

THE SUEZ CANAL AND THE UNITED NATIONS

*From a speech at the Australia Club Dinner,
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I do not think that retrospective discussion of great events is of much help unless such discussion can illuminate the path for the future. Because I think that in this case it can, I think I ought to say one or two things about the Suez Canal and about the United Nations and its relationship to this great issue, an issue which has divided opinion in so many countries, and which has in the long run altered the balance of power and significance in the whole of the Middle East area.

The first thing I want to say to you is – and this may appear to be a vain remark because I am of no particular importance on this matter – that I am utterly unrepentant about anything that was done or said over this great issue on our side. Having said that, I will examine the matter further. I think it is a very dangerous thing in the world to ignore differences – to pretend that they have not occurred – to be weak in appearing to admit error where you do not feel error. I think in the long run the world will be a happier place and a safer place if all the grown-up nations of the world will talk to each other quite plainly, not saying, ‘Well, I am wrong because you think I am’, but saying, ‘This is why I think I was right.’ In the long run, if we are frank and brotherly and understanding with each other, much good may come.

Peace – and peace has been established in the Middle East in the sense that fighting has ceased – is not a mere matter of the cessation of fighting; there can be no permanent peace in the world unless justice is established as between nations and, therefore, our search always, through whatever instrumentalities we may have, must be a search for justice. The slogan that ought to be painted round the walls of the general Assembly of the United Nations is ‘We stand for justice.’ That is the thing that has to be remembered; that is the kind of thing that I want to talk about, because I believe that over this matter of the Canal the United Nations, through the General Assembly, acted with both haste and injustice. I know that everybody does not agree with that, but I think it might be perhaps useful, even on a happy occasion like this, if I said why I think so.

One must remember that a great change has come over the United Nations. When the Charter was established in 1945, when the splendid words of the Charter were written, when it all began, the whole idea was that the Security Council, its permanent seats occupied by the great powers of the world, would be in effect the Executive Body, and the great powers would keep the world’s peace. Sir, it is still true that if the world’s peace is to be kept, it will be kept by the great powers and by no other. The world’s peace will not be kept by resolutions; it will not be kept by the ardent views of smaller countries; it will be kept if the great powers want it to be kept; it will be destroyed if the great powers fall into conflict with one another. That remains, as I would say in my own phrase, one of the facts of life, and that was the idea in 1945. But of late the balance has moved; the emphasis has moved from the Council to the Assembly, under the ‘Uniting for Peace’ resolution in 1951. Frustrated by the veto in the Council, the nations said: ‘All right, let the Assembly discuss and make recommendations upon these matters.’ The Assembly contains eighty-one representatives of eighty-one countries; and it was the Assembly which passed all the relevant resolutions pursuant to which Great Britain and France withdrew their forces from Egypt. So the Assembly, rightly or wrongly, legally or illegally, I do not know, has become the centre of the world’s interests;

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it has achieved a new significance, and, therefore, I would like to say something about how the Assembly dealt with the Suez Canal issue.

It dealt with it, of course, in a vast hurry. It said, 'This requires haste, this is an urgent matter.' The haste was so great that back in my own country, though I had had some small part in the matter, I hardly remember reading the terms of a resolution in the Assembly until after I had read the division lists. An odd thing it was to learn in my own country about what the motion was or the amendment was only after it was all over. Indeed somebody said to me the other day (somebody very knowledgeable – I do not vouch for this – I could not be sure on this) that there have been one or two occasions when the Assembly have voted first, and debated the amendment afterwards! And that may well be true, because all I know is that they do not always appear to realize in New York that the clock is different. The earth goes round the sun – I am sure I am right in saying that. And because the earth goes round the sun, when some profound fellow in New York is writing out the second draft of an amendment, I, I am happy to say, am sleeping the sleep of the just at six o'clock in the morning in Canberra and the celebrated statesmen in this country are sleeping the sleep of the just, or the unjust, at some other hour. But the Suez procedure was all done in a hurry, and because it was done in a hurry there were some things that I believe were never adequately put, or adequately understood and I am enough of a lawyer to know that unless the case is fully argued, the judgment may turn out to be wrong. Let the case be fully argued.

Now why do I say that? Well, take one example; I am sure that in the General Assembly, as in one or two great organs of public opinion in this country, it was taken for granted that if Colonel Nasser wanted to nationalize the Canal, he has as much right to do so as my friend Lord Atlee in his day would have to nationalize an industry in Great Britain. The two things were utterly different.*

* I then restated the arguments about the validity of nationalization set out in earlier speeches.

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When I remember all those things – and I have had the opportunity in my time of explaining them to Colonel Nasser – I am staggered at the people who begin their whole argument on this matter, as the General Assembly did, by taking it for granted that whatever the Egyptian Government did on that was quite lawful, and was no breach of International Law. Well, I do not confess to be the world's greatest authority on International Law, but if those things are not a breach of International Law, then there is no International Law, and we might as well give up talking about it.

Now why do I recite these things? Why do I bring your minds back to them? I do so for this very reason, that when the General Assembly, hastily convened, discussed these matters, it discussed them on the footing that this was a lawful act, and, therefore, of course, that what Great Britain did, and what France did, must be unlawful. Those nations were treated as challenging, and, indeed, in the long run challenging by arms, an act which had all the purity of an unchallengeable act, so that if it was legal, they were illegal. That is the whole footing on which this matter was considered, and that has given me a very great deal of trouble. Not that we can go back and replough the ground, reargue the case, secure different decisions, because, in the long run, Great Britain and France, great law-abiding countries, having received the views of the General Assembly, went out; and the Israelis, who had pursued the somewhat speedy Egyptians when they crossed the frontier, had gone back. Then people say,

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‘Very well, it is all over.’ But it is not all over. I am not advocating some new military developments, but I do say this to you, gentlemen, that if the General Assembly of the United Nations is to assume and exercise this moral and political authority in the world – these eighty-one nations – then the time is more than overdue for introducing procedures into that body which will enable both sides to be effectively heard at the right time.

Many of you here tonight have, like myself, felt a bitter resentment over some of these incidents, and have said, ‘Well, what is the use of the United Nations?’ I have given this a great deal of thought myself. I do not think that it is good or wise that we should allow resentments to drive us into an attitude in which we would leave the United Nations physically, or depart from it in either mental or spiritual terms. I do not think that it is right. I think that we must try to make this second great experiment work. But if it is to work, then there are two observations to be made about the General Assembly with its new powers, its new authority, its new prestige, which must be considered by everybody. First of all, we are told, and repeatedly told, that the General Assembly is the ‘Parliament of the World’. Now, I am an old parliamentary ‘sweat’ myself, and I do not see many of the earmarks of the democratic Parliament in the Assembly. There are eighty-one nations, each with one vote. A highly developed and advanced country like the United States, with 170 million people, one vote; and some country, perhaps not very advanced, perhaps very backward, with a quarter of a million people, one vote. We have some democracies fully developed; we have some aspiring democracies (and how much this country has done to encourage them and to develop them); and we have on the other hand some dictatorships; we have the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc, the satellites. Here is indeed an odd gallery of nations, but each one with one vote. I do not suppose that is very easily altered, but I find it hard to call the Assembly a ‘Parliament’ under those circumstances. However, if it cannot be altered, at least I would like to say this to a lot of the new nations whose proper pride it is to be admitted to the United Nations: ‘Please understand that you will have power in the Assembly; you will be able to vote in the Assembly; but the people with the great responsibilities for peace are four or five or six great nations in the world. Now do not drive them too hard by the power of the vote. Always remember that though you have some power, your responsibility is small; you must respect and treat with objectivity the arguments of the great nations who, when it comes to the point, will accept and carry the great responsibility for world peace.’

Now that is my first point about the General Assembly. The second is this: I think it is intolerable that an Assembly meeting in New York should be able at five hours’ notice to vote on something when my Government cannot consider it, and perhaps your Government cannot consider it, and most of the countries around the world cannot consider it. If this is to be Parliament, then let it have parliamentary procedure; let there be notice given of meetings; let there be notice given of motions; let there be adequate debate; let there be time for everybody to cast an informed vote, and to precede it, if necessary by an informed speech. That is the very essence, and unless it is done, we will have in the General Assembly snap votes, snap motions; we will have people of prudence, in a hurry, and, in the long run, there will be a serious risk that the great nations, who are the custodians of the peace, will say, ‘We cannot have this – we will withdraw.’ And, if they withdraw, the whole structure falls to the ground. So let us have no mere grouping for catch-votes to get majorities, or to frustrate majorities.

Let us have a clear understanding as to where the responsibility for peace lies in the world. I am the Prime Minister of a small country, and I am perfectly willing to offer my views, and sometimes I fall into the habit of doing so, on matters in the world. We are a mere blind

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beneficiary – we are proud to say in Australia that on all great occasions we have been on the list of contributors to the safety of the world. As you know, gentlemen, if there were a great conflict in the world, this ancient home of our race would be the first to take the blow. This is a great nation. In spite of the pessimists, it remains one of the great nations of the world, and I still think the greatest moral leader in the world. The responsibilities that you will take, the danger that you will submit yourselves to, far exceeds the responsibility or the danger of any small country on the periphery of the world's events. The same is true of France, with all her troubles. The same is true of the United States of America. You go around the world and you find that these great nations, the historic homes of the things that we defend, have the responsibility; and small nations and new nations must be careful not to be so taken up with the power of the vote as to forget that in the long run the responsibility will be to a major extent in other hands.

If then, this is to develop into the 'Parliament of the World', as countries become more and more democratic, then let us have the procedures of Parliament. Those who are not in Parliament occasionally make rude remarks about Parliament; they say, 'What a lot of gasbags they are; what is all this waste of time; what is all this nonsense about second readings and going into committee?' But there is nobody here who has ever practised or understood the art of parliamentary government, who does not know that time lost is in the long run time gained. There has been a debate; there has been a chance for the people in the electorates to speak their minds. In the long run the decision has more chance of being just, and, Sir, unless that becomes understood all round the world, unless it is realized that questions of procedure, like some other technical matters, may alter the whole history of a country or of an institution, we may find that as power passes to the Assembly, the Assembly is not capable of exercising that power as it should; that it has become the scene of wrangling factions; that it has created division instead of unity. If that happens, the result may not be merely that the United Nations becomes futile, it may even be that it becomes dangerous.

Now the last thing I want to say to you is this. There are some people in some countries in the world who appear to think that to take a matter to the United Nations is in itself an act of policy – 'Our policy is to take this to the United Nations.' There would be no greater blunder. There have been symptoms of this blunder even among some of our traditional friends. It is not a policy to take a matter to the United Nations – it is just as if you signed an application for this thing to be referred to the United Nations, and at the same time you said: 'Well, I am in debt – I.O.U. – thank God that's paid.' It does not happen that way. My conclusion, much contrary to what I have said in my anger a few months ago, is that the great and significant powers in the world must treat the United Nations more seriously; they must say, 'It is not a policy to go there, but it is a good procedure to go there with a policy.' And the policy must be hammered out. Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, whoever it may be, must thrash out in advance its own or their own policy. This is the right thing to do, if we realize that in the General Assembly we can present a policy; can advocate a policy by public and private argument; can persuade other people that it is the right policy. If that is done, great good sense may yet come to the world. But if every significant power in the world says, 'Well, we have no policy, but we are going to the disembodied spirit of the United Nations' (as if it has some mysterious existence of its own), and says to it, 'Show us a miracle', then nothing will happen. We must go to it with a policy; fight for it; persuade people; make people understand where responsibility falls in the world and where power lies. And we can do all that only on the basis of a procedural system in which every nation may be heard before it is judged.