Military Service Bill 12 January 1916 debate in the House of Commons in which Arnold Rowntree Contributed on the position of the Quakers and conscience

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Mr. ROWNTREE I want to ask the indulgence of the House, in speaking on this subject, with regard to a matter which perhaps they feel at first is not a very real one, but it is one which I believe, if they consider, they will see is a very vital matter indeed. Since this Bill was introduced I have been genuinely unhappy because of the fear that the country was going to be seriously divided. I believe that the most critical matter for the present in this country is the condition of labour. When I first read this Bill 1 feared very much indeed that the very difficult position would be still further aggravated. I hope very much that the concessions outlined by the Prime Minister have done something to remove that fear; yet I feel that those concessions have not removed it, and that increased difficulty may be experienced. I have also been unhappy because of the fear that there might be real religious difficulty and conflict in this country. I am perfectly certain that the Government wish, if they can, to meet the standpoint of the conscientious objector, but this is a very difficult point to meet. I will explain to the House why. Severe things are said at the present time by some about the conscientious objector. He is often called a slacker. I want to suggest to hon. Members that it is not quite fair to speak in these terms of the conscientious objector. I believe that if I had time I could make every hon. Member feel that, in this conflict, many of those who felt unable to fight have yet tried to serve their country in other important ways. Let me, if I may do so, put the difficulty which the conscientious objector feels. May I just say what the Quakers feel? We claim that no man can be called upon compulsorily to fight when the dictates of his conscience convince him that it is morally wrong to do so. Secondly, we claim that to require every man to be a soldier is to hand over every individual's freedom to the military authorities, and to make the nation essentially a military Power, dependent on material force. We have taken that view from the early days.
It is felt that war is essentially contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and, naturally, when a war like this breaks out the Quakers find themselves in a position of peculiar difficulty. Though they hold back, and though their view is felt by thousands of others, yet a large body of these conscientious objectors want to serve their country in a time of trial like this in the most effective way they can. I believe that something like 500 young men holding those views have joined the Ambulance Unit in France which was referred to in very flattering and generous terms by an hon. Member opposite a few days ago. These men, in Belgium and in France,

have done what they can to carry the wounded, to establish hospitals, and to undertake reconstruction work in that part of Belgium which is not in German occupation at the present time. I must not give the figures, but with the help of the military authorities we have been allowed to do that work in our own way. The men have not enlisted; they have not bad to bear arms, but they have done what they could, and I think all who have seen anything of the work say that it has been done well. My hon. Friend who sits beside me (Mr. Edmund Harvey) has been the leader of another party in another part of France, where young men who hold these views have left their work in this country and have built, I think, about 300 houses, rehoused 2,000 people, helped in giving seeds and starting those poor people with new crops, starting hospitals, and doing other work of that kind. The desire of an increasing number of Friends, and those who hold those views, is to be allowed to extend that service and to do work of that kind of a voluntary character. I must not pass from that point without saying that in all that work we have had the most generous help from Mr. Stanley, Lord Derby, and
others. But there are others who do not feel that they can do that kind of work, and I do beg of hon. Members, when they are apt to criticise those men, to recognise that there is a great principle at stake, and to be careful how they treat these conscientious objectors. Religion during this War has had a great triumph and a great failure. It has had a great triumph in the magnificent heroism of men who, at the call of conscience, have given themselves for their country. It has had a great triumph in the consolation that it has brought to those who are distressed. Is there one of us but feels that it has had a great failure in being unable to stop this devastating and desolating War? There are in this country to-day large numbers of men who feel that they cannot help in the way of which I have spoken, because they are afraid of getting within the military machine. They are willing to be persecuted if you are prepared to do it, but it is a question of conscience with them. I have been trying to understand it in the last few days, because I have been often in conflict with some of them. What they feel is, that if there is to be a re-establishment of right relations between nation and nation there must be a new spirit, and they feel that they must try and interpret that spirit, the gospel of love, the gospel of meekness. They feel that it is possible that before you get this new feeling established over the world there may have to be on the part of a large number suffering. They may have to sacrifice their position. I want to suggest to you that it would be a most disastrous thing if, in connection with this War, you were to do anything that might bring about religious persecution in this country. I am one of those who feel how much we owe this country. I believe that the view of most conscientious objectors is that they cannot do enough to pay back what this country has done for them. I believe the view of most conscientious objectors is that they remember day by day the men who are dying for them in the trenches, and they want to repay that debt. I ask this House

to be very careful that it does nothing that is going to fan anything that might be a religious war in this country. I know it is not your intention to do so, but directly you begin to try and find out who is a conscientious objector and who is not, your difficulties begin. I do not think that the tribunals at present suggested are the best. They are right for the other exemptions, probably, because largely that is a question of fact; but to find out who is a conscientious objector needs a very broad sympathy.

Then supposing a good many of the conscientious objectors do not ask for exemption. They will then be court martialled as deserters, and will then have to suffer the penalties of court martial. They are not afraid of suffering those penalties: they will suffer anything; but I am sure it would be bad for this country to have hundreds or thousands of these men suffering for conscience sake in this way. Some feel so strongly, that the State has no right to compel them to fight or compel them to get into the military machine, or to compel them to go before a tribunal like that, that I am afraid some would object to do it. I am not supporting that. I want to help the House, and not to hinder it, in coming to a right decision. But I want to warn Members that they will have to face facts, and I want them to be, for the sake of unity, willing, so far as they can, to let the work that is to be done by conscientious objectors go on on this voluntary basis, and I fancy that if you are able to do that you will find that conscientious objectors, or many of them, will be willing to give full measure to their country.

I must not speak longer, because I have promised not to do so, but I have not been able to put as effectively before the House this problem as I should like. The reason why I regretfully have to oppose this Bill is because I feel it makes the labour position more difficult; it may bring about serious religious difficulties and complications, and may break up the unity of the country. I want to put to Members that this country occupies the place she does in the world to-day because, with all her faults, she has proved herself time and time again the true home of personal liberty, of free institutions, and of unimprisoned spiritual ideas. I beg of you to leave men still the masters of their own souls, and to do nothing to destroy the fabric of England's appeal to the conscience of the world.

Pm the Richmond 16 – questions in the House.

Mr. ROWNTREE (by Private Notice): I beg to ask the Under-Secretary of State for War whether it is true that sixteen men from Richmond and others from Abergele, who on conscientious grounds were resisting military orders, in spite of instructions to the contrary, were this week

sent to France; if so, what steps have been taken to bring them back without delay?

Mr. TENNANT I may say that I have received no notice of the question from my hon. Friend. I can inform the House of the steps that were taken to prevent these men going abroad, and as to what the proposal is now. A telegram was sent, as I have informed my hon. Friend. I think I need not read it. It asked that steps should be taken to send the men back.

Mr. ROWNTREE Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will read the telegram.

Mr. TENNANT Very well— "Copy of telegram from the War Office to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Command, 30th May:" "It is understood that there are eight conscientious objectors at Kinmel Park who are being sent overseas. Take steps to ensure that they do not go overseas. If they have already gone, take steps to recall if still in this country or state whereabouts as far as is known. In addition forward a report on the matter." That was repeated to the other commanders by letter. "Copy of telegram to General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Northern Command, 30th May:" "It is understood that there are sixteen men of Non-Combatant Corps now in detention or recently released at Richmond due to proceed to France with their unit to-day. These men are said to have committed offences against discipline on account of conscientious objection. Take steps to ensure that they do not go to France, but remain to undergo sentence or, if released, are forthwith attached to another unit of the Non-Combatant Corps. If they have already gone, take steps to recall if still in this country or state whereabouts is far as is known." "Copy of telegram from War Office to General Officer Commanding Northern Command, 30th May:" "In addition to particulars required by War Office telegram of this date furnish a report on the matter by letter." The reply that was received was: "Copy of telegram from the General Officer Commanding Kinmel Park to the War Office, dated 30th May:" "Reference your telegram of to-day. No. 1 Western Company Non-Combatant Corps, including nine men under escort, proceeded last night to France, due Southampton to-day."

The other telegram was: "Copy of telegram from the Officer Commanding Troops, Richmond Barracks, to the War Office, dated 30th May:" "Reference War Office telegram of to-day. Non-Combatant Company left yesterday for Southampton and the sixteen men are probably now in France." It was stated last night that it is not easy to rescue them, though it is very desirable. These men left for France as free men, and those who commit themselves there will get imprisonment and will be transferred home to civil prisons.

Mr. ROWNTREE Arising out of the answer of the right hon. Gentleman,

may I ask him whether he knows that a definite assurance was given to us on Tuesday that these men should not go to France, and that on that assurance no Debate took place in this House in regard to the matter? That being the case, may I ask whether he cannot give orders at once that these men shall be returned? May I also ask him whether, in view of the new Army Order, he cannot give an assurance now that no more of these resisting men shall be sent to France, where they must be a serious encumbrance to the Army?

Mr. TENNANT I am not at all aware that no Debate took place. There was a Debate on the subject for about two and a half hours. I made a long speech, and my hon. Friend made a very interesting speech, so that I do not think he is correct in that matter. But I do not think my hon. Friend ought to press me further than he has already done. It is quite true we tried to get these men stopped, but we were too late. What difference can it make to my hon. Friends if these men are kept in France or if they are brought back to this country? I really do not think it can matter.

Mr. HARVEY Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that a question was put down by Private Notice, and was withdrawn at the express desire of the War Office authorities, conveyed to myself and my hon. Friend through a Cabinet Minister, and on the absolute understanding that those men should be stopped from going to France, and when I placed before the Cabinet Minister the probability that the telegram might be sent to the wrong place I also got the assurance that steps should be taken to bring them back; is he aware that I communicated with a Parliamentary Private Secretary about the matter during the course of that day; and is he also aware that if a telegram had been sent to—

Mr. SPEAKER The hon. Member is abusing his right.
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