

## **‘AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING’**

*Speech in the House of Representatives by the Prime Minister of Australia,  
Canberra, on 8 November 1956*

As honourable Members know, the latest reports are that there has been a ‘cease fire’ in Egypt, consequent upon the announcement by the United Nations of an international force for use in the Suez Canal area. But it is still necessary to remind the House and the country of the true quality and consequences of recent events.

The free world has had clearly put to it in the last week or two a question, the answer to which will determine not only the future of the United Nations, but also the future of the world. Israel and Egypt became involved in operations of war. That what Israel did when it invaded Egypt was an act of aggression, few people would be concerned to deny. Yet, as I have previously pointed out in public statements, Israel had become painfully aware of the aggressive attitude of her neighbours and had, quite plainly, made up her mind that something should be done to correct a situation in which Israel’s existence should always be on a precarious tenure. She therefore sent her forces into Egypt. It was clear that if this invasion of Egypt proceeded, and Egypt defended herself, there would before long be a war conducted over and around the Suez Canal. If this local war had occurred in some other part of the world, it might have been isolated and either dealt with by the great nations or allowed to wear itself out. But the Suez Canal, as hundreds of millions of people in the world clearly understand, was and is one of the economic lifelines of the world.

We in Australia realize that the great bulk of our overseas trade, which is vital to our own economic existence, passes through it in one direction or the other. The Western European powers, including Great Britain, depend upon a free and open Suez Canal for the vital industrial ingredient, to wit, oil, of their own industrial life and employment. Under these circumstances, should the two great Suez Canal shipping powers, Great Britain and France, have stood aside and pretended that a war in the Suez Canal zone was no concern of theirs? They would have been bent on economic suicide if they had thought so, or said so, or acted so. What then were they to do? Were they to believe that the United Nations could and would promptly and efficiently deal by deeds? If they had done so, resolutions would have been passed in the General Assembly at any rate, but there is no reason to believe that anything would have happened; no more than there is reason to believe that a vetoed resolution of the United Nations will restrain the Soviet Union from its career of butchery in Hungary.

These two great powers, therefore, concluded that action was necessary if the Suez Canal was to be kept free and open and out of a zone of war. That is why Great Britain and France developed their military activities in the Middle East. They have, I believe, been well justified in the result. It is just because they took strong action that the United Nations itself has been galvanized into action. They made it perfectly clear that their object was and is to separate the belligerents, to get a peaceful settlement of disputes, and to preserve the Canal. If, as a result of this, both Israel and Egypt have declared a ‘cease fire’ and if the United Nations itself is prepared to put in an effective military force to replace the police action of Great Britain and France, we will all very willingly believe that practical action has been taken by the world organization. But at the same time, it must not be forgotten that there will always be the threat of conflict around the Suez Canal if the outstanding issues are not really

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

settled. It must, therefore, not be thought that an international force will have exhausted its function until the outstanding questions between Israel and Egypt have been settled on a basis acceptable by both, and the future of the Suez Canal as an international waterway, insulated from the politics of any one nation, has been assured.

I think I might with propriety quote the words of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom spoken in the House of Commons on Tuesday evening. He said this:

During the night we received from the Secretary-General of the United Nations a communication in which he informed us that both Israel and Egypt had accepted an unconditional cease fire.

He went on to say:

I should like to make one or two comments on the general situation. There have been and no doubt still are bitter differences upon this matter across the House.

I will lay down what I believe has been the result of the action we took with all its admitted attendant risks which I have never concealed. If honourable Members think that that is not a fair comment I should like them to consider whether, when hostilities broke out, any of them thought it possible that the other Arab countries would not have been all of them immediately involved in a war with Israel. I believe – in fact I am convinced – that it was only the knowledge of the presence of our forces which limited the conflict to that area. The fact that fighting has now stopped and that the Israeli acceptance of the ten-mile limit has made it virtually certain as far as it can that the two parties shall not re-engage in conflict is, I should have thought, also an achievement which all of us should reckon to be worth while.

Going on, Sir Anthony Eden said:

Now I come to what is a more controversial but as time passed may perhaps become a more generally accepted statement of one of the results, namely, that the action we took has been an essential condition for the attempted creation – which we hope will be successful of a United Nations force to come into the Canal zone itself. I ask honourable Members to look at the history of the Middle East in the post-war period and ask themselves if anything but this action would have brought the United Nations to take this step. I am absolutely sure it would not. After years of flickering war the stage can now be set – if the United Nations will put forward this force adequate for the task – for negotiations and for a real settlement of the problems of the Middle East.

The concluding paragraph of my citation deals with two matters of outstanding importance. The first is that the United Nations force should be adequate for the task. This is significant. It would be rather a strange circumstance if the properly armed and equipped troops of the United Kingdom and France should be replaced by a force of no military consequence without adequate supply and backing. It should be an effective military force. At present, we in Australia do not know whether it is desired that we should contribute to it. It appears that the introduction of such a force, under United Nations rules, must be with the consent of the nation whose territory is to be entered, and as our Minister in Egypt has just received

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

notification that diplomatic relations with Australia are cut off, it may be that Australia will not be included in a general approval. I do not know. It is probably too soon for anybody to have worked out what its constitution is to be, how it is to be used, and in what particular respects individual nations should take part in it. All I need say at present, on behalf of the Government, is that if the proposal is to constitute a military establishment which will facilitate the making a permanent settlement in the Middle East, Australia will certainly be not unwilling to make such quick practical contribution as it can.

The second point to be emphasized is that Sir Anthony Eden has pointed out the objective of a real settlement of the problems of the Middle East. This is a matter of major importance. If all that happened was that the British and French forces, having cleared the Canal of physical obstructions, withdrew and were replaced by a United Nations force, and the charter of that force was merely to keep the peace for a limited time, leaving all outstanding questions concerning the Canal and the relations between Egypt and Israel unsolved, our people might well ask what was the good of Anglo-French intervention. It is, therefore, essential to emphasize that the conflicts around Israel frontiers and the questions affecting the free passage of the Canal cannot be solved by being either ignored or postponed.

The people of Israel have a perfect right to know that their national integrity will be respected. Half the people of the world have a perfect right to know that a non-political control of the Canal is guaranteed. Peace is not a mere matter of the cessation of hostilities; it can be founded only upon the sensible removal of differences. In the making of peace in the Middle East, co-operation with the United States will be essential. I am sure that, in spite of recent differences, such co-operation will be freely available. It is for reasons like these and for the general reasons which I set out in my statement to the House on 1 November that we have supported the action of the United Kingdom and continue to support it.

Some casual but biased observers have suggested that we have merely 'toed the line'. This is, of course, nonsense. We have not, if I may say so, lacked the capacity for expressing our own views, though we have at all times expressed them as British people. But I would think badly of myself and my colleagues would think badly of themselves, if we remained silent or neutral under circumstances in which the Government of the United Kingdom has been assailed for taking action which we regard as both practical and courageous. I think that already it is being realized more and more that taking a firm course on matters like the Egyptian conflict is not a means of provoking war but of averting it.

I pass to a few other considerations which have been much in our minds in these very troubled days. A good deal of apprehensive talk has occurred about the differences which have been manifested over this Egyptian matter between some of the countries of Europe and some of the countries of Asia. In particular, honourable Members will not have failed to notice that some of our Asian friends have protested strongly against Anglo-French action in Egypt, but have had little or nothing to say about the murderous activities of the Soviet Union in Hungary. These are matters which it is considered wise politics never to mention. But a time comes when this rule should be broken. There could be no greater tragedy in the world than for it to become settled doctrine that the great nations of Asia and the great European and neo-European nations have conflict in interests, and that they must, therefore, accept conflict about them as inevitable. We, in Australia, do not believe that, in world matters, the interests of India must be in conflict with those of Australia or the interests of Asia in conflict with those of Europe. Statesmanship requires that we should all swiftly bring ourselves to an

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

understanding that the world is one, and that ordinary human beings all around the world have similar interests and the same dignified and human ambitions.

Having said this I would like to say to such people in other nations as may be willing to listen, that there are three aspects of the present Middle East crisis which deserve the urgent and earnest consideration of all men. They are:

First, the freedom and integrity and peace of the Suez Canal are of just as much importance to the villager of Pakistan or India as to the ordinary citizen of Australia or the wage-earner of Great Britain or France. The freedom of the Canal, therefore, has a universal quality, the significance of which is not altered by the pigment of the skin or the geographical locality of the Canal users. If we are to settle these problems by lining ourselves up in favour of a European bloc or in favour of an Asian bloc, if actions taken by Egypt are to be regarded in Arab communities as good simply because Egypt is an Arab community, then the world will be committing itself to a dispute to which there can be no end except in bitterness and destruction. In dealing with such a matter, we must try to look objectively at the merits and at the common good of all; we will initiate the suicide of mankind if we substitute bigotry for judgment, or seek to revive racial hatred under the guise of instituting the brotherhood of man.

Second, the significance which we attach to great world events depends essentially upon our sense of proportion. Does anybody in Egypt or in Syria seriously believe that the active intervention of the Soviet Union in the Middle East would be, in the long run, to the benefit of Middle Eastern people? Would Egypt, so proud of having marched from 'colonialism', seriously seek to defend its new freedom by submitting itself to the help and, therefore, in due course, the tyranny of the worst 'colonialism' in modern times? Are the people of southern Asia, who have worked so long and so successfully for democratic self-government, prepared to lend their countenance to a most obvious attempt by totalitarian Communism to divide the free countries so that, being divided, they may all become slaves?

Thirdly, I would have thought that the purpose of the United Nations was not to make great powers impotent and small powers truculent, but to reconcile the strength of great nations with the strength of an international organization; to use great power not for aggression but in support of resistance to tyranny; to build around the great peace-loving powers of the world an area of peace which would ultimately become a dominating area of peaceful strength in the world.

Does anybody suppose that an enfeebled Great Britain or an enfeebled France, or, in some circumstances, an enfeebled United States of America, could give to a world organization the strength which alone can make that organization effective and save it from futility?

These are matters to be thought about and to be acted about. Great Britain and France rightly felt that if the Suez Canal and the vast traffic which passes through it were to be made unavailable, inaccessible, closed by a war between two minor powers, the time had come when it was necessary that there should be some assertion of the rights of the majority of the people of the world. By bitter experience they knew that with a certain veto in the Security Council, the whole pass might be lost. They, therefore, took definite action. I have said, and I repeat on behalf of the Government of this country and, as I believe, on behalf of the majority of the people of this country, that we agree with them. They have said, and said truly, that they have no desire to remain in perpetuity as a military garrison on the Canal.

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

That has in the past been tried and has been abandoned. But they have been immeasurably wise and courageous in taking steps which would not only anticipate but would, in some measure, compel the attention of the United Nations. I have no doubt that they will welcome relief from their task. I believe that the United Kingdom and France have pursued their intervention not for territorial conquest, not for any purpose of domination, but to produce peace where the world needs peace; so that, when the United Nations produces an international body in this area, it will not have to fight its way in but will be in such a shape and in such a position that it may first keep the belligerents apart and then bring them together for a sensible and honest and permanent solution of their differences.

Perhaps the most impudent thing that has occurred of late is the self-righteous attitude adopted by the Soviet Union towards Anglo-French action in Egypt. Many of us had just begun to hope that the anti-Stalin movement in Russia heralded a new period in which the Soviet Union would begin to recognize the self-governing rights of other people, and would accordingly reduce the international tension in the world. This would, of course, have been of great significance if it had happened to be true.

In the modern world, the Soviet Union has made itself a great 'colonial' power though it has never ceased to inveigh against 'colonialism'. How this propaganda on the Soviet side has succeeded is one of the mysteries of life. For example, Great Britain was the great 'colonial' power of the nineteenth century. There is no evidence that her 'colonialism' failed to improve the lot of her 'colonial' people. But in this century, the whole progress of the old British colonial empire has been towards self-government. It has been made clear that 'colonial' peoples were not to be kept in subjugation but that they were to be advanced into self-government as their capacity for self-government was developed. In the result, many countries which were once part of Great Britain's 'colonial' empire have become completely independent self-governing communities. Up to now, the proof is to be seen in Burma, in India, in Pakistan, in Ceylon. Before long there will no doubt be further proof in the cases of Malaya, Singapore, and the Gold Coast countries, while the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland has been advancing rapidly towards a full self-governing status. In brief, the British procedure has been to promote dependent countries into self-government.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union, acting in relation to what we call its satellite countries, of whom the two who are most vividly in the public mind are Poland and Hungary, has pursued a line of policy designed to destroy self-government and to reduce people from independence to 'colonial' subservience.

It therefore comes as a shock to civilized onlookers to find that at the very moment when the Soviet Union has, by brute force and savage rapacity, been crushing the flame of independence in Hungary, with the loss of many thousands of lives, it should have the effrontery to pose as the defender of Egyptian liberty and to issue the wildest threats against the Western Powers.

I feel bound to make one further set of observations. There has been much propaganda over recent days and weeks. For example, it has been repeatedly said from Cairo that the Anglo-French action in Egypt was the result of a pre-arrangement between Great Britain, France, and Israel. This story was always fantastic, and particularly so to anybody familiar with the efforts made by Great Britain to avoid conflict between Jordan and Israel, or Israel and Egypt. But the propaganda has gone on. There must be quite a few scores of millions people today,

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

particularly in Asian countries, who have been persuaded to believe that this allegation is true. For another example, it has been said by some that the action taken by Great Britain and France in delivering an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel and following it up by armed action encouraged the Soviet Union to make an attack upon the people of Hungary. This statement is monstrously untrue.

On Tuesday, 30 October, I made a statement in this House about Hungary, in the course of which I pointed out that the explosion in Hungary was touched off on 23 October by the action of the police in firing into a peaceful demonstration of university students. From that moment, events in Hungary moved rapidly. There was great loss of life and many other casualties. The whole matter became so intolerably acute that the Security Council held an emergency meeting on 28 October; a meeting at which ten members of the Security Council voted for a discussion and investigation of the matter, but were frustrated by the Soviet veto, which was based upon the clearly invalid argument that what had happened in Hungary was a purely domestic affair. It is quite clear that the events in Egypt were subsequent. Indeed, it was suggested in some quarters – which shows how hard it is to be right – that the invasion of Egyptian territory by Israel was designed to take advantage of preoccupations arising from the tragic events in Hungary! All I need to say is that those who are always ready to criticize our friends and to justify our enemies cannot have it both ways. It is to me a melancholy fact that some people, admittedly a small minority of the Australian people, should have so exhausted their vocabularies in denunciation of the action taken by Great Britain and France, an action now proved to have produced good results, that they have left themselves with not enough words to denounce the brutal procedures of the Soviet Union in Hungary.

I have referred to some of these matters with some reluctance, but only because I believe that in these great historic events the record should be kept straight. I have, indeed, another reason for this second exposition of what I believe to be the facts about Egypt. It is this: My colleagues and I believe, and have repeatedly affirmed, that the free future of the world depends primarily upon mutual understanding and co-operative action between the people of the United States and those of the British Commonwealth. This does not mean that either Great Britain or Australia, to take two instances, should simply subscribe to the American opinion of the moment. We have our own pride and independence and responsibilities. But the whole history of this century is so full of friendship between our two peoples, and the whole outlook of the United States has been compounded of such generosity and understanding, that I believe that the more the position adopted by Great Britain on this crisis is understood by our American friends, the more they will come to understand that what has been sought is not war, but the averting of war; not aggression, but the effective settlement of disputes which could, if left to work themselves out, involve all the peace-loving people of the world in the kind of conflict which they all hope honourably to avoid.

There my statement was designed to end with a feeling optimism. But this morning, there has been news on the wireless to the effect that the General Assembly has passed a resolution directing Great Britain and France to withdraw their forces from Egypt forthwith. That appears to have been subsequently officially confirmed. At the moment – that is, when I prepared this statement – we have had no official advice of this decision nor, of course, have we had any opportunity to consult as to its significance. If the report is true – and it is true – its significance is not to be underestimated. But I would prefer to reserve any comment until we have means of knowing what interpretation will be given to the resolution or what the reactions to it of Great Britain and France will be. Even before this announcement, there

**'AFTER THE SUEZ FIGHTING'** *cont'd*

were still great areas of doubt and uncertainty. For example, there are reports that the Government of Israel no longer accepts the Armistice boundaries of some years ago as binding on it. There are statements that the Government of Egypt, which was reported to have accepted a 'cease fire' unconditionally, now seeks to impose conditions on its acceptance. There are later unofficial reports that Egyptian attacks on British and French troops have not ceased.

There is still considerable vagueness about the international force. Will it be called upon to conduct military operations against the Israelis if the Israelis persist in their present attitude, or against the Egyptians should they not honour the 'cease fire' terms? But above all, the question now is whether the allied forces can be seriously expected to leave at a time when the international force does not even exist.

We have just received messages that this problem is recognized in the speeches made in support of the Afro-Asian resolution to which I have just referred. Dr Walker, our distinguished representative at the United Nations, has reported to us that several nations have said that in supporting this resolution they interpret it as meaning that they support a withdrawal of United Kingdom and French forces not immediately, and not so as to leave a vacuum but 'as soon as practicable having regard to the fact that it will take some time for the international force to be established and reach the area'. Some used phrases such as 'as soon as possible'. Declarations along those lines have been made, we are told, by Canada, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran, and also, be it noted, by the United States. We have been told that the substance of Mr Cabot Lodge's statement last night to the Assembly on behalf of the United States was first, that the United States believed that the withdrawal of United Kingdom and French forces should be phased with the introduction of the international force and secondly that these operations should be carried out as soon as possible.