

that could offer a modicum of protection for increasing shipments of munitions and troops. An offer by the Dominion government in May 1916 to construct two or three torpedo boat destroyers brought the Admiralty's suggestion that Canadian shipyards would be better employed building merchant ships, "as at present additional mercantile tonnage is of equal imperial necessity to naval tonnage."<sup>19</sup> U-boat activity in the North Atlantic increased in November 1916, leading the Admiralty to urge Canada and Newfoundland to augment the number of armed patrol vessels from twelve to thirty-six.<sup>20</sup> The Canadian response was blunt and to the point. The Dominion government regretted that such vessels were not available because all of Canada's trained seamen who could serve as crew had already been sent to England, and the Royal Navy was still recruiting in the country. The Admiralty discouraged the idea of building destroyers earlier in the year, and the War Office had been allowed to purchase or charter vessels in Canada that might have been useful for patrol work; hence, adequate protection of Canada's coast was the responsibility of the Admiralty.<sup>21</sup> There was no answer from London until 10 January 1917, when the Admiralty confirmed that the situation was urgent, but that no patrol vessels would be forthcoming. It recommended that the Dominion obtain low-speed trawlers with good sea-keeping characteristics. Borden's government approved the purchase of ten trawlers from New England on 17 January (although only five would be available when Naval Service officials finalized the purchase) and ordered the construction of twelve Battle class trawlers. The situation changed dramatically, however, when the Admiralty sent word on 5 February 1917 that Canadian shipyards should be used to build thirty-six steam trawlers and one hundred wooden drifters under the direction of the Dominion government.<sup>22</sup>

While the request marked a significant policy shift when compared with the Admiralty's previous rejection of overtures by Borden and Canadian Vickers, it likely did not come as a surprise. The Admiralty inquired about the capacity of Canadian shipyards in August 1915, which led the Dominion government to collect information on numbers of employees, average cost per deadweight ton, restrictions on vessel size (such as length of canal locks), and sources of construction material.<sup>23</sup> A year later, the general manager of Canadian Vickers contacted his counterpart at the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company to ask how many trawlers could be built before the close of navigation in 1916, since his principals had inquired about constructing between 200 and 300 such vessels. Upon meeting in Montreal in August 1916, they agreed that only sixty might be built in Canada due to the size of the workforce and existing orders from other clients, with work distributed between Canadian Vickers, Collingwood, the shipyard in Kingston, the Polson Iron Works, and Davie Shipbuilding & Repairing Company in Levis, Quebec. John Leitch,

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, paraphrase of cypher telegram from A. Bonar Law to the governor general, 26 May 1916.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11 November 1916.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., governor general to A. Bonar Law, 19 November 1916.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Long to governor general, 5 February 1917.

<sup>23</sup> LAC, Department of External Affairs fonds, RG 25 G-1, vol. 1166, file 1722, A. Bonar Law to the governor general, 13 August 1915 and 10 November 1915.