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Great Britain and the Crisis in Europe

BY PROFESSOR W. I. JENNINGS

CHAIRMAN T. D'ARCY LEONARD:—Gentlemen, in your name I extend a warm welcome today to our guest on the occasion of his first trip to Canada. Professor Jennings is professor of law at the University of London, in England, and is a recognized authority on International Law. He arrived in Canada a week ago and is delivering a series of lectures at universities in Canada and at Cornell and Columbia in the United States. These are anxious days in Europe, and it is a privilege that so well-known an authority as Professor Jennings has given us the opportunity to hear him on the subject of Britain and the Crisis in Europe.

PROFESSOR JENNINGS:—Mr. President and gentlemen. It is a very great privilege to be able to address the Canadian Club. I came from England not to talk, but, primarily, to listen, but I found that, though I was expected to listen, I was also expected to talk a very great deal. I seem to have spent my waking and sleeping hours, since I arrived here, in either talking or listening.

I am very glad to be able to meet the members of the Canadian Club because I know it is one of the chief formative elements of Canadian Public Opinion.

The subject about which I have been asked to speak to you is one that can be approached from many different angles, and when I landed in Canada I had the natural feeling of the Englishman that, Canada being so far away, there would be much less attention paid to European affairs than there is in England. But I have been gratified to find

that Canadians are just as well informed, and in some cases better informed, for the very reason that you are so far away.

So I think that possibly I could assist most by explaining something of the currents of opinion in England, or perhaps I should say Great Britain at present, because when dispatches come over from Europe they are naturally read with the assumption that what the Government has decided is necessarily what Great Britain has decided, whereas on every question of international affairs there is usually a very wide division of public opinion.

In order to explain my point that there is such a considerable division of opinion I would like to take you back to 1924 when there was a Labor Government in office. A minority government having fewer members in the House of Commons than the Conservative party. That Government, through Mr. MacDonald, who was Prime Minister, and Secretary of State for foreign affairs, entered into the Geneva Protocol, a measure involving much more active interference in European affairs than has been the case since. The Labor Government was defeated in 1924, but not on its European policy generally. Usually a government is not defeated on its foreign policy. An election is not fought on Foreign policy, and therefore the fact that a government has an enormous majority does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that a particular foreign policy is approved by a majority of the people.

In 1925 the Conservative Government came into power and immediately refused to ratify the Geneva protocol. I have never been certain that, had a vote been taken, the result would not have favored a more active foreign policy than the Conservative Government adopted.

That Conservative Government went out in 1929 and a Labor Government took office, again without a majority, but with just enough supporters among the other parties to keep it from defeat.

That government was divided on the issue of Financial reform in 1931 and accordingly resigned, and a National Government was formed which in the subsequent General election gained an overwhelming majority.

But again it must not be assumed that an overwhelming majority in the House of Commons is necessarily an overwhelming majority among the people of the country; nor must it be assumed that, even with that majority, the policies it adopts would necessarily be those which would be adopted by the people if they had an opportunity of expressing an opinion.

No one objects to the system. It is an inevitable consequence of democratic Government. It is inevitable also that the policy of the Government and the views of the country are not necessarily the same.

Actually in 1931, while the Labor Party had only a handful—40 out of 615—in the House of Commons it had behind it some six million votes as against the twelve or thirteen million of the Government, whereas the majority in the House was something like 550 to something less than 50. So you will see that through the system of the single vote, the government secured a much larger majority in the House of Commons than among the Electorate.

It was the Government of 1931 that made what most people in England and on this continent regard as the most fundamental mistake in British Foreign policy that has been made in recent years, in that it did not take more active steps in the Manchurian question when the Japanese first intervened in Manchuria. The League of Nations and the system of collective security, did not do its part as effectively as it should, and so was created a precedent that has been followed by Signor Mussolini and Herr Hitler, in taking steps contrary to the treaty—in the case of Mussolini, contrary to the Covenant of the League of Nations—and feeling reasonably certain that no forcible action would be taken by the democracies of Western Europe.

Again if this question had been submitted to the electorate I am reasonably sure that in respect of Manchuria a more active policy based more firmly on the League of Nations would have been demanded, so the government in this respect was not wholly representative of public opinion.

Primarily a government's record is determined on its internal policy and I have no doubt that in 1931 the vast majority preferred that of the National Government.

But that again does not mean that there was anything like the same majority in favor of its foreign policy among the electorate.

I feel even more certain that this was the case about its policy with respect to Abyssinia. There was a very strong desire on the part of the people that a more active foreign policy should be pursued to restrain the actions of Signor Mussolini, which were regarded as an infringement of the general principles of international law and a gross attack upon a nation incapable of defending itself.

That attitude was shown conclusively in a Peace Ballot organized by the League of Nations Union in which the electors were asked to express their opinions on a number of questions. It was not a plebiscite like those they hold in Germany or like that which will be held in Austria next month. It was a perfectly fair *questionnaire* in which fair questions were put and explained fairly, and the answers made it clear that there was an enormous majority in favor of a more active foreign policy, that is to say, in favor of defending European peace and the League of Nations by force, if necessary. That *questionnaire* and the answers made by so large a proportion of the Electorate undoubtedly had considerable influence on the policy of the National Government.

It produced that wave of emotion that followed the Hoare—Laval proposals, and it is almost impossible to give you a true impression of what took place when they were made. It was a rush of passion throughout the country—one of those occasions when the newspapers did not represent the general atmosphere. Public opinion was thoroughly aroused. People in the streets, people in the railway carriages, people in the hotels and in their private homes attacked the government on these proposals. It was most amazing. Nothing like it has happened before or since. The proposals were held not only dishonorable but objectionable in respect of British foreign policy on moral grounds.

It was the most curious example of the working of public opinion that I have seen. That, then, was the atmosphere when the election of 1935 was held. The Government put the soft pedal on foreign policy. Actually, if you

looked at the formal policies of the Labor party and the Government there was extraordinarily little difference between them. I have set them side by side and studied their platforms the one against the other and they were astonishingly alike. In respect of formal foreign policy of the two there was no substantial difference. And yet in the *ethos*, in the emphasis, there was a difference.

You have to remember that though the Government again attained a very large majority in the House of Commons, the actual difference in votes was extremely small.

If the Labor party could somehow have collected about three quarters of a million votes out of the 1935 figures—if it could have taken those votes and put them down in the right spots as you do bisks of a golf match—if it could have put a hundred here, five hundred there, a thousand elsewhere, and five or six thousands in the particularly weak constituencies that three quarters of a million votes would have been enough to have gained a majority for the Labor party. To take another example, if you had taken three quarters to one and a half million votes and distributed them in the marginal constituencies again, labor would have had a majority.

Thus you will see that though the Government got a large majority in the House of Commons, opinion on the general issues was fairly evenly divided, and in the matter of foreign policy, the majority was the other way. Those who favored an active policy of collective security, were not only the labor men and the liberals, but a considerable number of left wing members of the Conservative party.

One can see, therefore, that the actions of the Government in respect to foreign policy are not necessarily the actions which would have the approval of the majority of the people. In fact these actions would in all probability be objected to by most of the electors.

So you will see that there is a very substantial division of opinion in Britain, and I think I could possibly help you to appreciate the difference if I try to divide out the various groups of opinion on foreign policy, as far as possible in respect of the House of Commons, though I must emphasize

again that that body is not truly representative, though it is fairly so in relation to internal policy.

Let us begin at the extreme right. I think we can leave out the Fascist group for it has practically no following, but on the right of the Conservative party there is a group with certain fascist sympathies, who believe that fascism is likely to be able to attain ordered government, and that democracy fails to do that. It is a group that is very small in the House of Commons but is perhaps more prominent outside, a group which welcomes any negotiations with Mussolini or Hitler—on a basis of mutual respect if you like, but certainly on a basis of mutual tolerance.

Next to it, and at present partly associated with it is a group of young conservatives, which has strong views about communism and particularly that aspect of republicanism that has become anti-clerical. They gave some assistance to the insurgents both before and after the outbreak of the Spanish war, and are extremely anxious for a victory by Franco in Spain. That group is rather more international in tendency than the extreme right wing even though it is to some extent associated with it.

The main group of Conservative members is in favor of keeping as far out of European affairs as possible. They would like to carry the British Isles across the Atlantic and dump them somewhere on this side, in the near vicinity of the United States or Canada. That being physically impossible, they strive to keep themselves as isolated as they can. In the House of Commons this policy is argued by what are known as the honorable and gallant members. If you look at the list of members you will find that a large proportion of them are retired Navy, Army and Air Force officers.

These are the "honorable and gallant", and we have had some magnificent debates from them, for every once in a while they forget the opposition and attack each other, especially on the question of transfer of the fleet air arm. The Admirals all come out and say that planes can't sink battleships and the Air Force is no use anyway. The Air Force retorts that it can sink all the battleships it wants, any time it wants to, and their matter stands. On one thing

only is the Conservative party homogeneous, and that is on the need for an extensive rearmament policy. But that policy is acceptable to all sections of the House of Commons and to most of the population at the present time.

Then there is a younger Conservative group, known as the Y.M.C.A., which is much more liberal in its outlook than the rest of the party both on foreign and internal affairs.

That is the division of opinion in the Conservative party, and in the other groups which support the Government, there is an even wider divergence.

Among the Opposition there is no difference of opinion on Foreign Policy between the Labor and Liberal Parties. Both stress very emphatically the necessity for dependence on the League of Nations and the system of collective security, and by the League of Nations they mean, of course, an organization of democratic peoples. The Labor party, however stresses more than the Liberal Party the value of a friendship with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. On the other hand the Liberal Party looks more toward France than Russia. It is this group that has the support of the majority of the electors on foreign policy.

There are, of course, extremists in the opposition as well as on the other side. There is a militant left wing to the Labor Party, which includes the Communist Party in so far as it exists in Britain, that contends that it is quite useless to have any truck with Capitalist countries and works all the time for closer understanding with Russia. It is a small group, but very vocal, and contains some eminent members of the Labor Party.

Then there is the Pacifist group which contends that armaments are useless.

Both the Liberal and Labor Parties accept the necessity for rearmament, but for other reasons than the Conservatives. The Conservatives think it is necessary in any case, and the Liberals think that any League would be quite useless against dictatorships unless it were backed by force, and that Great Britain must of necessity supply most of that force.

That is the division of opinion in the British parliament, and now I want to go on to present day problems.

I cannot say anything much about the English attitude toward the invasion of Austria by Hitler, because that has happened since I left London, but I can say something about the atmosphere surrounding the resignation of Eden, and I have really been leading up to this because I wanted to emphasize, first, that the foreign policy of the Government is not necessarily approved by the majority of the country, that there is in the Cabinet a very strong and definite division of opinion.

In respect of the resignation of Eden I have not the least doubt that there was a majority in favor of Mr. Eden. If I had to guess a figure I should say that about sixty per cent of the electors were for Mr. Eden, and forty per cent for the Prime Minister. That, of course, is just a guess, but I took that figure for this reason: looking into the matter I came to the conclusion that London opinion was more or less evenly divided, and London for this purpose means some eight or ten million people. But I feel certain, being a Provincial myself, and meeting many people from the provinces, and reading the attitude of the provincial papers, that the Provinces were emphatically in favor of Eden, that is they agreed with him that it was not much use having any dealings with Mussolini, who seemed unlikely to keep any promises he might make, unless he gave evidence of his good faith, by actually withdrawing troops from Spain. This he seemed unlikely to do unless Franco won first. Then he might possibly withdraw, but the general opinion was that he would not do so in any case. They were struck by the remarks of Eden and Lord Cranbourne as to the methods that Italy was adopting in the Negotiations. Eden spoke of attempts at compulsion but Cranbourne called it "Blackmail". That word stuck, and all over the provinces they went about talking about it. At least seventy per cent of them were against Blackmail, and only thirty per cent in favor of the Prime Minister. If you put the two together the result would probably be sixty to forty in favor of Eden. At the same time that does not mean they would be prepared to turn out the present Government.

Both the House of Commons and the whole Conservative Party organization are farther to the right on foreign policy

than the majority of the electors. That is inevitable, and it applies to both sides. Parties are generally more extreme than the general body of the electors, and there is no doubt that on this issue the Government has not the support of the majority of public opinion. Again I emphasize however that they would not lose if there were an immediate general election because although great numbers do not support the Government on its foreign policy, they would be even more unwilling to support the internal policy—the nationalization policy—of the labor party. The Liberal party has lost most of its organization and support, and it would not increase its strength very much. If there were a general election immediately the Government would obtain a majority.

If there is a general election next November, as some think there will be, the result will depend essentially on the atmosphere of the country at the time. If Hitler goes any further between now and then there may possibly be a change of Government, but if the present conditions continue I feel reasonably certain that the Labor Party could not secure a majority.

I think that gives you a picture of the present division of opinion in England on Foreign policy, but there is no division about rearmament. On that subject the whole country is practically unanimous. The only objection which a large number of the supporters of the Labor Party has against it is that they don't like the foreign policy for which the armaments are likely to be used by the present government. No, there is no doubt whatever about the country's view of the armament situation. It was made abundantly clear last year because not only was there a very strong favorable vote at the Conservative Congress, but at the Labor Party convention there was an overwhelming majority in favor of the rearmament program.

That does not mean, I think, that the trades unions will necessarily give the government their support on its present attempts to speed up. The question has been raised as to the actual relationship between the Trades Unions and the Government. I should interject here that the Trades Unions are a part of the Labor Party and are purely a political

organization. What the Labor Party says, that the Unions decide. They may not collaborate at this stage, but if Hitler goes any further they might do anything, for they are not opposed to the idea of rearmament but to the policy on which they might be used.

On the armament issue itself, with the exception of a small pacifist group, there is practically unanimity, and if war broke out tomorrow I think the response of the country would be at least as unanimous as it was in 1914.

And that brings me to my last word, which is as to what would be the attitude of Great Britain toward the Dominions in the event of war, and what she might expect of them in the matter of assistance. I would like to make it quite clear that the lessons of 1926 to 1930 have been very thoroughly learnt in England. Nobody now thinks that the Dominions are bound to follow Great Britain in her Foreign Policies. The average Englishman now considers the Dominions as independent states, but what he does feel is that he can rely on them for a certain amount of sympathy which he might not get from any other country.

Take Canada. He would feel that if Great Britain were to be involved in a war Canada would be under no obligation to take any part whatsoever. On the other hand he knows that being a democratic state Great Britain is very unlikely to go to war except in what would be regarded as a just cause, and he would therefore feel that a considerable number of Canadians would approve of that declaration of war. Not necessarily would he feel that they would approve to the extent of taking an active part, but sympathy after all is a very useful thing to a body of people at war, particularly the sympathy of a nation which is the next door neighbor of the United States, and the attitude of the United States would be of fundamental importance to Great Britain.

Somebody the other day said when Battleship won the Grand National that it would also win the Grand International, and if it were an American owned Battleship so much the better. So there is a feeling that the sympathy of Canada would be extremely effective because it would be the most efficient form of propaganda in the United States.

And of course sympathy has economic as well as sentimental repercussions.

The attitude of the average Englishman is perfectly definite. Canada is considered as a separate nation which would necessarily take its own point of view. That is the attitude of the man in the street—he does not consider Canada, as so many Americans seem to want to do, as necessarily involved in any attack on Great Britain.

I am not going to express any opinion as to what Canada might be likely to do, but I have sought to put before you what would be expected of you by the man in the street in Great Britain in the event of war, which I fervently hope will not break out at all.

Mr. Leonard, thanking Professor Jennings offered the assurance that "in the event that war should break out under the circumstances you have outlined Great Britain can count upon a good deal more than sympathy from Canada.