

(January 15th, 1936)

The Political Situation in England

BY THE MARQUIS OF LOTHIAN.

PRESIDENT A. L. BISHOP, welcoming the speaker, said: We welcome back to the Canadian Club of Toronto today one who has been with us on several occasions previously, and we are very delighted to have him with us again today. Like many of the great English families, he exemplifies the ideal of public service by devoting his whole life to it. It gives me very great pleasure on your behalf to offer him a warm welcome. Gentlemen, The most honorable the Marquis of Lothian.

THE MARQUIS OF LOTHIAN:—Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I come so often to Toronto that I feel you must be getting tired of listening to my political observations, and I feel in greater difficulty today because it has been suggested that I should talk about the British political situation, and I am an old enough politician to know that if I say anything indiscreet in Toronto, it will certainly be cabled to London this evening, and I shall get into trouble with my political friends at home.

I have considered discussing the results of the last election and the probable political future of England, and Dr. Cody, on my right, has just reminded me of something I had quite forgotten, that when I was here some six months ago, I made some prophecies as to the results of the impending election, and that I was proved to be entirely correct.

Some of you may remember that the National Government was rather unpopular about last February or March, and I think if the election had taken place then, they certainly would not have gained a majority of 250 in a parliament of 615, as they did in November last. There were

three things that greatly favored the National Government then. In the first place, the decision of Herr Hitler to re-introduce conscription and to lay the foundations of an army of 550,000 men startled not only Europe, but Great Britain as well. It made the people realize that we were moving into a very dangerous era, and that the risk of war, that they had discounted in previous years, was perhaps nearer than they had expected.

Following that came a most successful Jubilee, in which the whole nation felt a glow of sympathy and good-will towards the Royal family, and the National Government was in some part identified with the feelings of contentment which the Jubilee and a very beautiful summer had brought about. Finally, on September 11, Sir Samuel Hoare made a speech which resounded around the world and which represented exactly the dominating sentiment of all three parties, and deprived the opposition of the principal arguments it had expected to use against the Government. Therefore we got a National Government returned by a much larger majority than anyone expected—250.

I am going to call your attention to some figures, because these figures, I believe, are symptomatic of what is going on underground in political opinion. The total vote for the Government was eleven and a half millions, and these may, broadly speaking, be regarded as Conservative and Liberal-Conservative votes. Against the Government were cast ten million votes, the great majority of which were for the Labor or Socialist party, about eight and a half millions in all, and one and a half millions for the Independent Liberals. Therefore the figure of a 250 majority in parliament is a great exaggeration of the voting strength polled by the two sides. Only eleven and a half million against ten, and yet Labor only gained 150 seats, compared with the Conservatives' nearly 400.

Now compare these figures with those of 1929 and of the last election of 1931, which was quite unrepresentative because it failed to support a labor government with Ramsay Macdonald and Philip Snowden in the National Government. In 1929 there was a more normal election and the figures were: Conservatives, 8,500,000; Labor, 8,500,000;

Liberals, 5,000,000. Now you can see what had happened in the interim. The Liberal vote had fallen from five millions to one and a half and the greater part of it went to the National Government.

It is very difficult to prophesy about the future, but in the normal way, with the pendulum swinging with its normal tendency, there will be a change of government. In England it is looked upon as an axiom that no Government lasts more than ten years, and as the old Liberal party has more or less faded from the picture, this means that unless the labor party pursues a very extreme policy, or unless a war or some similar crisis interferes, you are likely to have a Labor or Socialist majority within four or five years.

But that, of course, will depend upon whether the Labor party can restrain the extreme radicalism of its left wing and present a programme sufficiently moderate not to precipitate a crisis.

Today in England, owing to the gradual disappearance of the old Liberal party, the issue is more and more coming to be between property and non-property. Today it is not the old challenge of democracy and individual freedom, but the basic socialist thesis as to whether the capitalist system can eliminate permanently the tremendous measure of unemployment, and whether it can bring about such a levelling of income as will end the great differentiation of incomes which have existed for the past thirty or forty years. I am not going to prophesy as to the date of the next election, but I think it is fair to say that there is quite a likelihood of a socialist government. Not one that will adopt policies that will even remotely resemble those of Russia, but one that says that government of this century must be along the lines of socialism if we are to solve modern problems. But again I say, that will depend upon whether the moderate forces of the labor party can keep in check their more extreme elements.

Turning to the Abyssinian crisis as seen in parliament, I would only say that you in Canada are responsible for one particular ferment. In March of last year it was pretty evident that the Government was not thinking very much about the League of Nations. It issued the famous March

White Paper, asking for an increase of armaments on the ground of the need of greater security. They were principally occupied with the German problem, for Hitler, determined that he could not get equality for Germany by talking, decided that he was going to take it by action of his own kind. The crisis was of a very serious nature as you will all remember.

It was only after that began to recede that the Abyssinian question came to the forefront. But while the whole official world was considering the German situation, there was going on that very remarkable movement known as the Peace ballot. This was largely the result of a Canadian, Lord Beaverbrook, because he, during the preceding year, had conducted a vigorous campaign against the League of Nations, demanding that Britain return to a policy of "splendid isolation." Now the amazing thing about this peace ballot movement was, not so much in the results obtained, as in the enormous number of workers who volunteered to get out and put the thing over. No less than half a million people went to work. All over the country they went out distributing the questionnaires, taking them to peoples' houses, and then going back to pick them up and turn them in.

The result was that they obtained no less than eleven million signatures, and of this eleven million practically all expressed a firm conviction that the League of Nations was essential to peace, and that Great Britain should be willing to introduce economic sanctions against an aggressor. Not only that, eight millions went so far as to support the use of military sanctions for the same object. These results were published in June and July, just about the time that the Government began to realize that nothing they could do was likely to deter Mussolini from attempting to solve the Abyssinian question by war.

It was about this time that Mussolini is said to have made the statement quoted by Pertinax, that "Even if you give me Abyssinia on a silver platter I will not accept it, because I am determined to take it by war." That was part of his belief that Italy could not be made into a great imperial nation except by proving itself and its capacity under the stress of modern war.

It was only in July that it was made plain that the people of Britain had made up their minds that they were going to try to deter Mussolini by sanctions. Consider now the position in which the Government was placed. It could no longer attempt to side-step its difficulties. The League was quite different from its original set-up. Four of the greatest powers in the world were outside—The United States, Germany, Japan, and Brazil. So arose the question of whether the League could take steps to use coercive measures against an aggressor that was a great power. This left the government with two options. They could go to Geneva and say that lacking the help of the four great powers the League could do nothing. That course would have meant the end of the League as an effective instrument for the prevention of war.

The only alternative course was to go to Geneva and say that in spite of the absence of the four great nations we were prepared to live up to article sixteen of the covenant, if other nations were prepared to do so. That met with an astonishing response from all over the world. No less than fifty nations rallied to support the League, and when the invasion actually took place, Italy was declared the aggressor, and sanctions were immediately imposed.

Now we come to the genesis of the Hoare-Laval plan, and to understand the course of events you must realize that in part it was one of those chapters of accidents which all politicians recognize may disturb their best laid plans. Undoubtedly Mussolini convinced the French and British Governments, and me too, that if oil sanctions were imposed, he would regard it as an act of war, and deliver an air attack on the British fleet. That may have been bluff, for by December it became clear that Mussolini had misread the situation in two very important respects. He had underestimated the effect of the sanctions which the invasion would bring on Italy, and he had miscalculated the military campaign. He had expected to be much further ahead three months after he started than he actually was, for the Italian armies met with unexpected difficulties, and he was confronted with a long campaign which looked as though it might end in the disintegration of his armies in morale,

and perhaps in military disaster. If oil sanctions were imposed that disaster became certain, and would be greatly expedited because within three months his oil supplies would be cut off.

But was there a way out? He argued that the best way out would be an air attack on the British fleet. No one knows the effect of the modern air arm on naval vessels, and, though nobody thought for a moment that it would enable him to seize the Suez Canal, there were many who thought he might be able to do a great deal of damage to the British Fleet. It was also clear that there was no effective agreement between the powers to come to the aid of Great Britain in the event of such an attack. If such an attack were made, did it not offer him a way out? The very next day the Suez Canal would be closed and his East African armies cut off.

When that happened he would have been in a position to make peace without any loss of face, because he would be engaged in a war not with Abyssinia only, but with Britain and France. In other words he could say to his countrymen, "We have no other alternative, faced as we are with overwhelming force."

And what terms of peace would have been imposed? No one would have wanted to take away the Italian Colonies. Everybody knows that reparations cannot be collected. The utmost would have been the transfer of a few Italian battleships to the League of Nations—possibly perhaps the whole fleet. There is no sort of doubt that that was the sort of argument that was being used in Paris and London, and I am not prepared to say that under the circumstances, and in dealing with a man of the resolution and decision of Mussolini, that it would not have been true. But the British Government had not only to consider the possibility of finding itself subject to Italian attack, it had to ask whether the war would stop as soon as Mussolini might want; whether British public opinion would be willing to make peace; whether the Turks would not try to seize Rhodes, Jugo-Slavia, Fiume, and Germany take the opportunity to absorb Austria. That, in effect, was the threat that Mussolini was using, much in the same way that Sam-

son pulled down the pillars of the temple,—by pulling down the pillars of European peace. That was the argument which was circulating through the houses of parliament, and I am prepared to say that it was wholly specious under the circumstances. At any rate that is what led the British Government to decide to make a further attempt to bring about peace before oil sanctions are actually put into effect.

Now we come to the second stage. Sir Samuel Hoare was a sick man, suffering from nervous exhaustion from the Indian problem, and he had actually fainted two or three times while at work in the Foreign Office. Nobody knows how far the preliminary discussions had gone when he was in Paris, but it was certain that they were not known to the Cabinet as a whole. At any rate, Sir Samuel Hoare, according to his own story, was asked to go to Paris and settle the details of the peace offer on his way to Switzerland. He went on a Friday night and came to the Abyssinian question in Paris on Sunday.

Now if Sir Samuel Hoare had been in a normal state of health he would not have gone to Paris, but would have sent Eden, or would have gone back to London without signing the peace plan, stating he would have to consult his Cabinet. But, as he was a sick man, he initiated the plan, and went on to Switzerland, sending it back to London by messenger. That was very unfortunate, because the next morning the plan was disclosed in full to the French press, and the Cabinet was confronted with the alternative of either throwing over its foreign secretary or a proving a plan which, the more they looked at it, the less they liked it. That had the quality of an accident. Under ordinary circumstances the foreign secretary would have come back to London and given the Cabinet time to consider it.

What followed you know. There was a tremendous outburst of protest in England, and from all over the world the Cabinet wisely decided to throw over the plan. Hoare came home and decided he could not carry on as foreign secretary unless he had the support of the public. Baldwin said he had made a mistake, and there is no sort of doubt that it was a great triumph for democratic sentiment. We are, therefore, back where we were on September tenth. We

are committed (and I understand Canada takes the same view), to work out the Abyssinian problem with the League of Nations, no matter what the results may be.

I can give you nothing later than December nineteenth, because it was then that I left England, but there are one or two observations I would like to make, but only about fundamentals.

There was a good deal of disquiet about the whole policy and about the position which this unlimited support of the League was going to lead us into in other cases, such as that of Germany, later on. She is much stronger in power than Italy, and is not likely to put her neck through the Suez Canal so that anyone with resolution can cut it off. Thinking opinion in England came to the view that we were at the parting of the ways and that the alternatives were, we must either move everywhere along the lines of the League of Nations or go back to the old system of the alliances which will eventually lead to war.

No! we must go forward on the lines of the League, for unless we control war, war will control us. That is the idea to which we must be faithful, and it is an idea which, if sufficient nations are faithful, must eventually prevail.

The alternative is to abandon the League thesis and go back to the alliance system, and that is no way out of war. It is only a worse way into war. Its essence is that every nation tries to provide for its own security, first by armaments, and secondly by entering into strict military alliances with other nations. The result of that, sooner or later, will be that the world will be divided into two or three armed camps. When that stage is reached, though everyone is against war, it lies within the power of one nation to start mobilization, and that brings into operation the military time-tables. If we have an alliance system, war will become world-war much more quickly. The United States might stay out for a time, but the forces that drew them into the last war will inexorably bring them into the next.

I think the dominating feeling in England today is that for good or evil we are committed to going forward along the League road. We have had three very remarkable manifestations of British public opinion in that direction. First

there was the Peace Ballot, in which at least half the total adult population supported the League and sanctions. Second was the last general election in which all three parties had the same policy, and last the tremendous tide of public opinion against the Hoare-Laval plan, which in effect would have made peace at the expense of the victim of aggression. That feeling was founded on the fundamental instincts of fair play of the British public, and expressed itself almost as strongly in the Conservative as in any other party and forced the government to give way.

But if the League is to succeed it must undertake sooner or later the question of revision of injustices, and there are many injustices. Take the case of Italy alone. Time was when her population was kept at a reasonable level by emigration to North and South America. But now as the result of the economic depression she cannot send out emigrants and her population is increasing at the rate of four hundred thousand a year, and the country cannot support it. True, it is also Mussolini's plan. He wants them to stay at home to found a greater Italy. But it is also one of the pressures growing up as the result of nations trying to live in watertight compartments.

If we are to have peace the League must consider how every nation can have a place in the sun, as well as how to stop war. In considering the future of the League revision in some form is essential to the problem, and revision is becoming increasingly difficult with the question of what is to be done about the "dictator" powers. There is a considerable body of opinion willing to consider the revision of mandates, but unwilling to hand over either to Hitler or to Mussolini nations to be turned into cannon fodder.

Just to conclude, my own view is that British public opinion has made up its mind that it has got to proceed along the League road as the only hope. That road is a much more dangerous and difficult road than we used to think, but we feel we must follow it, despite its risks and dangers, for, grave though these may be, they are not so grave as those of the other road. It offers the only road to the establishment of peace and the foundation of a universal League, founded on the revising of treaties as well as the curbing of those nations who take to the sword to settle their disputes.

In thanking the Marquis of Lothian, Colonel Bishop said:—The rapt attention, with which the members of the Club have listened, is a tribute to the magnificent address you have given us today. Your ease and familiarity with the facts have not only given us pleasure but a great deal of enlightenment. We know you have been very close to the situation, and, coming from you, we know that the words are weighty. We deeply appreciate your being with us today.