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## Angus L. Macdonald and the Conscription Crisis of 1944

THE CONSCRIPTION CRISIS WHICH VERY NEARLY toppled the Mackenzie King government and divided the country in the autumn months of 1944 has been well documented and is one of the more familiar episodes in the story of the Canadian involvement in the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> From mid-October to early December, the Government of Canada seemed to be in a constant state of crisis, threatening self-immolation at any moment. In the end, King's government endured, lost only two ministers, imposed a limited form of conscription, survived a parliamentary vote of confidence and, after the end of hostilities in Europe, won the next federal election.

In analyzing the dramatic crisis, most observers either have focused on Prime Minister King's actions or have attempted to take a broad view of the situation, putting the events into some sort of larger context. However, as J.E. Rea noted, "there is always the danger that we may over-emphasize the importance of context"<sup>2</sup> and overlook the roles played by individuals. In this case, the role of one key cabinet minister — Angus L. Macdonald, Minister of National Defence for Naval Services — has only superficially been examined. This is significant in that many observers at the time, both inside and outside of the cabinet, believed that the survival of the government could turn on Macdonald's decision whether or not to resign in support of his colleague, J.L. Ralston, Minister of National Defence. While Macdonald is typically painted as an ardent supporter of conscription who was outmanoeuvred by King, this paper will show that Macdonald's decision to remain in the government and his efforts to achieve a viable solution to the conscription crisis contributed substantially to the survival of Mackenzie King's government and to the preservation of an admittedly strained unity in Canada.

1 See, for example, Bruce Hutchison, *The Incredible Canadian - A Candid Portrait of Mackenzie King: His Works, His Times and His Nation* (Toronto, 1952), pp. 340-98; R. MacGregor Dawson, *The Conscription Crisis of 1944* (Toronto, 1961); Maurice Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians: The Memoirs of Lt.-Gen. Maurice A. Pope, C.B., M.C.* (Toronto, 1962), pp. 247-61; C.G. Power, *A Party Politician: The Memoirs of Chubby Power*, Norman Ward, ed. (Toronto, 1966), pp. 150-78; J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster, *The Mackenzie King Record: Volume 2, 1944-1945* (Toronto, 1968), pp. 111-277; J.L. Granatstein, *Conscription in the Second World War: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto, 1969); C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 424-81; J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Governments, 1939-1945* (Toronto, 1975), pp. 333-81; J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 185-244, and Brian Nolan, *King's War: Mackenzie King and the Politics of War, 1939-1945* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 122-53.

2 J.E. Rea, "The Mackenzie King Controversy: 'Clay from Feet to Forehead'", *The Beaver*, 73, 2 (April-May 1993), p. 34.

Angus Lewis Macdonald, familiarly known as “Angus L.,” was widely considered one of the bright lights in the Liberal Party when he left the Premier’s office in Nova Scotia to serve in Mackenzie King’s cabinet in the summer of 1940. Macdonald had come to power in Halifax in 1933 and he proved to be one of the more popular provincial premiers — particularly within the Liberal Party — during the difficult years of the Depression.<sup>3</sup> In putting together a new cabinet after his victory in the 1940 General Election, Mackenzie King invited Macdonald in to help counter the argument that King was running the War with “an old government and old policies”.<sup>4</sup> King’s government had been greatly weakened by the death, on 10 June 1940, of Norman Rogers, a close friend of Macdonald and the former Minister of National Defence. Macdonald was elected in Rogers’ riding of Kingston, Ontario and was given the portfolio for Naval Services. Several people commented to Macdonald that it seemed he was being groomed to succeed Mackenzie King after the war.<sup>5</sup> This was not to be, however; when Macdonald left federal politics in April 1945, he was very bitter toward the Prime Minister, and the feeling was mutual.<sup>6</sup>

Conscription was not a new problem for Canada or for the Liberal Party in 1944. In 1917, the party had been split when many of its anglophone members supported conscription and joined the coalition government headed by Sir Robert Borden, while their leader, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, stood opposed to conscription. The issue had bitterly divided the nation, and Mackenzie King, eyewitness to the first conscription crisis, tried desperately to avoid another.

In 1942, King’s government called a national plebiscite, asking Canadians to release its members from a pledge they had made at the beginning of the Second World War and again in the election campaign of 1940 not to impose conscription for overseas service. Although the government was already conscripting men for service within Canada under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA),<sup>7</sup> it had promised the nation, and particularly Quebec, that it would not send any conscripts to serve overseas. In part, this promise was made to try to ensure a united war effort in Canada. The results of the plebiscite, held on 27 April 1942, only highlighted the divisions in Canada on the issue of conscription. Though the national vote showed that 64 per cent of Canadians were in favour of releasing the government from its pledge, 71 per cent of voters in Quebec, the province to whom the promise was originally made, opposed such a release.<sup>8</sup>

3 For Macdonald’s record as provincial premier, see J. Murray Beck, *Murray to Buchanan, 1896-1988*, vol. 2 of *The Politics of Nova Scotia* (Tantallon, Nova Scotia, 1988), pp. 153-86 and 205-37.

4 Clipping “Angus L. Macdonald Won Leadership with Speech”, *Ottawa Journal*, 27 July 1940, Angus L. Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1512, no. 526, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS]. See also clipping from the *Sydney Post-Accord*, 14 October 1941, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1478, no. 1, PANS.

5 See for example, Senator W.H. Dennis to Macdonald, 9 July 1940, and clipping, “Macdonald Won Leadership”, *Ottawa Journal*, 27 July 1940, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1505, no. 411, and MacIsaac to Macdonald, 21 July 1940, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1518, no. 757, PANS.

6 “I must say I have been deeply disappointed with Macdonald”, W.L. Mackenzie King, *Mackenzie King Diaries, 1932-1945*, microfiche (Toronto, 1980), 11 April 1945.

7 For a description of the provisions of the NRMA, see Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, pp. 142-3.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-71.

Parliament then embarked on a debate on Bill 80, the legislation intended to repeal the limitations in the National Resources Mobilization Act which prevented the government from sending NRMA troops overseas. The passage of Bill 80 did not impose conscription for overseas service, however. In his most celebrated phrase, King said the policy of his government was “not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary”.<sup>9</sup> Even if conscription became necessary, King initially implied that he would bring the matter before the House of Commons for a full debate. Two of his defence ministers, Ralston and Macdonald, were outraged by this plan, arguing that this would be an unnecessary delay, as the plebiscite and the debate on Bill 80 had given the government the legal and moral authority to impose conscription when it became necessary. Ralston threatened to resign — and, indeed, submitted his resignation — but was persuaded by Macdonald to remain,<sup>10</sup> and King agreed to a more expedient policy if conscription became necessary. The government would impose conscription by order-in-council, but would then seek a vote of confidence in the House of Commons before implementing it. One of the most important results of the debate over Bill 80 was that it solidified the “voluntary enlistment” and “conscription” wings in cabinet.<sup>11</sup> Equally significant, the dangerous disagreement over the meaning of the word “necessary” in King’s statement was not resolved,<sup>12</sup> but, until the autumn of 1944, there was no apparent crisis to bring the issue to the fore.

The essence of the conscription crisis in 1944 concerned the shortage of infantry reinforcements for the five Canadian divisions and two armoured brigades fighting in Europe. Although the government had been assured on 3 August 1944 by Lieutenant-General Kenneth Stuart, Chief of Staff at Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ), London, that there were “plenty of reserves”,<sup>13</sup> a shortage of infantry reinforcements was already developing. In fact, a deficiency in reinforcements had been perceived early in 1944, and the Canadian General Staff had made some attempt to remuster troops from other arms to infantry service, a process that took some months’ retraining.<sup>14</sup> However, the problem was forgotten until August, when the Canadian campaign in northwestern Europe was at its height.

The day after Stuart assured the Cabinet War Committee that there were enough reinforcements for the duration of the war, the commander of the First Canadian Army in North West Europe, General H.D.G. Crerar, cabled him with contradictory information. Crerar’s telegram of 4 August read, in part:

Am concerned about the infantry general duty deficiencies which

9 Nolan, *King’s War*, p. 86.

10 Granatstein, *Canada’s War*, p. 240.

11 Memorandum in King’s Papers, n.d. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 363.

12 For King, “necessary” meant necessary to win the war; for Ralston, it meant necessary to support the army in the field. See Rea, “The Conscription Crisis: What Really Happened?” *The Beaver*, 74, 2 (April-May 1994), p. 17.

13 Pickersgill and Forster, *Mackenzie King Record*, p. 111.

14 Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, pp. 432, and 437-8. Granatstein has observed that the remustering process was often rushed into a space of three to four weeks, a period — in his opinion — too short to be effective. See J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto, 1993), p. 230.

approximate 1900. Our ability to continue severe fighting or to exploit a break out would be seriously restricted through lack of replacement personnel...I consider this the most serious problem of Cdn Army at the moment and to require most energetic handling.<sup>15</sup>

Crerar sent another cable on 8 August urging that “vigorous remustering and strenuous conversion training” be initiated to solve the developing reinforcement problem.<sup>16</sup> However, in August 1944, Germany seemed to be on the verge of collapse, and it appeared that the war in Europe would end before the new year.<sup>17</sup> Stuart, therefore, saw no reason to alarm the government.

Rumours that there was a crisis in reinforcements became public in mid-September 1944 when Major Conn Smythe, the builder of the Toronto Maple Leafs who was convalescing in Canada after being wounded in France, charged that men who were poorly trained and, in some instances, only partly recovered from wounds were being sent into battle, endangering the lives of all Canadian troops at the front.<sup>18</sup> The Conservative Premier of Ontario, George Drew, took up Smythe’s accusations and again raised the clarion call for conscription.<sup>19</sup> Ralston soon left on a three-week tour of Europe to assess the situation first-hand.

The Minister of National Defence returned from the front on 18 October and went immediately to see the Prime Minister. Ralston told King that the war in Europe was now expected to last into 1945, possibly into the spring, and that casualties among the infantry were far higher than had been anticipated. The pool of troops used to replenish front line units was dangerously low and was expected to be exhausted by the end of the year. To meet this shortage, the Army required 16 000 trained infantry. Ralston believed that the only way to obtain the necessary reinforcements was to extend the terms of service of the NRMA troops to include duty overseas. King’s greatest fear, a divisive struggle over conscription, was being realized in the last months of the war.<sup>20</sup>

Ralston presented his report on the reinforcement situation to the War Committee the next day, and the news came as a shock to all. Even Macdonald, who, as far back as December 1941,<sup>21</sup> had informed cabinet of his intention to support conscription if it were necessary, asked for time to consider this news. “He had his views on it but would like to think them over as to whether he had been right or wrong”.<sup>22</sup> In the first

15 Quoted in Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p. 437.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 438.

17 For evidence of optimism about an early end to hostilities, see Grant Dexter, *Ottawa at War: The Grant Dexter Memoranda, 1939-1945*, F.W. Gibson and Barbara Robertson, eds. (Winnipeg, 1994), p. 480. Grant Dexter memo to George V. Ferguson, 17 September 1944. Dexter was a reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press* and had superb and intimate contacts in Ottawa. This collection of memos written to his editors, J.W. Dafeo and Ferguson, provides valuable and perceptive insights into the political world of Ottawa throughout the war.

18 Smythe’s charges appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* on 19 September 1944. Quoted in Granatstein, *Canada’s War*, pp. 338-9, and Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p. 440.

19 Drew to King, 30 September 1944, Mackenzie King Papers, MG26, J1, vol. 359, reel C7050, National Archives of Canada [NAC].

20 King, *Diaries*, 18 October 1944.

21 *Ibid.*, 10 December 1941.

22 *Ibid.*, 19 October 1944.

few days of the crisis, it seemed that Ralston was the only member of the government convinced that conscription had become necessary. When the War Committee met again the next day, King suggested that another appeal to NRMA troops to volunteer for overseas service — to “go active” — be made. Angus Macdonald, King wrote, “much to my relief, took up this idea, though he kept supporting Ralston in a general way, but I could see that he had begun to realize that there were real difficulties”.<sup>23</sup> Macdonald was clearly not intent on bringing in conscription at any cost; from his experience as Premier of Nova Scotia, he knew that a good leader had to be flexible.

King was worried “that Ralston himself may again take it into his mind to tender his resignation because of what he feels the reinforcement situation demands, and that Angus Macdonald may decide to leave the Government to go to Nova Scotia, Ilsley taking the view that he must stand by Ralston and Macdonald”.<sup>24</sup> Ralston and Macdonald were both from Nova Scotia, as was J.L. Ilsley, Minister of Finance. King recognized that if two Nova Scotians left the cabinet, it might be politically impossible for Ilsley to remain, and the loss of three key ministers could lead to the downfall of a government. C.D. Howe, Minister of Munitions and Supply, claimed that “[t]he three Nova Scotians were a sub-cabinet in themselves”.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, many members of the cabinet, including King, believed that Macdonald’s resignation would precipitate Ilsley’s and possibly others as well. Thus, Rea noted in his analysis of the situation, “in the end, it seems Angus L. was the critical factor”.<sup>26</sup>

Macdonald was searching for a satisfactory compromise, but he also stood ready to defend his good friend Ralston. Realizing that Ralston would only grow more entrenched in his position in the face of opposition, Chubby Power urged King, on 25 October, to get Macdonald and Ilsley to meet with Ralston alone. Power thought that they were the two most likely to influence Ralston.<sup>27</sup> King agreed to try but feared he would have little influence with Macdonald who disliked him as a result of his refusal to allow the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to operate with the Royal Navy (RN) in the Indian Ocean.<sup>28</sup> Regardless, the two men met the next day to discuss the crisis.

King testified to Macdonald’s conciliatory attitude in his diary: “Angus said he saw the difficulties. Was very much concerned about everything himself, but Ralston was hard to deal with”. It was agreed that Macdonald and Power would meet with Ralston and his advisors to go over the Army’s figures to see whether the reinforcements

23 *Ibid.*, 20 October 1944.

24 *Ibid.*, 18 October 1944.

25 Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe, a Biography* (Toronto, 1979), p. 134. Ralston and Macdonald had been friends since the 1920s, and it was Ralston who first put Macdonald in touch with King. See Ralston to King, 19 November 1930, King Papers, MG26, J1, vol. 180, reel C2322, NAC. After he had left public life, Ralston delivered a speech to assist in Macdonald’s reelection campaign for Premier of Nova Scotia. See “Speech on Behalf of Angus L. Macdonald”, 2 October 1945, Ralston Papers, MG27, B11, vol. 175, NAC.

26 J.E. Rea, “A View from the Lectern”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series, Vol. 2 (1991), Presidential Address, p. 15.

27 King, *Diaries*, 25 October 1944. Ian Mackenzie, Minister of National Health and Welfare, had also advised King to get Macdonald and Ilsley to try to influence Ralston not to push for conscription. *Ibid.*, 21 October 1944.

28 *Ibid.*, 25 October 1944. King believed that any action in the Indian Ocean was solely designed to reclaim parts of the British Empire, and he wanted no part of an “Imperial war”. *Ibid.*, 13 September 1944.

could not be had without resorting to the conscription of NRMA soldiers. King appeared to recognize that Macdonald was, indeed, trying to help. “He impressed me as realizing more than heretofore the seriousness of the situation. I think he still holds to the desirability of attempting conscription”.<sup>29</sup> Although Macdonald was not surrendering his principles, he was making every effort to avoid the very crisis which King feared.

That evening in Ralston’s office, Power and Macdonald pored over the Army’s reinforcement figures. Power had found it incredible that, while there were 120 000 general service — i.e. volunteer — personnel in Canada and another 90 000 in Britain, 16 000 soldiers fit for infantry service could not be found without resorting to conscription. He found the Army regulations for infantry too rigid and wondered whether the General Staff was making a sincere effort to meet the situation without resorting to conscription.<sup>30</sup> The Army used a system called PULHEMS<sup>31</sup> to evaluate its personnel. To qualify for general infantry service, a soldier had to score 1111221 in the respective PULHEMS categories, a much higher standard than the British Army used to screen its infantry troops. As well, the minimum age for infantry was set at 19 years, though Power, and others in the War Committee, recommended lowering it to 18½. Nonetheless, neither he nor Macdonald contradicted the General Staff’s essential version of the situation. Power also commented on Macdonald’s flexible nature. “During all this I thought Macdonald was doing the best he could to be helpful, and to avoid the cabinet crisis we both thought was likely to occur”.<sup>32</sup>

Power and Macdonald reported the results of their efforts the next day to the War Committee. From this point on, the crisis was played out in front of the full cabinet, where King thought the position of the conscriptionist ministers was not so strong. King calculated that in the War Committee Ralston, Macdonald and Ilsley would have the support of T.A. Crerar, Minister of Mines and Resources, and possibly Power, while King could count on only Louis St. Laurent, Minister of Justice, J.E. Michaud, Minister of Transportation, and possibly Howe. This was too close a contest for King, and he preferred to conduct business in the cabinet where he believed the vote against conscription would be about 13 to eight.<sup>33</sup> The change of venue did nothing to bring about a solution, but the two sides did come closer to a compromise. On 31 October, Macdonald suggested that the Canadian front line be shortened to ease the burden on the infantry, but this point was not followed up.<sup>34</sup> He was also prepared to accept King’s offer of one last appeal to the NRMA men to go active and was willing to have

29 *Ibid.*, 26 October 1944.

30 “I began to suspect that in the minds of these generals the infantry man of today must almost be an honours college graduate”. Power, *Party Politician*, p. 154.

31 PULHEMS stood for Physique, Upper extremities, Lower Extremities, Hearing, Eyesight, Mental capacity and Stability. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p. 451.

32 Power, *Party Politician*, p. 155.

33 King, *Diaries*, 20 and 25 October 1944. King was not entirely accurate in his assessment: Crerar had not yet changed his mind, and Power was prepared to resign rather than accept conscription. Nevertheless, after 27 October 1944, the War Committee met on 9 November and then not again until 11 December. Minutes of the War Committee of the Cabinet, 27 October, 9 November and 11 December 1944, RG2, vol. 16, NAC.

34 King, *Diaries*, 31 October 1944. This would have been difficult to arrange as it would have required approval and coordination from Canada’s allies at the highest military, if not political, levels.

the appeal on King's terms.<sup>35</sup> This meant that no decision would be made about conscription until the end of the appeal. Ralston, however, insisted on a commitment to conscription should the appeal fail.<sup>36</sup>

On 1 November, Ralston and Macdonald spoke with Major-General G.R. Pearkes, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Pacific Command, from a telephone in Ralston's office. Pearkes was in charge of most of the camps with NRMA personnel, and the two defence ministers hoped to get a clear picture of the possible success of another appeal to these troops. Pearkes advised Macdonald that it would take a few weeks to make the appeal, and then another week or two for the soldiers to make up their minds. He told Macdonald that it would be possible to gauge the success or failure of the appeal by 30 November, and he also advised against saying that conscription would be applied if the appeal failed, as most of the NRMA personnel would then wait for the government to order them overseas.<sup>37</sup> Before the two ministers went into that afternoon's cabinet meeting, Macdonald had apparently convinced Ralston to accept King's offer of an appeal without a guarantee that conscription would be imposed should it fail.<sup>38</sup> In spite of Ralston's new willingness to compromise, however, this was to be his last cabinet meeting.

Mackenzie King had been anticipating Ralston's resignation since the defence minister's return from Europe and had been considering a suitable replacement.<sup>39</sup> He settled on Lieutenant-General Andrew G.L. McNaughton, former commander of the First Canadian Army in Britain. McNaughton had been removed from command in 1943 at the urging of the Imperial General Staff, who believed he was not fit to command in the field. McNaughton and Ralston had had a bitter confrontation over the incident, but McNaughton was brought home to Canada without the public becoming aware of the situation.<sup>40</sup> Thus, his reputation as Canada's leading soldier was still intact when King approached him on 31 October to see whether he would be willing to replace Ralston and make an effort to secure the necessary reinforcements through the voluntary system.<sup>41</sup> McNaughton said that he would come into the government, and he expressed great faith in the voluntary system, believing that his reputation would go a long way toward convincing NRMA soldiers to go active.

Though King later claimed that he had thought of getting McNaughton to replace Ralston only on the morning of 1 November,<sup>42</sup> the day Ralston was dismissed, he had had the idea very early in the crisis.<sup>43</sup> In fact, on 20 October King let Louis St. Laurent,

35 Macdonald, untitled memorandum of the events of 1 November 1944, prepared 2 or 3 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS. See also King, *Diaries*, 31 October 1944.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Conversation reported in Reginald H. Roy, *For Most Conspicuous Bravery: A Biography of Major-General George V. Pearkes, V.C., Through Two World Wars* (Vancouver, 1977), pp. 220-2.

38 See Macdonald, untitled memo, 2 or 3 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS. See also John Swettenham, *McNaughton: Volume 3, 1944-1946* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 45-6.

39 King, *Diaries*, 18 October 1944.

40 For an account of the Ralston-McNaughton falling out, see Granatstein, *Generals*, pp. 61-80.

41 King, *Diaries*, 31 October 1944.

42 See, for example, House of Commons, *Debates*, 19th Parliament, 5th Session (Ottawa, 1945), 27 November 1944, p. 6603, and Hutchison, *Incredible Canadian*, pp. 355-6. Hutchison wrote that King had thought of McNaughton the night before (31 October).

43 King, *Diaries*, 19 October 1944.

his Minister of Justice and Quebec lieutenant, know of his plan and implied that the threat of McNaughton would compel Ralston and Stuart to be more compliant.<sup>44</sup> As well, other anti-conscriptionist members of the government had suggested that King inquire of McNaughton whether he would be willing to replace Ralston.<sup>45</sup>

If King did intend to use McNaughton to keep Ralston and his senior military advisers in line, it would make sense that the Prime Minister would let slip his intentions in order to inform Ralston indirectly of the threat. At least two observers outside the government either heard or guessed what King was up to. On the evening of 31 October, Grant Dexter and Bruce Hutchison, two of the most respected and well-connected Ottawa journalists at the time, told Macdonald that they thought the Army had created the situation and handled it poorly. They also speculated that King would bring in McNaughton to replace Ralston, but would introduce conscription before he allowed Ilsley, Macdonald and possibly other ministers to break from the government.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Macdonald was at least aware of the possibility that McNaughton would replace Ralston, and this may have helped him to convince Ralston to be more conciliatory at the cabinet meeting on 1 November.

Macdonald's efforts and Ralston's readiness to accept King's compromise were not enough, however, to prevent the Prime Minister from dismissing the Minister of National Defence. King had begun to perceive a conspiracy to oust him among the ministers urging conscription.<sup>47</sup> It was, perhaps, more than a coincidence that the ministers who opposed King's social security programme — family allowances, old age pensions and so on — were also pressing for conscription for overseas service.<sup>48</sup> However, there is no evidence to support the notion of a conspiracy beyond King's own paranoid assertions that the reinforcement crisis had been concocted to destroy him.<sup>49</sup> King's suspicions prevented him from appreciating the efforts of Macdonald and others to build a consensus within cabinet and avoid a split.

In cabinet on 1 November, King observed that Macdonald was making every effort to reach a compromise, noting that he "was as conciliatory as possible and put forward, while Ralston was out of the room, what he thought Ralston was prepared to consider in further ways".<sup>50</sup> King patiently waited for Ralston to say, as he had said

44 *Ibid.*, 20 October 1944.

45 King wrote that Howe and Mackenzie both advised getting McNaughton to replace Ralston. *Ibid.*, 31 October 1944.

46 Macdonald's Diary, 31 October 1944, quoted in Granatstein, *Canada's War*, pp. 353-4. Hutchison, and especially Dexter had earned the trust not only of Macdonald, but of most of the prominent cabinet ministers, including Mackenzie King. It seems to have been understood that they would not betray confidences. See Gibson and Robertson, eds., *Ottawa at War*, Introduction, p. xxvi.

47 According to his diary, on 24 October, King began to suspect that the purpose of the crisis was to remove him from office; by 30 October he was convinced of the existence of a conspiracy. King, *Diaries*, 24 and 30 October 1944.

48 See Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 350-1, and Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, p. 218.

49 King, *Diaries*, 1 November 1944.

50 *Ibid.* For other accounts of the events on 1 November, see Macdonald, untitled memo, 2 or 3 November, and J. L. Ilsley, "Memorandum of events leading up to the resignation of Colonel Ralston...prepared some weeks after Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>", Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS; and T.A. Crerar, "Notes for the record on the recent crisis in the Government over reinforcements", 26 December 1944, T.A. Crerar Papers, Collection no. 2117, box 119, Queen's University Archives [QUA].



before, that he would have to resign if his recommendation were not accepted; he waited for him to argue that the government must commit itself to conscription before launching an appeal to the NRMA troops. Ralston did neither, and King became suspicious. He was certain that Ralston's amenable attitude was part of "a scheme to make the situation still more difficult for me".<sup>51</sup> In fact, Ralston appeared to be following Macdonald's advice and trying to resolve the crisis.

King could not wait for Ralston to resign. He informed his ministers that he felt an appeal to the NRMA soldiers to volunteer for overseas service could succeed only if organized by someone who believed it would succeed. Ralston had expressed the belief that such an appeal would fail, and this would impinge on its effectiveness, King said. He then announced that he was forced to accept Ralston's resignation which had been submitted two years previously during the debate over Bill 80. King was bringing General McNaughton in, certain that he would have the confidence of all Canadians, and that, by his reputation alone, he would help to make the appeal successful. Ralston was summarily dismissed in front of his cabinet colleagues, and McNaughton was sworn in as Minister of National Defence the next day.

George Currie, Ralston's Deputy Minister, had helped Ralston write out his letter of resignation on the evening of 31 October. Ralston had made two very prophetic comments to Currie. First, he said that if King were clever, "he would fire him before he could get his resignation in". Second, he said that he felt that in this crisis "he was all alone".<sup>52</sup> King did fire him, and Ralston left the cabinet alone.

Most observers have found it necessary to explain why, when King "accepted" Ralston's resignation, no other member of the cabinet resigned in support of the Defence Minister. This question is especially intriguing when asked of Angus L. Macdonald. Macdonald would seem to be the cabinet minister with the least to lose: he was an outsider who had been appointed for service during the war, and he had never expressed any intention to stay in federal politics after the war; in fact, Macdonald had already made up his mind that he would leave Ottawa, and rumours of his private decision were circulating in late October.<sup>53</sup> The Prime Minister was aware of this.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Macdonald was reasonably sure of regaining the Premiership of Nova Scotia, which was under the caretakership of his old friend A.S. MacMillan,<sup>55</sup> and therefore, unlike most of the other members of the cabinet, was not dependent on Mackenzie King for his political future.

Macdonald had identified himself with the conscriptionists as early as December 1941, and King fully expected him to resign if the government failed to endorse this

51 King, *Diaries*, 1 November 1944.

52 G.S. Currie, "Private and confidential", 4 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS.

53 For evidence that news of Macdonald's departure was in the air, see Rod MacSween to Macdonald, 26 October 1944, Macdonald Papers, vol. 1518, no. 764, PANS, and Dexter, *Ottawa at War*, p. 483: Memo to Ferguson, 25 September 1944.

54 King, *Diaries*, 20 October 1944.

55 See Beck, *Murray to Buchanan*, pp. 187-203.

policy.<sup>56</sup> Other observers at the time believed that Macdonald was one of the leading conscriptionists in the government, though he had not publicly stated his position.<sup>57</sup> Here, it seemed, was a solid platform from which to support conscription, which Macdonald favoured because it offered “equality of sacrifice”. Yet Macdonald did not resign in order to force the issue or to support Ralston’s position. Why did Macdonald stay on in a government which was moving in a direction of which he did not approve?

The most common answer among historians has been that Macdonald and the rest of the cabinet were stunned into passivity by King’s swift move to oust Ralston. R. MacGregor Dawson, for example, argued that King’s action was the best way out of a very perilous situation for the government. “The move, as it was actually carried out, caught everyone by surprise and made instantaneous concerted action almost impossible, and once that dangerous corner had been turned the situation became relatively safe”.<sup>58</sup> In one of his earlier treatments of the event, J.L. Granatstein wrote that: “[Ralston’s] fellow conscriptionists were stunned into silence as King announced that McNaughton would put his enormous prestige into an all-out effort to persuade NRMA soldiers to volunteer for overseas duty. It appeared that King had carried the trick”.<sup>59</sup> Colonel C.P. Stacey, the official historian of the Canadian Army, also took this position: “The Prime Minister’s tactical plan had been a complete success. The conscriptionists, totally taken by surprise, were in no position to act together”.<sup>60</sup> This assessment certainly has some merit; Crerar’s, Ilsley’s, and Macdonald’s accounts of the 1 November cabinet meeting all describe their being surprised at King’s move.<sup>61</sup> Surprise, however, wears off. What kept the conscriptionist ministers from taking action shortly after the cabinet meeting, or even mentioning in cabinet that they might have to “consider” their situations carefully, as Macdonald had said only the previous day?<sup>62</sup>

Another explanation is that the ministers felt obliged to give McNaughton a chance to meet the situation without resorting to conscription.<sup>63</sup> Macdonald himself

56 In a cabinet discussion on 9 and 10 December 1941, King had surveyed his ministers’ positions on conscription and Macdonald appeared to have been the strongest voice in favour of it, though even he did not believe that it was warranted by the war’s situation at that point. King, *Diaries*, 9 and 10 December 1941. For King’s expectations of Macdonald’s actions, see *ibid.*, 18, 30, and 31 October 1944.

57 See J.J. Connolly, Executive Assistant, Minister for Naval Services, to Macdonald, 2 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1500, no. 291, PANS: “...while the papers have said you wanted ‘conscription now,’ you personally have never said so publicly. Under Bill 80 you went farther than any other Minister but then you said, not that you wanted conscription at once, but that when necessary conscription should be applied...” For evidence that Macdonald was publicly identified as a supporter of conscription, see “Home Defence Army Will Again Be Debated?” *Halifax Herald*, 30 October 1944, p. 1, and “Cabinet Crisis in 8th Day”, *Winnipeg Free Press*, 1 November 1944, pp. 1 and 7.

58 Dawson, *Conscription Crisis*, p. 51.

59 Granatstein, *Conscription in the Second World War*, p. 59.

60 Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p. 458.

61 See Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS, for Macdonald’s and Ilsley’s accounts, and Crerar, “Notes for the record”, 26 December 1944, Crerar Papers, Collection no. 2117, box 119, QUA.

62 King, *Diaries*, 31 October 1944.

63 See, for example, Granatstein, *Canada’s War*, p. 357, and Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p. 459.

noted in a letter to Premier MacMillan that he felt McNaughton ought to be given a chance to see if he could make the volunteer system work: if successful, he should be supported; if unsuccessful, the cabinet would then have to make up its mind as to the best course of action.<sup>64</sup> By acknowledging that McNaughton did deserve an opportunity to make the voluntary system work, Macdonald implicitly repudiated Ralston's position on the reinforcement situation.

In an intriguing and persuasive shift away from traditional accounts of the conscription crisis, Rea argued that Ralston's colleagues who supported conscription did not walk out with him because they questioned his judgment and his assessment of the situation.<sup>65</sup> In particular, some believed that Ralston had been badly advised by his Army officers, who needed to be reined in. T.A. Crerar, a close friend of Macdonald, did not trust Ralston's department and had opposed almost every expansion in Army numbers requested by the General Staff.<sup>66</sup> Certainly Mackenzie King believed that the entire situation was directly attributable to mismanagement on the Army's part,<sup>67</sup> and there is evidence to support this view.

The General Staff had perceived a shortage of infantry as early as January 1944, and yet had failed to implement an aggressive remustering programme, even as other branches of the Armed Forces were discharging excess personnel.<sup>68</sup> Had a more farsighted campaign of converting soldiers to infantry been pursued throughout the summer of 1944, it would certainly have eased the reinforcement crisis which arose in the autumn, though it may not have completely circumvented it.

An even more blatant example of poor management was the concealment of telegrams sent by General Crerar to CMHQ in the days after General Stuart had given the War Committee his assurance that there were enough reinforcements for the duration of the war. Crerar's telegrams pointed to an impending shortage of trained infantry reinforcements, yet Stuart did not pass them on to the Defence Minister. Later, Stuart himself cabled Ottawa from London warning, in much less alarmist language, about a shortage of properly trained infantry replacements.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, Ralston ignored Stuart's message, and he did not see Crerar's telegrams until 24 October.<sup>70</sup> Although the delivery of these telegrams might not have prevented the resulting crisis, Stuart's negligence seemed evident; in a War Committee meeting, King seemed to lay the blame squarely at Stuart's feet:

64 Macdonald to MacMillan, 7 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, file 385, PANS.

65 Rea, "The Conscription Crisis", p. 19. Rea's perceptive article — unfortunately lacking footnotes — analyzed the position of the entire cabinet, not just Macdonald's, and he did address the specific question of why ministers who supported conscription seemed not to support Ralston at the critical moment.

66 Crerar told Macdonald that he thought Ralston's dismissal would be a good lesson for the General Staff. Macdonald Diary, 3 November 1944, quoted in Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 357. Crerar made a similar comment to King: "[Crerar] never wanted to have a large army. He thought that all the defence departments were no good and said so right along". King, *Diaries*, 26 October 1944.

67 King, *Diaries*, 19 October 1944.

68 Power's Royal Canadian Air Force was in the process of reducing its Canadian establishment by 10 per cent in the summer and fall of 1944. Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 338.

69 Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, pp. 439-40. Stuart's telegram to the Chief of the General Staff was dated 26 August 1944.

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 437-40.

I asked Stuart about his statement, his assurance two months ago as to there being plenty of reinforcements, and also about the additional brigade in Italy not making any additional drain on manpower. He gave some sort of an explanation about the latter that it simply meant changing over certain units; did not touch on the question of extra men involved. As to the former, he said he had made a mistake. Later I said to him that having given us the wrong information and having made a mistake, I hoped he would, as I knew he would, do all he could to help the govt. out of the present situation.<sup>71</sup>

Observers outside the government were also critical of the General Staff. Victor Sifton, Master-General of the Ordnance from 1940 to 1942 and publisher of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, had written to Ralston on 1 March 1944 that:

...a good many of your difficulties have arisen because a small group of G[eneral] S[taff] officers were determined to keep things in their own hands and in consequence recommended appointments of men who either were sympathetic to them or who they felt sure they could dominate. This has now produced the inevitable result, a lack of capacity in key positions.<sup>72</sup>

In his conversation with McNaughton about the latter's coming in as Minister of National Defence, King asked him if he would have any problem working with anyone in Defence, and noted that McNaughton said he "disagrees cordially with Ralston on some of the things he has done and he says he does not trust Stuart's judgment at all".<sup>73</sup> It came as no surprise that when he moved into the department, McNaughton quickly got rid of Stuart.<sup>74</sup>

One should hesitate to blame the General Staff for the entire conscription crisis, however. As Stuart later pointed out in his 19 October report to Ralston — and thus, to the War Committee — in early August, most of the Allied commanders believed that the war would be over by December 1944, but as the Germans had been successful in denying the Channel ports to the Allies, it appeared in October 1944 that the war would probably last into 1945. Also, CMHQ had been calculating its reinforcement requirements based on the British figures which had suggested that infantry casualties would account for approximately 45 per cent of the total; in actual fact, infantry accounted for 75 per cent of total casualties.<sup>75</sup> It may not be reasonable to suggest that the Canadian commanders ought to have been any more prescient than their Allied counterparts.

71 King, *Diaries*, 19 October 1944. At the meeting of 3 August 1944, King and his cabinet reluctantly agreed to reinforce the 5th Canadian Armoured Division in Italy with a second infantry brigade, based on assurances from Stuart that this would not aggravate the reinforcement situation. It is not certain that the additional brigade contributed to the later infantry shortage, though this was another indication of a steady demand by the General Staff for a larger army.

72 Sifton to Ralston, 1 March 1944, Ralston Papers, MG 27, III, B11, vol. 57, NAC.

73 King, *Diaries*, 31 October 1944.

74 Stuart was placed on leave pending retirement. Minutes of the War Committee, 9 November 1944, RG2, vol. 16, NAC.

75 *Ibid.*, 19 October 1944.

Nonetheless, some of the cabinet members objected to the nature of Stuart's report and found it representative of an overall attitude among the military commanders. Alphonse Fournier, Minister of Public Works, believed that Stuart's job was to make reports, not recommendations; that was clearly a matter for cabinet ministers. Stuart's letter to Ralston on 19 October was plainly a recommendation to conscript NRMA personnel for service overseas. King agreed with Fournier's assessment.<sup>76</sup> Macdonald, too, had expressed his mistrust of the General Staff the previous year. He told Dexter that he thought Ralston was being pushed around by his generals. "Angus not nearly as keen on conscription as a year ago", Dexter wrote to his editor: "Is now inclined to think that, on balance, King may have been right".<sup>77</sup>

Both Howe and Crerar were "impatient" with Ralston and his demand for a large Canadian Army and had been since 1941.<sup>78</sup> A large Army competed with industry for male workers, and Howe believed that his war production programme was at least as important a contribution to the Allied war effort as Canada could make on the battlefield; Crerar also took this view.<sup>79</sup> By November 1944, however, Crerar was in favour of conscription, believing it was necessary to meet the reinforcement crisis; Howe would later join the conscriptionist side as well.<sup>80</sup>

The behaviour of certain Army commanders later in the crisis must have added to the skepticism about discipline within the department. On 20 November, for example, General Pearkes allowed some of his officers to express their views freely about the NRMA situation, an action strictly against the King's Regulations and one interpreted by the Prime Minister as an effort to embarrass his government into making a decision.<sup>81</sup> At all turns, King found the Army less than cooperative, and he was not the only one to hold this view.

Along with King and Power, Lieutenant-General Maurice Pope, military secretary to the War Committee, recommended easing the reinforcement problem by taking certain steps within the Army itself. Specifically, they recommended reducing infantry battalions from four rifle companies to three, an organization which British and German forces had been using throughout the entire war. This would have cut down the reinforcements required, perhaps delaying the impending shortage by as much as a month. They also suggested lowering the physical and mental standards

76 As did McNaughton upon reading Stuart's report. See King, *Diaries*, 25 October 1944, and Granatstein, *Generals*, pp. 232-3.

77 Dexter, *Ottawa at War*, p. 431; Memo from Dexter to Ferguson, 9 September 1943.

78 Rea, "The Conscription Crisis", p. 14.

79 Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, pp. 190-2.

80 Howe was in Chicago and missed the 1 November cabinet meeting. He did not fully commit to conscription until 22 November. See King, *Diaries*, 1 November 1944, and Crerar, "Notes for the record", 26 December 1944, Crerar Papers, Collection 2117, box 119, QUA.

81 Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, pp. 468-9, and Roy, *For Most Conspicuous Bravery*, pp. 225-6. Pearkes was far from sympathetic toward the King government. On 29 November, with NRMA men protesting their shipment overseas, Pearkes ordered RCAF planes to make passes over one of the camps, threatening the NRMA men. This act would almost surely have aggravated a tense situation, and was prevented only through bad weather and subsequent counter-orders coming from the Chief of the General Staff. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, pp. 476-7, and Roy, *For Most Conspicuous Bravery*, p. 231.

which had been set for infantry service as calculated by the PULHEMS scale.<sup>82</sup> Each of these suggestions was rejected by Army commanders, including Lieutenant-General J.C. Murchie, Chief of the General Staff, as being “objectionable...from a military point of view”.<sup>83</sup> It almost seemed as if the Army wanted to find a way to get the NRMA troops into action, as it resented the fact that these men would not volunteer.

Ralston had become merely an advocate for the Army and was intractable during the first few days of the crisis. King found his insistence on achieving his goals almost intolerable and noted on 21 October, “I feel more and more, as McNaughton does, about Ralston; that there is something inhumanly determined about getting his own way, regardless of what the effects may be on all others”.<sup>84</sup> Rea argues that Ralston had become an impediment to ending the crisis and that no other minister resigned to support him because they all believed that “[t]he issue could only be resolved satisfactorily after his departure”.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout the crisis, Macdonald seemed to be trying to build a consensus and achieve a resolution, while not totally abandoning his position that the troops had to be supported. When King first mentioned another appeal to the NRMA men, it was Macdonald who voiced support. On the day of Ralston’s dismissal, Macdonald was making every effort to prevent a major break, but while King seemed to notice this, he did not trust his Navy minister. “Angus Macdonald has given the impression of trying to go very far to help all he can and has done well but I realize that behind it there has always been the laying of the ground for his leaving the govt. on the score of conscription along with Ralston and embarrassing the govt. as a consequence — not in desire but in effect.”<sup>86</sup> When King dismissed Ralston and announced that he was bringing McNaughton in to replace him, Macdonald did not resign to support his friend. He was incensed at the treatment Ralston had received, however, and, as he told Dexter later, if he had risen from his chair, he thought he might have struck King.<sup>87</sup> Still, he remained throughout the cabinet meeting and appeared at the rest of the meetings for the duration of the crisis, even nodding his approval of McNaughton’s appointment the next day.<sup>88</sup>

At the height of the cabinet crisis over conscription in 1942, Macdonald had seemed to be on the verge of resigning. At that time, Dexter noted that Macdonald was “becoming fatalistic”:<sup>89</sup> believing that King was manipulating his cabinet members for political purposes, he appeared disgusted with federal politics. After Ralston’s dismissal in 1944, Macdonald again seemed disillusioned and sought advice as to what path he should follow. On the day after the fateful 1 November meeting, Macdonald’s executive assistant, J.J. Connolly, laid out his options and arguments. The reasons he listed for Macdonald not resigning included: (1) if only Macdonald

82 Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians*, pp. 248-51, and Power, *Party Politician*, p. 154.

83 Minutes of the War Committee, 24 October 1944, RG2, vol. 16, NAC.

84 King, *Diaries*, 21 October 1944.

85 Rea, “View From the Lectern”, p. 15.

86 King, *Diaries*, 1 November 1944.

87 Dexter, *Ottawa at War*, p. 489; Memo from Dexter to Ferguson, 6 November 1944.

88 King, *Diaries*, 2 November 1944.

89 Quoted in Granatstein, *Canada’s War*, p. 236.

and Ralston left, their resignations would have no effect; (2) King's appointment of McNaughton was shrewd as no one was prepared to say that this was a step down in capability; (3) the Party would be hurt by further resignations; (4) the government's and McNaughton's prestige would be compromised and this might damage the war effort, especially the appeal for NRMA volunteers which still might succeed; (5) party loyalists would accuse Macdonald of making Ralston's mistake, i.e. accepting the Army's appraisal of the situation; (6) Quebec would say that Macdonald was trying to "foment racial disunity"; and finally, (7) no one outside the inner circle would know of Macdonald's actions, as King would use the tool of cabinet secrecy to conceal what had happened.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, his assistant noted that "[t]he issue is important enough for you to [resign]", though the best time for resigning would have been before McNaughton's appointment, as a move at this point would have hurt McNaughton's prestige. "You cannot delay going out on this issue, if you are to go". He also argued that if Macdonald were staying, he ought to make a statement saying that he thought the use of the NRMA men was necessary, but that McNaughton's views were reassuring enough to warrant his remaining in cabinet.<sup>91</sup>

Unlike King, who inferred from Macdonald's mediator's approach a conspiracy of conscriptionists, Macdonald's executive assistant recognized that the Naval Minister may have held the most objective view of the entire situation. "I sometimes think that if Colonel Ralston had been a bit more amenable to your way of thinking, the crisis would not have happened".<sup>92</sup> Macdonald was playing the role of consensus-builder, rather than ardent defender of the Army's position. Had King recognized this, he might have been able to keep the peace in the cabinet and keep Ralston, if that was, in fact, what he had wanted to do.

Macdonald also contacted Senator Rupert Davies from his riding of Kingston, Prof. J.A. Corry of Queen's University, Premier MacMillan, and Frank Davis, Nova Scotia's Minister of Public Health, to canvass their views. Davies had often advised against pushing the conscription issue, and after McNaughton lost a February 1945 by-election bid to become a member of the House of Commons, he wrote: "Of course, if Ralston had come back with some kind of reasonable proposition, we would not have been in this kind of mess".<sup>93</sup> During the crisis, Corry, in response to Macdonald's request for advice, warned against too readily accepting the General Staff's position: "I find it hard to believe that the national honour is seriously involved by a possible reduction of one infantry division in the front line".<sup>94</sup> In writing to MacMillan, Macdonald mentioned Ralston's dismissal and his thoughts afterward. "I then had to

90 Connolly to Macdonald, 2 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1500, no. 291, PANS.

91 This is also a theme in what would appear to be the only academic analysis of Macdonald's role in the crisis. See Bernard Charles LeBlanc, "A Reluctant Recruit: Angus L. Macdonald and Conscription, 1940-1945", MA Thesis, Queen's University, 1987, pp. 77-8. LeBlanc argued that the only reason that Macdonald stayed in the government was because there would have been no defence minister — Power was in hospital in Quebec having an appendectomy — and he later decided to give McNaughton a chance to try his hand at securing reinforcements.

92 Connolly to Macdonald, 2 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1500, no. 291, PANS.

93 Senator Rupert Davies to Macdonald, 6 February 1945, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1518, no. 764, PANS.

94 J.A. Corry to Macdonald, 17 November 1945, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1500, no. 291, PANS.

consider what I should do. Should I go out or stay in? On this point let me say that from the time of the plebiscite in 1942 onwards, I had always understood that the Government, if the need for conscription arose, would apply conscription, would then go to Parliament and announce its decision, and ask for a vote of confidence". He also wrote that when McNaughton came in, he thought he should be given a chance to try the voluntary system, and, if successful, he should be supported.<sup>95</sup> MacMillan responded by advising Macdonald that "if it is possible for you to remain for the present, it would be in your own interests to do so".<sup>96</sup> Macdonald wrote to Frank Davis mentioning that he might soon be returning to Nova Scotian politics: "for a time last week I felt my return might be hastened. In fact, that it might be almost immediately". Did the Nova Scotia Liberal Association want him to have his old job back?<sup>97</sup> Davis, for his part, replied that further resignations could bring down the government, leaving the people who resigned to take the blame. In addition, Davis was not sure that MacMillan was prepared to give up the reins of power just yet.<sup>98</sup> He advised Macdonald to stay put, if possible.

It seemed that most of the advice Macdonald received in the period following Ralston's dismissal was urging him to stay on. Though he was, by now, fully disillusioned with Mackenzie King, Macdonald was prepared to follow this advice, but only if the government showed that it was going to deal aggressively with the reinforcement situation. However, King seemed willing to let the matter slide. Dissatisfied, Macdonald wrote King on 13 November, pressing the Prime Minister for a definition of the word "necessary" on the grounds that he was trying to determine whether the government had changed the policy it had adopted during the 1942 debate on Bill 80. King's reply of 15 November was equivocal, referring Macdonald to the *Hansard* report of his 10 June 1942 speech, and adding that he did not wish to discuss the matter further while it was before cabinet.<sup>99</sup>

The government continued to dawdle on the appeal to the NRMA to go active. After McNaughton gave a poorly received speech at Arnprior, Ontario, on 5 November and King delivered a radio speech on 8 November, little was accomplished in the way of an appeal. King noted this in his diary: "But what I fear is that now that both McN[oughton] and I have spoken, little else will be done. I don't know what further progress there has been in carrying out what the Committee recommended as to individual appeals. No one person seems to have that in hand. General McNaughton cannot be expected to follow it up".<sup>100</sup> As the appeal dragged on, Macdonald became convinced that it would fail<sup>101</sup> and began to consider his options, among them the

95 Macdonald to MacMillan, 7 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS.

96 MacMillan to Macdonald, 20 November 1944, *ibid.*

97 Macdonald to Frank Davis, 5 November 1944, *ibid.*

98 Davis to Macdonald, 14 November 1944, *ibid.*

99 King to Macdonald, 15 November 1944, King Papers, MG26, J1, vol. 364, Reel 7053, NAC.

100 King, *Diaries*, 9 November 1944.

101 Macdonald Diary, 14 November 1944, quoted in Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 362. McNaughton's appeal and King's radio address on 8 November appeared to have little effect on changing public opinion. On 13 November 1944, 57 per cent of Canadians polled were in favour of conscription for overseas service, while 36 per cent were opposed and 7 per cent were undecided. These figures were unchanged from November 1943. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8 (Winter 1944-45), p. 591, quoted in Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, pp. 222-3.



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formation of an Independent Liberal Party.

Macdonald seems to have been working closely with his good friend T.A. Crerar on organizing the conscriptionist members of the government into an effective group. It appears that Ilsley did not play a large role in this, as it is likely that, although he supported conscription, he did not relish the thought of leaving the government. On 18 November, Macdonald wrote to Ralston informing him of his and Crerar's plans:

Crerar thinks, however, that it is vital that by Wednesday [22 November] those who are going to break should do so, and provide a rallying ground for Liberal Members who will be dissatisfied with Government policy, assuming that that policy will be

- (a) one of no conscription; or
- (b) one of further delay.

I agree that the sheep must have a shepherd.... There is no doubt in our minds that you would be the man whom the public would look to to head the group.<sup>102</sup>

While Ralston may have been too rigid within the cabinet to earn the support of his fellow ministers earlier in the crisis, it was clear that his popularity among Canadians, especially those in favour of conscription, had been strengthened. As the first minister to leave the cabinet during this crisis, he would provide a natural rallying point for a conscriptionist government.

The conscriptionist wing in cabinet got a boost when McNaughton brought in his reinforcement figures on 20 November 1944. McNaughton predicted that there would be a reinforcement surplus of approximately 700 at the end of December, but that a deficit would soon develop. He expected this shortage to reach more than 2 000 by the end of January and 9 500 by the end of May.<sup>103</sup> Except for Ralston's prediction of a reinforcement deficit by the beginning of 1945, the figures provided by the two defence ministers were very similar, especially for the four and five month projected shortages. Macdonald noted that these figures made much more of an impact on cabinet than had Ralston's, however, primarily because the ministers had been expecting better news. At this point, Crerar, Ilsley and Macdonald again mentioned resigning if conscription were not imposed. They even mentioned a deadline for the appeal to the NRMA personnel: 1 December 1944. Howe, who was still not committed, said that the government had to decide which path it was going to choose before it faced Parliament in a few days. The conscriptionist wing was growing stronger.<sup>104</sup>

On 21 November, King told cabinet that if the appeal failed, he would step down and let someone else lead the government when it imposed conscription; he would not. Macdonald argued that most of the cabinet and much of caucus would go with King, making the position of those who remained impossible. Although he had been

102 Macdonald to Ralston, 18 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS. At the bottom of the letter, Macdonald wrote, "This had better be destroyed once read".

103 Macdonald Diary, 20 November 1944, quoted in Granatstein, *Canada's War*, p. 362.

104 *Ibid.*

considering an Independent Liberal Party to bring in conscription, Macdonald seemed to think that it would be difficult to draw MPs to the vestiges of the King government. It would be better to allow King's failure to deal with the reinforcement situation to be brought out in front of Parliament which was to meet the next day. This would make it easier for the conscriptionists to pull together dissatisfied MPs and form a government. As an alternative to King's proposal, Macdonald suggested that he, Crerar, Ilsley and any other ministers who favoured conscription would resign and thereby save embarrassing the majority of the government. Macdonald argued that King would be able to replace the departed ministers and carry on governing.<sup>105</sup> He wanted King to shoulder his share of the blame for any defeat the government might suffer.

At the meeting of caucus the next day, little new was said, and both sides seemed to be waiting until that evening's cabinet meeting to act. In between caucus and cabinet, Macdonald gathered with the other conscriptionist ministers — Crerar, Ilsley, William Mulock, Postmaster-General, Colin Gibson, Minister of National Revenue and, for the first time, Howe — in Crerar's office. The group was prepared to resign, but they had heard that King intended to set a time limit on the appeal; some of the group wanted to work on determining what deadline would be established; Crerar wanted it to be 30 November, and Ilsley, 2 December. Macdonald believed that the appeal had already failed and that a future deadline would be pointless but, he conceded, a deadline would help the Quebec ministers if conscription had to be implemented. Nevertheless, Macdonald implied in his diary that when the group of six ministers went to cabinet at 8:00 p.m. they intended to resign as a bloc.<sup>106</sup>

Although he was unaware of the conscriptionist ministers' intentions, King announced at cabinet that McNaughton had advised him that morning that the appeal had failed and that there was a risk that all of the District Officers Commanding might resign, leaving the domestic army in a state of chaos;<sup>107</sup> the only option remaining was conscription of NRMA soldiers. The cabinet soon agreed to impose a limited form of conscription, sending no more than 16 000 NRMA personnel overseas. Chubby Power announced that he would have to resign, and, at first, it seemed that Jimmy Gardiner, Minister of Agriculture, and Alphonse Fournier might go as well, but they eventually stayed with the government. Needless to say, Macdonald and the other conscriptionist ministers chose to remain.

An order-in-council authorizing the service overseas of not more than 16 000 NRMA troops was signed on 27 November. On 7 December, the King government safely won a vote of confidence in the House of Commons,<sup>108</sup> and the Liberal Party won a slim majority government in the general election of June 1945. Canada's Army

105 Macdonald Diary, 21 November 1944, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 365.

106 See Macdonald Diary, 22 November 1944, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 367-8, and Crerar, "Notes for the record", 26 December 1944, Crerar Papers, Collection no. 2117, box 119, QUA.

107 King even hinted that there was a "revolt of the generals" to St. Laurent, presumably to convince St. Laurent of the need to accept conscription. Chubby Power was amused by this suggestion and later wrote to Macdonald: "It would have been great fun, had your loyal and intrepid Navy turned its guns on Laurier House from its armoured rowboats in Dow's Lake". Power to Macdonald, 15 November 1952, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, file 382, PANS.

108 Granatstein, *Canada's War*, pp. 372-3.

had a lighter load than expected in 1945, and the reinforcement crisis was not as bad as was forecast. In all, just 2 463 NRMA troops were posted to units of the First Canadian Army.<sup>109</sup>

Macdonald finally left the government in mid-April 1945, with the war and his Naval Service work safely winding down. He and King were not sorry to part company. King, who was still certain that the conscription crisis had been simply a conspiracy to oust him, wrote in his diary that Macdonald had “been merely a pipe[*line*] to Ralston” during his last few months in Ottawa, providing him with sensitive and potentially embarrassing information from within the cabinet. King added, with some bitterness, “I will feel a great relief to have him out of the government altogether”.<sup>110</sup> He did not recognize what a debt he owed to his departing Minister for Naval Services.

Angus L. Macdonald has usually been portrayed as one of the most ardent conscriptionists in King’s cabinet during the Second World War, but this image obscures much of his role during the conscription crisis in 1944. If one accepts the image of him as a strong conscriptionist, his behaviour on 1 November and shortly thereafter appears less than honourable, almost cowardly; if one views him as one of cabinet’s leading mediators, however, his behaviour is more easily explained and appears more effective. In his analysis of why other cabinet ministers did not walk out on 1 November behind Ralston, Rea argued that the conscriptionist ministers, at least, disagreed with Ralston the man, and not the policy he was advocating. In this, Rea may be partially correct. If Macdonald did not support Ralston, it was not because he was not sold on conscription. But neither was it because he did not respect Ralston. He remained in cabinet because he recognized that to walk out with Ralston would not solve the reinforcement crisis and might very well bring down the government. He certainly disagreed with Ralston about the best path to follow to achieve a solution, urging him not to push for a commitment to conscription too early, but he also realized his own place in the scheme of things.

At the time of the crisis, King, St. Laurent, Power and Cabinet Secretary Arnold Heeney all seemed to recognize that Macdonald could be the linchpin holding cabinet together if Ralston left. They all believed that if Macdonald joined Ralston, Ilesley would resign as well, possibly taking along other ministers and causing the government’s collapse.<sup>111</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest that Macdonald was aware of this possible scenario. If this is true, his conscious decision to remain in the cabinet, when many of his principles — and acquaintances<sup>112</sup> — seemed to demand his resignation, could be adjudged to be the defining factor in the successful resolution of the crisis.

The evidence of Macdonald’s efforts to avoid a governmental collapse is apparent

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>110</sup> King, *Diaries*, 11 April 1945.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 19, 20, 25 and 30 October 1944.

<sup>112</sup> Macdonald told Power in a phone conversation on 13 November 1944 that “a great many of his friends felt he should have resigned at the same time as Ralston, but his idea was to thoroughly explore every possibility of compromise before he left the Government”. Power, “Notes of Discussions on the Conscription Crisis”, November 1944, C.G. Power Papers, Collection no. 2150, box 12, QUA.

in several places. King's diary bears many references to Macdonald's helpfulness, at least until Ralston's dismissal.<sup>113</sup> All references to Macdonald after this seemed tainted by King's belief that Macdonald was about to strike him down at any time. Macdonald attempted to persuade Ralston to accept King's apparent offer of a compromise — one final appeal to the NRMA men, after which a decision would be made concerning conscription — in the days before Ralston was dismissed.<sup>114</sup> He wrote to his close friends and advisers that even after King's shoddy treatment of Ralston, he was willing to give McNaughton and his appeal a few weeks to prove their effectiveness.<sup>115</sup> Even when Macdonald concluded that he must resign late in November, he attempted either to avoid embarrassing the King government, or to establish a viable alternative party that could carry on running the country while imposing conscription to meet the reinforcement crisis.

Macdonald remained in the government after 1 November 1944 because he believed that he must, for the sake of the infantry and the country, but also for sake of the Party and the government. To walk out would either have led to an irreparable split in the Party, if Ilsley and others followed him, or have allowed King to delay resolving the crisis, possibly to the point where the lives of Canada's infantry were fundamentally jeopardized by his determination to avoid sending conscripts overseas.

In the end, Macdonald succeeded in bringing the government over to his position, but it cost him any broad political support he may have enjoyed before the crisis. He returned to the Premier's office in September 1945 and although he considered running in the 1948 federal Liberal leadership race, his old friend Chubby Power agreed with him that he would not get many delegates from outside his province to support him.<sup>116</sup> Once the darling of the Liberal Party, after the conscription crisis, Macdonald could exercise little power or influence beyond the borders of Nova Scotia.

113 See King, *Diaries*, 19, 20, 25, 26, 30 and 31 October, and 1 November 1944.

114 See Macdonald, untitled memo, 2 or 3 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1503, no. 385, PANS. See also Swettenham, *McNaughton*, pp. 45-6.

115 Macdonald to MacMillan, 7 November 1944, and Macdonald to Edward Young, 22 November 1944, Macdonald Papers, MG2, vol. 1500, no. 291, PANS.

116 Power, *Party Politician*, pp. 396-7. It is possible that Macdonald's increasing conservatism may have put him out of step with national politics in 1948, as Canada was developing the basis of a welfare state. See Beck, *Murray to Buchanan*, pp. 205-37.