

Balfour's Speech on Reduction of Armaments



PEAKING in the British House of Commons on Monday, March 2, on the motion by Mr. Murray Macdonald, "That, in view of the continued friendly relations with foreign Powers announced in the gracious Speech from the Throne, this House trusts that further reductions may be made in expenditure on armaments, and effect be given to the policy of retrenchment and reform to which the Government is pledged," Mr. Balfour said:

I am sorry to intervene at this hour, but it is necessary to leave space for the Secretary for War, who will reply on the whole debate. I have not heard the whole of the speeches since the dinner hour, but I heard the whole of the debate before that time, and I do not think any hon. gentleman will dissent from the opinion I express, that the speeches were able and interesting, but the debate itself has been very unsatisfactory. It has been unsatisfactory for a quite simple reason—that we have not all been addressing ourselves to the same issue; the House has not been occupied in discussing the arguments for and against a simple question of policy. Quite the contrary. Partly from the use of the particular phraseology in the propositions, and partly from the introduction of subsidiary circumstances, we really have been for a large part of the debate at cross-purposes. If I may say so, one of the most fruitful causes of a certain discrepancy and want of concentration in the arguments on either side has been that while some hon. members have been discussing economy others have been discussing reduction. Now, economy and reduction are quite different things. (Hear, hear.) The Secretary for the Admiralty, for instance, never discussed reduction; he spent the whole of his time in a long and able address upon economy. He was occupied in showing that, as trustee for the taxpayers and administrator of the Navy, he had done a great deal to save here and save there by introducing better methods; and in the same way the Chancellor of the Exchequer occupied a large part of his speech in contrasting, not different policies of two successive Administrations, but the question of economies he alleged were made by the Administration of which he is a member, to show that they were better stewards of the taxpayers' money than those who preceded them. I am not going to discuss this question of economy as distinguished from reduction. If you are going to deal with questions of economy, that is to say if you are going to ask whether the predecessor of the First Lord of the Admiralty was a more careful administrator of public funds than the present First Lord, or whether the late Secretary for War was a worse administrator of funds than the present, you inevitably involve yourselves in an endless controversy about some departmental detail. (Cheers.) Do not let anybody suppose that I regard departmental details in connection with finance as insignificant. I quite agree that they are very important. It is very important that the public funds should be administered without waste. It is the business of the Committee of Supply in discussing the Estimates to do what they can to prevent waste. But on this resolution we should only be lavishing our time if we were to discuss, not questions of reduction, but questions of economy in regard to departmental administration, which show how vain these discussions are. We had the question of loans for public works dealt with at great length by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is fond of discoursing on detail. He thinks the whole course pursued by the late Government was one of extravagance. (Ministerial cheers.) He thinks that the habit of contracting even short loans throws upon— he said posterity, but I suppose he ought to have said the next Chancellor of the Exchequer—the cost indulged in by one administration. I think the Chancellor of the Exchequer has gone much too far in all his speeches on this subject; and I think, if the present Government runs its natural and appointed course, he will, before leaving office, find that he has gone too far in the matter of detail. The hon. gentleman who seconded the amendment made a very interesting parallel between good business methods and Government methods, and he quoted, as he had a right to quote, the extreme success with which he is identified of the business he has built up. He quoted a saying that no business man should regard the opinion of his experts with too profound or too subservient a reverence. I appeal to the same right hon. gentleman on another matter connected with this, and I ask whether there is a business firm in the world, from the largest railroad down to the smallest industrial enterprise, in which it is not only proper, but absolutely necessary to deal with great capital expenditure by spreading it over a certain number of years. There is no other way of doing it, and if you refuse to do it in this way the only result is that you will not do it at all. (Cheers.) I would, therefore, reply on that ground, which is, I think, subsidiary and apart from the main topic, in the following way: He says that by borrowing money you are throwing upon future governments and future taxpayers the cost of carrying out your permanent improvements. I say that by his course he is throwing greater burdens on those who are to come after him. If you neglect these works while you are in office on the excuse that if you have not the money you will refuse to borrow, if the work in consequence remains undone, the result is inevitable. Repairs cannot be avoided. The time comes when they

must be done—when the barracks become so abominably insanitary, so utterly impossible to use that they have to be renewed, or the cry for a new naval base conforming to new conditions of strategy becomes overpowering. Then you have to find money. You have to complete your annual Estimates for the necessary work of the year, or you have got to borrow so as to be able to carry out capital expenditure with capital money. I am not going to dwell on the point further; but I have brought it in to show that we really have been led off, in the first instance, I must say by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and, secondly, by the Secretary to the Admiralty, from the great issue really raised by the mover and seconder to quite subsidiary and subordinate questions as to comparative skill and dexterity of administration between two successive Boards of Admiralty or Ministries. Do not let us confuse during the short time that remains to us the two great questions of economy, which everybody is in favor of, and retrenchment or reduction, which is quite a different thing, and involves questions of great Imperial policy.

The True Issue

If I have, by what I have said, cleared the ground, surely I am right in saying that the true issue has not been put or met from the Treasury Bench? (Hear, hear.) The true issue was put by the mover and seconder of the amendment and by the hon. and learned member for Walthamstow. They say that the present Government—and, to do them justice, they say also the late Government—have brought us into such an international position that we ought to have great reductions in our defensive forces. (Ministerial cheers.) We have been present tonight at one of these Parliamentary comedies—I dare say they are inevitable—in which the responsible Ministers have got to find a way out from a situation of difficulty, which situation depends on the fact that there is a real disagreement between themselves and their followers which they want to disguise (laughter), and possibly something resembling a real agreement with their opponents which they wish to forget. (Laughter.) I heard a great deal from the Chancellor of the Exchequer and from the Secretary to the Admiralty of economies practised and of elaborate comparisons between the Estimates of one year and the Estimates of another—comparisons, by the way, which omitted such important facts as that we had to re-arm the whole Army with a new gun just at the time when some of the important armaments of expenditure by right hon. gentlemen opposite began to produce their effects. (Hear, hear.) But I do not wish to proceed on these side issues. The fundamental issue is this—Is the general scale of armaments and of expenditure upon the Army and Navy which the late Government thought necessary still necessary, or ought we fundamentally to modify that scale in consequence of recent diplomatic arrangements? That is the question to which I wish to speak. That is the question of which the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not say a word from the beginning of his speech to the end, except that he did admit, quite explicitly, that the two-Power standard was one which the Government were prepared to maintain, although his friends will accompany him into the lobby insisting that the necessity for the two-Power standard has been exploded owing to readjustments in international arrangements within the last four years. (Laughter.) I have some questions to ask on the real issue that is before us. First, in regard to the Army. Can we or can we not do our duty necessary for the defence of the frontier of India if we carry much further our reductions in the Regular forces of the Crown? Every one who has studied the Indian question knows that if there is to be a war for the defence of the frontier of India it is not going to be a short war, the natural wastage of war would be especially great in a country of the climatic conditions of India. Do the Government think that with the inevitable wastage of war we could do with a materially smaller number of regular troops to deal with the difficulties of the first year or eighteen months of such a campaign? That is a question of purely scientific examination. I agree with the right hon. gentleman who seconded the motion that you must not treat experts as if they were infallible authorities. But, at the same time, it would be folly to ignore them; and I understand that is a folly which the Government are not committing and do not intend to commit. The Chancellor of the Exchequer told us that the whole question of the defence of the frontier of India was being subjected to a most close and critical investigation by those scientific advisers, and that they were entering into it without the slightest arrière-pensée or any desire unduly to force the decision of that investigation in the direction of reductions. No military position in the world is more essential than the defence of the Northwest frontier of India. Though we spent an infinite amount of time and trouble over it, the subject was not complete when we left office, and I am glad to find that the investigations have been taken over by our successors. But have the military authorities in India will admit that we can deplete the resources in this country of regular troops which will be required for India far below the necessities there? I greatly doubt it; and, if that is, then the conclusion is that we are not merely dependent on considerations derived from the Cardwell system for keeping up the number of our Regular troops, but that we depend on something more fundamental, more essential, and which is not so

arbitrary as the mere balance of battalions at home and abroad, for in addition to that we depend on considerations based on the vulnerability of our frontier in India and the possibility of meeting all military exigencies. (Cheers.)

The Two-Power Standard

The Chancellor of the Exchequer says that he adheres to what is known as the two-Power standard. It is not a strictly scientific standard, but it is a good, broad, roughly working hypothesis. (Cheers.) It is a standard which everyone can understand, and the point of which is quite plain and obvious to the "man in the street," as it is plain to everybody else. It is therefore invaluable in practice. I wish that we had it in the Army. The nearest approach we have to it in the Army is the Cardwell system. The two-battalion system gives a rough standard, but it is far less valuable for practical purposes. Then I ask this plain question. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said distinctly that he adhered to the two-Power standard; but the mover and the seconder were as distinct and as explicit in stating that they did not adhere to it. (Cheers.) Are these two bodies of men—the Government and those who support them, the critics who move this resolution and those who oppose it—going into the same lobby on the same question (cheers), differing not about a trifle, not about something that is an exceptional accident in the situation, but differing fundamentally and on a point which, in the opinion of those who believe in the two-Power standard, they believe in because of its security for national safety, as well as national prosperity. (Cheers.) There you have the two opposite schools of political and military thought: Are they going to be joined together in holy matrimony over the amendment of the Chancellor of the Exchequer? (Cheers.) If so, then I know a just cause or impediment (laughter and cheers) why they should express publicly and in the face of the world the reason why there is this fundamental difference, and why a resolution is brought before the House, the whole course of which is to bring light upon this difference of opinion which should not be disguised in the discussion of this meaningless amendment. (Cheers.) I believe myself to be in agreement with the Government on this point and in disagreement with the mover and seconder of the motion, although I do not think that the division lobby will show that. (Laughter.)

Foreign Policy and Armaments

But let us ask what is the basis of the opinion of the mover and seconder, and of those who agree with them. What is the reason why they wish our ancient policy to be abandoned, what novelty is there in the existing situation requiring us to violate principles which have been accepted by successive Governments and successive parties for many years? I think that I can put the whole of their argument in two or three sentences. They say that the naval and military policy depends on the Foreign Office. The foreign policy of the present Government is a policy of peace and good will. It has found practical embodiment in the agreement with Russia; and therefore you ought, it is said, to find in your National Budget some reflection which can be estimated in pounds, shillings and pence of the exact amount of the good will which you have succeeded in obtaining by your diplomatic dexterity. "Show us," they say, "in your army and navy estimates the pecuniary equivalent of your skill in diplomacy." I think that is an utterly erroneous way of reading either the signs of the present times or of any times. (Cheers.) I may put in parenthetically the modest suggestion that peace and good will were not the invention of the present government; that their predecessors were anxious to be on good terms with their friends and neighbors; and, if you are to estimate the value of the foreign office by these crude methods, we on this side may point to a series of treaties of arbitration and of arbitrations carried out, and finally to agreements with foreign powers, to which this government, with all its good will, can really show as yet no parallel. If the relations between us and foreign powers are so much better than they were ten years ago, then because we have been in office longer we have done more than our successors. (Cheers.)

The Chancellor of the Exchequer—I expressly shared the credit between Lord Lansdowne and my right hon. friend.

Mr. Balfour—The right hon. gentleman was perfectly fair. I only want to show that if these good relations are a ground for economies; they have been so for some time past. (Cheers.) Let us now examine that which is the fundamental proposition—that if only you make treaties of amity and arbitration with a sufficient number of your neighbors, then you may cut down your military and naval expenditure to the point which suits your pockets, although it may not minister to your safety. That is fundamentally erroneous. (Cheers.) Let us consider the particular arrangement which has been most in evidence in this debate—the Anglo-Russian agreement. Does it make the frontier of the Indian empire safe in the sense that it would enable us to make great military economies? I did full justice to the effect of that treaty in preventing Russia in times of peace from creating a new base from which to attack India. But that in any case would have been a thing of the far future which would have involved Russia in enormous expenditure. But as far as the actual and existing frontier of India is concerned we are no safer in case of a quarrel with

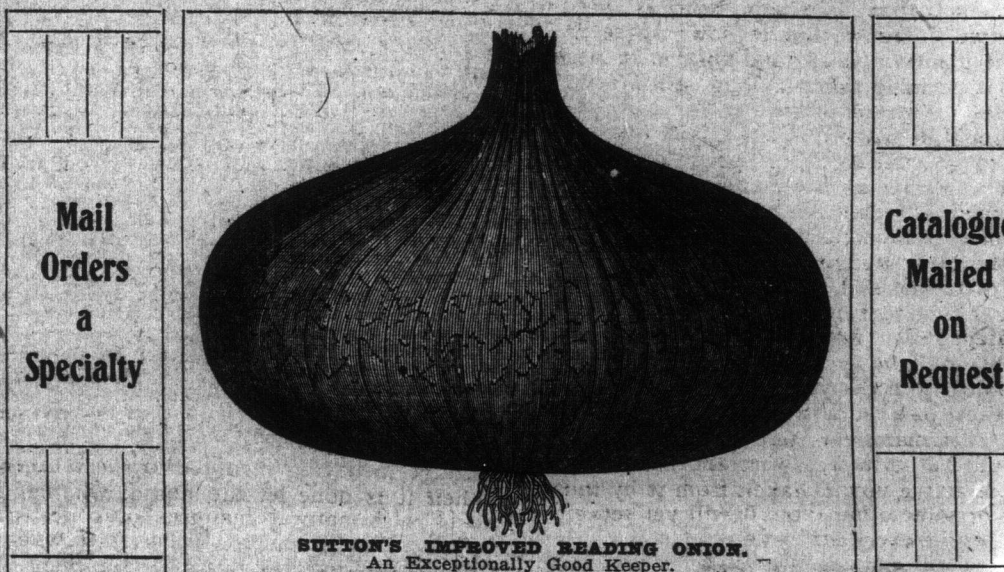
Russia than we were before. You say we shall not have a quarrel. Let us suppose that it is made more difficult and remote in consequence of the Agreement. Of course, I grant it is more improbable. But are you to allow the safety of your Indian Empire to depend on that improbability? (Cheers.) If you could in the course of six months raise from the soil an army capable of meeting all your requirements, I agree that while the two Chancellories were haggling over their quarrel you might put yourself in a posture of defence. But everyone knows that is impossible. To put the thing arithmetically. Estimate how long it takes you to create a great fleet and army and compare it with the time it takes you to quarrel with some one else. If you think it impossible to get up a quarrel under four or five years, then you may let your defences go down much lower than they are now. But it takes two years to make a battleship and a great deal more to make a sailor. (Cheers.) Does it take you more than two years to submit to a quarrel's being forced upon you? Does anybody think that in consequence of our specially good relations with France, Russia, and Japan, and in spite of the good terms on which, I am glad to think, we are with Italy, Germany and Spain—does anybody think that, in consequence of that state of things and by reason of it, we ought to leave these islands defenceless? (Ministerial protests.) I hear a murmur of dissent. (Ministerial cheers.) Well, if not defenceless, less defended? (Cheers.) If your defences are not adequate, what is less or more to you? If they are more than adequate to any possible difficulty, I agree diminish them. (Ministerial cheers.) But is that alleged? (Ministerial cries of "Yes.") That is alleged by hon. gentlemen below the gangway, but is it alleged on the Treasury bench? (Loud cheers.) And if it is alleged, as apparently it is, by hon. gentlemen below the gangway, have any single one of them in the course of this debate given the

grounds of the faith which is in them? Have they explained to us or to anybody else how we are to meet possible difficulties that may arise with less forces than we have at present? Have they gone over the ships and troops, all the apparatus of those who may conceivably be our enemies and compared them with our own means of defence? Not one of them. They have not gone beyond platitudes, eloquently expressed, but absolutely unmeaning and useless. (Cheers.)

The fact is, and it really is a fundamental fact, that there is no greater fallacy than that of saying that armaments and policy are mutually interdependent, if you mean by policy what most people mean—namely, the efforts of the Foreign Office at a given time to keep on good terms with its neighbors consistently with maintaining the national honor. It is very important, it is invaluable, to have such a Foreign Office. It may save you from wars, it may save you from the fear of wars, but it is not a thing you can put in the place of fleets or armies? Fleets and armies are the only expedient known in this world by which those who desire to maintain their independence can maintain it in spite of the fluctuating movements of human passion. (Cheers.) I certainly do not understate the abilities of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, but neither he nor any other prophet ever born into the world could foresee what is to be the European political weather two years or three years hence, any more than you can foresee the weather in the Channel next week or in the Atlantic a fortnight hence. These things are beyond human ken, and until we find some method by which political prophecies of that kind can be made with certainty, so long it is absolutely essential for the honor and safety of this country that we should keep a Fleet and an Army adequate to every enemy or combination of enemies which is likely to arise, and which, according to all experience, we may have to meet either on sea or on land.

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