

WHY THE DOMINIONS ARE FIGHTING

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MANY people believed a short time ago that the British Dominions would never participate in another European war. Some inhabitants of the Dominions believed the same. These countries had now grown old enough to think for themselves, and most of their thought about war and its consequences was definite and unequivocal. Why should they be involved in the Old World's perennial folly? And they were now quite free to make up their own minds.

Therefore the immediate reaction of all the Dominions to the present conflict was contrary to some expectations, if heartening to all hopes. At once the Dominions offered full support to Great Britain and her allies. They proceeded to translate the offer into terms of direct military and economic assistance, and to-day the British Commonwealth is more united than it has been since its foundation.

What is the explanation of this remarkable phenomenon? A brief survey of salient events in the recent history of the Dominions may lead to an answer.

In 1914 the Dominions had already attained nominal independence, but were actually dependent upon Great Britain for the conduct of foreign policy. They had evolved fairly comfortably behind the broad back of the Mother Country, and had so far found it neither necessary nor convenient to develop international minds of their own. But the first German War hastened their growth. By their efforts in the field and elsewhere, the Dominions soon earned a responsible place in the Imperial council-chamber. It was just and proper that afterwards they should assist in reconstruction, and when the League of Nations was formed, they became independent members, quite apart from the British representation. That war finally broke the Imperial egg-shell, and the chicks were out.

In post-war years the Dominions gradually evolved international policies, each according to individual circumstances. Thus it was natural that Canada, with a mixed population and the powerful United States for neighbour, should consider now that she had played her part in European power politics

once and for all. This Dominion made first employment of her new influence to advise Britain against continuation of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty. Thereafter she concentrated upon improving her economic relations with the world, and did not speak again until the formulation of the *Statute of Westminster* which she approved. In the early thirties responsible Canadians increasingly favoured a policy of isolation. A Liberal Government came to power, practically pledged to a sort of "anti-Imperialism". And a few years later the leader of this Government was stating publicly that if Britain were involved in war, Canada would be at her side! It was the consciousness, to quote Mr. Mackenzie King, that "the only way to overcome force is by force", which convinced Canada that she "must be strong and prepared to play her part in the defence of liberty and freedom". Then came the Nazi invasion of Poland, the British declaration of war, and Canada an immediate ally.

The case of South Africa is still more remarkable. After the first German War this Dominion concluded an agreement with Britain to ensure that the Royal Navy would continue to protect her protracted coastline and tenuous trade-routes; but Nationalist sentiment seemed to increase steadily in post-war years, and was reinforced dangerously by definite pro-German influences, often in the Union Cabinet itself. Even the Nazi aggressions of 1938 and 1939, subversive Nazi activities in South-West Africa, and the strengthening of a potentially hostile Power in the North did not sway General Hertzog and his followers from their intransigent attitude. It was confidently expected by most observers that South Africa would remain neutral in a war, and that the loyalist influences in the Union would be unable to secure power. But within a few days of the outbreak of war, the power of General Hertzog and his strong party was broken. General Smuts and other ex-rebels against Britain gallantly led South Africa to war at her side.

Admittedly Australia and New Zealand rarely spoke officially of isolation during those interregnum years. Officially they both doubted the wisdom of the *Statute of Westminster*, and even said so. But neither of these Dominions gave blind, unswerving support to British policy; they often expressed their dissent. The very strong body of Labour opinion in Australia consistently urged that Australia should not again be involved in "Imperialist wars". New Zealand elected a Labour Government that voted against Britain at Geneva and loudly proclaimed pacifism. A large number of intelligent people in

both countries thought it neither probable nor desirable that expeditionary forces be sent overseas again.

Until Munich!

There is no doubt that the *volte face* in the Dominions dates from the Nazi threat of September, 1938, even if it did not reach full circle until March, 1939. From Munich onwards the yeast of public opinion in the Dominions began to work violently. Always clear-eyed when presented with facts, inhabitants of the Dominions began to realise that civilisation itself was threatened by these new forces of foreign evil. The subsequent Nazi invasion of Czecho-Slovakia and Italian conquest of Albania finally fixed this realisation in overseas minds.

Consequently Hitler's August demands on Poland met with only one reception in the Dominions. All considerations of isolation were swept finally from indignant, determined minds. And no mere national pride or imperialistic vain-glory inspired this united stand. The British Commonwealth arose, not in patriotic enthusiasm for a war against Germany, but in plain rebellion against the very idea of war.

I may be derided for this claim. I have myself said in the past that the Dominions "could not afford" to remain outside a British war. I still hold that opinion. But I do firmly believe that the Dominions have not come in for selfish reasons alone at the present juncture. There is something more in it than that, something more than ordinary Imperial patriotism or economic necessity.

Let me return for one moment to Mr. Mackenzie King and those other Dominion statesmen as they spoke in the hour of decision. Mr. King said that Canada "must be prepared to play her part in the defence of liberty and freedom". Now this was a very remarkable statement from the lips of a man who had proclaimed only a year before: "We are unlikely of our own motion to take part in wars of conquest or wars of crusade." But later Mr. King gave a still more definite indication. In a special appeal for peace to Hitler, Mussolini and the President of Poland, he took pains to state "the belief of Canadians that there was no international problem which could not be solved by negotiation". And they believed equally that "force is not a substitute for reason, and the appeal to force as a means of adjusting international differences defeats rather than furthers the ends of justice".

In South Africa the first official reactions were a number of statements by prominent pro-British members of the Cabinet,

to the effect that South Africa "could not afford" to remain neutral in a war. Parliament was then recalled, and the Prime Minister, General Hertzog, read a declaration of policy that South Africa's relations with the various belligerent countries should "persist unchanged and continue as if no war was being waged".

But General Smuts immediately challenged this attitude, called for a division, and defeated the Prime Minister by 80 votes to 67, thereafter forming a Cabinet pledged to sever relations with Germany and continue full co-operation with the British Commonwealth. During the debate General Smuts stated his reasons for forcing the issue. General Hertzog had said that Danzig was "a Polish affair with which South Africa has nothing to do". But he, General Smuts, was profoundly convinced that although Danzig and the Corridor were the immediate occasion of war, the real issue went far beyond Danzig and Poland, and touched South Africa. This Dominion, under his guidance, would "adopt the clear line recognised by international law, sever relations with Germany, and look upon her as an enemy".

The attitude of Australia and New Zealand does not require such careful analysis. Australia declared her support of Britain from the first. The Prime Minister, Mr. R. G. Menzies, stated on August 23: "If Britain's great peace efforts fail, we will stand by her side. It is committing a cardinal error if any other country assumes that there is any lack of unity among the British peoples. In these matters Australia stands where she stood 25 years ago." Afterwards, however, Mr. Menzies took care to enunciate the principle that had inspired this declaration. He said that the "great cause" to which Britain had attached herself was "the peaceful settlement of differences". Subsequently the Labour Party offered the Government its full support of this attitude. In fact, the only condition put forward, to quote one commentator, was "that there must be no second Munich, and that the present crisis must at all costs end crises".

New Zealand stated at the outset of the emergency that she would "stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain", whatever might ensue. A further message was sent to London on the declaration of war: "H. M. Government in New Zealand desire immediately to associate themselves with H. M. Government in the United Kingdom in honouring their pledged word. They entirely concur with the action taken, which they regard

as inevitably forced upon the British Commonwealth, if the cause of justice, freedom and democracy is to endure in this world."

I take that last sentence as my text, the underlying sentiment of the Dominions to-day. I know we are in the habit of overlooking conventionally phrased sentiments of that kind. They have fallen glibly from hypocritical lips in the past, and will do so again. But there is no getting away from the fact that a short time ago the Dominions were firmly resolved not only "to keep out of it if we can", but also to keep public opinion clearly informed of international manoeuvres and accordingly impervious to "the enthusiasm which is near hysteria". Politicians in the Dominions have increasingly aimed at local self-sufficiency. With the League of Nations, it was said, the last British Empire died.

My point is that Nazi aggression has summarily forced the Dominions to lay all purely national considerations aside. The new situation created is a world and not merely an Empire situation. The Dominions are certainly standing by Britain because they don't want her to be defeated and themselves exposed. But they would never have accorded their support so readily if Britain had not been forced into the war against her will, to prevent a predatory Power from swallowing any more victims. Thus they have been inspired by an ideal, the only explanation of their immediate, and, to some people, surprising unity.

Perhaps I have over-laboured this point. But I don't think so. It is necessary to establish at the outset what we are fighting for, lest we may forget again.

And we may well be heartened by the attitude of these Dominions, for their support is worth far more to-day than it was in 1914. Since then the populations of the Dominions have increased largely, and overseas industrial resources are vastly greater. Should Birmingham and Coventry be reduced to ruins, Canada and Australia could shortly fill the gap in war materials. It has been estimated that an initial mobilisation of half a million men may be effected in the Dominions. Their fighting qualities will, nevertheless, defy any quantitative estimate of their possible contribution. These young and virile volunteers from the free countries of the New World, inspired by an ideal above self-glorification and aggrandizement, should easily be capable of defeating superior numbers of inspired automatons. It might be said that the

accession of the Dominions to the Allied Front is equivalent to the support of another first-class Power.

Beyond that, the second German War has conclusively proved the strength of the British Commonwealth in its new form. A de-centralized Empire of independent states, the first in history, has taken an early opportunity to demonstrate its solidarity in the face of a threat to the principles upon which its own constitution is based. There is hope for mankind in such a spontaneous uprising.