(March 10, 1930)

Address on Public Opinion and War

By the Rt. Hon. Alanson B. Houghton

President George Smith:—Gentlemen, the British peoples very much appreciate the friendship of the wide group of public men in the United States. Among those we mourn today, one who is highly respected and greatly loved in Canada—Mr. Taft, ex-President and former Chief Justice of the United States. Of the same order as this man is our distinguished guest today—Mr. Houghton. Mr. Houghton is a business man of wide interests, of deep understanding, who is devoted to the public service of his country. That public service has found expression in the field of education, in politics and in diplomacy. As you all know, he was most successful as ambassador of the United States to Germany. He was equally successful and equally popular as ambassador to Great Britain during the years 1925 to 1929. We are very grateful to him indeed for his willingness to come here to address this Canadian audience. I believe that that willingness has been stimulated by his friendship for a distinguished citizen of Toronto, a distinguished citizen of Canada, our late High Commissioner to London, Mr. Larkin. It is my privilege to express to Mr. Houghton a very cordial welcome to the Canadian Club. Mr. Houghton.

Mr. Houghton:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I deem myself very greatly honored to be numbered among your guests today and I really welcome this opportunity of meeting you. To one who believes, as I believe, that the future of the world, its peace, its happiness, its general well-being, —depends largely and sometimes altogether upon a substantial measure of goodwill and mutual confidence between the English-speaking peoples, the attitude of the Canadian people is, of course, of very high importance. On the one

hand, you are a member nation of the British Commonwealth. On the other, as our closest neighbor you are in a position to understand better, it seems to me, than anyone else the problems and difficulties which confront the Republic, the trend of its public sentiment and the extent of its development. That fact, it seems to me, offers a unique opportunity of service. And I can think of no man who realized that more fully or who made better use of that than your late High Commissioner in London, Peter Larkin. He rendered that service, as I can testify from personal experience, with admirable fidelity and sympathy and understanding. But, gentlemen, he did far, far more. He exerted a wide-ranging and never-failing influence, sane, clear-sighted and wholly beneficent, upon Anglo-American relations. In his passing not only the Canadian people, but all the English-speaking peoples, have suffered a loss which I do not like to contemplate.

Mr. Chairman, what has interested me most during these post-war years, or what has seemed to me most significant and most pregnant with hope for the future, is that revolutionary movement among the self-governing peoples to rid themselves of the dangers and burdens of war. I have watched its growth almost day by day. I am wholly sympathetic with its purpose. I believe implicitly that in the end and not too remote future it will succeed. But naturally, as it develops, it raises new problems, problems of governments, problems of all sorts, some of them of a pretty fundamental kind. I have thought I might venture today to say a few words to you this morning about one of these problems which, it seems to me, even now is taking somewhat definite form. I mean the relations between public opinion and war.

Few of you, I suspect, have forgotten the shock, the fearful shock, with which the Great War burst on the world. Its probability, its certainty even, had long been contemplated. No one believed that peace could be indefinitely maintained in Europe merely by increasing armaments. But even so, aside from a few minor disturbances, the peoples had lived for two generations in a state of peace. No new cause of ill will between them was discernable. No obvious reason presented itself to make war

necessary at that moment. And so, as a matter of course, these peoples went their several ways and assumed that these conditions might perhaps continue more or less indefinitely. I chanced to be in England at that time. I shall never forget the amazement, the consternation, with which the war was greeted. And what was true in England I think was true elsewhere. I doubt, indeed, if there was a people in Europe not equally startled and not equally appalled when suddenly confronted with that terrible reality. It found them all mentally unprepared.

After the first shock had passed and the peoples had settled down to their grim task, they naturally looked for some explanation of that dreadful and overwhelming catastrophe which had over taken them. And the explanation generally accepted, I suppose, among the allied nations was that two great conceptions of government had finally come to grips, and that the peoples, democratically organized, had finally to fight for existence against the military autocracies. The world apparently was not large enough to hold them both. One of them had to go. And, believing the moment favorable, it was urged the military autocracies had determined to force the issue to a conclusion. Such, at any rate, was the explanation offered. And, after four and a half years, and at a cost which staggered humanity, victory finally came to the free peoples. The autocracies were overthrown and the dynastic ambitions and quarrels were swept away. And the perils, real or imaginary, which had existed when peoples democratically organized were confronted by military autocracies had disappeared. On the face of it, and on the basis of that explanation, the world had been made safe for democracy. A happier future, a future bought at a great price, which should be undisturbed by war, lay ahead.

Then, you remember, came a hard awakening. Slowly, reluctantly, but very definitely, we all found ourselves compelled to realize that the war which we had been told was being waged to end war had somehow failed in that purpose. The democratic peoples now, apparently, distrusted one another quite as profoundly as before they had distrusted the autocracies. War again had to be contemplated. And in this year of our Lord, for instance, if we but lift our eyes from our daily tasks and look about us, we see

more men under arms than ever before. Armaments have increased rather than decreased. The search for new and more deadly methods of destroying life and property goes on unchecked and unimpeded. And if we listen carefully, we may even hear whispers of the mysterious year, just ahead, called X, which is supposed to be the final year that peace between the great powers may be regarded as assured. Peace is no less desirable. No nation wants war. But somehow or other that durable peace we sought has receded even as we stretched out our arms to grasp it. That is not a pleasant conclusion. Yet, in view of the facts confronting us, it is difficult to believe that our governments, the governments of the self-governing peoples, are relying less than before upon armaments to provide for national security. And if we ask the reason for this strange persistence in a policy which has always, hitherto led to war, and which, even today, divided the nations and is keeping them apart, we find an explanation ready for us. Where all the peoples are self-governing, the fault must obviously be ours. Those in political authority now apparently find the real source of danger to be ourselves, and you and me and all the rest of us, and assume, human nature being what it is, war must still be regarded as probable if not inevitable. Therefore, they arm for protection. They regret the fact. In view of human experience, however, they see no alternative. Deep down in human nature are racial and national instincts and prejudices which, when appealed to, have always hitherto resulted in a war spirit. They see no reason to believe any other result may be anticipated in the future. Meanwhile their obvious duty is to protect us against others and more particularly against ourselves.

Now gentlemen, that explanation is, of course, understandable. There is a great deal to be said for it. It is a law of historical background and it voices that cynical disbelief in human beings in the mass which, whether true or not, always seems so much wiser than faith in nature, good sense and goodwill. But, so far as I can see, the explanation does not square with the facts. I, for one, do not believe that war today takes its origin, primarily, in the moral defects and weaknesses and lack of self-control of great masses of men and women capable of self-government. Even less do I believe that war arises, from time to time, from a sudden and uncontrollable impulse on the part of one of these great national masses to go out and slaughter another. War is possible, no doubt, because these masses are willing, under conditions, to fight. But I need hardly say to you that those conditions are themselves an integral part of the problem. Certainly, before a war is conceivable even, there must be something to fight about, an issue. And that issue, broadly speaking, you will find, I think, is the outcome of a series of political manoeuvres by which the masses concerned are brought into positions of opposition. Obviously the manoeuvring is not done by the masses themselves. Collectively and as individuals they have little, if anything, to do with the slow and subtle and hidden shiftings of international relationships. That task, very properly, they leave to their governments. Their own interests are directed by the more prosaic task of earning a living. The manoeuvring, of course, is done by those little groups of men whom we call governments. These little groups seek constantly and naturally to gain supposed advantages of one sort or another for their own nationals. Out of their efforts to enlarge or to strengthen or to maintain the interests committed to their charge, the masses they represent are gradually manoeuvred into positions which, to say the least, cannot easily be surrendered. If the process continues, sooner or later an agreement between these little groups becomes impossible. Then, on the ground that their lives and property are somehow involved and endangered, these great masses of men and women, roused by every power of organized appeal and propaganda, are ordered under arms and war follows. The little groups make the issue. And the little groups declare the war. And the masses they represent find themselves at the critical moment substantially helpless. And so, as individuals, loyally, patriotically, they accept the decision, and go out to pay the bills of war with their bodies, in the hope that if not they, then those who come after them, may reap a benefit in some measure proportionate to its cost.

I do not pretend, of course, that this is an exhaustive analysis of the origin of modern war. It is not. But I do submit that, in the main, the process leading up to war is in

the hands of these little groups of men. I do submit that they possess the power not only to control and direct our relations with other peoples, but also the power, at their discretion, to throw us into war with them. And if any conclusion can be drawn from this hasty analysis, it is that at some point in their dealings with each other, not the peoples but the governments, choose war. It matters not a whit that those governments be autocratic or democratic in form. The power to decide for peace and war is inherent in them both alike. Each of these conflicting governments would assert, of course, that the particular issue which divided them, owing to the others, folly and wickedness, was incapable of peaceful solution. The statement seems to carry its own refutation with it and there are few, if any, settlements based on compromise, which are not preferable to war.

What I want to make clear, however, is that we may seem to be caught in a political process of our own making, over which as individuals we have no control. And that political process, out of which war emerges, is not changed in the slightest. What I want to emphasize is, unless that power to declare war can, in some proper or constitutional way or method, be brought under control, there seems little apparent reason to hope that the future will be other than an intensified repetition of the past. Our governments will continue to move along well defined grooves, and in accordance with political theory, which exalts naturalism and relies frankly upon the use of force, when necessary, to obtain its end. In due time, the necessary issue will be developed. War will follow. And precisely that, I suspect, is what many of us believe will be the probable course of events.

Now, against this view, against this method of dealing and its assumed necessity, there has arisen a sentiment, vast, insistent, growing, which demands peace, and peaceful settlements. It exists everywhere. It is becoming more conscious of itself, and of its purpose. And it was born of the agony of the recent war. I need not speak to a Canadian audience of the human cost of that war. Thirty million lives, it is estimated, was the toll it exacted, And naturally, against such a cruel and insensate slaughter, the conscience of the world revolted. A human need was bared which could not be denied. A passionate demand went up

for a saner and better method of settling international disputes. And, as a result, there has come into being a series of agreements and treaties, which, so far as words go, and promises, would seem to make war between the great powers, if not impossible, at least more difficult of realization. They began with the League of Nations. The World Court followed. Then came the Washington Conference and the Four Power Pact covering the Pacific. A little later came Locarno. And finally, less than two years ago, the Briand-Kellogg Pact was signed at Paris by which the signatory powers, now numbering fifty-seven in all, pledged themselves to seek only pacific settlements for all disputes of whatever nature that might arise between them. That is a formidable record of accomplishment. It is possible, of course, to exaggerate the importance of these agreements. It is equally possible to underestimate them. But, I think, taken as a whole, we must agree that an alternative course to war has, in fact, been opened and the political machinery provided it. If that demand for peaceful settlements continues to grow, if it shows a comparable rate of increase during the coming decade as in the past, we have reasonable assurance that that more durable peace, for which so many of our children died, and for which so many long and pray, may not be far beyond our reach. But will it continue to grow?

Personally I have no doubt that great sentiment in favor of peaceful settlements will grow. I base my belief, partly, on moral grounds, because forces, none the less real, are still working to that end; partly, because we have learned by experience what uncontrollable furies of destruction a modern war lets loose; and finally on political and economic grounds. This new and democratic world we are entering, wherein production is becoming more and more an international process and in which the livelihood of each and every one of us is increasingly dependent upon others, cannot withstand the shock and dislocation and waste of war as safely as a world more primitively organized. Peace is now something more than a pleasant interlude between wars. It is becoming a necessity if our present standards of living are to be maintained, to say nothing about raising them. And, as you know, our productive processes are becoming more

complex, and more highly integrated, and more widely extended. They are, of course, enormously more productive, but they are more susceptible to injury. They can be more easily broken down. Even to-day, I am afraid, we do not always realize the full significance of that fact. Little more than a century ago the population of Britain was roughly, fourteen million souls. To-day, excluding Ireland, the population numbers forty-three millions. The population of France was then eighteen or twenty millions. To-day it is thirty-nine millions. The Germans then numbered probably slightly more than twenty-one millions. Today, in the German Republic alone, there are sixty-five millions. Not only have these new methods of production raised the standard of living for each succeeding generation, but almost three times as many people are now dependent upon them for support. Break that system down, make its functioning difficult or impossible, throw men back upon the simpler and more primitive productive methods of a century or more ago, and you have possibilities I need not elaborate. Moreover, how easily, how quickly such a situation could be developed we know from the results from the last war. There were reserves to draw upon then which may not exist if a new war should come. But that is not all. The dominating peoples are now "self-governing". And democracy, we must remember, like any other form of organized human life, tends to create the environment best suited to its safety and development. Democratic peoples, self-governing peoples, do not naturally go to war. Their individual interests bulk too large. To make war successfully, they must surrender all those safeguards and rights and powers which they have won, and subject themselves, if only for the time being, to despotic control and leadership. That is not easy for them. And it is likely, I suspect, to grow even harder. There is among them a natural inertia against the violent dangers which war brings in its train. They will fight if persuaded that their lives and property and freedom are in danger. But, at least, we have reached the point, where they will not knowingly engage in a war of sheer aggression. These great masses of men are not dreaming dreams of conquest. They do not seek splendid adventure. They will not willingly hazard all on a

throw. They ask most, as you know, to be left undisturbed that, by their own activities, they may lift themselves and their children to new levels of comfort and happiness. And to maintain, in face of these new and radically changed conditions, that men and women, capable of self-government, will permit themselves to be involved in war as easily or as readily as their fathers before them, is to maintain an absurdity. The whole problem has changed. The costs and dangers of war have been multiplied enormously. The possible gains have ceased to exist. And we may safely assume that the change will not go unnoticed by those who are most concerned.

Now, gentlemen, something like that, roughly put, I take it, is, in its broad outlines, the situation in which we find ourselves today. Some of us think that war is unavoidable and that it must be prepared for. Some of us think peaceful settlements are obtainable and demand them. And some of us, I suspect, busy about our own affairs and careless of the future, do not think about such matters at all. There is no unity of opinion. Our minds are divided. And, groping about for guidance, we seem to have set up a new political entity which we call public opinion to act as our court of last resort. Public opinion, we say, should decide. And the fact suggests the existence of a pretty widespread suspicion that in this rapidly changing world of ours, situations may be developing with which our present political methods are inadequate to deal. It might even suggest that we are living in one of these historic periods when governments do lag behind their peoples and the peoples have a truer and saner view of relations than their governments and when constitutional changes necessary to bring the powers of government into better accord must be anticipated. I could give you this illustration. I want to give you one. The self-governing peoples choose their own governments. They are, therefore, presumably, responsible for the acts and decisions of their governments. But, as a matter of fact, their governments are never elected on a precise issue of peace or war. They are elected on domestic grounds and for domestic reasons, and a government elected, let me say, on an issue such as prohibition, or the tariff, or some other interest which bulks large, may be not at all represen-

tative when confronted by the need of a decision involving peace or war. What happens then? Such a conflict of opinion would mean comparatively little in the ordinary run of affairs. If our governments decide to do this or do that or to make any certain decision, if it proves contrary to what a majority of us want, in due time we simply turn them out and substitute a new government more in accord with our wishes. In case of war, a possible difference of opinion assumes tremendous importance. The populations involved cannot change that decision at some later time. It sets in motion a set of forces which are uncontrollable—and from whose action there is no appeal. We can carry on the ordinary work of legislation well enough by representatives chosen for that purpose. We still keep the control. But a declaration of war is final. It binds us absolutely. It involves a question as fundamental as the adoption of a constitution. For the power to declare war stands on a different plane from all other powers of government. It is all-embracing and all-consuming. It subordinates all other powers to itself. It represents the highest act of sovereignty. It is the one power which of all others a self-governing people would keep in its own hands and reserve to itself, since it involves their collective lives and property. Apparently, there is a dawning recognition of all this, and we seem now to be endeavoring to meet the issue thus presented by what we call public opinion. The phrase is on all our lips. We use it constantly. Only the other day, you will recall, Ramsay Macdonald told the Naval Conference that the peoples of the world were looking to it to give public opinion a chance.

We are reminded almost daily that the sole and only sanction of the Briand-Kellogg Pact, is the public opinion of the world. That sounds like good sense. Perhaps it is good sense. But after all, does it not leave us in a sort of no man's land? If public opinion is to guide us, and its expression is made decisive, we ought, one would suppose, to know what it is. Certainly, no method yet exists by which the public opinion of the world can be ascertained with any certainty. None of the nations, signatories to the Briand-Kellogg Pact, has set up any political machinery by which that opinion can be definitely registered or made known. Gentlemen, we are

simply taking for granted that public opinion at any given time is a known fact. That is not true. The autocracies have been swept away. The dominant peoples today are self-governing. If they want peace it would be natural to assume that peace is assured. But, as a matter of fact, that statement is not true. Neither war nor peace is within their control. They have delegated the decision to others. It is a function of their governments. We may assume, if you will, that our governments will act at any time in accordance with our wishes. But it is pure assumption. We do not know. We have no method of knowing. And modern war is too overwhelming a catastrophe to be risked on an assumption.

So, it seems to me, sooner or later, if public opinion is to be decisive we shall be forced to drag out into the open and face frankly the question that is lurking here in the background, whether, as at present, the power to declare war shall continue exclusively in the hands of our governments, or, if public opinion is to decide, and that would seem to be the object of self-government, whether that power shall be exercised only after we who are most concerned have given our consent. We cannot proceed indefinitely in both directions. Yet that is precisely what we are trying to do today. Sooner or later we must choose which way we will have it. And, bound up in that conclusion, I suspect, is the next constitutional problem which the self-governing peoples must solve.

And there, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I leave the problem for your consideration. I would add only this. A durable peace cannot be based upon force. It must, if it exists at all, be based upon goodwill, not sentimentalism, nor shallow emotionalism but upon goodwill which, in essence, is the common sense acceptance of the fact that no dispute between the great self-governing peoples can possibly be worth the human and material costs of war. I believe profoundly that this practical goodwill exists, that the great self-governing peoples may safely trust one another, and that today, only a method of dealing between them, inherited from an outgrown system of autocratic government, prevents our recognition of that great and beneficent fact. And I want to confess very freely that, as I

have watched the agony of the post-war years among European peoples, and have come to realize the extent and sincerity of their desire for peace, and their profound recognition that war, whether won or lost, is a mere suicidal act (feelings quite as strong, to say the least, gentlemen, as your own), I have found myself coming to the conclusion, hesitatingly at first, but with growing conviction, that possibly there is a power to control these recurrent war crises, a power which has never yet been utilized, the power which plain men and women can exert if, when war threatens, their wills and their desires can be given constitutional expression.

And there, as I said, I leave the matter. You have been most patient and very kind. I thank you again and again.