

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HC Deb 24 May 1944 vol 400 cc762-829762

§Motion made, and Question proposed, That a further sum, not exceeding, £40, be granted to His Majesty, towards defraying the charges for the following services relating to Foreign Affairs and the foreign policy of this country and the Dominions, for the year ending on the 31st day of March, 1945:

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|---------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Class I., Vote 4, Treasury and Sub-ordinate Departments | £10 |
| Class II., Vote 1, Foreign Office | £10 |
| Class II., Vote 3, League of Nations | £10 |
| Class II., Vote 4, Dominions Office | £10 |
| | £40" |

§The Prime Minister (Mr. Churchill)

I hope the Committee will permit me to enter a plea for the modest request made from the Chair. The meeting of Dominion Prime Ministers, which covered the best part of three weeks, has now concluded, and very full statements to Parliament and the public have been made, individually by the Prime Ministers themselves, and collectively by the declaration to which we have all subscribed. I could not pretend that we have arrived at hard and fast conclusions, or precise decisions upon all the questions which torment this afflicted globe, but it can fairly be said that, having discussed a great many of them, there was revealed a core of agreement which will enable the British Empire and Commonwealth to meet in discussion with other great organisms in the world in a firmly-knit array. We have advanced from vague763generalities to more precise points of agreement, and we are in a position to carry on discussions with other countries, within the limits which we have imposed upon ourselves.

But this is a Debate upon foreign affairs, and nothing was more remarkable than the cordial agreement which was expressed by every one of the Dominion Prime Ministers on the general conduct of our foreign affairs and on the principles which govern that conduct, nor, I should add, on the skill and consistency with which they have been treated by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. The utmost confidence was expressed in him and in his handling of all those very difficult affairs, in spite of the complications by which they are surrounded, and in spite of the need for prompt action which so often arises—for prompt action by the Mother Country before there is time to have full consultation. In spite of all these difficulties, the fullest confidence and pleasure were expressed in the work which my right hon. Friend has done. We therefore embark upon the present Debate with the backing of their good will from all these representatives of the Commonwealth and Empire—the word "Empire" is permitted to be used, which may be a great shock to certain strains of intellectual opinion. And we embark upon the present Debate not only with this backing of hearty good will, but with the feeling that this meeting of Prime Ministers from all over the Empire and the representatives

of India in the midst of a second deadly war is in fact the highest pinnacle to which our world-wide family association has yet reached.

At this time, in policy and in war, our objective is the same, namely, to beat the enemy as soon as possible; and I am not aware of any action or of any studied inaction for which His Majesty's Government are responsible that has not been directly related to that single and dominant purpose. The duty of all persons responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs in a world war of this deadly character and of all who, in different ways, exercise influence is to help the fighting men to perform the heavy tasks entrusted to them and to ensure them all possible ease in execution and advantage in victory. Everyone in a position to guide public opinion, like Members of this House [764](#) or of another place, or newspaper editors, broadcasters, calumnists, or columnists—I remember a tendency to throw the accent forward—and others—all of these should keep this very clear duty before their eyes. They should always think of the soldier in the battle and ask themselves whether what they say or write will make his task easier or harder. We long for the day to come when this slaughter will be over and then this additional restraint which imposes itself on every conscientious man in war-time can be relaxed or will vanish away entirely.

I must make my acknowledgments, first of all, to the very great degree with which these precepts are followed among those who accept the task of guiding public opinion, and especially in the House of Commons, which is always so careful of the public interest and which in other ways has shown itself to be possessed of those steadfast and unyielding qualities in the face of danger and fatigue for which it has always been renowned, but never more renowned than now. I shall try to practise what I have been preaching in the remarks I have to make, and I am sure the Committee will remember how many different audiences I have to address at the same moment, not only here but out of doors and not only in this Island, but throughout the Empire, not only among our Allies, great and small, West or East, but finally, among our enemies, besides, of course, satellites and neutrals of various hues. I must, therefore, pick my way among heated ploughshares, and in this ordeal the only guides are singleness and simplicity of purpose and a good or, at any rate, a well trained conscience.

Since I last spoke here on foreign affairs, just about three months ago, almost all the purposes which I mentioned to you have prospered, severally and collectively, First of all, let us survey the Mediterranean and the Balkan spheres. The great disappointment which I had last October, when I was not able to procure the necessary forces for gaining the command of the Aegean Sea, following upon the collapse of Italy, and gaining possession of the principal Italian islands, has, of course, been accompanied by an exaggerated attitude of caution on the part of Turkey. The hopes we cherished of Turkey boldly entering the war in February or March, or at least according us the necessary bases for air [765](#) action—those hopes faded. After giving £20,000,000 worth of British and American arms to Turkey in 1943 alone, we have suspended the process and ceased to exhort Turkey to range herself with the victorious United Powers, with whom she has frequently declared that her sympathies lie, and with whom, I think, there

is no doubt that her sympathies do lie. The Turks at the end of last year and the beginning of this year magnified their dangers. Their military men took the gloomiest view of Russian prospects in South Russia and in the Crimea. They never dreamed that by the early summer the Red Army would be on the slopes of the Carpathians, drawn up along the Pruth and Serreth Rivers, or that Odessa and Sevastopol would have been liberated and regained by the extraordinary valour, might and energy of the Soviet onslaught. Consequently the Turks did not measure with sufficient accuracy what might have occurred, or would occur, in Rumania and Bulgaria or, I may add, Hungary, what would be the result on all those countries of these tremendous Russian hammer blows, struck even in months which are particularly unsuitable for operations in these regions and which normally would be devoted to the process of replenishing the advancing front for future action. Having over-rated their dangers, our Turkish friends increased their demands for supplies to such a point that, having regard to the means of communication and transport alone, the war would probably be over before these supplies could reach them.

We have, therefore, with great regret, discontinued the process of arming Turkey because it looks probable that, in spite of our disappointment in the Aegean, the great Allies will be able to win the war in the Balkans and generally throughout South Eastern Europe without Turkey being involved now at all, though, of course, the aid of Turkey would be a great help and acceleration of that process. This, of course, is a decision for Turkey to take. We have put no pressure upon them, other than the pressure of argument and of not giving the supplies we need for ourselves and other nations that are fighting. But the course which is being taken, and has been taken so far, by Turkey will not, in my view, procure for the Turks the strong position at the peace which would attend their joining the Allies.

766I must, however, note the good service and significant gesture rendered to us by the Turkish Government quite recently, and it is said that it has been rendered to us on the personal initiative of Turkey's honoured President, General Inonu, namely, the complete cessation of all chrome exports to Germany. It is not too much to expect that the assistance given us in respect of chrome will also shortly be extended to cover other commodities, the export of which, even if of less importance than chrome, is of material assistance to the enemy. If so, we shall endeavour to compensate the Turkish people for the sacrifice which their co-operative action might entail by other means of importation.

I thought it right to speak bluntly. Turkey and Britain have a long history. They entered into relations with us before the war when things looked very black. They did their best through difficult times. I have thought it better to put things bluntly to-day, but I cannot conclude, notwithstanding anything I have said in criticism, without saying that we hope with increasing confidence that a still better day will dawn for the relations of Turkey with Britain and, indeed, with all the great Allies. Always in recent decades there has been in the Mediterranean a certain tension between Turkey and Italy on account of Italian ambitions in the Greek Islands and, also, possibly in the Adana Province of Turkey. The Turks could never be sure which way

the Italian dictator would turn his would-be conquering sword. On that score Turkish anxiety has certainly been largely removed.

The fate of Italy is indeed terrible, and I personally find it very difficult to nourish animosity against the Italian people. The overwhelming mass of the nation rejoiced in the idea of being delivered from the subtle tyranny of the Fascists, and they wished, when Mussolini was overthrown, to take their place as speedily as possible by the side of the British and American Armies who, it was expected, would quickly rid the country of the Germans. However, this did not happen. All the Italian forces which could have defended Italy had either been squandered by Mussolini in the African desert or by Hitler amid the Russian snows, or they were widely dispersed. In a half-hearted way, the patriots of Yugoslavia Hitler decided to make great exertions to retain Italy, just as he has decided to make great exertions to gain the mighty battle which is at the moment at its climax to the South of Rome. It may be that after the fall of Mussolini our action might have been more swift and audacious. As I have said before, it is no part of my submission to the House that no mistakes are made by us or by the common action of our Allies; but, anyhow, here is this beautiful country suffering the worst horrors of war, with the larger part still in the cruel and vengeful grip of the Nazis, and with a hideous prospect of the red-hot rake of the battle-line being drawn from sea to sea right up the whole length of the peninsula.

It is clear that the Germans will be driven out of Italy by the Allies, but what will happen on the moving battle fronts and what the Germans will do on their way out in the way of destruction to a people they hate and despise, and who, they allege, have betrayed them, cannot be imagined or forecast. All I can say is that we shall do our utmost to make the ordeal as short and as little destructive as possible. We have great hopes that the city of Rome may be preserved from the area of struggle of our Armies. The House will recall that when I last spoke on foreign matters I expressed the view that it would be best that King Victor Emmanuel, and above all Marshal Badoglio, should remain at the head of the Executive of the Italian nation and armed forces until we reached Rome, when it was agreed by all that a general review of the position must be made.

Such a policy naturally entailed differences of opinion which were reflected not only among the Allied Governments but inside every Allied country. However, I am happy to say that after various unexpected happenings and many twists and turns the situation is now exactly what I ventured to suggest and as I described it to the House three months ago. In addition, far beyond my hopes, an Italian Government has been formed, of a broadly based character, around the King and Badoglio, and the King himself has decided that on the capture of Rome he will retire into private life forever and transfer his constitutional functions to his eldest son, the Prince of Piedmont, with the title of Lieutenant of the Realm.

I have good confidence in this new Italian Government which has been formed. It will require further strengthening and broadening, especially as we come more closely into touch

with the populous industrial areas of the North—that is essential—but, at any rate, it is facing its responsibilities manfully and doing all in its power to aid the Allies in their advance. Here I may say we are doing our best to equip the Italian force who are eager to fight with us and not in the power of the Germans. They have played their part in the line on more than one occasion. Their fleet is discharging a most useful and important service for us not only in the Mediterranean but in the Atlantic; and the loyal Italian Air Force has also fought so well that I am making special efforts to supply them with improved aircraft of British manufacture. We are also doing our best to assist the Italian Government to grapple with the difficult financial and economic conditions which they inherited from Fascism and the war and which, though improving, are still severe behind the lines of the Army. It is understood throughout Italy, and it is the firm intention of the United Nations, that Italy, like all other countries which are now associated with us, shall have a fair and free opportunity, as soon as the Germans are driven out and tranquillity is restored, of deciding whatever form of democratic government, whether monarchical or republican, they desire. They can choose freely for themselves. I emphasise, however, the word "democratic," because it is quite clear that we should not allow any form of Fascism to be restored or set up in any country with whom we have been at war.

From Italy one turns naturally to Spain, once the most famous Empire in the world and down to this day a strong community in a wide land, with a marked personality and distinguished culture among the nations of Europe. Some people think that our foreign policy towards Spain is best expressed by drawing comical or even rude caricatures of General Franco; but I think there is more to it than that. When our present Ambassador to Spain, the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Chelsea (Sir S. Hoare), went to Madrid almost exactly four years ago to a month, we arranged to keep his airplane waiting on the airfield, as it seemed almost certain that Spain, whose dominant party were under the influence of Germany because German many had helped them so vigorously in the recently-ended civil war, would follow the example of Italy and join the victorious Germans in the war against Great Britain. Indeed, at this time the Germans proposed to the Spanish Government that triumphal marches of German troops should be held in the principal Spanish cities, and I have no doubt that they suggested to them that the Germans would undertake, in return for the virtual occupation of their country, the seizure of Gibraltar, which would then be handed back to a Germanised Spain. This last feature would have been easier said than done.

There is no doubt that if Spain had yielded to German blandishments and pressure at that juncture our burden would have been much heavier. The Straits of Gibraltar would have been closed and all access to Malta would have been cut off from the West. All the Spanish coast would have become the nesting place of German U-boats. I certainly did not feel at the time that I should like to see any of those things happen and none of them did happen. Our Ambassador deserves credit for the influence he rapidly acquired and which continually grew. In his work he was assisted by a gifted man, Mr. Yencken, whose sudden death by airplane accident is a loss which I am sure has been noted by the House. But the main credit is undoubtedly due to the Spanish resolve to keep out of the war. They had had enough of war

and they wished to keep out of it. [An HON. MEMBER: "That is a matter of opinion."] Yes, I think so, and that is why my main principle of beating the enemy as soon as possible should be steadily followed. But they had had enough, and I think some of the sentiment may have been due to the fact that, looking back, the Spanish people, who are a people who do look back, could remember that Britain had helped Spain to free herself from the Napoleonic tyranny of 130 years ago. At any rate the critical moment passed; the Battle of Britain was won; the Island Power which was expected to be ruined and subjugated in a few months was seen that very winter not only intact and far stronger in the homeland but also advancing by giant strides, under Wavell's guidance, along the African shore, taking perhaps a quarter of a million Italian prisoners on the way.

770But another very serious crisis occurred in our relations with Spain before the operation designated "Torch," that is to say, the descent of the United States and British Forces upon North-West Africa, was begun. Before that operation was begun Spain's power to injure us was at its very highest. For a long time before this we had been steadily extending our airfield at Gibraltar and building it out into the sea, and for a month before zero hour, on 7th November, 1942, we had sometimes 600 airplanes crowded on this airfield in full range and in full view of the Spanish batteries. It was very difficult for the Spaniards to believe that these airplanes were intended to reinforce Malta, and I can assure the House that the passage of those critical days was very anxious indeed. However, the Spaniards continued absolutely friendly and tranquil. They asked no questions, they raised no inconveniences.

If, in some directions, they have taken an indulgent view of German U-boats in distress, or continued active exportations to Germany, they made amends on this occasion, in my view, so far as our advantage was concerned, for these irregularities by completely ignoring the situation at Gibraltar, where, apart from aircraft, enormous numbers of ships were anchored far outside the neutral waters, inside the Bay of Algeciras, always under the command of Spanish shore guns. We should have suffered the greatest inconvenience if we had been ordered to move those ships. Indeed, I do not know how the vast convoys would have been marshalled and assembled. I must say that I shall always consider a service was rendered at this time by Spain, not only to the United Kingdom and to the British Empire and Commonwealth, but to the cause of the United Nations.

I have, therefore, no sympathy with those who think it clever, and even funny, to insult and abuse the Government of Spain whenever occasion serves. I have had the responsibility of guiding the Government while we have passed through mortal perils, and, therefore, I think I have some means of forming a correct judgment about the values of events at critical moments as they occur. I am very glad now that, after prolonged negotiations, a still better arrangement has been made with Spain, which deals in a satisfactory manner with the Italian ships which have taken refuge in Spanish771harbours, and has led to the hauling down of the German flag in Tangier and the breaking of the shield over the Consulate, and which will, in a few days, be followed by the complete departure of the German representatives from Tangier,

although they still remain in Dublin. Finally, it has led to the agreement about Spanish wolfram, which has been reached without any affront to Spanish dignity, and has reduced the export of wolfram from Spain to Germany during the coming critical months to a few lorry-loads a month.

It is true that this agreement has been helped by the continuous victories of the Allies in many parts of the world, and especially in North Africa and Italy, and also by the immense threat by which the Germans conceive themselves to be menaced, by all this talk of an invasion across the Channel. This, for what it is worth, has made it quite impossible for Hitler to consider reprisals on Spain. All his troops have had to be moved away from the frontier, and he has no inclination to face bitter guerilla warfare, because he has got quite enough to satisfy himself in so many other countries which he is holding down by brute force.

As I am here to-day speaking kindly words about Spain, let me add that I hope she will be a strong influence for the peace of the Mediterranean after the war. Internal political problems in Spain are a matter for the Spaniards themselves. It is not for us—that is, the Government—to meddle in such affairs—

§Mr. Shinwell (Seaham)

Why then in Italy? My right hon. Friend did remark, as regards the restoration of the Government in Italy, that it could not be Fascist. That was his declaration. Why not in Spain?

§The Prime Minister

The reason is that Italy attacked us. We were at war with Italy. We struck Italy down. My hon. Friend, I am sure, will see that a very clear line of distinction can be drawn between nations we go to war with, and nations who leave us alone.

§Dr. Haden Guest (Islington, North)

Is not a Fascist Government anywhere, a preparation for an attack?

§The Prime Minister

I presume we do not include in our programme of world renovation any forcible action against any Government whose internal form of administration does not come up to our own ideas, and any remarks I have made on that subject referred only to enemy Powers and their satellites who will have been struck down by force of arms. They are the ones who have ventured into the open and they are the ones whom we shall not allow to become, again, the expression of those peculiar doctrines associated with Fascism and Nazism, which have, undoubtedly, brought about the terrible struggle in which we are engaged. Surely, anyone could see the difference between the one and the other. There is all the difference in the

world between a man who knocks you down and a man who leaves you alone. You may, conceivably, take an active interest in what happens to the former in case his inclination should recur, but we pass many people in the ordinary daily round of life about whose internal affairs and private quarrels we do not feel ourselves called upon to make continued inquiry.

Well, I say we speak the same words to the Spaniards in the hour of our strength as we did in the hour of our weakness. I look forward to increasingly good relations with Spain and to an extremely fertile trade between Spain and this country which will, I trust, grow even during the war and will expand after the peace. The iron from Bilbao and the North of Spain is of great value to this country both in war and peace. Our Ambassador now goes back to Spain for further important duties, and I have no doubt he goes with the good wishes of the large majority of the House and of all thoughtful and unprejudiced persons. I am sure that no one more than my hon. Friend opposite would wish that he should be successful in any work for the common cause. My hon. Friend has been often a vigilant and severe critic of His Majesty's Government, but as a real Opposition figure he has failed, because he never can conceal his satisfaction when we win—and we sometimes do.

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