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Presidential Address: A View From the Lectern

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Article abstract

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS/ DISCOURS DU PRÉSIDENT

A View From the Lectern

J. E. REA

Résumé

This paper explores the relationship among teaching, research, and publications for, the author argues, a good teacher must carry out advanced historical research and report results to a wider academic audience. This observation leads to an examination of three kinds of questions which challenge the historian as teacher: the first, questions to which the primary and secondary literature provide no answer; the second, questions to which standard works offer no adequate response but which inspire research and rethinking and thereby lead to a new understanding of the issue; and the third, questions which can be fully answered only by informed speculation. The paper then illustrates the challenge posed by each type of question by looking at important incidents in twentieth-century Canadian history: the first, why Prime Minister Borden on 1 January 1916 doubled Canada's manpower in the Great War to five hundred thousand; the second, why did the tariff disappear as an issue from elections after 1935; and the third, why did the Cabinet accept the forced resignation of J. L. Ralston as Minister of National Defence in November of 1944? The specialised knowledge required to respond to such questions necessarily enriches our overall understanding of the past.

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Cet article explore la relation entre l'enseignement, la recherche et les publications, car l'auteur croit qu'un bon universitaire doit à la fois effectuer des travaux de recherches avancées et en communiquer les résultats à un auditoire plus large. Cette prémisse renvoie à trois types de questions auxquelles les enseignants font face. Il s'agit premièrement des questions auxquelles les sources primaires et la littérature ne donnent aucune réponse. En second lieu, des questions auxquelles les travaux habituels ne donnent pas de réponse satisfaisante, mais qui provoquent la recherche et la réflexion en vue de proposer des solutions. Et troisièmement, des questions auxquelles l'on ne peut répondre que par des spéculations fondées sur de solides connaissances. En guise d'illustrations des défis posés par chaque ordre de questions, l'auteur considère trois problèmes majeurs de l'histoire canadienne. D'abord, comment expliquer la décision du Premier ministre Borden, le premier janvier 1916, de doubler la participation des soldats canadiens à la Grande guerre, pour atteindre le nombre de 500 000 soldats? Ensuite, pourquoi les tarifs douaniers ont-ils disparu des enjeux électoraux après 1935? Enfin, pourquoi le cabinet libéral a-t-il accepté la démission du ministre de la Défense nationale, J. L. Ralston, en novembre 1944? Les connaissances spécialisées auxquelles

un professeur devra avoir recours pour répondre à ces questions enrichiront sans aucun doute sa compréhension du passé.

Almost everyone who has been in this position has begun their preparations — or at least claims they have — by reviewing past addresses and found that they have generally fallen into one of three categories; historiography, our attitudes and obligations to governments and public questions, or the results of current research. In other words, there seems to have been a preoccupation with the more public aspects of our pursuits. In thinking about this, it seemed a somewhat selective or distorted reflection of our collective careers. Is it not curious that these occasions have almost never been given over to that other professional duty which occupies the bulk of the time of most of us — teaching? Could it be that we somehow hive off teaching into a separate, more mundane compartment of our activities, less suitable for trotting out on formal occasions such as this? We spend a goodly part of our working lives preparing and giving lectures, organising and conducting seminars, surviving the mind-numbing boredom of marking essays or, infrequently, experiencing that thrill of delight when a graduate thesis redeems all those begrudged hours we spend away from our real love, research and writing. At least this is the way we like to think of ourselves. It may be a crutch, or a rationalisation, or an excuse, or a martyr complex, or whatever. For most of us, however, it is also very much a reality. Hence, it struck me as unusual that this theme has not attracted more attention. To be more specific, what is the nature of the relationship among our primary function of teaching, for which we get paid, our research, in which we happily indulge ourselves, and publications, over which we labour so hopefully?

I'm sure you recall, as I do, the injunctions and advice that we received at graduate school and in our first years in the academic field. "To be a good teacher, you must be out at the cutting edge of research." "Historical research is a collaborative undertaking of instructor and disciples." "Employ the Socratic method of teasing out answers through judicious questioning." And so on. Now all of this is, to some extent, true and even useful. It can also be considered pedagogically elitist, however, most appropriately applicable to the comfortable and rarefied atmosphere of the history seminar. There should be no doubt, however, about the mutual stimulation that occurs at this level; we have all enjoyed and profited from it. Yet how beneficial and practical is such advice when one is standing before an undergraduate lecture class of one hundred or more, almost always a macaronic mélange of students of varying abilities from several faculties, some of whom are there only because your class suits their car-pool schedule? Obviously, they must be handled differently for purely pragmatic reasons. We often seek to entertain in order to instruct. Yet that does not mean that there is no reverse flow of stimulation; it is simply of a different order.

Mixed in with these classes are invariably some bright and thoughtful students and, every once in a while, one of them will ask a question that forces you to take stock of your grasp and understanding of the material you are presenting to them. I do not refer here to questions about factual detail, rather to questions that are really quite obvious and which we either ignore or glide over in a lecture without giving them much consideration. When they are raised by a student, we are sent diving into the literature to try and find a plausible explanation. Surprisingly often, when we consult the specialists, either there is no answer readily available or the explanation we do find is not entirely

satisfactory. Such questions, I have found, tend to be one of three types: the first, a question to which neither the secondary nor documentary material will yield an answer; the second, a question to which there is no apparent solution in the literature but is answerable with some research, perhaps provoking a fresh hypothesis and leading on to publication; the third, a question to which the best response is considered speculation, depending upon the material available. I would like to present an example of each. If this paper has a title, it would be something like this: "questions that students have asked over the years that I wished I had been able to answer better."

A question in the first category will not, I suspect, come as a surprise to you, but it does force one to reexamine the issue. It goes something like this: when Prime Minister Borden addressed the Canadian people on New Year's Day in 1916, he announced that Canada's military contribution to the Great War would be doubled to five hundred thousand men. Under a system of voluntary enlistments, how did he think he could manage that and why did he make such an extraordinary promise? This commitment (and it quickly took on the nature of a solemn pledge) was made, according to Borden, "to crown the justice of our cause with victory and abiding peace." It was, indeed, on reflection, quite remarkable.

At the beginning of 1916, Canada had an estimated population of eight million, of whom there was an estimated male population in the age group 18 to 45 of 1,720,070. This latter figure represented the entire pool of potential recruits, since only males were wanted (except for the few nursing sisters). It included the willing and unwilling, the fit and the unfit. Military manpower requirements took no account of the competing demands for labour in agriculture and industry, however strategically necessary. Did Borden expect that nearly 30 per cent of them would voluntarily enlist and be accepted as suitable? The first matter to be determined, therefore, is just what did Borden intend by the figure of five hundred thousand. Did it include all those who had volunteered prior to 1 January 1916 as well as all those who would subsequently enlist, or did it mean a current, effective force of five hundred thousand? The answer was spelled out in Order-in-Council #36 dated 12 January 1916. The crucial passage reads, "to raise, equip and send overseas . . . officers and men not exceeding five hundred thousand, including those who have already been raised and equipped . . . and includes also those who have been, or may hereafter be raised for garrison and guard duty in Canada."

There was no doubt in the mind of Col. Nicholson, author of the standard work in this field, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, as to what the figure meant. It did not mean enlistments during the remaining period of the war or of the total during the entire war, but referred to "the *actual* strength at which Canada's military forces were to be maintained." This meant, of course, that many thousands more would have to be enrolled because of casualties. R. B. Bennett had warned Borden on 7 December 1915 that it could not be done. Of the Cabinet, only Sir Sam Hughes thought it possible. Sir Thomas White, the Finance minister who had been apprised of Borden's intent on New Year's Eve, wrote later that "none of us had any clear idea as to how so many additional men could be raised or where the necessary men would come from. We simply went on faith. . . ." On the face of it, Borden's pledge seems to have been, at best, ingenuous, at worst, preposterous. The perplexed student can only repeat, why did he do it?

The secondary literature is not very helpful, since few authors have focused on this anomaly. Desmond Morton, in *Canada and War*, does not address the question directly, but implies that Borden's "dangerous New Year's promise of half a million men" was due partly to his outrage at not being consulted by Britain in the conduct of the war. This same theme appears in Col. Stacey's *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, wherein he remarks that "it seems likely that this was a beau geste intended to impress the British government." It was the opinion of Granatstein and Hitsman, in *Broken Promises*, echoing Sir Thomas White, that Borden's announcement "had been made without any clear idea whether the necessary men were available or the means that might be needed to secure them." Col. Nicholson remarked that Borden's motives "remain obscure," but he went on to speculate that it might have been Borden's intent to use the announcement to gain from Britain "a greater willingness to consult Canada on general policy in the conduct of the war." Nevertheless, Nicholson offers no evidence except the well-known, exasperated letter of Borden to Sir George Perley, the Overseas War minister, in which he complains that countries which contribute four or five hundred thousand men in the field could not be treated "as toy automata."

Sir Robert's biographer, Professor Craig Brown, recognises this dilemma, of course, and attempts to confront it. "The impulsive commitment," Brown writes, was made because "the men would be needed. The move would be welcomed by English-speaking Canadians demanding a more vigorous war effort and it would further reinforce Borden's claim to fuller consultation in war policy." The first of these reasons was pure conjecture at the time; the second was problematic, especially in western Canada, if it were to entail conscription; and this leaves the single argument that Borden upped the ante in this way to force Britain into greater consultation with the Dominions on war policy. When in Britain, Borden had pressed Bonar Law on this issue, but the latter had asked an angry Borden to suggest some practical means of conducting such consultations. Professor Brown himself goes on to say that Borden "realized that it was not, after all, up to the British government to devise a plan for dominion participation in war policy formation." Early in 1916 "as Bonar Law suspected, Borden had no practical scheme, only a firm commitment to a vague aspiration." Borden then instructed Perley "to take no further steps at present." Thus the secondary literature is, in the end, disappointing.

This simply reflects the fact that Borden's papers do not yield any definitive answer to the question as to the Prime Minister's motive, but there is a hint in his published *Memoirs*. On New Year's Eve, the day prior to the announcement, the Governor General was forewarned by Borden. Connaught's secretary replied that "HRH understands that of the 250,000 men at present authorized, some 50,000 are still deficient and he fears that the magnificent total of 500,000 may be beyond the powers of the Dominion of Canada to provide under voluntary enlistment." In his response the next day, Borden indicated that he "was not inclined to share the doubts which HRH entertains," but he went on to assert that "whether or not these doubts are well founded, [he] was thoroughly convinced that more will be accomplished by the proposed effort than could otherwise be achieved." Are we to infer from this that Borden did not seriously intend what he had announced that New Year's Day; that he had no real expectation that half a million men and more would come forward willingly; that his intention had only been to stimulate enlistments and rekindle national enthusiasm for the war? Perhaps. Yet the student

had to be left hanging, her query unanswered. We do not have a satisfactory reply and, unless Professor Brown receives a letter *from* Limbo, it will likely remain so.

Now an example of the second type of student question, the sort that requires considerable research to answer. This one usually occurs when I am lecturing about the federal election of 1949 or 1953. The students already are aware that the 1940 and 1945 elections were about the Liberals' conduct of the war and plans for the future. Suddenly a student will ask, whatever happened to the tariff? It had always been a staple of national elections. Indeed, it had been a bone of contention in every election from 1878 to 1930, except for the wartime election of 1917, and it had been *the* issue in 1891, 1911, 1921, and 1925. The sudden demise of the tariff as an electoral concern is simply ignored in the survey texts of Canadian history. Even Murray Beck's little gold mine on federal elections mentions the tariff only to note its disappearance as a matter of controversy. I would like to offer a modest hypothesis by way of explanation.

The tariff as a political issue, from the early part of this century onward, provoked a recurring battle between the grain growers of the Prairies and successive federal governments. Yet by 1935, the issue was politically dead. I would argue that the explanation lies not in the policies of governments but within the grain growers' movement itself; it amounted, indeed, to a failure of the cooperative spirit in the West. Now one does not impugn the cooperative movement in western Canada without some peril, but occasionally even sacred cows should be rounded up and their brands examined. I should like to advance the following propositions: between the Great War and the Great Depression, prairie Canada witnessed the disappearance of a vigorous and nearly united farmers movement; the farmers attempted to maintain an adequate farm income by a shift of emphasis from control of production costs to manipulation of supply; and the grain growers were reduced from independent businessmen to dependents of the government, little different in practice from tariff-protected manufacturers.

Consider the agrarian context on the Prairies in 1916 and 1930. During the Great War, the Canadian Council of Agriculture issued the Farmers' Platform, a political and economic manifesto designed to challenge the protective tariff which, the council charged, was little more than institutionalised greed, affording privileged concessions to central Canada to the detriment of the primary producers, especially in the western hinterland. The clear implication was that, once freed of this incubus, agriculture and particularly the grain growers would flourish. Their efficiency and cooperative techniques would ensure success if they were allowed to compete on even terms with other sectors of the economy. They condemned all special privilege and the tariff explicitly — always, of course, excepting the Crow's Nest Pass rates. The grain growers in 1916 were aggressive, confident and, it must be conceded, rather annoyingly self-righteous. The economic thrust of their platform was the reduction of production costs by eliminating protection. By 1930, the situation was vastly different. The Canadian Council of Agriculture had disintegrated. The provincial grain growers' associations, after a precipitous decline in membership, were almost moribund. The Saskatchewan Cooperative Elevator Company had disappeared. The marketing phenomenon of the 1920s, the wheat pooling experiment, was virtually bankrupt, surviving only on government guarantees.

The experience of the Great War had been instructive. Alarmed by the rising price and vulnerable supply of grain, a British royal commission recommended and then itself applied a central purchasing scheme which quickly included France and Italy as well. Whether intended or not, this resulted in a virtual corner on the market. The Canadian government appointed a Board of Grain Supervisors to manage wheat exports. For the 1917-18 crop year, the board, acting in conjunction with the United States Grain Corporation to stabilise the market, set the price at $2.21 per bushel for the year. Put another way, the government had created, almost accidentally, a 100 per cent compulsory pool with a guaranteed floor price set at a very profitable level. What made this possible — and the point was not emphasised nearly enough, of course — was the fact that the Allied governments of Europe required the entire exportable surplus and were willing to meet the carefully fixed price.

At the end of the war, it was anticipated that the open market would be reestablished. With decontrol in Europe incomplete, the banks and railways in Canada were reluctant to move the 1919 crop without purchase orders coming in and the government was obliged to intervene once more. The first Canadian Wheat Board was set up under the War Measures Act. Its key features were an initial payment to producers, a final payment based on participation and the year's average price, and a selling agency with freedom to sell at best advantage. The new board lasted only a year.

In August of 1920, the open market was reestablished. After an immediate bullish flurry, the price declined from $2.82 in September to $1.11 in December of 1921. There were, of course, a variety of factors involved, not the least of which was an expectation by European countries of a return to prewar prices as Australian and Argentine wheat once again added to available supplies. Reaction in Canada was two-fold. First, there was an attempt to reduce production costs through political means. The farmer-backed Progressive Party had, as its primary economic objective, the elimination of protection and a consequent reduction in costs for the grain growers. They failed to make any significant impact on the tariff. This disappointment led immediately to a campaign to bring back the wheat board. The new government led by Mackenzie King, elected in late 1921, had no wish to take on such a responsibility, but they did pass enabling legislation in 1922, permitting the prairie provinces to create their own wheat board. This scheme failed as well.

Enter Aaron Sapiro, the hot-gospeller of the pooling movement. He was much like E. A. Partridge, the first charismatic leader of the grain growers — energetic, innovative, glib, and utterly fearless. Yet he had many of Partridge's less admirable traits as well — a consuming ego, a mercurial temper, and an inability to translate ideas, however inspired, into practice. Sapiro's reputation as a successful organiser of commodity pools in the United States and his dynamic, evangelical style nevertheless had a messianic impact.

Hence the grain growers set out to do for themselves what governments had declined to do, create an alternative to the futures marketing system. The futures market protected the grain buyers, the millers and, to some degree, even the consumer by hedging the risks of a fluctuating grain price. The producer would also benefit, despite Sapiro's rhetoric, since the buyer, with his risk diminished, could afford to offer a higher

initial price. He could do so only because his purchases *and his sales* were hedged. It was not a case, as Sapiro charged, of buying low when farmers were forced to sell and then enjoying an unearned increment. In condemning speculation, however, the grain growers also rejected hedging as a legitimate business tool to reduce risk in an uncontrollable world marketplace.

The main features of a commodity pool are not complex. A producer agrees by contract for a fixed period of time to deliver all his crop to the pool. In return, he receives an initial payment based on the pool's expectation of the world price for the crop year, an interim payment, usually just before seeding time, and a final payment when the year's business had been concluded and final accounts rendered. The total figure is the average price received over the year less the costs of handling the operation. Financing was done through the chartered banks, the major requirement being the cash for the initial payment which was secured by the delivery contracts held by the pool. It all sounded simple enough, deceptively simple. Producers everywhere in the pool area would receive the same price for the same grade over the whole crop year. The traditional rush to market, which allegedly so distorted supply, would be replaced by orderly marketing. It was assumed that the pools would quickly create a central selling agency for direct sales both at home and abroad, thus eliminating at least two sets of middlemen.

For any possibility of success, a pool must sign up a significant number of producers in a geographic area; the considered viable minimum was at least half. Thus a dispute quickly arose between proponents of a voluntary pool and those who argued for a 100 per cent compulsory pool, enforced by legislation. Secondly, there does not seem to have been any consensus on the meaning of the term "orderly marketing." At its simplest, it ensured the regular distribution of deliveries and sales over the year to achieve a satisfactory average price for pool members, but to others it meant matching supply to demand at best advantage — in other words, price manipulation through controlled selling, supply-side economics at its crudest level. Finally, and obviously, success would depend upon the skill of pool managers and especially the central selling agency, in predicting grain prices and achieving large, regular sales without hedging.

By 1924, three separate and voluntary provincial pools had been organised. They combined to form a Central Selling Agency with a seat on the Winnipeg Exchange under the managerial control of A. J. MacPhail and grew quickly with twenty-eight offices in fifteen countries. Within three years, it was handling over 50 per cent of the prairie wheat crop which made up two-fifths of the world export total. The pools appeared to be off to a flying start, but all was not rosy. MacPhail fought a draining rear-guard action against the ideologues of the Farmers Union of Canada who sought a 100 per cent compulsory pool and castigated the CSA for its very limited (and in fact timely) use of the futures market. The most enthusiastic supporters of the pools, and those who recruited and signed members to contracts specifically, raised expectations unduly with their inflated claims. The very fact of the formation of the pools, they boasted, would immediately raise the world price ten cents a bushel. They bravely, and foolishly, implied that, once the pools were firmly established, their great market influence would ensure prosperity for all prairie grain growers.

Nevertheless, there were other factors that ought to have been considered and should

have prompted a greater degree of caution. The pools operated on very narrow projections of the spread between initial and final price. The only charges against the final price levied by the CSA were administrative expenses, which were kept admirably low; a special reserve of two cents per bushel to meet the costs of elevator purchases and construction, which were extensive; and a commercial reserve of only 1 per cent, which would prove completely inadequate. All of the pool grain was unhedged and thus immediately vulnerable to fluctuations in the world price. Pool supporters argued that their system of initial, interim, and final payments over the crop year was itself a sufficient hedge against price variations and adequate to maintain the required fifteen-cents-per-bushel margin with the banks who supplied the credit. True enough, but only if the world price remained relatively stable. With roughly 20 per cent of the current world export production, the pools could hardly ensure a stable price themselves by managing the flow of grain to market, and their narrow spread could result in grave danger.

In addition, wheat was a difficult commodity to control effectively by pooling. It could be grown in any of the temperate zones of the world. Rising demand or sharp price increases could bring vast acreages into production from the United States, Argentina, Australia, or even occasional exporters like the Soviet Union. Those importing countries of Europe, as well, were under increasing pressure from their own farmers to protect their position against foreign producers. Put another way, the stable prices of the years of the midtwenties masked the danger that pool selling policy, while virtuously avoiding the futures market, did, in fact, constitute in itself a gigantic and unprotected speculation on the cash market. A sharp downward price break could erode their reserves, wipe out their margin with the banks, and throw the pools into chaos.

There were high hopes in the summer of 1928 as prairie farmers watched a record crop of 545 million bushels of wheat mature, but frosts in August reduced the quality substantially and much of the grain went out of condition. Prudently, the CSA set the initial payment at eighty-five cents per bushel for pool grain. Even so, there was considerable anxiety through the year as the price hovered uncomfortably close to the bank margin. Reduced interim and final payments brought the crop year total to $1.185 with a heavy carryover. Not enough note was taken in the spring of 1929 as European tariffs on imported wheat began to rise and the value of European currencies to decline.

The 1929 crop yielded only half the record harvest of the preceding year. Both the CSA and the private traders expected a bullish market in consequence and, in the early autumn, heavy futures buying helped drive the market price to $1.56 per bushel. The CSA had once again set its initial payment at one dollar per bushel for pool deliveries but, after the stock market crash of October 1929, the price of wheat began a precipitate decline. The pools, with their wheat unhedged, were helpless as the price dropped below the initial payment and they bitterly (and wrongly) blamed the speculators in the face of looming disaster. By the end of the crop year, their small commercial reserve had quickly disappeared and the only recourse, to stave off the frightened bankers who were threatening to make matters worse by forcing the pools to dump their grain and depress prices even more, was to turn to government for relief. The great hopeful experiment in voluntary pooling was dashed, but lost as well was the prepool emphasis on lowering production costs. It had been sacrificed to an ephemeral market impact diversion and hence the tariff effectively disappeared as an important issue in national politics. Except

for the die-hards, the farmers no longer saw themselves as managers of their own economic destiny. The grain growers had become clients of government and the tariff, as an election issue, became irrelevant.

The final type of question that I would like to consider is one that leads to speculation, dangerous ground, perhaps, but tempting. This is how one student put it (and I paraphrase): "If the Liberal Cabinet during the Second World War was, as some historians claim, the most talented and able in our history, why did they all sit there like lumps when Mackenzie King sacked J. L. Ralston?" This refers, of course, to that famous cabinet meeting of 1 November 1944 when Col. J. L. Ralston, the Minister of National Defence, forced the issue of sending overseas as infantry reinforcements those trained men who had been conscripted for home defence under the National Resources Mobilization Act. Ralston had offered to step down during an earlier dispute on this issue, when King smoothed matters over, but the resignation was neither accepted nor withdrawn. Two years later, King used the almost-forgotten letter of resignation to force Ralston's retirement and replace him with Gen. A. G. L. McNaughton, who felt confident that the necessary men could be secured through voluntary conversions for overseas service. Thus the issue was joined.

Historians have not been kind to King when describing this dramatic event, often depicting him as a duplicitous and ruthless manipulator, interested primarily in his own political survival and determined to root out or over-awe any Cabinet dissent. Donald Creighton, admittedly no fan of King, describes Ralston as "a selfless and devoted patriot." After the dismissal, he continues, "Ralston confirmed his resignation, got up, said good-bye to his colleagues, and left the room. He went alone. Not one of the conscriptionist ministers followed him. King had succeeded in cutting off the venomous head of the conspiratorial snake." Granatstein and Hitsman are even more dramatic: "The Council Chamber was quiet as Ralston, a gentleman and a soldier, rose, said he would hand in his resignation, shook hands, and left the room. The Cabinet sat in silence, stunned by the swift brutality with which King had applied the axe. None of Ralston's supporters moved a muscle or made to follow the departing Minister . . . . King's seizure of the psychological moment had been supremely calculated. . . ." Col. C. P. Stacey was somewhat more restrained in his description: "He went alone. The Prime Minister's tactical plan had been a complete success. The conscriptionists, totally taken by surprise, were in no position to act together."

The imagery in these accounts is not subtle. King is the insensitive manipulator who brutally dismisses Ralston about whom floats an aura of nobility, integrity, and selflessness. His conscriptionist colleagues were stunned, distracted, and overwhelmed by the Prime Minister's swift coup. There is, in almost every account of this well-known incident, a presumption that on analysis may, however, be problematic. It is the identification of the policy of overseas conscription with Ralston. In other words, to support Ralston was to support conscription; to support conscription meant support for Ralston. The point is neatly summed up by MacGregor Dawson, the first historian to write of this event: "Thus while the Government could ill afford to lose a man of Ralston's inherent honesty and steadfast devotion, it could no longer afford to keep him unless it was willing to embrace conscription." Indeed, Dawson's analysis presumed that the conscriptionists viewed Ralston and the policy as inseparable. There is enough evidence,

it seems to me, to cast some doubt upon this presumption and to allow room for an alternate, if speculative, explanation.

The background to the reaction of certain Cabinet members to the dismissal of Ralston begins in late 1941 and early 1942. During these months the Cabinet, and especially the inner War Committee of Cabinet, went through a tense and often-bitter debate over what was called the "big Army." This was the proposal of the General Staff, represented by Ralston, to have in the field in Europe, a Canadian Army of two corps, made up of five divisions with all the necessary support personnel in Britain and Canada and with provision for casualties. These were the General Service personnel, volunteers who would serve where they were sent. In addition, there would be a monthly draft of men for home defence under the National Resources Mobilization Act as amended in 1942. There were also, of course, the considerable and continuing requirements of the Air Force and the Navy. All together, this would place a heavy demand on potential manpower.

The "big Army" scheme provoked criticism from two sources. There were those in Cabinet — including all the French-Canadian ministers and Gardiner, Mackenzie, Claxton (later), and Dr. King, the government leader in the Senate — who feared that the creation of such a military establishment would ultimately force the question of conscription for overseas service. There was another group of critics — which included Crerar, the deputy chairman of the War Committee, Howe at Munitions and Supply, and Mitchell at Labour — who argued that the scheme would undercut Canada's most important contribution to the war effort, industrial and agricultural production. The entry of Japan into the war and Churchill's "give us the tools" speech greatly strengthened this argument. Ralston was usually supported by his two defence colleagues, Power for the Air Force and Macdonald for the Navy, as well as his fellow Nova Scotian, Ilsley, the Finance minister. Two others, Mulock and Gibson, were firm conscriptionists. The anticonscription members are excluded from this survey because their view of Ralston had nothing to do with their opposition to compulsory service for overseas. They were opposed in all events. They followed King's lead, that overseas conscription for Canada would only be resorted to if it were necessary in order to win the war.

Hence it is the standing of Ralston among supporters or potential supporters of conscription that is of interest here. There is a surprising amount of evidence to indicate that Ralston's reputation as Defence minister among his colleagues was, at best, ambiguous. The sources for this opinion may be found in the minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, the King papers and diary and the papers of Crerar, Power, Macdonald, J. W. Dafoe and, especially, Grant Dexter, the *Free Press* journalist who knew most of the players very well indeed and visited with them continuously through the war.

As the debate over the "big Army" began, so did the criticism of Ralston. Even Victor Sifton, who served as his Master of Ordnance, was very much against the increase. According to his friend Dexter, Sifton could not "make Ralston see that the gang [led by Generals Harry Crerar and Andy McNaughton] are putting it over him by increasing [the] establishment surreptitiously." The Cabinet debate itself, according to most accounts, was a struggle between Ralston and T. A. Crerar. The latter made his position clear in a letter to Dafoe: "if I were convinced that conscription of men for

service Overseas was the most effective contribution which Canada could make to the defeat of Hitler, I would be for it, but I am convinced that, at the present time . . . it would not produce this result." C. D. Howe was, at this point, hostile to conscription because he believed war industry, his special care, was more important than the Army. Ralston argued that an increased Army overseas could be supported by voluntary enlistments, but the evidence at hand, Ralston's own manpower report from his staff, threw this claim into doubt. When challenged by Crerar, Ralston conceded that conscription might be necessary.

Nevertheless, Ralston carried the day. According to Dexter, "King has bowed to Ralston" and we must "take a chance on the experts being right." Crerar was "deeply disappointed and relationships apparently are badly strained all around. Ralston is scarcely speaking to him." When the smoke cleared, the anticonscriptionists in the Cabinet, including Howe and Crerar at this time, became "very suspicious of [Ralston] believing that he mistrusts his colleagues, has small use for the government, is the tool of the generals who will never be satisfied however large the army is."

The battle between Ralston and Gen. A. G. L. McNaughton hurt the minister's reputation as well. Dexter noted that Crerar felt Ralston "is a 'National disaster' as minister of national defence, and should be moved. But while Ralston's incapacity as an executive makes him impossible in that portfolio, T. A. is very just. He appreciates Ralston's integrity and patriotism. There is, he conceded, nothing finer in the way of character than Ralston."

Yet, as the Cabinet and the country headed into the first conscription crisis in the summer of 1942, Ralston would not back off. It followed the plebiscite which released the government from its pledge not to impose conscription for overseas service and focused on Bill 80 which was to implement that result. Ralston kept insisting in Cabinet "that the most important task facing the government was to get more men for the army." Howe publicly exploded in the House of Commons, protesting at the large numbers called and taken to the Army. In his view, this would weaken Canada's contribution to ultimate victory. Even Angus L. Macdonald apparently agreed that "Ralston went too far." This was the background that led up to Ralston's letter of resignation to King in July of 1942. Professor Granatstein, in *Canada's War*, has an interesting comment on this which misses the point. "T. A. Crerar argued that [Ralston's] letter should be accepted because 'he saw only one side of things and was not given to considering the social problems as they should be viewed.' This was a remarkable comment from Crerar, a genuine nineteenth-century free enterprise Liberal." Granatstein was quite correct about Crerar's Liberalism, but his papers indicate clearly that what he meant by social problems on that occasion was the inevitable clash between French and English Canadians if Ralston were not reined in. In the event, the crisis passed and the resignation was neither accepted nor withdrawn.

Yet the struggle within Cabinet went on. As the war stretched into months and years, the manpower costs of maintaining the "big Army" competed with the needs of agriculture and, especially, industry. Howe was almost as relentless as Ralston. King's diary records one such clash in 1943: "Angus Macdonald was inclined to help Howe. St. Laurent was very strongly for Howe; also Michaud and of course Crerar and my-

self. . . . I do think Ralston has far too many men in the army." These positions remained pretty well fixed until October of 1944.

The successful invasion of Normandy in June of that year sparked hopes for an end to the European war within a few months. The Canadian general staff assured the government that all was well; the voluntary system was expected to provide the necessary replacements. With the spectre of conscription apparently lifting, King was so buoyed that he made a rather ill-considered speech to the Quebec Reform Club in September. According to Dexter, King concluded by eulogising the departed Lapointe. He had not failed him. There had not been, nor would there ever be, conscription for overseas service. "The conscriptionists," Dexter reported, "Ralston, Angus and the rest, were sitting right at the head table. You can imagine their feelings. Even T. A. who was always the Col.'s opponent on the army, found it too much."

Given King's position on conscription, however, this statement was not really intemperate. He had always said that conscription would be invoked only if it were necessary to win the war. The postinvasion successes of the allies meant victory was only a matter of time but, in fact, the crisis for King had not passed. Reports came in to Ottawa that the reinforcement supply was not as satisfactory as had been anticipated. In addition, the Canadians were given the difficult and costly assignment of clearing the Scheldte estuary and the casualty projections were far too low. The news was so alarming that Ralston went to Europe late in September to judge for himself. When he returned three weeks later, events in Cabinet moved swiftly to that dramatic conclusion on 1 November. Positions and opinions had changed. Ralston was now convinced that the Army overseas could not be maintained at strength without sending over the trained NRMA men but, at the War Committee meeting of 18 October, he conceded that "it was not the winning of the war that was at stake." "To my mind," King recorded, "that is the only stake on which we are justified."

C. D. Howe was customarily impatient. He had fought the "big Army" all along, but now all he wanted was a solution to the interminable arguments in Cabinet. T. A. Crerar had just returned, gloomy and dispirited, from a trip across western Canada. King was now faced with another dissident as Crerar "kept talking about his trip across Canada and the talk there was against the Zombie army. He thought the people of Canada would not stand for our men overseas not being kept up to strength as long as there was a Zombie army in Canada to draw from . . . he had opposed increases in the army at every stage, but now he felt that the Zombies ought to be sent overseas." This seems to have been the opinion of many of the so-called conscriptionists. The inadequacy of the army's advice and projections now left them little choice but to accept a change in policy, but that did not necessarily mean support for Ralston, who had for years represented the army's ambitions. King tried to keep the waverers in line. His attempt to lean on Crerar brought only agreement to consider his position. "He never wanted a large army. He thought the defence departments were no good and said so right along." A remark by Louis St. Laurent at this juncture was revealing. In considering the swirling rumour that King was planning to replace Ralston by McNaughton, he observed that "everyone had great confidence in the General, and would accept his view of what was, or was not, necessary." It was a clear implication that Ralston's views did not command the same respect.

At this point, 27 October, King suspended meetings of the Cabinet War Committee until 9 November, since it was now, according to Col. Stacey, "dominated by the conscriptionist group . . . . In full Cabinet the conscriptionists were a minority, although a very impressive one." Professor Granatstein, citing Mackenzie King, has graphically set the scene at Cabinet on 31 October but, in my view, not yet definitively. "The Prime Minister's estimate put thirteen ministers with him and eight with Ralston." Granatstein's acceptance of King's identification of Ralston with the policy may not be as obvious as it might appear.

The climax came the next day. Power, a potential but undeclared supporter of Ralston, was in hospital. Mulock and Gibson were for conscription with or without Ralston. Howe, despite his many quarrels with Ralston, now favoured conscription just to get the issue off the table. He does not seem to have cared much how this was accomplished. His mind had already turned to reconstruction. That left the Nova Scotians, Ilsley, Macdonald, and Ralston. The Prime Minister met with the Governor General early on 1 November to forewarn him that Ralston was likely to resign that day. In explaining the possibility of other defections, King recorded that Ilsley had given a rather curious justification, "that he could not face the people of Nova Scotia with both Angus L. and Ralston out, without joining them." This seems to imply that he would not go with Ralston if Macdonald stayed on. Thus, in the end, it seems Angus L. was the critical factor.

At Council later that day, there were two surprises. When King insisted that voluntary conversion for overseas service should be given one last opportunity, Ralston was surprisingly accommodating, a stand which immediately made King suspicious. The rest of the ministers seemed adamant that a fixed date be agreed upon to make the final decision. King was now more determined than ever to force Ralston out and sprang his announcement that McNaughton would take the Defence portfolio.

When Ralston rose and left the room, he went alone. He retained the respect and affection of his colleagues but no longer had their support. With the possible exception of Macdonald and perhaps Ilsley, conscriptionist members of Cabinet felt that Ralston had been badly served by his army advisers and was fatally compromised by his support of their aggressive and often-inaccurate advice. The issue could only be resolved satisfactorily after his departure. Angus L. recorded that night that he felt "Ilsley would stay in the Cabinet and that Crerar took a certain glee in Ralston's sacking on the grounds that this would teach the General Staff a lesson." Macdonald had, in fact, talked with Crerar that evening and the latter "thinks that Ralston has been very badly treated, but on the other hand, seems to believe that this will be somewhat of a lesson to the General Staff, for which Crerar has little use." Crerar himself wrote to Ralston the next day to express his continued friendship and respect, despite the fact that, "over the past three years none of your colleagues has differed with you more than I have done." Yet he made his position clear, and surely spoke for some of the others when he continued, "the incident in last evening's Council meeting, in which you were relieved of your portfolio, shocked me greatly. This was occasioned, *not by your leaving the Administration*, but by the manner in which it was done."

It should not be forgotten that three weeks later, Crerar hosted a meeting in his

office attended by Macdonald, Howe, Gibson, Mulock, and Ilsley at which they all resolved to resign if conscription was not imposed that day. At Council that evening, King finally gave in. Hence one possible answer to the student's question is that they did not all sit there like lumps; it was not only Mackenzie King who believed Ralston had to go.

The foregoing should not be construed as an implied criticism of the specialisation that has occurred in our discipline over the past thirty years. That will, of course, greatly enrich the synthesis of Canadian history. Nevertheless, I do intend a caution. As long as the parameters of our survey courses continue to be political, we must endeavour to get the story straight. As our students will continue to remind us, we must ensure the steady development of research in that field.