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"Trench Life in Canada"

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COL. W. W. FOSTER:—Mr. President and gentlemen, may I first thank your president for his most kind introduction, I fear perhaps it was too kind as far as personal reference to myself is concerned, and, then express my very deep appreciation of the opportunity given me today to speak to such a distinguished audience. Might I also add that, coming from the far West it was particularly gratifying to stand with you this morning and sing the national anthem, because in that national anthem we are ever reminded that in a time of crisis we have in the person of our King the symbolism of unity such as nothing else can afford, the Empire's great bond, something that draws us closer together in a time of crisis and tells us that we are all one at heart in appreciation of things worthwhile as demonstrated in the person of His Majesty himself.

At noon today one might naturally be expected to address you in terms different from those which you will hear, as when a great crisis faces our country naturally the individual does not always think in those terms of every day life that would otherwise be the case; but, I will still try to give you in simple language some little appreciation of the condition that exists in this country as seen by one who has lately had the opportunity of travelling from sea to sea and made personal contact with so many, who, despite the great distances by which we are divided, despite the diversified resources of our country, are all at heart sincerely desirous of developing a country that will be worthy of the effort and sacrifice of times past. You might have wondered why I chose as the title of an address the somewhat

obscure one of "Trench Life in Canada". Might I justify it by a comparison with the conditions faced in the field after the first encounter of the Great War when our armies settled down into the trenches and succeeding years saw a war of attrition with its limited outlook and possibility of victory; the trenches themselves the all important factor with names suggestive of local endeavour. We had the Vancouver trench, Regina trench, Winnipeg, Montreal, Toronto trench and whilst in those trenches men certainly learned to know their own intimate associates, they rather failed to grasp what was being done by others and failed to appreciate that it was only by combining together, only by manouevres upon such a scale that all could unite in one common thought and objective, that success could be achieved.

And so the early part of the war found our different units immobilized in this manner not understanding co-operation, and it was only by bitter experience there came a realization of the fact that one must have vision and unity to achieve success. To Canadians that appreciation came first with the great attack on Vimy Ridge. Looking around this room I can see many who were there. They can well recall that morning waiting in hastily improvised trenches, or lying out in the sleet and rain, Canadians assembled together for the first time as a unit, their task to attack the ridge, and how they succeeded in doing what had hitherto been termed impossible, the capture of that great bastion. Its capture naturally brought a thrill of pride to all who took part. But there was something else attained that day, and that was the giving to Canada of a prestige such as she never before had enjoyed. Constituting Canada in the eyes of the world a nation to a far greater degree than was expressed in later years by the written word. It is a fact that unity was only secured after long years of war, but, the point I particularly wanted to make is that war did teach us the value of unity not alone in the field, but also at home where those who remained, with every resource at their command, supported their armies in the field. It was overseas our men learned the simplicities of courage, of faith, laughter, and even of death itself:

perhaps also seeing these things in their relation to the immediate destiny of our land, until finally under one command, with one common objective, victory was secured, victory that could never have been attained had that trench life prevailed for all time.

There are many here today who will recall one of the most spectacular scenes in history and that was the return to their people, of King Albert and his Queen to Brussels just after the armistice, a magnificent day when everything lent itself to pageantry of that character, the King riding in at the head of his army, and with them representatives of every unit of every army that had fought side by side on Flanders Fields. A great demonstration of what unity means. At the gates of the city he was received by burgo-master Max, one of the outstanding characters of the war who presented him with the Keys of the city. In the afternoon there was a scene that those who witnessed never forget, the King's arrival in St. Martins' Cathedral to celebrate mass. It was not my church, but it was one of the most outstanding services that any one could possibly have been present at. From the early hours of the morning his subjects had been there on their knees waiting to see their King, and when he arrived somewhat late in the afternoon the doors of the great cathedral were thrown open and there standing in the oaken portal the people for the first time for so many years saw their King. They forgot they were in the House of God; they forgot everything but that sight, and rising from their knees all through the cathedral there were cries, "It is our King; our King is back; Belgium is again a free country; we are free people." And then, as though with common accord, they sank back on their knees, and departing from the order of service Cardinal Mercier before proceeding to meet the King turned to the people and said, "It is true; our King has returned. We are again free people." The freedom of our institutions have been secured, but, as long as there are true men and true women the world over they will never forget that the price of freedom has been the paving of the road from Mons to the Marne and back to Mons again with the bodies of our dead.

Such events we naturally think of today, and, with that most stirring spectacle what have we seen in our own time—the passing of great empires, a sacrifice amongst our own people of over ten million lives, as well as untold treasure, and we realize more than ever today the clouds of bitterness and distrust that have been hovering over us, many of course the direct result of the Great War, whilst in the so called post war period we witnessed nine other wars take place. The one thing that is not so apparent unless you travel throughout this vast country, is the moral set back when with the more obvious danger removed we lost that unity by which so much had been achieved. During these years we have been thinking in terms of self interest, not terms of the country's need. We have seen grown up provincialism not national thought, whilst even in the Canadian Club, as I think its members will agree, it certainly was the case in the Canadian Club to which I belong, even to speak in terms of Empire became unfashionable, a very strange reaction from the appreciation of Empire during the war period. And so to complete a rather curious comparison may I suggest that during the past years we simply settled down to what the soldier would describe as the limited viewpoint of trench life. As far as those who returned from overseas are concerned it is true they had ideals in mind, one, that of preserving the comradeship which had meant so much. Also vague ideas of using it for the benefit of country, and of uniting with other comrades to achieve that purpose. Today naturally is not the time, particularly under the present circumstances, to emphasize too much the detail of soldier organizations but I think in connection with the main theme of the value of unity that it is fitting I should point to some facts. After the war was over the British Empire Service League, a League destined to become, as it is today, the Empire's greatest organization, was brought into existence and Earl Haig, our old Commander in Chief, the man most fitted to do so, came to Winnipeg and called a conference of all existing Canadian returned soldiers' organizations. There were a great many of them, all animated by an idea of service to their country, but the very number of these

organizations confusing the issue and defeating the purpose they had in mind. Earl Haig pointed out that if men were sincerely desirous of serving their country in times of peace, and help one another as they had overseas, there was only one path, and unity was the method of approach. From that day, as far as the Canadian Legion, of which I am the present head, is concerned, it has persistently endeavoured to broadcast that thought. It has as you know an organization extending from coast to coast with something like 1,600 branches and over 175,000 members enrolled, all of them trying to exemplify a spirit of comradeship, because they feel it is their greatest asset in life today in a personal sense, and also because they think it can be put to such useful purpose in these critical times. And might I add that the Canadian Legion is not purely a Canadian institution; it is part of the British Empire Service League and we in Canada are simply trying to do our bit in our own land as our comrades and fellow soldiers who served are trying to do theirs in different portions of the Empire. What a wonderful possibility can be conjured up if we imagine a great national service organization of those who understand service, who have faith and confidence in one another, trying to build up their own country, trying to develop it along lines commensurate with the sacrifice of the past, and then extend that thought to co-operation with other portions of the Empire and so bring the component parts of the Empire closer together. It opens up a vision of limitless possibility. To come back to our own land naturally one would say the first thing to do is within its own boundaries, secure unity of veterans and building upon that assist to develop unity amongst our people as a whole. The Legion today is united within its own ranks. It is perfectly true amongst the returned men in our land there is not that common front their country might have expected them to achieve, but there have been many difficulties in the way. One was that our units on demobilization were scattered through this country. We did not meet in our own home towns to any large extent the men with whom we fought in the field, and the creation of these different organizations in a vast country such as ours was perhaps

to be expected, as opposed to the smaller land at home where they know each other so intimately and are accustomed in great emergencies to think first in terms of country. But much has been accomplished, and although I do not intend to go into detail, I have with me records showing the splendid work of the Service Bureau in Ottawa and your own in Ontario. In Ottawa there is maintained an organization not alone to serve members of the Canadian Legion but all who served or their dependents, financed, to the extent of two thirds of its cost, by members of the Canadian Legion and its cost amounted to something like \$25,000 a year, of which only about one third, \$9,000 has come from grants from the Dominion Government. Of the work that has been done you will appreciate its scope when I tell you in Ontario alone your own Service Bureau has been responsible for something like 6,000 pension claims being admitted and for adjustments of another 11,000. At Ottawa since the time this Bureau started, approximately 8 pension adjustments have been made every day of the year. I am not giving you those figures as figures but to give an idea of what happiness has been brought to homes where otherwise there would have been distress, and to ask you to extend your vision from coast to coast where members of those 1,600 branches often in very difficult circumstances, and their own positions in jeopardy, have unselfishly bound themselves together to serve their comrades and their families in order to help out our own country in its time of need and I think you will agree that these men who overseas did their best for Canada, are indeed trying to play the game to the end.

One other thing, the Canadian Legion has always done its best in the cause of peace. It has been one of our first objectives, and today there is some comfort in the thought that during the past years we have had affiliation with 20 millions of returned men of different countries, all of them devoted to the ideal of peace, all of them just as sincerely desirous as we are ourselves of saving their respective countries from the catastrophe of another war. Perhaps you might have noted that when Chamberlain made that magnificent gesture of going to Germany to make every

possible contribution in the cause of peace, on the public streets of that land he was received with acclaim, the men who tendered that appreciation being the men who knew what war was. Another great statesman of the old land, Mr. Baldwin, said in front of some 8,000 Canadians, referring to the fact that during the excavations for the great Vimy memorial some of the dead had again been uncovered, that civilized nations today are treading on very dangerous ground and if while still burying the dead of the last war they are willing to engage in another, civilization might perish and deserve to perish. That is the thought of our great statesmen. That is why today men like the British Prime Minister are doing things that would not have been done in times past, accepting even humiliation, in order to avert if possible that great catastrophe. As far as the Canadian Legion is concerned, because of the fact that we have from coast to coast a united organization it enabled us to assure the Prime Minister of this country who is working for peace in conjunction with His Majesty's ministers at home, that the services of the Canadian Legion were unreservedly at the disposal of their country in any emergency. And one might add today, in view of war being a possibility, that if those great efforts for peace fail, there will be general recognition of the fact that everything humanly possible has been done, and our comrades throughout the country, and other citizens, because that is the case, will do their duty without hesitation.

If I might suggest it, one of the great needs that we face today, when we are brought face to face with an emergency of this character, is the fact that we are not able as we should be to speak in national terms. It is true that in building up our country the doors were thrown open and many entered who could not possibly understand our traditions and our conception of freedom, and that is one of the great problems Canada has to face—how to visualize an ideal of what our country stands for. Today in different provinces we think provincially and if we have sectionalism throughout our land, how can we possibly expect those who do not inherit those traditions of freedom to appreciate what Canada means in a national sense. It was with that

in view that a brief was presented to the Rowell Commission by the Canadian Legion suggesting that the time had come when there should be a presentation to the Canadian people of what Canadian unity really means, and that certain great principles should be enunciated upon which we can unite. A few days ago I had the opportunity of standing with other comrades around that table where the great statesmen of Confederation gave us Canada and one could not help thinking that if we would meet our problems in a national spirit, and with the same courage and with the same vision that those statesmen displayed, perhaps today our country would be looked upon by its associates in the British Empire and the world, as one that had really attained national unity. Today we face a world divided in thought, and yet whatever such thoughts may be, united in destiny and with all the different ideologies at the present time existing, there can be no longer any standing aloof with a policy of splendid isolation, even if such were possible. We have left the people at home in the old land bearing the burden all too long, and perhaps the very crisis we are facing today by bringing us closer together, will also tend to give us a further appreciation of our responsibilities within the Empire, because if ever Canada is to take its place as a nation, fulfil its great destiny, we must be able to speak with united voice as far as our own land is concerned, and so serve our country, serve the Empire, and in so doing aid in the solution of some of the great problems facing humanity today.

There are many other things one has in mind, but, I think I will just give you a little sketch of another scene on Vimy Ridge because our thoughts today have been diverted to remembrance and duty. On Vimy Ridge two years ago there assembled a great pilgrimage from Canada, thousands of those who served and the next of kin of those who fell—many of the former bearing visible evidence of service, amputated, maimed, and blind, as they stood there in order to be present at Canada's unveiling of its great memorial to her dead. The keynote of the pilgrimage was that of peace and goodwill. The whole atmosphere was in marked contrast to that I referred to a few minutes ago when Vimy

was conquered. They stood on Canadian soil. Vimy has been conveyed to Canada in perpetuity, in gratitude for what Canadians accomplished. On that day one could look northwest to the Ypres salient, and southwest almost to Amiens, and embrace within that glance the terrain where we left 60,000 dead, and where lie the remains of nearly 11,000 whose last resting places were never found. They are the ones whose names are perpetuated in that great memorial. Not much is visible of the ravages of war, other than in every direction one could see the cemeteries where the dead lie side by side in peace. The great memorial consists of a rampart of defence with symbolic figures at either side, whilst rising from the platform two great pilons symbolize the joint civilizations from which we sprung, French and British. Upon these pilons are the symbolic figures of peace, justice, honor, and truth, whilst in front upon the wall appears the heroic figure of a woman with cowed and bowed head, symbolic of Canada mourning for her dead. Beside that figure the King stood at its unveiling and said words that will ever remain a memory—that long after the cause of war has been forgotten the courage and sacrifice of those who fell will be remembered. Surmounting all others, is a figure, the spirit of sacrifice and the passing of the torch to those who remain, and when Last Post sounded that day it emphasized the sacrifice that made Canada great. I remember speaking to one old lady, who had lost five sons in the Great War, and who said that up to that day she had never had true comfort, but now she knew Canada would ever remember the loss of her boys. Other thoughts came to one with the sounding of Last Post, but above all was a feeling of happiness that Canada had paid this great tribute to her dead. Then as Reveille echoed again over Vimy it brought the thought of duty, of the responsibility that remains with those who live today to carry the torch, to see that peace, justice, honor, and truth prevail throughout our land and coupled with it, to those who served, the realization that only by unity can objectives such as those be secured. And so in conclusion if I may voice the thought as one from the west, who has had the opportunity during the past few months of seeing a great

deal of our magnificent country, that we today have a tremendous responsibility; we have the experience of the past to guide us and should remember what was done by those great statesmen who gave us Canada; remember the sacrifice by which the ideals of today have been secured, and forgetting the sectionalism and things of lesser moment, join together and try and build up a united Canada in every sense of the word.