

FOCUS ON Conscription

Is it ever right to force citizens to go to war?

When Britain declared war, Canada had no choice but to go to war, too. But the government did have a choice about how much it would help the Allies, including how many troops it would send.

Robert Borden's Promise

At first, Canadians were so enthusiastic about the war that volunteers were turned away from recruiting offices. As a result, Prime Minister Robert Borden promised that the government would not introduce **conscription**; in other words, the government would not force people to enlist in the army.

Volunteers Decrease

As the war dragged on, more and more Canadians were injured or killed in battle. As a result, fewer volunteers were signing up.

Other factors also reduced enlistment. War industries, such as manufacturing weapons, had created high-paying jobs. Many workers, especially those with families, did not want to leave these jobs to enlist. And farmers worried about what would happen to their farms if they left to join the fighting.

Like many English-speaking Canadians, many French Canadians were also reluctant to sign up. They felt no strong connection to Britain — or to France, which had given up its claim to Canada more than 150 years earlier. In addition, many French Canadians were farmers who shared the concerns of farmers in other parts of Canada.

What's more, French Canadians faced a language barrier. French-speaking soldiers were often placed in English units, and all the army's instructions, manuals, and commands were in English. This made things hard for French speakers.

creation of a list of people who must go to war

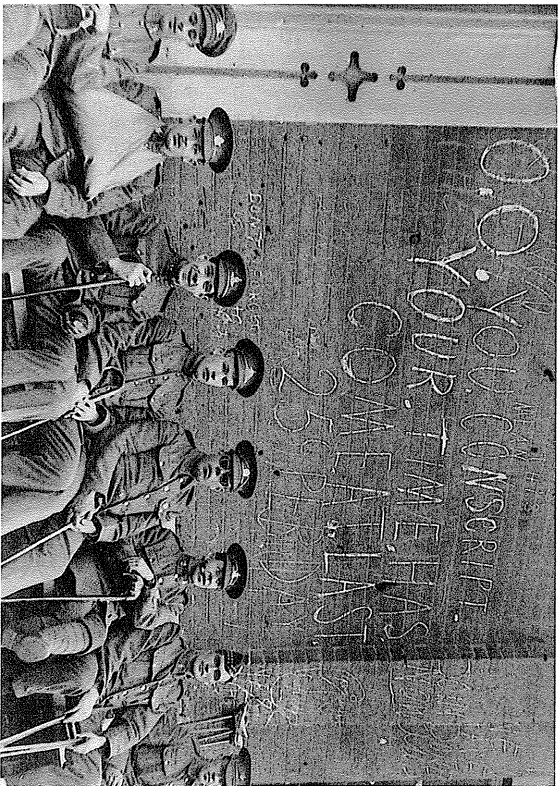
conscription

conscripts are forced to serve in the armed forces

caused violent protests and riots

an issue that bitterly divided Canada

from the root word "scribe" — to write down or list



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 736

▲ **Figure 1.25** Many men who were already in the army supported conscription. They regarded men who didn't sign up as slackers. The writing on this wall in Toronto warns slackers that they will be conscripted.

Introducing Conscription

When voluntary enlistments slowed to a trickle, Borden went back on his promise and decided that conscription was the only way to raise enough troops. In June 1917, the government passed the Military Service Act, which introduced conscription.

The reaction was immediate. Many people, such as the families of those who were already overseas, supported the act. But many others were outraged by the idea of being forced to fight. Feelings ran high. Violent protests and even riots broke out, especially in Quebec. There, Henri Bourassa, a prominent politician and newspaper publisher, helped lead the opposition to conscription.

When a federal election was called later in 1917, conscription was the main issue. The campaign was bitter, but in the end, Borden was returned to office. Conscription became a reality.

In January 1918, more than 400 000 men across Canada received a letter ordering them to report for duty. In response, 94 per cent asked to be excused from service — and nearly all these requests were granted. Many other conscripts disobeyed the order. Some even went into hiding to avoid arrest.

Although the conscription issue had divided the country, it made little difference to the war effort. By the end of the war, only 24 000 of those who fought overseas were conscripts.

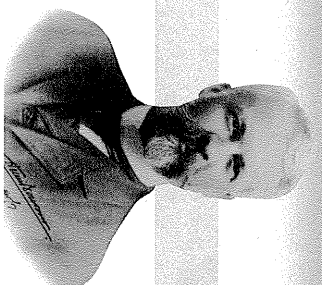
SHOW YOU KNOW

1. List four reasons for the decline in the number of men who enlisted voluntarily.
2. Imagine that you are Robert Borden, the prime minister during World War I. Would you have introduced conscription if you had known how things were going to turn out? Explain the reasons for your answer.

Henri Bourassa

1868–1952

- ▶ Born in Montreal, Quebec.
- ▶ Elected mayor of Montebello, Quebec, at age 22.
- ▶ Elected to House of Commons in 1896 but resigned in 1899 to protest sending Canadian troops to a war in South Africa.
- ▶ Elected to Quebec Assembly in 1908.
- ▶ Founded Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir*, which continues to publish today.
- ▶ At first, cautiously supported Canada's involvement in World War I.
- ▶ Strongly opposed conscription and led the fight in Quebec against it.



**ATTENDRONS-NOUS QUE
LES NÔTRES BRÛLENT?
ENRÔLONS-NOUS et tout de suite**

Dans le
178
ième

Bataillon
CANADIEN
FRANCAIS

Commandé par le
Lt. Col. Girouard
et six autres officiers du
22^e tous de retour du
Front.

INFORMATIONS:
AUX QUARTIERS GÉNÉRAUX
SHERBROOKE P.Q.
OU COM. STAMPEL ET S. CATHERINE
MONTREAL

Figure 1.26 To attract French-speaking Canadians, recruitment posters were produced in French.