

position to-day. If Canada is faced by the necessity of making a decision on the most serious and momentous issue that can face a nation, whether or not to take part in war, the principle of responsible government which has been our guide and our goal for a century past, demands that that decision be made by the parliament of Canada. Equally, the system of government we have inherited from Britain, of the close and essential relations between the legislature and the executive, makes it the duty of the government to propose to parliament the course which in regard to particular issues it considers should be adopted, and to stand or fall by the decision.

It has been contended in some quarters that this policy is not sufficiently definite and absolute. What government to-day, may I ask, is making absolute and irrevocable statements of the policy it will follow, its people will follow, regardless of the contingency, the issues at stake, the position of other countries? I had occasion only a few days ago to refer in this house to the statement made by Mr. Chamberlain at Birmingham as recently as March 17th, in which the Prime Minister said:

I am not prepared to engage this country by new and unspecified commitments, operating under conditions which cannot now be foreseen.

Speaking as the Prime Minister of Canada, I wish to say that I am not prepared any more than is the Prime Minister of Great Britain to engage this country by new and unspecified commitments operating under conditions which cannot now be foreseen.

Canada's attitude as to automatic commitments involving possible or actual participation in war has been asserted time and again both in this parliament and at Geneva. Whether it has been in reference to the application of sanctions under Article 16 of the covenant of the league or to participation in wars apart altogether from the league, Canada's position has been the same, namely, that in either case the approval of parliament will be required.

At the seventeenth session of the Assembly of the League of Nations, in September, 1936, in the presence of British ministers and representatives of other nations of the British commonwealth, and of other member countries of the league, I stated the position as I then understood it, very clearly. No exception so far as I am aware was taken at Geneva, at the time, to that statement nor has exception been taken to it since, by any political party

[Mr. Mackenzie King.]

at Ottawa, though the statement of Canada's position as therein set forth has been drawn to the attention of parliament at each subsequent session.

I feel I cannot do better at this time than to quote once more essential paragraphs of the statement making clear that they define, as accurately as I believe it is possible to define it, the position of the present government in the matter of Canada's participation in war whether it arises out of our membership in the league of nations or our membership in the British commonwealth of nations.

The paragraphs I regard as pertinent are the following:

There is another factor which inevitably influences Canadian opinion on many league policies, and 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. The nations of the British commonwealth are held together by ties of friendship, by similar political institutions, and by 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 the circumstances existing at the time, to what extent, if at all, Canada will participate in conflicts in which other members of the commonwealth may be engaged.

There is a general unwillingness of 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 at any place, any time, in circumstances unforeseen, and in disputes over whose origin or whose development they have had little or no control. This difficulty of automatic intervention increases rather than decreases when conflicts tend to become struggles between classes, between economic systems, between social philosophies and, in some instances between religious faiths, as well as between states.

The Canadian House of Commons by unanimous resolution has made the adoption of undertakings to apply either military or economic sanctions subject to the approval of parliament.

What I have said and quoted does not mean that in no circumstances would the Canadian people be prepared to share in action against an aggressor; there have been no absolute commitments either for or against participation in war or other forms of force. It does mean that any decision on the part of Canada to participate in war will have to be taken by the parliament or people of Canada in the light of all existing circumstances; circumstances of the day as they exist in Canada, as well as in the areas involved.

I cannot accept the view which is being urged in some quarters to-day, that regardless of what government or party may be in office, regardless of what its policy may be, regardless of what the issue itself may come to be, this country should say here and now that Canada is prepared to support whatever may be proposed by the government at Westminster.