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Canada and the League of Nations

By Col. O. M. Biggar.*

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I am afraid that the duties I performed as Judge Advocate-General are not duties to give me any qualifications to address this Club on the subject of "The League of Nations." The chief characteristic of that office, is its complete absence of any reference to the duties in the name of it. When I was the incumbent of it, I was neither a judge, nor an advocate, nor a General; and the little knowledge I picked up was in other capacities than those three.

My attendance, however, at the Peace Conference was particularly interesting from the point of view of the League of Nations; and I had the honor and also the privilege of attending there some of the meetings in Lord Robert Cecil's room in the hotel, at which the attitude of the British delegation towards the proposed provisions of the League were from day to day discussed. I confess that sometimes the chief business of those meetings, which were held at a quarter to ten in the morning, was the completion of Lord Robert Cecil's breakfast, but the other things that had to do with the League of Nations were very interesting.

It seems to me of the greatest importance that the relation of Canada to the League of Nations should be presented from as many different points of view as possible; and therefore I accepted, with a great deal of hesitation, your invitation, and what I want to say about the League of Nations is from my own point of view of the subject.

I do not propose to deal with its local aspects except in general terms. I rather propose to deal with its more general aspects; and indicate what, in my opinion, is the tremendous advance made in the proposal to establish it, and the tremendous advance which Canada must make in order to fulfill its share in it.

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One of the things, particularly, that struck us was this; that if the Big Four, the four members of the Council of Four, had been withdrawn and four other individuals substituted for them; if somebody else than Lloyd George, somebody else instead of Wilson, and somebody else instead of Orlando and Clemenceau had been there, the character of the conversations in the Council of Four would have been, practically, exactly the same.

Each of those four did nothing more than focus and direct the opinion of the public which each of them represented; and, even if other individuals were substituted for them, the substitute would have equally represented that opinion as he understood it; and, probably, as it in fact was; and the accumulated result of their labors, the construction which would have been given to the decisions, and the character of the decisions arrived at, would have been exactly the same. I am quite convinced that the character of the work that is done by the League of Nations, the direction in which that organization moves, will be determined not so much by the character of the individuals who happen to be on the Council, but rather on the attitude of mind of the publics of those countries represented on the Council, and represented in the Assembly which will in turn give color to the discussions of the Council.

We refer to history, perhaps too often, as an account of political battles; some of them bloody, some of them legal; battles for Constitutional changes; and I remember that I thought, a great many years ago, that no question introduced into any organization ever gave rise to such bitterness as questions that involved alteration of the Constitution; and that was as true of a Literary Society in a University as in the larger spheres of Provincial, National, and other Governments.

History, it seems to me, as we have been told, is very largely a discussion of those conflicts that went on in each community looking for changes in the mode of administration; and also conflicts between each community and the communities with which it is brought in contact. We began history with conflicts between two or more communities on the Tigris and the Euphrates, with conflicts between tribes on the Nile which are lost in the mist of early history; and we soon find Egypt and Mesopotamia coming into conflict; again we find Persia fighting with Mesopotamia; and then Persia and Greece coming into conflict; finally we have Rome pressing forward on all sides and finding that the only way she can secure the kind of

order of freedom which she thought it necessary for her citizens to enjoy was by bringing the whole of the then world under her domination.

In modern Europe the same thing is practically true; history becomes a series of accounts of successive wars between the different European communities, the last of which, we hope, is only recently over.

Now, those wars, I am convinced, did not arise because it is in the nature of man to make war; because I never heard of any community that wanted to make war. Those wars must have been due to the desire of the citizens of some community to secure a larger freedom; not only to enjoy individual freedom within the States of which they were members, but to extend that freedom in other areas. They wanted freedom of movement; and the gradual accumulation of causes of dissatisfaction in one community against another has finally led to war, not because it was desirable in itself, but because something for the greater welfare of the individual was at stake.

We may say that even the last war was, to some extent at least, a desire for freedom; a desire, not for the freedom of the world, but for the freedom of some individuals in the world who thought they were being unduly restricted in the pursuit of their individual aims. That gave rise to the war quite as much as any militarism. One of Germany's own statesmen said that War was the end of Policy—not Policy itself, but the end of Policy,—and it is this desire for individual freedom which from day to day leads, finally, not individuals, but communities, to war.

Now, in the time that preceded the war which has changed the face of the world, more in the latter part of that time, we had developed a machinery for international communication, the character of which was the appointment by each of a number of sovereign States of Ambassadors and Plenipotentiaries, who were delegated by each State to attend at the Capitol of the other State and keep their own country informed of the situation in that other State and act as a channel of communication between their Government and the one to which they were accredited.

One can see at once what an extraordinarily unsatisfactory method that was for securing results that interested more than the two countries concerned. The whole system was based on the idea that no more than two countries were interested in a particular problem at a given time. If three, or any other number, were interested, it obviously required the erection of

machinery for the purpose of reaching any satisfactory conclusion. There was no group at any single place in the world which had power to discuss or deal with problems of any general character affecting more than two countries.

The Ambassador from Germany, we will say, in Paris, had no duty in relation with the Ambassador from England; his only duty was to act as a channel of communication between the German and French Governments. It was the same with every other Capitol.

Some people do not realize, in spite of the enormous difficulties that were involved; how far we had got, before the war, along the road of smoothing and clearing away the difficulties common to all civilized nations. L. S. Wood has written an exceedingly interesting book in which he not only indicates the distance we had traveled before the war; but also indicated what immediate steps were necessary—what immediate further steps were necessary—and he gives an account of nine different International Conventions, each of which had a central International organization with duties more or less circumscribed. He also gives an account, I think, of ten International Conventions which assimilated the laws of different countries on the particular object with which the Conventions dealt. For instance, it is clear that it was not for any particular interest that we got into the International Postal Union or agreed to carry out the arrangements arrived at by the International meeting of that Union.

It would be a distinct loss of liberty to us as Canadians if there were countries not members of the International Postal Union; it would be a distinct loss of liberty to us as Canadians if there were areas in the world with which there was no arrangement for the mutual delivery of letters.

Exactly the same thing is true with regard to the Telegraphic Convention, which dates from somewhere about 1870. More recently, we had the Radio-Telegraphic Convention, which was obviously necessary; because if the ether was filled with all kinds of wandering waves we should not be able to use our own Radio Stations because we would be interfered with by stray waves from other places not included in the International Convention.

We had a number of Conventions of that kind which provided for the free exercise of the rights of individuals throughout the world and which increased the individual liberty of Canadians by reason of making it possible, either to do freely something in our own country which they could not do without an international convention, or which allowed them rights in other countries.

Now, in the course of the discussions at the Peace Conference, two other agreements of exactly the same kind came into existence, and many others were under discussion; but the two coming into existence were the International Labor Convention, which provided for an International Labor Organization; and also an International Air Convention to regulate air navigation, which again provided for an International Air Council or Commission to regulate air traffic throughout the world.

It is for things of that character quite as much as anything else that the League of Nations came into existence. It is primarily, of course, associated in the minds of most people with the prevention of war; partly because it arose out of the war, and also partly because war is an interference with liberty and happiness all over the civilized world, and is the most urgent, the most pressing source of misfortune that we can imagine.

The League will primarily deal with the adjustment of much less pressing and obvious difficulties, with the elimination of the causes of friction, before they get into the realm of war; and deal with them in such a way as not only to prevent war but also to increase the liberty and freedom of action of individuals all over the world, by the assimilation of rights in those matters which require international recognition, and which will anticipate the possible ways in which friction that might give rise to war might develop.

It is true that, out of the Articles of the Covenant of the League of Nations, a large number are concerned with the machinery for preventing war. The reason is obvious; it is because that is the thing which must be provided for now. You cannot go into an organization without knowing how it will operate; we must have machinery which operates from time to time with regard to those particular rights which it is necessary from time to time to deal with.

Before I go on to the actual provisions of the Covenant of the League on that subject, I would like to refer to two things which make the proposal of the League of Nations, as we now have it, a thing completely different from anything we ever had before. Really, the great Democracies, under the old system, the old international machinery, were a sort of anomaly. The system of ambassadors—the only system we had—was a machinery which grew out of the idea of a sovereign personally exercising power; the ambassador was his delegate, and it was the voice of his sovereign which he was

making heard in the Capital to which he was accredited.

The ambassador was applied to the Democracies, but he was applied by a sort of stretch of the imagination; he was not there to express the ideas of the Democracy which he represented, but he was there as the direct personal representative of the head, for the time being, of that Democracy.

We had, at the beginning of the war, only two of the old Autocratic Governments that had really continued in existence up to the beginning of the war; and those two autocratic governments have disappeared, and the League to-day consists of an association of Democracies, differing in some respects from our own, not in principle, but in degree.

Even we have not reached the complete form of Democracy. Only part of one whole sex has been enfranchised; we still have a long way to go towards the enfranchisement of all adults in Canada; but the end with regard to that is in sight, and it will not be long when, throughout the world as included in the League of Nations, every adult person capable of intelligent thought will have a share in and responsibility for the conduct of government in that particular area in which he happens to live.

Another great change has come on account of the war; and that is, that the position of Canada has completely altered. You will hear a good deal about some of the slighting references to the change in status of Canada during the war and as a result of the Peace. I do not think that any slighting reference to that change is sound, and I think it is very dangerous, because it does incline us to think that we have not a responsibility which we certainly have; our situation has completely changed as a result of the war and peace.

Before the war, Canada was not an international person at all. No foreign Government had any interest in what the Canadian Government might do. The only way Canada had an opportunity to express herself was through the Government at Westminster. The Canadian Government at Ottawa had no official relations with any of the Governments of the world.

That situation has completely altered and Canada has been recognized as an independent unit—I don't mean independent in a political sense, but as a unit having an international individuality of her own which must be considered in international arrangements. She has, in a word, been admitted as a member of the family of nations; and has assumed a responsibility to the other nations of the world, a responsibility which she cannot now lay down, a responsibility I don't suppose anybody in Canada desires, or thinks, should be laid down.

That situation involves an understanding by Canada that the interest of her citizens is no longer limited to municipal, or provincial, or Canadian, affairs; but it now extends to International affairs; and it is consequently the duty as well as the privilege of Canada to take part in, and act with regard to, matters that concern the civilized world; and her duty and privilege in that is not a duty and privilege which she has exercised in any ideal sense or in a sense of self-abnegation, it is a duty and privilege to be exercised for her own benefit. Canada has to trade with the world. Canadians as individuals are interested in the world being made a place wherein we can communicate freely and trade all over freely; where the rule of law and freedom of movement is guaranteed, not only to some particular individuals or groups, but to the world at large. Canadians have a direct and poignant interest in International affairs.

There are a lot of people who have said that the League of Nations is a visionary thing; that it springs from idealism and will be lost in the clouds of idealism. I cannot conceive its not being a matter of interest to Canadians. As Canadians, we have to be able to communicate freely with anybody in the whole world; and any machinery which looks as if it would secure that desirable end is a machinery which it is the duty of Canadians to support.

I don't know whether we don't forget that the world has really changed in a hundred years; that it is only a hundred years ago since we had our first steamboats and first railways; and in that hundred years we not only have got the electric telegraph, the telephone, not only railways and steamboats,—but we have actually in operation Wireless Telegraphy and, to be in operation soon, Wireless Telephony. Marconi said that we would be able to telephone to London for twenty-five cents a minute before long, and think of the further development which will follow the perfection of air navigation.

All those things have brought the world together in a way which was not possible for the men of a hundred years ago to even conceive, and they have given us mutual interests with the people of the other side of the world. I don't think it is putting it too strongly if one says that we have, a great many of us, a great deal of difficulty in realizing that the world has shrunk perhaps to a hundredth part of the size it was to our grandfathers.

It is not long since I talked to an old man in Paris who said that as a student he came to Paris part of the way by road, and then his chaise was hoisted on a railway, and then on by road again, finishing his journey on the road. We hardly think that it is only in the course of one single life-time that those enormous changes in facilities for communication have developed; and they are changes which made the world really different from the world it was for—what shall I say?—millions of years before the beginning of the last century.

It is, I think, a question of the advance of the freedom of individuals which we have before us in the League of Nations, and a question of purely practical things.

I will refer you to one clause which seems to carry hope for the future in it. The preamble of the League is very short. It is this: "In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security." The promotion of international co-operation and the achievement of international peace. This is the twenty-third clause: "Subject to, and in accordance with, the provisions of the International Conventions existing, or hereafter to be agreed upon, the members of the League will:

(*a*) Endeavor to secure and ensure fair and humane conditions of labor for men, women and children, both in their own countries and in all countries to which their commercial and industrial relations extend, and for that purpose will establish and maintain the necessary international organizations.

(*b*) Undertake to secure just treatment of the native inhabitants of territories under their control.

(*c*) Entrust the League with world supervision over the traffic in women and children, traffic in opium, etc., and dangerous trades.

(*d*) Entrust the League with the general supervision of trade in arms and munitions with countries where this is necessary.

(*e*) Make provision to secure and maintain freedom of communication and transit and equitable treatment for the commerce of all members.

(*f*) Endeavor to take steps in matters of international concern for the prevention and control of disease.

Altogether apart from the prevention of war, that is an international program of enormous breadth and interest. I see no reason why, in these days of rapid communication, we should not take steps towards the formation of an international organization which will attempt to achieve those ends.

I have heard it suggested that sometimes a municipal government does not succeed. The opinion is frequently expressed in Canada that the Canadian Government does not always achieve its ends; but the fact that an international government may fail is no excuse for refusing to give it an opportunity to succeed. We here who have our allegiance and our loyalty to our municipality, to our Province, and to our Country, can have no very great intellectual difficulty in conceiving a readiness to serve an international organization devoted to action only in an international sphere; and which may have a great effect on the world, now so much smaller than it used to be.