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“The World Situation”

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MR. CURTIS:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I spent some fourteen years of intensive work on existing world problems, the results of which are published in a book; and some friends who read it have urged me to try to give you the drift of that work today. Well it is not an easy task to give the results of fourteen years work in the course of forty minutes or so. I merely want to say that the facts and the reasoning upon which I base what I am going to say to you in the next half hour can be found in print under the title of, “The Commonwealth of God” published by Macmillan, Toronto.

I am going to tell you how I came to put myself to that task. It is just thirty-nine years ago since I enlisted in cyclist's section. The volunteers who were better known to the vulgar as, “The Devil's Own.”

And we went out to South Africa under Guards officers who looked in their drill book and found that according to the drill book, cyclists were infantry. Well, cyclists were no earthly use as infantry, on the South African veldt but it so happened that one day we came under the notice of an enterprising Canadian officer called Colonel Sam Hughes and Colonel Sam saw that we could be put to some good use as dispatch riders and I need not tell you that we worshipped the man that found we could be of use. He mixed us up with his own personal followers from Canada and he always called us “The Boys” and I am afraid that “The Boys” were a pretty rough lot and they afterwards became the subject of long and acrimonious debates in your Parliament at Ottawa. And when some years after I

came to Toronto and met some very respectable friends here I chanced to say to one of them one day that I had been one of Colonel Sam's boys and he looked at me in astonishment and he said, "You were one of Colonel Sam's boys?" And then there was an embarrassing silence.

Well somehow or other I found myself on Lord Milner's staff before the war was over and after it was over, stayed in his service helping in the task of clearing up the mess. And that war as you know was settled by the Peace signed in 1902 when the Boer Generals surrendered the independence of those two republics after fighting the whole might of the British Empire for nearly three years with incredible courage and endurance. These two conquered republics were at once organized as crown colonies under governments of officials who took their orders from the British High Commissioner, first Lord Milner and then his successor, Lord Seldon. They were both inland territories and between them and the sea was the Cape Colony and Natal which were both under responsible government, elective, popular governments so you had two crown colonies and two democratic governments side by side but they were all strongly British in personnel and sympathy. And yet almost on the moment when peace was signed these four governments were at each others throats behind the scenes, over questions relating to customs, railways, roads, the native policy and a host of other matters. And they were only prevented from coming to open rupture with one another by the fact that the British High Commissioner made concessions to the colonies which no Prime Minister responsible to an Electorate in the Transvaal or in the Free State could possibly have made.

In 1906 there was in power a liberal government with an overwhelming majority and Campbell-Bannerman lost no time in announcing that as soon as possible responsible government would be given to these two Crowned colonies. At the time I thought that was the right thing to do and I think so more than ever now but I am perfectly sure that Campbell-Bannerman did not know as we knew, the dangers which would ensue of conflict between those two inland colonies when they got democratic government with the coast colonies and that in the country where guns went off

with remarkable ease. Lord Seldon who was now High Commissioner, knowing the dangers of the situation entrusted a few of us to make a survey of the situation under his direction and I in particular was told off for the job of going to interview the government, I suppose because my job in the Transvaal had been to organize a municipal government which was the only form of government we had there. Of course I knew my own government in the Transvaal. I had been a member of that government for some time, when my chief was on leave, and I went and saw the neighbouring governments. I sat in the houses of some of their members and they struck me as being generally speaking, honest, public-spirited and high-minded men, but I was shocked to find that members of each government had the worst possible opinion of the members of the other government and the more impetuous among the ministers did not hesitate to discredit members of other governments as liars and scoundrels which I knew they were not. I asked whether there was not something radically wrong with a system which could make perfectly decent men think so meanly of one another and what was wrong with the system. At that juncture it occurred to us we could get some light on our troubles by studying what happened in America after the revolution and that study was the reading of the Federalists which as you know, were brilliant papers written in 1787 by Hamilton, Madison and Jay, when the situation at Philadelphia was hanging in the balance. And what we found was this. After the revolution that ended in the independence of the colonies there were thirteen sovereign states united under a confederation by articles which described themselves in terms as "indissoluble, compact" and yet that whole confederation had fallen in ruins. To begin with the coastal states were levying dues on the traffic going through to inland states, a condition exactly like that which we were facing in South Africa. Again the Federal Government had completely failed to carry out the treaties it had made with Britain and Spain because its only way of carrying out these treaties was to request this or that sovereign power to take this or that action and in many cases these sovereign governments had failed to take that action. But of course the worst mess of all was in the region of

finance. During the struggle, the Federal Government had raised loans partly, from patriotic Americans, partly from France and Holland, and now faced the obligation of meeting charges. In order to obtain the revenue they had under the articles of confederation to apply to thirteen sovereign legislatures to pay up money under a quota specified in the articles a large number of these sovereign legislatures failed to respond, with the result that the Federal Government was in default.

Now those are the facts and it was in the light of those facts that Madison, Hamilton and Jay proceeded to demonstrate that it was impossible to construct a staple society in America on the basis of a compact between the sovereign states. The actual experience of several years had proven the repeated failure on the part of these sovereign states to carry out their compact and when they failed what was the remedy of the Federal Government? Its only remedy was to call upon the loyal states to make war on the states that had failed to fulfill their compact and as Hamilton proceeded to point out, this federacy could only operate by virtue of continuous civil wars. The general conclusion was that thirteen sovereign states could neither under the articles of confederation hope to maintain peace among themselves nor to prevent a united front towards the world without it. And then the federalists pointed out the remedy which had already been drafted at the congress of Philadelphia which was before the country. That was that the central authority must derive its power not from sovereign legislatures or states but from the people themselves, from individuals and must be able to enforce its authority upon those individuals. And Hamilton proceeded to illustrate this principle in his own special field of finance.

As I have said when the federal government called upon some states, they failed to respond and then the only remedy was to call on the other states to make war on them. Now what the Federalists urged was that the federal authority must have power to tax not the state, but the individuals composing the state, and must have power of exacting that taxation from the individuals. You will note, gentlemen, that these writers were realists. They were men who had handled governments; they knew that in this imperfect

world you had imperfect human beings. No government can hope to dispense altogether with the element of force. That is different than saying the government is based on force, an absurdity which you often hear put forth by politicians. I think the profoundest thing ever said on that subject was: "The function of force in human affairs is to give moral ideas time to take root." And so the remedy the Federalists composed which was embodied in the Constitution of the United States under discussion was that when Congress or the Federal Government imposed taxes on individuals that they should have power to make a defaulting taxpayer pay his dues by going to court on their own, and getting an order to distrain on his goods and then sending the police or whatever force was necessary to distrain on individual goods. And in the last instance, to call on all loyal citizens to back up the police and see the individual did his duty. The importance of that is it shows a distinction between the system which can only be worked by civil war and a system which can be worked as the system you and I live under in our own countries by the methods of police.

Now reading these papers from thirty years ago we found they cast a flood of light on the situation we were facing. It showed us why the different compacts between these colonies only lead us to disaster. It showed us the way not to follow. It showed us our only remedy was to establish a government in South Africa responsible not to the governments of the four colonies but to the people of the country as a whole and by that means only could be substituted the methods of the police. We took that remedy but I should like to ask you to consider what it meant to us British. Responsible government in the Transvaal and Free State of course meant we were going to be governed by the Boer Generals whom we had fought and beaten and governed for a number of years. The proposal we were now making meant that those generals were going to govern the British colonists inhabiting the colony of Natal as well. And we got our people to accept that course. That situation was ratified by the British parliament in 1909 and came into operation in 1910. I had a question put to me in a meeting in Kimberley by one of my old supporters who was in deep trouble. In those years the shadows of The

Great War were already lengthening across the landscape and this man got up and said, "What is going to happen if Germany attacks the British Empire and the Imperial Government should call on us to come out to fight to defend the British Empire?" It is quite on the cards; and we all knew that there might be a government in South Africa which in that event would declare the neutrality of the country. The government would order us not to fight. And this man said, "You are asking us to establish this government and when it is established to obey." In that event he suggested which of these two governments are you going to obey? And I had no answer. We all realize we were faced by a possible conflict of loyalties and so we made up our minds as the only thing to do was to go on with our old operations of research. I undertook to give him a whole outline of the research into this very problem.

And so I set to work to see what this British Empire, Commonwealth as we now call it, was, at that time I found first it included nearly one quarter of the human race. Now it includes more. And I also noted it included territory in every continent. It included sections of every race and every religion and every level of civilization. It was not merely a quarter of mankind, it was also all grades and sections of mankind. And as years went on I began to realize that the problems of this commonwealth were solvable only in the light of the world's question. And I believe that is true of every country of every community. You take the two in which I have been domiciled, Britain and South Africa. I am convinced that the problem of those countries can only be solved by people who first of all ask what are the interests of the world at large and then come on the question of how far can this country of mine help to meet those necessities. That is what I mean.

I come to the world situation. What is it? I am going to give you my own short answer. We have spent one hundred and fifty years in acquiring ever increasing control of physical forces and that control has reacted on human society to change its quantity and also its quality. Mechanization has meant that a far larger number of people are now living on this planet than could ever have been born without it. But it has meant something more than that.

It is not merely increasing volume of human society but it has integrated and is doing so moreover on the whole fabric of human society. What it comes to is this, that while we have acquired this ever increasing control of the physical forces we have acquired no corresponding control of human forces. Socially, economically, human society is now one closely integrated union. Politically it is fragmented into over sixty states, each of which looks to its own separate interests frequently in disregard of what the results may be to the rest of human society. For human society as a whole there is no control of its paramount interest. That is what I call the world question. And that situation was recognized in the catastrophe of the war by the statesmen who gathered at Paris to attempt the reconstruction of the whole shattered fabric of human society and the remedy they applied under the inspiration of President Wilson was the League of Nations which was based on the covenant and not only recognized but emphasized the sovereignty of the nations. That league was to keep the peace between these nations, was to set up an authority at Geneva with the secretariate to maintain peace. Now it so happened that I was a member of the League of Nations section which Lord Robert Cecil had taken to Paris. And the reason he took me, was I had written an article in the Round Table called, "Windows of Freedom" in which I strongly argued for a League of Nations but it was the counterpart of our Imperial Conference with the secretarial committee. When I saw the first draft of Woodrow Wilson's covenant and especially articles ten and sixteen, my expression was, that here was a covenant drawn in disregard of every principle on which that constitution of the United States was based. It was the close counterpart of the Federation which the Federalists had shown to be unworkable and it would, I feared, lead to endless trouble as the other had done. But I also remembered that the Federation had been a step to the Federalism under which the United States had since prospered. Now as then, human affairs have to proceed by the method of trial and error. I felt that league covenant had to be tried that the all important thing was that during the period of trial that people should be on the watch to read the lessons of experience and above all the lessons of

failure. Well we had nineteen years experience of the covenant and of collective security and today we realize that it is neither collective nor secure. Today we are facing the risk of war which if it broke out would be more widespread and more devastating than the war that broke out in 1914. And as during the last few months I have travelled through Australia, New Zealand and the United States and Canada, I felt as though I were back twenty-five years when I was travelling among the governments of South Africa. Everywhere I find people blaming individuals for the failure of the League—Lloyd George, Poincare, Mussolini, Simon, Hitler, Chamberlain, Halifax. I met Mr. Neville Chamberlain once or twice, though I have never had the opportunity of knowing him well, but he seemed to me clearly a man most honourable, high-minded and a practical statesman. Lord Halifax was a fellow of mine in College and we shared rooms together for some time, and so I had to know him intimately, and I have a feeling that he has more in common with Lord Grey than anyone else I can think of. The same characteristics, the same passion to acquire country life. The same overwhelming sense of duty that made both of those men accept office when they didn't want it, if you read the life of Lord Grey, you will find among the charges brought against that man in the early days of the war, was that he had spent previously cold-bloodedly, ten years to bring the war about. All I can say is that as I hear charges as to the motives that prompt men like Chamberlain and Halifax, which strike me, knowing one of them very well, as almost as fantastic as the charges brought against Grey. Again I say, is it not time we stopped blaming individuals and just look for a little, at these systems and see if there is not something wrong with the system. Would it not be a good thing to take the leaf out of medical practice and diagnose before we begin to write the prescription. And let me give you my prescription. I believe the Federalist doctrine is no less true when applied to world conditions today than it was when they applied it to the thirteen states. These bases of compact between sovereign states are foundations of sand and if there are engineers among my hearers they will tell you the larger and stronger the system you put on a foundation of sand the

more certain it is to collapse by its own weight and ruin those whom it was meant to shelter. To create staple society in this world you have to do what Washington and his followers did. You have to drive your pile right down through the sands to what Lincoln called "Dedication" of individual loyalty or in other words, the infinite duty which every man owes to his fellows. No kind of authority can secure peace to this world unless its responsibility rests with individuals and rests on individual loyalty and I say the same of international law. I am going to say that international law as it is now called, is just based on parchment compact between sovereign states. In plain words it is just an old wolf sneaking closely disguised in a clothing of legal sheep skin. You cannot rest law on compacts between sovereignties. Take my own case. Is my ultimate loyalty due to the British Government, the British Commonwealth, or the League of Nations? I cannot answer that question. I don't know whether you can. My meaning is that nothing can solve the problem we are now facing but the ultimate establishment however distant, of a government responsible not to states but to individuals fit for the trust of government for the whole of the human race. That is the goal as I see it. The first thing is to ask what we are trying to do. What is your goal? I am not convinced that a world commonwealth embracing all nations and kindred, and people, is the goal which we shall have to reach. Before we can move from the present level of civilization to a higher plane, before we can reach that goal, before we can set the road to that golden path, such civilizations as we have now, will have fallen in ruins as it fell in the fourth century after Christ. I am equally sure that the structure of a world government can only be applied little by little, bit by bit. The world is before us now with the belief that the national state is the last word in development. I believe in the preservation of all that is best in Nationalism but I am convinced that sooner or later men will conceive a new idea that two or more states without losing their characteristics or freedom can merge themselves in one international state, that they can erect one federal government responsible to all their citizens for maintaining peace between themselves

and with the outer world for that purpose and no other, leaving everything else in the hands of existing national government.

It is not enough to conceive a goal. When you have made up your mind what is the ultimate goal it is your duty then to think what practical steps can be taken in the early future to reach it, to find the road which leads to that goal. And I have not shrunk from doing that myself. I felt, looking at the problem, that the first step must be instituted by education, by two or three of the more experienced commonwealths. And the practical suggestion with infinite hesitation I put forward is that a beginning should be made by Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain, but I am convinced that if some beginning like that should be made in the early future that mankind as a whole would be saved. I have not a doubt that a thousand years from now the world government will have been long established. To be perfectly frank with you, I think when it has been established the goal will have been reached by a road different from that which I myself have been able to foresee. When I came to this country from New Zealand, I did not intend or want to air these views here on my way to England, but friends who read my writings have constrained me to do so and I have done so now from Vancouver right across this country, and I want to tell you frankly I have had the surprise of my life. I did not want to talk about this sort of thing in this country because I did not expect to get very much of a hearing for ideas so revolutionary as these but in the last three weeks quite a number of people have said to me that they think as I think that a world commonwealth is sound policy and a practical goal of human endeavour, however remote. I say if you accept that goal, do not be content to leave it in the air. Face the question at once. What practical step here and now in our own time can be taken to set the steps of mankind on the path to the goal? In England my greatest difficulty arises from the fact that people there have no experience with federal government. Here in this country whether you live north or south of the frontier, you people know all that is at present known about the working of federal interests, you know the difficulties and I had the great pleasure of informally meeting your

constitutional commissioners at Ottawa and I am convinced you will overcome those difficulties great as they are. It was here in this country that those institutions were conceived and those principles applied in situations which have called into being the greatest area of peace in the world. If Canadians and Americans can once come to see that in their own institutions is the key to the problems of suffering humanity and go and teach the world how to apply that key, then indeed would we be in sight of a time when we would cease to scourge the whole of this planet. One feels that a day would come in a happier, aye, a nobler age when historians would write that here in the crisis of human affairs were people who had raised their minds to the dignity of their true call.