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Britain's Work in the Middle East

BY THE RIGHT HON. L. C. M. S. AMERY, M.P.*

MR. HUGH S. EAYRS:—Mr. Prime Minister, Col. Amery and gentlemen, it is a great happiness on behalf of the Canadian Club of Toronto and the Empire Club of Canada to welcome again to this joint meeting the Rt. Hon. Col. Amery. Many of you gentlemen who are in the room today had the pleasure of hearing Col. Amery last year. At that time he was His Majesty's Secretary of State for Dominion affairs. Since this he has gone to a place of greater ease and less responsibility in the House of Lords. He has been climbing a mountain named after himself, Mount Amery. We have the authority that faith can move mountains but there is something to be said for a name that can keep a mountain where it is. Some years ago a chairman of a meeting such as this was in the position of having to introduce David Lloyd George. He introduced him as the little gentleman from Wales. Lloyd George said, "In my country we measure from the chin up." Well, in this country we measure from the chin up, Col. Amery.

COL. AMERY:—Mr. Chairman, Mr. Prime Minister, members of the Canadian and Empire Clubs, it is a great pleasure to me to come here once again and find an audience which includes so many old friends and acquaintances. Your chairman began by consoling me both for the result of the last general election in Great Britain and for my stature. As for the latter, Mr. Chairman, may I suggest for you who share in some measure with me in the same advantages, not only the consolation that was offered to Lloyd George but this further conviction that if you go into the mountains that once you have climbed 10,000 feet you will find an

* A joint meeting with the Empire Club.

extra six inches makes very little difference to the view. And whenever in the mountains or any other way we achieve our results, we find we are not much worried by these few inches.

You have asked me, I understand, to talk about a subject with which I have been very closely concerned for a good number of years, namely, Britain's task in the Middle East, the work she has done and is doing in those countries which lie between Europe and the countries of the further east. I mean those countries east of the Mediterranean, more particularly Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, or Irak, as it is now called, countries where without any deliberate purpose we have undertaken great responsibilities and built up very important British interests, which are of interest to every other part of the Empire as well. They are countries which have not only economic and political interests for us but an historical interest, for they are the very cradle of our western civilization, all the science and art, architecture, engineering, medicine, astronomy of our world came from Egypt and Babylonia. Our very alphabet was brought to us from Phoenicia, derived from Egyptian sources; the great religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, all arose in that comparatively small region of the world's surface. And it was not only the cradle of our civilization but it was a region where civilization was advanced to a very remarkable standard. In those countries men built immense temples and public buildings, and constructed irrigation works that supported a population of millions, planned on the most scientific lines. They not only organized mighty armies for conquest, they also organized business. Babylonia and Egypt had their codes of law with many features far more advanced than we usually imagine. Babylonia, for instance, had a married woman's property law in advance of anything that the English speaking world had until about fifty years ago. They had their system of banking and the citizen of Chaldea could stamp his check on a tablet of clay and have it baked secure against forgery, and send it to his correspondent in Assyria or Egypt almost as conveniently as we transmit a check today. Their art reached an extraordinary level at a very early age. Some little time ago I alighted from the air after flying over the ruins of

Nineveh, of Babylon and of the ancient city of Ur of the Chaldees, and watched the excavations of great temples and other public buildings, and a little later I saw in the British Museum the exquisite treasures of art dug up from those ruins—jewellery of the most skilfully designed patterns and exquisitely finished; gold helmets, Queen's head-dresses, little maskettes—all of work which the jewelers of today might envy, and some of it looking as if only made yesterday. And it suddenly occurred to me that these things were buried and forgotten for 1,800 years before Abraham walked the streets of Ur.

And in that connection I think we are sometimes apt to let our ideas of those lands, especially in connection with Bible history, be falsified by the picture books of our childhood which give you an idea of nothing but very primitive, patriarchal life. Abraham was not a mere desert Sheik, wandering the wild countries with only a few miserable little towns such as he would have found if he had wandered there twenty or thirty years ago. He was a man who came from a great city which in his day was older than Rome or London are today, and he moved from one great city to another—Damascus, Memphis. He may have been, to a far greater extent than we are led to suppose, not merely a patriarch, but a man of statecraft and one versed in big business. For all we know the two hundred pieces of silver which he paid for his family burying ground at Hebron—the burial ground they still show you under the floor of the Mosque in that place—he may well have paid for it by a check on his family bankers in Ur without handing the precious metal across. And the same is true in large measure when we come to the times of Christ. There again it is a great mistake to think of the Palestine of our Saviour's day as simply a peasant country. It was a country where Jewish and Greek and Roman culture lived side by side in keenest competition and each exercising a profound influence on the other. The child who astounded the elders of the temple with his knowledge of the Jewish scripture had every facility, if he wished it, within a day's walk of the Jewish cities on Lake Galilee, to visit the Greek cities of the Decapolis, with their great theatres and their philosophic discussions and to have studied the writings of Plato or

listened to the plays of Euripides. And again it was a country where a tremendous political conflict was being waged between the passionate religious nationalism of the Jewish zealots and the great administrative system of Rome, for that terrible struggle, which broke out some years later and ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Jews, had been menaced for many years. And when Christ was asked by the Pharisees, was it right to pay tribute to Caesar or not, he was not answering a mere irrelevant catch question. He had to decide then and there whether he was to put himself at the head of this passionate national movement and declare for the revolt against Rome or to decide that he was a spiritual and not a political leader. Palestine and Egypt and Mesopotamia remained great centers of the world's affairs and of the world's civilization for nearly ten centuries after that. Even the Arab invasion, though it destroyed much, was profoundly influenced by the civilization that it conquered, and in the eighth and ninth centuries there was more culture and learning at the courts of Damascus and Bagdad than anywhere in our modern world. The great mosques of Cairo, the wonderful Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, bear witness to their artistic capacity. The real destruction of that old civilization came about in the tenth century. First of all by the incursion of the Turkish troops from the interior of Asia, and then from the hammer blows of our own Crusaders from the west, and last but not most ruinous of all by the great Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, an invasion which not only conquered but utterly blotted it out. It is said that when Bagdad was taken the skulls of two million of its inhabitants were piled up in great pyramids, evidence alike of its prosperity and of the utter ruin accomplished. Deliberately the Mongols set themselves to destroy the head works of all the great systems of irrigation canals in Mesopotamia and elsewhere. Those regions never recovered from that blow. In the time of the Ottoman Empire, which could hold together but not build up, they wasted away and sank slowly into obscurity. Pestilential marshes covered the most fertile valleys; the desert encroached upon pasture lands; cities dwindled away and for five or six centuries the ancient cradle of civilization was a derelict backwater of

little interest to the western world, which, thanks to Columbus and Vasco da Gama, was seeking new outlets in every other direction.

The first person in modern days to realize the possibility of that region was Napoleon, who dreamed of creating for himself a new Empire in the Middle East as a possible stepping-stone for the conquest of India. His dreams met a rude awakening at the Battle of the Nile. It was reserved for another Frenchman, a man who perhaps has shaped politics and economics of the two hemispheres even more profoundly than Napoleon, I mean Ferdinand de Lesseps, to create the Suez Canal, thereby bringing these Turkish countries from their blind alley position, so that they became the main highway to the East and the world's economic and strategic route. From that moment the Middle East became once more of importance to Western Europe, and, above all, to Great Britain, with her Empire in India and all her interests beyond.

So it became impossible for us to allow Egypt, or any country adjoining the Suez Canal, to fall into such a condition that it could be taken over by a power whose policies might conflict with our own, or endanger our security.

Within fifteen years of the construction of the Suez Canal, Egypt had fallen into such conditions. Her finances were utterly bankrupt, her peasantry oppressed and starving, her army in open mutiny, so that we were forced by actual massacre of European residents to intervene, and owing to the reluctance of France to join with us, to intervene single handed. We did so, however, unwillingly and with the determination to leave Egypt at the earliest possible moment. The military problem, however, of defence against the Mahdi, the desperate attempt to relieve Khartoum, the difficulty of arriving at any agreement either with the Turkish government or with France, compelled us to stay there year after year, and the man who stayed, uncertain as the position was, could not remain without making some attempt to straighten things out; that great man, Lord Cromer, exercised his influence through Egyptian ministers, brought about a regeneration of the whole administration, for the first time in a thousand years, and the Egyptian peasant knew what the word 'Justice' meant. He

also knew that the proceeds of his toil would come to himself and not to those who squeezed him from above. Noted engineers such as Scott-Moncrieff and others restored the banks of the ancient Nile and brought fertilizing floods over great areas which had been drylogged for centuries; while later great undertakings such as the Assouan Dam were constructed.

Then that great diplomat-financier, Lord Milner, brought Egypt from bankruptcy to prosperity; Kitchener reorganized the miserable relics of the Egyptian army and with those forces reconquered the Sudan for civilization. I don't believe that any country in the world's history made more amazing progress than Egypt between the years 1885 and the Great War. It made that progress entirely through the devoted efforts of a quite small handful of Englishmen.

But with prosperity came forgetfulness. After all, it was not the first time that a king has risen in Egypt who 'knew not Joseph,' and with the growth of wealth and the greater sense of security came quite naturally a demand, strengthened enormously by all the talk just after the war, for self-determination, a demand by the Egyptians to be free of British control and to determine and control their own affairs.

The attitude of the British Government, of all British governments since the war, toward this difficult problem, has been based on the same principle; that is, we have felt that in Egypt we have built up in this last fifty years certain responsibilities and interests which we can not possibly abdicate. We can no more abandon or free ourselves from responsibility for those Imperial interests which concern the security of the Suez Canal route or the more modern air routes through Egypt, South Africa and India, than the United States could abandon the Panama Canal.

Nor can we abandon the work of regeneration of entirely non-Egyptian population which we undertook in the Sudan, or allow Egypt in its treatment of foreigners to fall back into that state in which we originally found it. But subject to those overriding conditions, we are all agreed in Great Britain in our willingness to give the widest possible measure of national self-government and national independence to the Egyptian people, to make them feel that

Egypt is their own country and that they are responsible for its welfare. If there is any difference between us, it is not on the underlying principles, but in the details of their application.

A new treaty has recently been made between the British Government and the Government of Egypt which has still to await ratification by the elective Assembly in Egypt. It is not my business, I think, here in Canada to express any criticism on the wisdom in detail of some of the provisions of that treaty, which I might express in parliament or on the other side of the water. But I do feel certain misgivings about that treaty. I doubt whether in the interests of the Egyptians themselves and of the progress of their self-government some of those provisions may not be premature; but the point I want to make here is not in regard to such differences, which can be discussed in their proper place, but rather of the underlying unity in British policy. Consistent with the maintenance of security of those communications which we have built up over fifty years—our sea communication through the Suez Canal, our air communications through Egypt, to India and South Africa—and with the obligations toward civilization generally which we have assumed there, we do not wish to stand in the way of the greatest possible measure of Egyptian self-government.

The main problem is one on which I think all parties in Great Britain are agreed; namely, that there are interests which have grown up in that region of the world as vital to the security of the whole Empire—not only to Great Britain, but India, Australia and indirectly, Canada, as a partner in Empire—which are as vital to us as the Panama Canal is to the United States. And those interests affect the security of all the countries bordering on these lines of communication.

Now may I pass from Egypt to the other extremity of the Middle East region? In the Persian Gulf British authority has been exercised for a century and a half in the suppression of the slave trade, in adjusting and eliminating trouble in the way of tribal warfare, and we have exercised an informal protectorate over the various Arab chiefs, and to some extent even over the local government of the provinces of Persia and Turkey adjoining that region.

In the last few years before the Great War we assumed another great responsibility from interest in those quarters. The development of the Anglo-Persian oilfields became a matter of vital importance to the British government and when the war broke out and Turkey misguidedly threw in her lot with our enemies, that oilfield was at once the object of menaces from the Turkish armies. So we were compelled to land troops at the head of the Persian gulf, and we were welcomed by the Arab inhabitants, who were delighted at the possibility of their dream of deliverance from the Turkish dominion becoming a reality; and in the course of military operations we found ourselves acting in their defence and had success in our operations. That led to no small responsibility in regard to the Iraks, we had to protect them and let them feel that they need not fear the Turkish government; we had promised to stand by them and to set up a National government of their own in their country. This was by no means an easy task to fulfill. In the first instance we were confronted by the passionate insistence of Turkey, herself under the influence of that great militarist and national leader, Mustapha Kemal, on the return of that great province of Mosul. To have returned that province would have meant the destruction of all possibility of building up that national state which we had promised. It would, I believe, have precipitated a whole series of new troubles and unrest throughout the country.

Consequently the British Government in face of a good deal of hostile criticism began to fulfill its pledge to the Iraks, in order to allow them to retain their natural geographical and racial frontier. It was my task to defend their case before the League of Nations and I am glad to say that the case for their entry into the League was agreed to on condition that we took the responsibility of looking after Irak affairs for a period of twenty-five years or until such times as Irak was ready to enter the League. I am glad to say that the progress of Irak in a few years has been satisfactory both politically and economically, so that it has now been found possible to promise that she shall enter into the League in 1932.

One of the criticisms we had to face was that the protection of Irak involved us in financial and military

demands entirely beyond anything we could afford; and indeed at one time it did seem so, when we had twenty battalions of troops who had to hold that great scattered country.

It was Winston Churchill who conceived the idea that an open scattered country like that could best be held by a few squadrons of the air force rather than by a great army of slow moving ground troops. Now that whole area is protected by four squadrons of air forces, so that today we are spending half a million pounds where before we were spending twenty million pounds, and at the same time the security of the country is maintained. Incidentally too this has led to the opening up of Irak as being on the Imperial high route for air service from Great Britain to India.

Now for the political task. We promised to create an Arab nation. What did we find? Two or two and a half millions of people scattered in a few cities along the Euphrates and Tigris in the desert, with a mixture of races and religions, Moslem and Christian and Jew. There was no source of cohesion beyond that of the tribe and no central authority.

But there was no center or nucleus around which a Government could be set up. That center, however, was found in King Feisal, a descendent of Mahomet. A constitution was formed and many distinguished men took on the task of helping the Arabs to govern themselves. In the scheme of administrative organization every Arab official was placed alongside a British official. How untrue it is to say that the only idea the British people have of governing is from above! A Government is being built up here, with British help and co-operation, with the idea of ultimate national independence.

Then there arose difficulties with Turkey over the disposition of the province of Irak. Turkey had demanded that this rich territory be handed over to them, and we were ready to accede rather than run the risk of war. Britain left the matter to the League, agreeing to abide by its decision. Turkey at first refused to accept the decision and for a time there was a threat of war.

When Turkey entered the war on the side of our late enemies, she made an attempt to invade Egypt. Britain

was compelled to march into Palestine and Allenby swept the Turks away and marched into Jerusalem. His manner of entry, quite different from that of a former entrant, had great influence for good throughout the east.

Palestine offered a task of peculiar difficulty to Britain. It was not only the same sort of task as in Irak of restoring order and prosperity. But here was a barren swampy, fever stricken land. And today it has been transformed almost into a vineyard. England has accomplished wonders in the country in the way of anti-malarial and sanitary works and never has a British colonial administration been more strikingly successful.

I think it is generally conceived by Jews who take a passionate interest in this matter throughout the world, that it is not that Palestine could ever become the homeland of more than a small fraction of the Jews in the world, but rather that there should be in this ancient home of the Jewish people a place where they can settle down on the land and be again a people rooted to the soil, and revive their ancient Hebrew language for modern uses, where they can live with a culture of their own, building up their own university life, and educational life and have a center of which the Jews throughout the world can be as proud as Scotsmen are of Scotland.

It involves bringing in Jewish people without doing injustice to the native population. It involves allaying the fears and suspicions of the native population that they are to be reduced to the position of a servile and secondary people in their own land. But I think in the main we have made remarkable success in the task. We have sometimes disappointed the impatience of Jewish enthusiasts who have not always realized it is better to build sure than in a hurry. The Arabs are beginning to realize, at least in normal times, that Jewish enterprise and capital are bringing them prosperity.

As you know there have been regrettable disturbances in Palestine arising out of religious feuds. They have, I think, been a rule in that part of the world. More than once Holy Week in Jerusalem has led to wholesale rioting, arising out of some such thing as the correct placing of a candle on an altar. All I can say about recent events for which I

am no longer directly responsible is: I have no doubt whatever that full inquiry will be made, and punishment will be inflicted where guilt can be proved, but that in no sense will the general policy of the British Government as regards the fulfilment of its mandate, whether towards Jews or Arabs, be in any way deflected or changed. And I have every hope that these incidents, regrettable though they have been, will not in the long run retard the progress which has brought the country forward more rapidly in the last ten years than in any hundred years in the last millenium.

It is no easy task bringing in Jewish immigrants and at the same time allaying the fears of the native population of Arabs that they are not to be swamped and dispossessed of their homes. And the Jews have had to be assured that they do not hold the country on sufferance but on a right recognized by the League of Nations.

I think in the main that we have been remarkably successful in Palestine. We have built slowly but we have built surely. And the capital brought in to the country has made for the success of the colony and Palestine and its population as a whole.

The Arab fear of being swamped has diminished. The natural Arab increase has been greater than that of the Jewish immigration. And Palestine is flourishing, with such great works as that of the harnessing of the Jordan, proceeding.

As I have intimated, Britain's work and interests in the east were not begun deliberately but arose by circumstances and the work that is being done there is as fine a work as has ever been done by British administrators in Britain's history. It is a less difficult problem we are being faced with in India today, a less difficult task than we have been faced with in the domestic reestablishment of England since the war. England is doing more for these people and for humanity at large than any other country has done in the history of the world.

MR. A. L. SCRIPTURE, President of the Canadian Club, moved a vote of thanks to Col. Amery for his splendid address.