his faith in reciprocity with the United States at the Eastern Ontario Liberal Convention.

And yet there was reason to believe that serious thought was given by Western politicians and agricultural organizations to independent political action. The United Farmers of Alberta had a convention on January 17, 1919 the primary purpose of which was "to discuss ways and means of taking independent political action and selecting an independent candidate."¹ Also in January there were several meetings of Unionist and non-Unionist Liberals from the province of Manitoba.² At these meetings thought was given to the formation of a Western Liberal party encompassing Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Apparently, A. B. Hudson was to correspond with Premier Stewart of Alberta and Premier Martin of Saskatchewan as to the feasibility of this project. By early February any enthusiasm that did exist for such a movement was somewhat dampened by the Liberal Convention in Alberta which seemed to indicate a united and solid Liberal front in that province. Moreover, the Premier of Saskatchewan was certain that Liberals in his province were at least sixty percent straight Liberal.³ J. E. Adamson assured Laurier that "if the Liberals as soon as an election is in sight, proceed to have some arrangement with the Grain Growers definitely leaving certain seats to them, things would seem to be as good as possible, at least in Manitoba."

Other political observers who were familiar with the Western situation were not as optimistic as Adamson that a third party could be prevented from

¹ W. L. Morton, The Progressive Party in Canada, p. 64.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 729, J. E. Adamson to C. M. Goddard, copy, Jan. 6, 1919.

³ Ibid., J. E. Adamson to Laurier, Feb. 4, 1919.

becoming a reality. T. A. Crerar admitted to Dafoe¹ that it would be difficult to "head off" a third party no matter what platform the Liberals adopted. "My own information," concluded Dafoe, "which I think is pretty accurate, is that regardless of what the Liberals do at Ottawa there will be a farmers movement in Western Canada, which neither Crerar nor anybody else can control."

If the Liberal party was to lessen the extent to which the farmers movement would make inroads into the potential Liberal support in Western Canada and Ontario it would have to identify with this movement. This however was going to prove difficult because of the varied complexion of the Liberal party in 1919. Dafoe's analysis, which in some respects was prejudiced and oversimplified, suggested three distinct currents within the Liberal party. First, there was the eastern wing of the party which, because of "its regard for financial and manufacturing interests", was barely distinguishable from the Conservative party. He placed the Quebec wing of the Liberal party in a separate category because it was "largely clerical in direction" and identified itself "with the bi-lingual movement." The Western Liberal according to Dafoe, could find no common ground "with either form of eastern Liberalism." If there was to be a coming together of these three elements of the party, it would simply be a marriage of convenience and expediency, that is, to secure and maintain the reins of office.

Where Dafoe saw incompatible regional or sectional divisions within the party, an English speaking Liberal from Quebec, Chubby Power, suggested that these divisions also revealed an "occupational or administrative stratification"

¹ J. W. Dafoe to Clifford Sifton, July 21, 1919, The Dafoe-Sifton Correspondence, 1919-1927, ed. Ramsay Cook, (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1966), p. 6.

within the party.¹ Power saw a distinct cleavage between those Liberals in power in Quebec such as Gouin and Tachereau who espoused the interests of big business in Quebec and the Federal politicians such as Ernest Lapointe and Jacques Bureau who favoured low tariffs and "a wide expansion of social benefits." There were eastern Liberals in Quebec and in Ontario ready to support demands of Western Liberalism. It was an oversimplification then to categorize all eastern Liberals as favouring the financial and manufacturing interests as Dafoe suggested.

There was an element in the party, however, which was considered undesirable if a modus vivendi was to be reached between the farmers' movement and Liberalism. A prominent Ontario Liberal, Alex Smith, referred to this element very vaguely as the "old gang."² According to Smith there was a strong feeling among Westerners that they were willing to support Laurier but "Laurier and the Old gang, never." Laurier momentarily could not understand what segments of the party constituted the "old gang".³ In reply to Smith's criticism, he identified his closest associates after 1911 as being George Graham, H. Guthrie, F. Pardee from Ontario; E. M. Macdonald, D. D. McKenzie, J. H. Sinclair, W. Pugsley, and F. Carvell from the East; and several Western Liberals including Frank Oliver, J. Turiff, A. Thomson and J. Buchanan. Among this group Laurier recognized a distinct cleavage on the question of reciprocity. Those in favour of dropping reciprocity were Graham, Guthrie, Pardee and E. M. Macdonald. It may be that Alex Smith did not consider the latter group to be "real Liberals." Similarly, Mackenzie King contended that the Liberal party "had

¹ Power Memoirs, p. 374.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 725, A. Smith to Laurier, Sept. 23, 1918.

³ Ibid., Laurier to A. Smith, Sept. 24, 1918.

become over-weighted with men who were Tories at heart, whose interests in politics was primarily that of furthering the ends of the corporate interests and special privilege in one form or another."¹ Such men, concluded King, "no matter by what name they are called, are not Liberals in any true sense of the word." If the party was suffering from a greater malaise than merely being badly disorganized and disunited as a result of the 1917 election Laurier demonstrated a willingness to remedy the situation.² There were those like Mackenzie King who were confident that the Liberal party had within its ranks sufficient numbers who thought like Laurier in order to assist him in reconstructing the party along "radical" and "progressive" lines.³ This task, however, was to be the responsibility of another leader. Laurier died on February 17, 1919.

His death naturally necessitated a positive resolution of the leadership question. Throughout 1918 this problem had been the subject of speculation and undoubtedly the topic of innumerable conversations among members of the Liberal party. Indeed, speculation as to Laurier's successor was expected. In 1918 Laurier was approaching his seventy-eighth year. More important still, several months elapsed in 1918 when he was inactive because of weakness and exhaustion. He accepted this physical disorder as something that must necessarily accompany old age.⁴ But in the summer of 1918 Laurier was so weak that he was forced to admit to Alan Aylesworth that if his condition did not improve he would "have to think seriously of passing the reigns to somebody else."⁵

¹ King Papers, W. L. King to A. Hardy, Jan. 9, 1918.

² Laurier Papers, Vol. 725, Laurier to A. Smith, Sept. 24, 1918.

³ King Papers, King to A. Hardy, Jan. 9, 1918.

⁴ Laurier Papers, Vol. 725, Laurier to E. C. Bowers, Jan. 22, 1919.

⁵ Ibid., Vol. 724, Laurier to A. Aylesworth, July 8, 1918.

Laurier and many who were associated with him realized, however, that he would not relinquish the leadership until his death or until he became completely incapacitated.¹

Whatever the state of Laurier's health his age alone made it imperative that considerable thought be given to a possible successor and to how this successor was to be chosen. The future leader of the party would have to command a reasonable degree of confidence and loyalty in the various sections of the party and also command respect in most regions of Canada. Mackenzie King, Premier Martin of Saskatchewan, Hartly Dewhart, the Ontario Liberal leader, and W. S. Fielding, were all discussed in terms of their suitability and acceptability as future leaders of the party. Such discussions were looked upon with apprehension by some because it would provoke "envy among the rank and file."² Laurier frequently denied rumours that Mackenzie King or Premier Martin were his favourites.³ "The question of leadership" wrote Laurier, "is a subject of anxiety to me, but whenever I lay down the reins, the choice of the party will be absolutely unhampered."⁴ Laurier agreed with the contention that the party leader should not be imposed by "the rump of the party," but rather by a National Liberal Convention, "representative of every constituency in the Dominion."⁵ Laurier's death made a Convention a necessity, and was called for early August, 1919.

His death also raised the question as to whether, in his absence, the

¹ Dafoe Papers, E. M. Macdonald to Dafoe, July 27, 1918.

² P. A. C. George S. Gibbons Papers, M. G. 27; II, H-4, S. W. Jacobs to G. S. Gibbons, July 3, 1918.

³ Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, Laurier to E. M. Macdonald, Jan. 12, 1918.

⁴ Ibid., Vol. 729, Laurier to W. R. Motherwell, Feb. 11, 1919.

⁵ Cameron Papers, A. K. Cameron to Charles Murphy, Nov. 20, 1918.

party would be more speedily reunited. It may be argued that since Laurier symbolized opposition to conscription his presence would make the return of Unionist Liberals more difficult. And yet the basis upon which most Liberals broke with him did not preclude a future reconciliation from taking place. On the contrary, their admiration, respect, and affection for him would indicate that their return to the party would involve a minimum of embarrassment. In his private correspondence Laurier always expressed tolerance as to the reasons why his former colleagues parted company with him in 1917. Moreover, political differences did not interfere with any associations Laurier may have had with such Unionist Liberals as Fielding and G. Murray outside of politics.¹

Throughout the last year of Laurier's leadership of the Liberal party his main preoccupation was to establish an honest and open dialogue between Liberals across Canada. Through this open discussion Laurier hoped to reunify the party. Most important, he wanted to ascertain, together with other Liberals, the direction that Liberalism in Canada should take. Laurier's contribution to this dialogue was the offering of suggestions and advice rather than committing the party to a rigid course of action. In a sense he acted as the broker of ideas within the party. Whether it concerned the party strategy to be followed in a future session of parliament, or whether it concerned the advisability of establishing a newspaper in Ontario, Laurier continually sought advice and weighed the arguments passed on to him prior to presenting his own views. Through this dialogue Laurier set a basic philosophy upon which the Liberal party would build its post-war platform. "We are Liberals," wrote Laurier, "the party of progress. Many problems will arise out of the war and the clear line that we will instinctively follow will always be towards making the lot of the masses increasingly more happy."²

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 721, Laurier to R. E. Rinn, March 7, 1918.

² Ibid., Vol. 727, Laurier to J. H. Sinclair, Nov. 23, 1918.

Conclusion

The Liberal party under the leadership of Sir Wilfrid Laurier entered World War I while it was in the process of being reformed as a more efficient instrument of Liberalism. This process was interrupted as soon as conscription became the dominant issue in Canadian politics. Although Laurier tried desperately to emphasize that conscription was a transient issue and should therefore be left as a personal decision, it was impossible for Liberals to find common ground upon which to speak and act in unison on the question of compulsory military service. As a consequence of the 1917 election the Liberal party was left without a structured organization and was ineffectual as an opposition force in the House of Commons during 1918 and 1919. And yet it existed as a separate political entity, distinct from the Union Government. In this sense, the party was free to continue the process of reorganization and reform that was interrupted by the war.

In assessing the post-1917 state of the Liberal party the question of Laurier's leadership is central. The most controversial aspect of his career during the years 1916-1919 revolved around his decisions as they related to the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question and to conscription. In an effort to explain Laurier's decisions on these issues several theories have been set forth ranging from his over-all preoccupation with the maintenance of national unity to his desire to regain the Prime Ministership of Canada and to remain the unquestioned leader of the French Canadians. Perhaps the simplest explanation for Laurier's decisions in so far as they applied to conscription has been overlooked - namely, that as a party politician he wanted to minimize the detrimental effects of the stresses which would be placed on the Liberal party as a result of Canada's involvement in the war. In this endeavour Laurier attempted to

maintain the unity of the Liberal party on issues broad enough to transcend race and religion. Admittedly, it is often difficult to categorize Laurier's views and decisions as they related to national unity or to the unity of the party since he regarded the Liberal party to be, as Dafoe suggests, "co-ordinate with the state."¹ Consequently, in Laurier's view issues which would unite or divide the Liberal party would have a similar effect on the country as a whole.

On the issues of conscription and the status of the French language in Canada Laurier's dual role as a party leader and as a national leader came into conflict. Since he was leader of the Liberal party for some thirty years by 1917 and Prime Minister of Canada for fifteen of those years, it was understandable that the people of Canada regarded him as a national leader whose actions and speeches were considered just as significant as those of the Prime Minister. Laurier's decision to support a discussion of Regulation 17 in the House of Commons for example, could be justified in the sense that he was a national leader concerned about the national unity of the country.

It was Laurier's unbending opposition to conscription, however, which evoked the strongest criticism and challenges to his leadership. Indeed, the large majority of Liberals were in agreement that a vigorous prosecution of the Canadian war effort was the central issue to be dealt with in a war-time election. Once Laurier became convinced that the Liberal party was hopelessly divided on the best means to achieve this end he tried as much as possible to prevent it from becoming a party issue. His determination to sustain the policy of voluntary recruitment if returned to office was not adopted with the hope of winning the

¹ J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, p. 177.

1917 election. "We may lose the elections" wrote Laurier, "but we must try to maintain the unity of the Liberal party upon the old lines, and to prevent division upon race and creed. The party was broad enough in the old times to ignore race and creed: we must bring it again to that standard."¹

It would be unreasonable to expect any leader to guide his party unscathed through an exceptional crisis as that provided by Canada's involvement in World War I. And yet, throughout the period when conscription became the dominant issue in Canadian politics there were serious challenges to Laurier's suitability as a war-time leader. On several occasions Laurier himself questioned the wisdom of remaining at the head of the party. Any offers of resignation on his part were not made, as Dafoe argues,² in order to buttress his position as leader. Instead, Laurier considered stepping down when his continued leadership appeared to jeopardize the future well-being of the party. To many English-speaking Liberals it did not seem rational that Laurier should assume such an inflexible posture on the issue of conscription. Nor did it seem rational that he should stress other issues such as the status of the French language or tariff revision during a time of war and during a war-time election. In the short run and on the surface such a position was understandably construed by Laurier's critics as being far too rigid where flexibility was needed and as catering unduly to Quebec without regard for the rest of Canada. Whereas the war effort preoccupied the minds of many political leaders in Canada to the exclusion of almost everything else, Laurier did not lose sight of the above issues and tended to view Canadian participation in the war by 1917 with an ever

¹ Laurier Papers, Vol. 713, Laurier to Ryan, Oct. 15, 1917; See also Laurier to G. Waldron, Oct. 5, 1917; Laurier to W. Houston, Sept. 19, 1917.

² J. W. Dafoe, Laurier: A Study In Canadian Politics, p. 140.

increasing sense of detachment. In Laurier's judgment, the fact that Canada was involved in the war effort did not mean that the Liberal party should abdicate its role as an opposition force in the House of Commons or that the status of the French language in Canada or the tariff assumed less significance during a time of war than in a time of peace. Perhaps one may attribute this attitude to Laurier's age or to his foresightedness. Whatever the reason, throughout 1917 when his closest colleagues could not see further than the outcome of the 1917 election, Laurier was looking beyond 1917 into the future. In this sense, his stand on conscription had considerable merit.

Once the hysteria that surrounded the 1917 election had subsided such issues as the lack of direction exhibited by the Union Government and the tariff began to loom large in the thinking of the Canadian electorate. Where a Conservative supporting a policy of conscription could not get a hearing in the province of Quebec, a Liberal was able to denounce the government's policy of conscription in English Canada and still receive a favourable reception. Consequently, in the long run Laurier's policy of opposition to conscription made the Liberal party dominant in Quebec and acceptable to a large segment of the electorate in English Canada as well.¹

Despite the differences between Laurier's views and those of his fellow Liberals on the issue of conscription his personality was the one bond of unity holding the party together during 1918 and the early months of 1919. Chubby Power, a Liberal M.P. in 1917, writing sometime after Laurier's death, made this comparison between Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Arthur Meighen as leaders:

"He was always ready, even anxious, to talk to any of his followers no matter how trivial the subject.

¹ Laurier Papers, Laurier to E. M. Macdonald, Aug. 19, 1918; Laurier to E. M. Macdonald, Aug. 26, 1918.

One of the things that endeared him to the younger members of the party was his habit of meeting us in the corridors, inviting us into his office to smoke a cigarette, and passing five or ten minutes in asking us how Bill Jones was in such and such a village... and inquiring about our own studies and our interests. After ten minutes' talking we returned to the House ready and eager to do anything we possibly could for the leader with whom we were in such perfect communication of heart and mind. Laurier had what Meighen never had, a natural and unaffected charm of personality. He had the gift of being loved; Meighen had the gift of being admired by those who agreed with him."¹

Admittedly, Power's judgment was influenced by his association with Laurier as a member of the Liberal caucus after 1917. The following assessment of Laurier made by Arthur Meighen, however, comes remarkably close to that of Chubby Power. "Laurier was" remarked Arthur Meighen "so spontaneously affable, a personality so universally gracious and engaging that one liked him, sometimes followed him, though he believed him wrong."²

¹ Power Memoirs, p. 73.

² The Toronto Telegram, Jan. 17, 1939 cited in J. H. R. Wilbur ed. The Bennett New Deal: Fraud or Portent? (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing Company,) 1968 . p. 244.

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