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The Prime Minister at Geneva

On more than one occasion—keeping in mind failure to achieve success in the application of economic sanctions against Italy and an earlier failure to check the imperialistic program of Japan in the Far East—The Star has suggested that henceforth the League of Nations should consider itself as only a discussion body, providing a meeting place where international arguments might be threshed out. In this way, we have submitted, the League could serve a useful purpose and produce worthwhile results, because it is obvious that when delay and negotiation intervene there is usually an excellent chance of keeping arguing nations from flying at each other's throats.

That Canada's Prime Minister, Mr. Mackenzie King, is thinking along similar lines, is evident from a perusal of his address to the Assembly of the League of Nations at Geneva yesterday.

"There is today a widespread conviction, born of experience," Mr. King said, "that at this stage in the evolution of the League, emphasis should be placed upon *conciliation* rather than upon *coercion*. There is a general unwillingness in peoples to incur obligations which they realize they may not be able, in time of crisis, to fulfil, obligations to use force and to use it any time, in circumstances unforeseen and in disputes over whose origin or whose development they had little or no control. The difficulty of automatic intervention increases rather than decreases when conflicts tend to become struggles between classes, between economic systems, social philosophies, in some instances between religious faiths as well as between States."

Mr. King, in the words above, places his finger on a fundamental weakness that was well illustrated in the League's unhappy and embarrassing situation arising out of Mussolini's ruthless invasion and subjugation of Ethiopia. True, the League took no forcible action against Italy. It merely initiated partial economic sanctions, forbidding the export of certain goods to Italy because of the latter's violation of the rules. What happened? Exactly nothing. Il Duce snapped his fingers at Geneva and proceeded with his plans just as if the League had never existed, carrying out the program and increasing the Mussolinian prestige both at home and abroad.

The League, obviously, was placed in a bad light. It lost face. It was humiliated. People began to talk of its folding up. It had failed, for a second time, to check a bold member to whom League rules or the Briand-Kellogg Pact renouncing war as an instrument of national policy meant just nothing at all.

The League made a gross error in going in for a policy of economic sanctions—when it was not in a position to back them up, if necessary, with military sanctions on a major scale. The League threatened, but it did not act. Mussolini gambled that this would happen and his judgment proved good. Had he been convinced that the members of the League—more than 50 nations—were ready to take effective action against him in case he stepped over the line into Ethiopia, then, there is reason to believe, Emperor Haile Selassie would still be ruling in Addis Ababa instead of being an exile in hospitable Britain. It was a great mistake, we say, to take preliminary action to punish or express disapproval of Mussolini, without being prepared to follow up. Imagine a parent saying, "I'll punish you if you do that," then letting the child get away with his misdemeanor.

There is no argument, of course, as to why the League failed to check Mussolini. Public opinion back home in the member nations would not have supported a war policy. Even in Britain, where sympathy for Haile Selassie was so pronounced and popular indignation reached fever heights because of Sir Samuel Hoare's suggestion to yield part of Ethiopia to Italy—forcing Sir Samuel's retirement from the Foreign Office—there was nothing to justify the Baldwin Government in taking martial

Great Britain—or any other part of the Empire—is at war, Canada is necessarily at war. Let us quote his exact words on this point:

"There is another factor which inevitably influences Canadian opinion on many League policies, particularly on the question of automatic obligations to the use of force in international disputes. I have in mind our experience as a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

"Nations of the British Commonwealth are held together by ties of friendship, by similar political institutions and by a common attachment to democratic ideals rather than by commitments to join together in war.

"The Canadian Parliament reserves to itself the right to declare in the light of circumstances existing at the time to what extent, if at all, Canada will participate in conflicts wherein other members of the Commonwealth may be engaged.

"It is true that there are special factors in this relationship which make it impossible to draw a complete parallel between League and Commonwealth relations. But these factors also work in both directions. Certainly this experience has had an effect in convincing Canadians of the possibility of reserving close and friendly co-operation without the existence of central authority or military commitments.

"This respect for the full autonomy of each of the self-governing members of the British Commonwealth, I may add, is not confined to questions of participation in war. It applies to all relationships. It is for each part to decide what political or economic policies it may wish to adopt. Recognition of the same principle, we believe, should govern the action of all members of the League of Nations."

In some quarters, needless to say, there will be criticism of this attitude, but it is in line with the position taken by Mr. King in the past and it is well to remember that in a general election held less than a year ago he received the largest parliamentary majority the electorate of this country has ever awarded the leader of any party. There should be no misunderstanding of the Prime Minister's position, of course. He is not contending that Canada should necessarily remain aloof from Empire wars. He is merely arguing against "central authority or military commitments" and contending that the Canadian Parliament, representative of the Canadian people, shall decide on the merits of each situation that arises.

This appeals to us as an eminently reasonable position.

Though Mr. King was discreet in his comparison of the European and North American situations—emphasizing, for instance, the right of each country to decide its own form of government or economic organization—he made the interesting observation that "we in Canada are particularly fortunate both in our neighbors and in our lack of neighbors." He pleaded, also, for less economic nationalism "and the endless devices of control which are making political co-operation and confidence difficult to establish" and pointed to his own Government's readiness to negotiate for tariff reductions with any country prepared to take this action and thus to help in the removal of trade bars which make political co-operation and confidence difficult to establish.

All in all, Mr. King's speech was a thoughtful contribution to the discussion at Geneva. It was not sensational, but it was frank, sympathetic and sincere. Our dwindling colonial school of thought will find fault, as we have already suggested, with the Prime Minister's references to war commitments, but that is to be expected and provides no cause for worry. Most persons will admire Mr. King's sound Canadianism and faithful interpretation of the position of our country.