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Mr. Redmond's Speech in House of Commons on Compulsion Bill.

House of Commons, Jan. 17. Mr. J. REDMOND (Waterford, Nat.)—I can assure the House that I would have been very glad indeed if I had found it possible to abstain from taking part in this debate, but I feel, after the turn the debate has taken, that it would not be respectful to the House if I did not offer a few observations. In what I have to say I will speak with extreme candour. I deplore more than words can say the situation that has arisen. I have for a long time past dreaded the raising of this issue, because I have felt that undoubtedly if conscription in any form were passed for Great Britain, and if Ireland were included, Ireland's whole attitude towards this war was likely to suffer and unjust misrepresentation. But the situation has arisen and we must face the facts, and the simple fact is that, as I understand the situation, conscription in Ireland would be impracticable, unworkable, and impossible. Conscription, if enforced in Ireland to-day, or sought to be enforced, instead of leading to an increase of the number of Irishmen in the Army, would in my opinion have the opposite effect. It would undoubtedly paralyze the efforts of myself and others who have worked unspareingly and not unsuccessfully since the commencement of this war, and it would play right into the hands of those—a contemptible minority amongst the Nationalists of Ireland—who are unsuccessfully trying to prevent recruiting and to undermine the position and power of the Irish Party because of the attitude we have taken up.

The mere fact that this Coalition Government recognizes that, and recognizes that in the circumstances it is not in the interests of the prosecution of the war or in the interests of the Empire to extend this Bill to Ireland, ought to be sufficient. I think to any Irish or Scottish member of this House. It is significant that there are in this Coalition Government many men of various parties who have been closely associated in the past with the Government—men like the President of the Local Government Board, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the present Chief Secretary, who has occupied that office longer than any of his predecessors since the Union—and they unspareingly tell the House that in their judgment it would be inexpedient in the circumstances to apply this Bill to that country.

Irish Home Defence. On this question of military service, Ireland has always stood in a separate and distinct position from

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this country. I will not go back into the far past, but allow me to point out that, when the Territorial system was established in this country, you refused to extend it to Ireland. The old Irish Militia was practically abolished, and nothing was put in its place. In my opinion that was a grave blunder on the part of this country. May I remind hon. members that, on the outbreak of the war, from the first day I urged that advantage should be taken of the existence of large bodies of volunteers in Ireland to establish a system of enlistment for home defence on some such similar lines to the Territorial system in this country? If immediately I had made that offer that system had been established, you would, in the course of a few weeks, have obtained tens of thousands of men, with the consequence that almost immediately you would have been able to release men of the Regular Army from defence work; and undoubtedly long before now 75 per cent. of those men would have volunteered for service abroad, just as happened in the case of the Territorials in this country. That was refused, and from that day to this I have been unable to carry my view into effect.

Then let me point out that the Registration Act does not apply to Ireland. The right hon. and learned gentleman, the member for Dublin University, was at that time in the Government. He did not think it wise to extend the Registration Act to Ireland. When Lord Derby's scheme was established in this country another separate and distinct scheme was established in Ireland. It was established as the result of a conference held in the Viceregal Lodge, presided over by the Lord Lieutenant, where I had the honor of sitting in Council with many of the leaders of the Unionist Party from the North of Ireland, and where we unanimously founded a scheme we all had which is the same as that of the hon. and gallant gentleman.

The War Office Demand. At that conference the War Office took us into their confidence, and the General Commanding the Troops in Ireland, General Friend, told us what it was that the War Office asked Ireland to do. He said we were not asked to create any new units. He pointed out that we had from Ireland already 53 battalions—16 of the old regiments and 37 of the three divisions of the New Army—and he told us that all we were asked to do was to maintain those regiments at their proper strength, and that to do so from 1,000 to 1,100 men a week

would have to be recruited; and he said that if that number were obtained "we shall then have a satisfactory inflow of recruits." That was the demand put before us by the War Office. So far as that is concerned over 10,000 have been recruited. Now we have at the present moment 25 reserve battalions, and when we are asked for 1,100 men a week, I say that the scheme which was put on foot has been and is being successfully worked.

The Lord Lieutenant, who is the Director-General of Recruiting in Ireland, said in the House of Lords about three or four days ago that it was not true to assert that the movement was a failure. The fact that recruiting is going on in a fairly satisfactory way in Ireland, is proved, I think, by the letter which Sir E. Carson wrote in refusing to come with me to a recruiting meeting in Newry. He gave as his reason the following: "I have already from time to time made known in Ulster my views as to supporting our comrades at the front by keeping up the necessary reserves, and I am glad to know from the most recent reports (the letter was dated December 6) that such opinions are being very patriotically repeated." I am sure he does not want to do now what he did not want to do in his speech, and that is to draw distinctions between one part of the country and the other.

I have endeavoured to get the figures with a reference to these reserve battalions, and it is a strange thing in all these matters how difficult it is for us to get from the War Office the correct figures. Although I have a list it is not a complete list and I cannot quote it as an authoritative list, although it comes from a gentleman in high command in Ireland. I find that the 3rd Royal Irish Regiment in Dublin has 2,000 men; the 3rd Royal Irish Fusiliers in Derry has 2,000 men; the 3rd Royal Irish Fusiliers at Lough Swilly, 1,600 men; the 3rd Connaught Rangers at Kinross, about 1,600; the 3rd Royal Dublin Fusiliers in Cork, over 2,000; the Royal Irish Fusiliers in Belfast, 900; the 5th Royal Irish Rifles in Belfast, 870; and the 5th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, 1,150. The gentleman who sent me these figures sent them at the commencement of December. Recruiting has gone on ever since, and I take it for granted those numbers have been increased.

Recruiting in Ireland has really, on the whole, been very satisfactory. In the towns, in my opinion, it has been amazing. Towns, large and small, all through the country have recruited in a most satisfactory way. It is true that the agricultural parts of Ireland have not provided as many men as some people, perhaps, expected, and that remark is true of the agricultural parts in the North just as it is true of the agricultural parts in the South, and it is true of the agricultural parts in England. The truth is you can never get as large a proportion of men from the agricultural parts as you can from towns.

Attitude of Ireland as a Whole.

I will endeavour to put this matter on what I think a wider plane of statesmanship and common sense. The view expressed by the Chief Secretary (Mr. Birrell) the other night, in a speech full of inspiration and sound statesmanship, is the view which I think men of all parties in this House ought to take. I listened to the concluding words of the Colonial Secretary with the greatest pleasure and sympathy, because those concluding words were spoken in the same key and on the same note as the speech to which I have alluded. Remembering the past—the very recent past—I ask any fair man in this House, if Ireland's attitude as a whole has not been something almost miraculous? (Cheers.) I speak not now of the valour of Irish troops in the field; I speak not now of the Irish Guards at Mons, or the Royal Irish Regiment at Ypres, or the Dublins and Munsters at "V" Beach, who, although their names were never mentioned in the official despatch, performed an achievement which General Sir Hunter-Webster, in a speech made to them the next day, told them was without parallel in the history of feats of arms. I speak not of the Munsters and Dublins at Svvia. I will not allude any further to the experiences at Svvia or to the Dublins and Inniskillings at Saloniki, where, we are told, they saved the British and French armies. I will not allude to what was done by the Leinsters, the Connaughts, the Royal Irish Fusiliers, or the Royal Irish Rifles—regiments from all parts of Ireland, and I am as proud of the Ulster regiments as I am of the Nationalist regiments. (Hear, hear.) I do not want to boast of these things. We Irishmen are inclined to take them as a matter of course. They merely keep up the tradition of our race. (Hear, hear.) But I say, apart altogether from the performances of the Irish troops in the field, that Lord Kitchener's words are true—the words that he wrote to the Viceregal Conference in Dublin a couple of months ago, when he said that in the matter of recruiting, "Ireland's performance had been magnifi-

cent." Let me ask any fair-minded man in the House this question: If five years ago anyone had predicted that in a great war in which the Empire was engaged that 95,000 recruits would have been raised from Ireland and that there would be 151,143 Irishmen with the colours, would he not have been looked upon as a lunatic?

Last August General Botha sent me this cablegram:—"I entirely endorse your view that this victory—his was speaking of his great victory—"is the fruit of the policy of liberty and the recognition of national rights in this part of the Empire." General Botha had enormous difficulties to face, serious racial animosity, and bitter national memories. Does any fair-minded man think that General Botha could have overcome those difficulties as he did if the war had broken out just after the recognition of those national rights to which he referred, and before they had come into operation? (Cheers.) And yet I honestly believe that General Botha's difficulties were in reality rather small compared with the difficulties which my colleagues and myself had to face in Ireland.

The Value of Irish Sentiment.

It is true to say that the overwhelming sentiment of the Irish people is with the Empire from the first. That fact is of incalculable value, and its value has been felt in every corner of the Empire. If the sentiment of the Irish people at home had not been with you in this war, the effect would have been felt everywhere in the self-governing Dominions. The result of what has happened has been that a wave of enthusiasm has stirred the heart of every man of Irish blood in every one of your Dominions. I was told the other day by a gallant wounded Australian from Anzac that a large proportion—he said 20 per cent.—of the Australians and also a large proportion of the Canadians are men of Irish blood. Only a couple of days ago I received a New Year's card from the commanding officer and the other officers of a regiment just raised in Vancouver, commanded by Irishmen and composed of Irishmen. They call themselves "The Vancouver Irish Fusiliers." Then not long since in Cape Town green flags were presented by General Botha's wife—I might remind the Committee that she is a member of the historic Emmett family (cheers)—to an Irish regiment raised in the Dominion where a wave of enthusiasm has filled the hearts of the men of Irish blood. That was a striking result of the action we were able to take to bring the sentiment of Ireland into line with that of the rest of the Empire. This state of things is of incalculable value also in America. If any one is inclined to doubt, let him refer to the Foreign Office for information.

An Obligation of Honor.

What I say to the House of Commons is "rest satisfied. Do not seek to drive Ireland." I have devoted myself since the war began to this work of recruiting. I have told the people that as a nation we should be disgraced if we were not able to keep up the reserves for our Irish regiments at the front. When I spoke to the Irish people again I was able to say that the exclusion of Ireland from this Bill was another reason making it incumbent upon them in honor to provide the men. Do not make our work more difficult in Ireland. Do not let any man for the sake of making a petty political point in the future against my country throw away or endanger the incalculable strength to the Empire which has been gained by the transformation of Irish public opinion. The other day the Sovereign in a letter of good-bye and congratulation to the third and last of the Irish new divisions for the front said he was confident that they would not only maintain but add to the glorious traditions of the Irish regiments. His confidence was well founded. I say to you, "Let Ireland go her own gait in this matter." Believe, when we make professions such as we have made, that we are honest men who mean what we say. Trust us to know the best methods of getting recruits for your Army. Do not attempt to drive a people who have already gone far further than yesterday you could have hoped or believed. Do not weaken the hands of men who are straining every nerve to allay suspicion and to arouse enthusiasm in this cause among their fellow-countrymen. Do not carp at or belittle Irish efforts. I believe this country may rely with confidence, until victory in this war has vindicated liberty and justice, upon the loyal support and the gallantry of the Irish race. (Cheers.)

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