

**Figure 6–26** Canadian Enlistments and Casualties, 1917

Think about the battles Canadian troops were involved in during 1917. Why might enlistments have spiked in May and June? Why would casualties have been higher in April, May, and November?

Month	Enlistments	Casualties
January	9194	4396
February	6809	1250
March	6640	6161
April	5530	13 477
May	6407	13 457
June	6348	7931
July	3882	7906
August	3117	13 232
September	5588	10 990
October	4884	5929
November	4019	30 741
December	3921	7476
TOTAL	62 810	95 246

## Voices

It has often been wondered why the people of Québec have not volunteered in large numbers. I am sure that not one man in the province of Québec has any relatives native of France. . . . I think it may be truthfully said on the other hand that there is not an English-speaking family in Canada which cannot claim relatives in Great Britain.

— Wilfrid Laurier,  
to the House of Commons, 1917

## The Munitions Scandal

Sam Hughes, Canada's minister of militia and defence, responded to the war by making sure that his friends, many of whom were wealthy businesspeople, got richer. Hughes was associated with the Shell Committee, whose members used their influence to land, and profit from, \$170 million in government contracts to make artillery shells.

By 1915, word of this **profiteering** — making excessive profits — had leaked out. The scandal became worse when the committee delivered only \$5.5 million worth of shells, and even those deliveries were late. The scandal ended Hughes' political career.

## Conscription

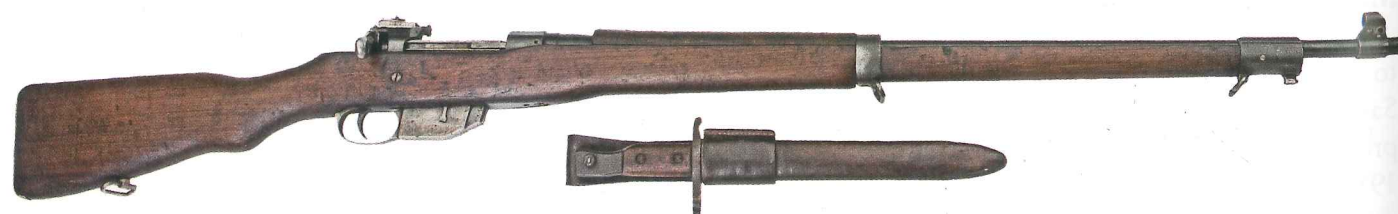
When World War I began, the government had no problem persuading Canadians to enlist in the armed forces. But by 1916, people had learned about conditions at the front from newspaper accounts and from wounded veterans who had returned home. Many families had lost loved ones, and the casualty lists published in Canadian newspapers were making the human costs of the war clear. In addition, many Canadians had landed high-paying jobs in the war industries.

In response, fewer people wanted to sign up. Enlistment campaigns started falling short of their targets, so soldiers lost in battle could not be replaced. At the same time, Britain was pressing Canada for reinforcements.

To make up the shortfall, the government of Prime Minister Robert Borden passed the Military Service Act in July 1917. The act introduced **conscription** — forced military service. Many Canadians, especially those with family members serving overseas, supported the act. But others, including Liberal leader and former Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, were outraged at the idea of forcing people to fight.

Violent riots erupted, especially in Québec, where Francophones were nearly unanimous in opposing the act. The conscription issue created distrust between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians.

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

**Figure 6–27** Sam Hughes had already been criticized for supplying Canadian soldiers with shoddy equipment, including leaky boots and the Ross rifle, which jammed in the heat of battle. Would you blame soldiers for tossing the Canadian-made weapon in favour of the British Lee Enfield?

# Conscription: Examining the Evidence

All of history is the telling of stories — interpretations of what happened in the past. Our links with the past are primary sources, which can be anything from a cave painting to a selfie. By making inferences from primary sources, we can create a story about what really happened.

For example, before calling for conscription, Prime Minister Robert Borden told the House of Commons in 1917 that “The time has come when the authority of the state should be invoked to provide reinforcements necessary to maintain the gallant men at the front.”

- **The primary source:** the text of Borden's speech
- **An inference:** Borden used the word “gallant” to convince members of Parliament that Canadian soldiers deserved support. Therefore, Borden favoured conscription.



A former member of Parliament, **HENRI BOURASSA** was the outspoken founder and editor of the influential Montréal French newspaper *Le Devoir*. In 1915, he posed the following question:

French Canadians are being exhorted to fight the Prussians [Germans] of Europe in the name of religion, liberty, and loyalty to the British flag. But shall we allow Ontario's Prussians to impose their domination at the very heart of Canada's Confederation, aided and abetted by the British flag and British institutions?



**TALBOT PAPINEAU** responded to his cousin while he was on the front lines in France. Papineau was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele.

Those of us in this great army, who may be so fortunate as to return to our Canada, will have faced the grimmest and sincerest issues of life and death — we will have experienced the unhappy strength of brute force — we will have seen our loved comrades die in blood and suffering. Beware lest we return with revengeful feelings, for I say to you that for those who, while we fought and suffered here, remained in safety and comfort in Canada and failed to give us encouragement and support . . . we shall demand a heavy day of reckoning.

## Explorations

1. Who is Bourassa calling “Ontario's Prussians”? What can you infer from his comparison? What does he think about Regulation 17? What does he think about conscription?
2. What can you infer from the Papineau quote about his view of the Canadian forces, the experiences he has undergone in war, and his view of those he says “remained in safety and comfort”?
3. How can evidence like these quotes help us better understand the conscription crisis?



### Conscription and the Vote

Prime Minister Robert Borden knew that the conscription law had stirred up a hornet's nest. So with a general election looming in late 1917, he introduced measures to improve his government's chances of winning re-election.

To begin, Borden brought in the Military Voters Act, which gave all members of the military, male and female, the vote. In addition, it allowed the government to assign the vote of soldiers who did not specify a riding to any constituency the government wished.

Borden thought that women with relatives fighting in the war were likely to support him and the policy of conscription. So the Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to close women relatives — wives, widows, mothers, sisters, and daughters — of men serving in the armed forces. This act also took away many people's right to vote. Those barred from voting included all enemy aliens, as well as conscientious objectors — people who did not believe in war.

In addition, Borden promised to extend the franchise to even more women. And when he realized that many Anglophone farmers opposed conscription because they believed they could not leave their farms, he granted farmers' sons an exemption from conscription, which he then revoked after the election.

Borden's election campaign was designed to appeal to women's patriotism and to fear. One leaflet, for example, suggested, "Before you cast your vote, think what the Kaiser [the German emperor] would like it to be." Posters and editorial cartoons portrayed the possibility of Germans invading Canada and attacking women and children in their homes.

Borden and his supporters easily won the election, and conscription went into effect. But the debate had been divisive and left a legacy of bitterness between Francophones and Anglophones. Borden did keep his election promise to women, and in 1918, women who were older than 21, who were not alien-born or Aboriginal, and who met provincial property-ownership requirements had the right to vote in federal elections.

**Figure 6-28** In 1917, these Canadian military nurses — often called Bluebirds because of the colour of their uniforms — voted at a polling station set up at their field hospital in France. Why would these women have the right to vote while other women did not?



### Recall... Reflect... Respond

- Many Canadian women won the right to vote in federal elections because of the political tactics Prime Minister Robert Borden used to ensure his re-election. An old saying — the end justifies the means — suggests that questionable methods are justified if the outcome is positive. Did the positive outcome for women in 1917 justify Borden's tactics? Explain your response.
- Think about the responses to war of Canadians at home and identify the two you believe had the greatest long-term impact for Canadian society, politics, or identity.
- Give reasons for your choices. Share your decisions and reasons with a partner.
- Some people believe that Canadians who did not enlist in the armed forces benefited greatly from World War I. Develop three pieces of evidence you could use to argue in favour of, or against, this position. Share your ideas with a classmate. After your discussion, identify the arguments that most effectively support your position.

### Thinking Historically: Historical Perspective

## Changing Attitudes About Women

There is a world of difference between the Canada of a hundred years ago and our Canada today. Societal norms and attitudes have all changed. So when we attempt to understand people from the past, we should avoid judging them as if they lived in our own era. The period of World War I was a period of transition in views about women's role in society. Some people held "old-fashioned" opinions, while others were more forward looking. If the opinions below seem odd or even objectionable, ask yourself how the passage of time offers an explanation.



In the early 20th century, **STEPHEN LEACOCK** was not only a teacher, political scientist, and serious author but also the best-known humorist in the English-speaking world. He wrote this comment in an essay called "The Woman Question."

The women's vote, when they get it, will leave women much as they were before. . . . The world's work is open to [woman], but she cannot do it. She lacks the physical strength for laying bricks or digging coal. If put to work on a steel beam a hundred feet above the ground, she would fall off. For the pursuit of business her head is all wrong. Figures confuse her. She lacks sustained attention. . . . Women could never be a team of anything.



**MARIE-JOSEPH DEMERS**, member of Parliament for St. Johns–Iberville, Québec, made these remarks in the House of Commons in May 1918.

[W]e all recognize [women's] sublime mission; that is to say, the moral and intellectual development of our children. I believe that it is a dangerous experiment to take them away from our homes.



**NELLIE MCCLUNG**, author and advocate for women's rights, wrote this in her 1915 book, *In Times Like These*.

No person denies a woman the right to go to church, and yet the church service takes a great deal more time than voting. . . . But the wife and mother, with her God-given, sacred trust of moulding the young life of our land, must never dream of going round the corner to vote. "Who will mind the baby," cried one of our public men, in great agony of spirit, "when the mother goes to vote?"



Homesteader **IRENE PARLBY** was Alberta's first female cabinet minister and one of Canada's Famous Five.

If politics mean . . . the effort to secure through legislative action better conditions of life for the people, greater opportunities for our children and other people's children . . . then it most assuredly is a woman's job as much as it is a man's job.

### Explorations

- Choose a speaker whose opinion seems odd or unacceptable to you. Think about the values and beliefs that were the norm in early 20th-century Canada. Does that help you understand, if not approve of, the opinion? Why or why not?
- Which speakers do you think were likely criticized for their views in the early 20th century? What opinions today might be viewed as odd or unacceptable 100 years from now? Explain your choices.