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The Washington Conference

By Mr. Wickham Steed.*

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—It is no small ordeal and no petty honor to be allowed to address you so soon after you have heard from Lord Beatty and Lord Cavan authoritatively the views—the position—of the great fighting services of the Empire. I might be abashed, impenitent and impertinent journalist though I be, had I not the privilege of the friendship of these two men, and did I not know they would make allowances for me could they see me to-day in this predicament. Fortunately, during the years of the War and since, we got into the habit, those of us who were all striving for the same cause and for its triumph, we got into the habit of working together, of pooling ideas, and of feeling a certain humble gladness if to any of us were vouchsafed the opportunity for service. That spirit continues, and it is as strong in men like Lord Beatty and Lord Cavan to-day as it was during the War. Never was a finer exemplification of the large view given than in Washington, when the American naval officers of the Grand Fleet entertained Lord Beatty at dinner, and showed no little apprehension as to the possible effects of a limitation of armaments upon their professional positions, and Beatty said: "Comrades, this job is so much bigger than any of us. This question of doing something to strengthen the prospects of peace is so much larger, affects interests so much wider than those with which we deal, that our only course is to put our shoulders to the wheel and drive that thing forward." (applause) There spoke a man of whom no one can say that he was not a brave and audacious sailor, of whom no one can say that he does not put his service to the Empire and to humanity above professional principles. Of Lord Cavan, whom you recently heard, the same is true. It was my honor to serve with him for a brief space on the Italian Front, not as a soldier, but with the help of a very able and brave Canadian soldier who I understand is in Toronto, and who I regret is not with us to-day—Colonel Mitchell. (applause). I went to the Italian Front with a simple

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mission—to break up the Austrian Army. I told Lord Cavan, who had just got into an enormous villa up in the Italian hills, that I had come on this simple mission. "How are you going to begin?" "Why! I want to discuss that with you." "I know nothing about it. Talk to Mitchell." So I talked to Mitchell. Mitchell said he was glad to see me. He had been wanting to do something of that sort for six or seven months, that he had proposed it to the predecessor of Lord Cavan, General Plumer, then hanging on by the skin of his teeth to an extremely precarious position. Plumer said, "No, my dear Mitchell. It is not fair. We must fight these fellows." "Did you ever hear anything more British than that?" asked Mitchell. I said "No," but all the same we set to work to break the cohesion of the Austrian Army, and with the help of Mitchell we made very considerable progress in ten days. But that is another matter.

The story of to-day is not the story of war, nor yet entirely of peace. It is, I hope, a story of war averted, and of peace well on the way towards being secured, and in order to appreciate that story in the right way, we must all remember that the world is still very sick; that we have still to win our final triumph over the consequences of victory; that even the fear of war over a protracted period might yet ruin the social and economic structure in old Europe, and affect it terribly elsewhere. That was the underlying condition for the Washington Conference. Most of you know probably how that Conference came into being. Some of you may not know what the position of the British Empire—or as I prefer to call it the British Commonwealth of Free Nations—was in regard to the Washington Conference. The United States had come into the war in 1917. They had greatly helped to win it. Some Americans, I understand, have said that they won it. I have heard others say the same thing; and Belgians, and Frenchmen, and even some Englishmen. And the trouble is that it is all true. They all won it—together; and without the help of any one of them it might have been lost. We all won it, but then came the Peace Conference in Paris, and it was a sore disappointment. This is not the moment to apportion the blame, or distribute praise; it is not the hour to say what might have been done, nor to say why it was not done; but the Peace Conference in Paris left behind it a very ragged situation; and after it was over that situation was rendered still more ragged by the defection of the United States. I can say here, what I have said to American audiences, and what I have written in the United States; it is not a matter of

opinion, it is a fact, as I ventured to remind some Americans who challenged me for having published an unpalatable fact. (When I am afraid of saying to anyone or any public anything because it is unpalatable I will quit journalism and apprentice myself to a beautifier.) And the fact is that when the United States Senate repudiated the signature of President Wilson they lost credit throughout the world. That was a great fault. I know there were many reasons for it, and far be it from me to say that some of these reasons were not valid. But the fact remains, and this Washington Conference on the part of the American Administration was perhaps unconsciously, but really, an attempt to come back—to link up again with the work of civilization; to break away from those influences; to turn a deaf ear to those voices who constantly preached from the text "To thy tents, O Israel. Let us be ingrowing; let us fatten on our own fat; let us cut ourselves adrift from the world; let us live in isolation. Are we not a great world in ourselves? Have we not mighty spaces? Have we not full unlimited resources? Why should we bother with entanglements in Europe or elsewhere?"

Gentlemen, the Americans are a very great people for whom I have the deepest respect, and a very high admiration. They are not unlike us. The are guided less by their brains than by their instincts. They may not have the great gift which I think the British race has in super-abundance, or, at any rate adequately, the gift that King Solomon asked of Jehovah—the gift of an understanding heart. We understand things through our hearts. We do things through our impulses; we very rarely work through our brains, and that is the reason why some nations which live by logic think we are hypocritical. We are not, we are merely unconsciously inconsistent. In moments of quiet, and even in times of elections, we express our views, and then comes the crisis, and we do the contrary, and then people say "What hypocrites!" Between our hearts and our instincts there is a watertight compartment. We never compare them. People outside think we know. We do not. And it is because the American people have got a majority of instincts not far removed from ours, because they speak a tongue not far removed from us, because they owe allegiance to ideals that are ours, have created their laws, their Common Law at any rate, from the same source as ours, and because whenever they indulge in the luxury of a conscious historical retrospect beyond the period of Grover Cleveland, they find themselves co-heirs with us to that grand body of political tradition which runs from the Roman Conquest of Britain, through the Saxon Kings, and on to the birth of the English language itself.

And here is a point let us never forget: Our English language is a compromise. It is the offspring of an approximately legal union between Norman French and Saxon. It has the marvellous flexibility of temperament that you sometimes find in cross-breeds. It has grown and has always carried with it in its growth, the mark of its birth, which was the mark of the principle of individual liberty and the rights of the subject against any form of tyranny. And that principle is instinct in the language; that principle is instinct in all that language teaches and because the Americans share that language and tradition, we can work with them and they with us as soon as we have got on a basis on which we can speak to them with frankness, and they can reply with equal frankness.

It was because of some obscure instinct they felt they must come back; because this lofty instinct acquired the peculiar validity that a touch of self-interest usually adds to ethical principles, because they felt the weight of unaccustomed federal taxation, they desired a limitation of armaments and they proposed it. Whether at that moment all the men who proposed it understood how mighty a matter was being raised I cannot say. Certainly as soon as they got their reply from Japan they understood. (laughter). Japan said "What about the Pacific? What about the Far East?" and the Americans had to sit down and think; and when they had thought they understood that the attainment of the ideal they had propounded was quite impracticable without very definite consideration of Far Eastern problems; and then, in this progression of their ideas, in their striving towards the attainment of peace, there was another little touch of selfishness. They did not like the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Well, no sensible man ought to quarrel with another on account of the company he keeps, but nobody is sensible all the time, and we in Great Britain had kept company with Japan for a considerable term of years, and though there had been some small hints of minor infidelities, with the prospect of a major infidelity, had things not gone well with us, yet on the whole the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was popular in England. Few people realize that, under cover of that alliance, while all our attention was concentrated on Europe, some Japanese—not all of them—had been making hay while the sun shone on the mainland of China. They do not know

how grave were the issues this action might involve, and they hardly realized, until they saw the Japanese naval building programme, followed by the naval programme of the United States, that we were, perhaps, in measurable distance of a great conflict in the Pacific. There may have been, among some short-sighted Englishmen, the idea that it would not be a bad thing if the Japs and the Yanks came to blows. None of them had suffered very much from the war. Why should they not knock spots off each other? Some Americans thought that was the British view. It was not, except in isolated and unimportant instances; but if we did not pay attention to that issue it was due to the fact that not until long after the invitation to the Washington Conference had been accepted did our Government really understand what was at stake. Its comprehension may have been stimulated by the propagandist work of a few people who took the trouble to go and see. It was certainly stimulated by the keen observations of Lord Beatty, but he was almost alone in England up till the middle, or the end of September.

Sir Auckland Geddes, who has proven in Washington one of the finest ambassadors, wrote dispatch after dispatch, and as is the fate of dispatches they went into the pigeonholes. But finally means were found to bring this truth home to the minds of the government.

"Suppose trouble arises between the United States and Japan what is the position of Canada?"

They shook their heads and wondered. So the question was put a little more precisely:—

"Is it probable, in the event of trouble between the United States and Japan, British Columbia will be able to maintain an attitude of utter and complete neutrality?"

And the answer seemed doubtful; and on thinking further they came to the conclusion that if the attitude of British Columbia was doubtful, that it might be affected by many factors beyond the control of British Columbia, such as the stampede of Japanese which would have taken place from Oregon and other places northwards to British Columbia, a stampede which would turn British Columbia into a centre of espionage of Japanese that might have obliged the United States to say to the Dominion Government: "Clear those Japs out or I must clear them out myself." What position would that have led us into? If you consider these factors you will see that the question which arose was one of extreme gravity, not only for British Columbia, but for the whole British Empire, which was still the ally of Japan, though not

technically an ally as against the United States. On thinking over that problem honest people said to themselves: "There is one way out. Japan must be enabled to understand that any policy of aggression in the Pacific, such as may bring about trouble in the United States will inevitably bring the Empire as one solid unit against Japan from the beginning. At the same time, if there were such creatures as navalists in the United States, they would also be led to understand that any provocative policy on the part of the United States could not receive British sanction or British capital. Our one and only interest in the Pacific is Peace, and the real question for us was: How can we assure peace while behaving like gentlemen? We might have denounced the Anglo-Japanese Alliance last summer. Mr. Meighan objected to its renewal, alone, I believe, amongst his colleagues. In that objection, whether or not the form it took was the best possible, he by that objection did greatly serve Canada and the Empire, for he helped us to understand what might be involved. Then came the further step; If we denounced the alliance it had at least one year to run, and during that year would come the Washington Conference. It would expire at the end of the year and leave an uncomfortable position, with Japan in the position of a sort of discarded and despised lover. That could not be tolerated, and therefore the only thing to work for was the abrogation of the alliance by mutual consent in order to make way for a larger agreement based on international good faith, aiming at the same objects for which the Alliance had originally been formed but which in later years, it had certainly failed to reflect; and with that line of policy the British delegation reached Washington. Rapid progress was made in the comprehension of the situation between the end of September and the beginning of November, for when the late Senator Knox left England in October he drew up a report to President Harding, of which the conclusion was: "I have found in political and official circles in England the utmost indifference and scarcely disguised hostility to the Washington Conference, and the movement is being carried solely by the London Times." A perfectly true statement when that was written, but a statement that was no longer true a little while after. In the interval wits had grown sharper, and old John Bull, who is a terribly slow old gentleman, but, like many portly gentlemen, devillish good at a sprint, had sprinted. And he sent over to represent him a Scot, helped by another Scot, helped by a Canadian, helped by an Australian, helped by a Hindoo, helped by a New Zealander.

Was there ever a more motley collection to represent a great empire, and did ever so strange a collection of individuals, barely knowing each other, as they met—did ever such a collection of individuals fall into line within a week, and work together as a band of brothers, and make the American delegation think they were dealing not with a number of states but with one? The rapid achievement of that result was due in no small part to the wise apprehension and dignity of Sir Robert Borden. It is invidious to distribute praise, but Sir Robert Borden did much. Sir Auckland Geddes, another Scot, but with something Canadian about him, I believe, was ambassador in Washington. This conference was in his territory. Would he not have been entitled to say: "Gentlemen, I am the ambassador. I am going to show you the way about." He took the last seat. He effaced himself entirely: he made himself the man-servant and the maid-servant of his fellows; taught them the paths they should tread; worked so that Mr. Balfour could devote all his time to the higher thinking, and, when at the end of six weeks, results had been achieved, Sir Auckland Geddes said to me: "You do not know how much I have learned from Balfour. It is extraordinary the wisdom of that fellow with fifty years experience to draw from. I have been like a schoolboy at his feet." That showed willingness to learn; faithfulness to a great object; the utter subordination of self—that is the real spirit which is the secret of the British Empire. And thus it was that with the entire confidence of the American Administration and the American delegation we reached that four-power arrangement in the Pacific which will endure.

Here I ought to say a word about the American Administration. They were in a very difficult position, but they played the game to an extent which would have seemed incredible to anyone not acquainted with the characters of President Harding and Mr. Hughes. It would have been easy for them—in fact President Harding received the Washington correspondents of the American journals twice a week—it would have been easy for them to give some information that would just have colored the minds of the newspaper representatives, who were questioning them; it would have been easy to let slip a hint that would have cast a slur on this delegation or that. But not only did no such half-word or whole word escape anybody, but Mr. Hughes, at the risk of his popularity, and at the risk of being compared with Mr. Wilson—as he was—resolutely refused to say any word on the conference. He allowed them to go to the British Press

Agent, Lord Riddell, who gave them British news. It says a good deal for my colleague and friend, Lord Riddell, who is a very delightful and whimsical gentleman, that on his departure from Washington, he was unanimously deplored, because he had given them news which carried no pro-British taint. This is the spirit in which things at Washington have been done, and this is the spirit in which the naval question has been and is being handled. You know the British Empire sets for itself a two-power standard. The disappearance of the German fleet has rendered that standard no longer necessary. After much thought the Government decided a one-power standard would be enough, but also decided that against the United States no standard at all was necessary, for we have come to this conclusion that for us and for the United States, the Atlantic Ocean, insofar as it is American or British, stands exactly in the same position as your three thousand miles of frontier between you and the United States. We did not like the prospect of these huge naval programmes coming from the United States and Japan. We did not like them for the political implications that attended them, or because of the enormous expenditures they involved; but frankly, a year ago, no British sailor from Admiral Beatty downwards hoped to attain a position relatively to that of other navies as the position in which we stood at the end of the War. We knew long years of strenuous building would be required before we could be sure of something like equality. One of the consequences of the Washington Conference will be to eliminate that dangerous superiority in capital ship strength of the American and Japanese navies, and eliminate it not by a process of competition, but by a process of agreement in good faith—for the good faith of Mr. Balfour has been able to inspire the whole American people with an almost reverent belief in the good faith of the British Empire.

What may happen to the submarine question I do not know. Personally I am somewhat sceptical, for I remember the last words of Admiral Fisher, a few days before his death. He said: "Remember, boys, these battleship things are very little good. In the future—submersible cruisers, internal combustion engines." I do know that, pending a decision as to the most useful naval type, if we can eliminate the submarine danger and save ourselves from having to keep in being a great body of anti-submarine craft, we shall have scored a very great advantage for us and a very great advantage for the peace of the world. And on this point allow me to remind you of the very significant happening only last Saturday at

Washington. On working at the subject our naval experts came to the conclusion that the submarine is practically useless as a means of defence, even for the weakest. It can always be overborne by a powerful navy. It is useful only against lawful merchant tonnage, and therefore it ought to be abolished. This position was reached by our experts; it was carefully formulated by Mr. Balfour and others and though our request for an open sitting in which to expound our views was refused, the speech was published and side by side was the report of the American Committee. In 24 hours so large a volume of opinion reached the American Administration saying the British case was right and the American case was wrong that last Saturday Mr. Hughes got up and said: "If the argument of Mr. Balfour and Lord Lee cannot be answered—I can only say I think they have not yet been answered—the Administration is much impressed by the cogency of these arguments and by the force of the appeal to the sentiment of the country, and therefore, pending arrangements for a larger conference, the United States proposes at once to cut its maximum by 30,000 tons."

These are the dimensions in which we have been working; these are the things that have held the imaginations of the people in Washington. Attempts to switch the conference off at tangents have all failed miserably. Every man there felt that he was engaged in laying the foundations for a truly better future —a future in which the governments of the great nations would come together and talk without *arrière pensée* of any kind, and confer instead of fighting, or instead of descending to the diplomatic wrangle that precedes a fight. A fashion I trust will have been set in diplomacy by this conference—of conferences called for a definite purpose and of short duration; fixing something; leaving over things that cannot be settled for the moment until a little later when they can be settled. By following up that line they will do much to create one great volume of determination among the civilized people of the world, and amongst the English-speaking nations in favor of this decision that so far as in us lies "War shall be no more."