Asquith

A UNITED EMPIRE

A SPEECH

BY

THE PRIME MINISTER

IN DUBLIN

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A Speech by the Rt. Hon. H. H. Asquith in Dublin

SOME weeks ago I took it upon myself to suggest to the four principal magistrates of the United Kingdom that they should afford me an opportunity of making a personal appeal to their citizens at a great moment in our national history. I have already delivered my message in London and in Edinburgh. To the first of those great communities I was able to speak as an Englishman by birth and as a Londoner by early association and a long residence. To the second, the capital of the Ancient Kingdom of Scotland, I had special credentials as having been for the best part of 30 years one of their representatives in the House of Commons, and now indeed by one of the melancholy privileges of time the senior among the Scottish members. But to-night when I come to Dublin I can put forward neither the one claim nor the other. I base my title, such as it is, to your hospitality and your hearing upon such service as during the whole of my political life I have tried, with a whole heart and to the best of my faculty and opportunities, to render to Ireland. I come here not as a partisan, not even as a politician, but as for the time being the head of the King's Government, to summon Ireland, a loyal and patriotic Ireland, to take her place in the defence of our common cause.

It is no part of my mission to-night—it is indeed at this time of day wholly unnecessary—to justify, still less to excuse, the part that the Government of the United Kingdom has taken in this supreme crisis in our national affairs. There have been wars in the past in regard to which there has been among us diversity of opinion, uneasiness as to the wisdom of our diplomacy, anxiety as to the expediency of our policy, doubts as to the essential righteousness of our cause. That is not the case to-day. Even in the memorable struggle which we waged a hundred years ago against the domination of Napoleon there was always a minority, respectable not merely in number, but in the sincerity and in the eminence of its adherents, which broke the front

of our national unity. Again I say that is not the case to-day. We feel as a nation—or rather, I ought to say, speaking here and looking round upon our vast Empire in every quarter of the globe, as a family of nations—without distinction of creed or party, of race or climate, of class or section, that we are united in defending principles and in maintaining interests which are vital, not only to the British Empire, but to all that is worth having in our common civilisation and all that is worth hoping for in the future progress of mankind.

What better or higher cause, whether we succeed or fail, and we are going not to fail but to succeed, what higher cause can arouse and enlist the best energies of a free people than to be engaged at one and the same time in the vindication of international good faith, the protection of the weak against the violence of the strong, and in the assertion of the best ideals of all the free communities in all the ages of time and in every part of the world against the encroachments of those who believe, and who preach, and who practise the religion of force?

It is not—I am sure you will agree with me—it is not necessary to demonstrate once more that of this war Germany is the real and the responsible author. The proofs are patent, manifold, and overwhelming. Indeed, on the part of Germany herself we get upon this point, if denial at all, a denial only of the faintest and the most formal kind. For a generation past she has been preparing the ground, equipping herself both by land and sea, fortifying herself with alliances, what is perhaps even more important, teaching her youth to seek and to pursue as the first and the most important of all human things the supremacy of German power and the German spirit, and all that time biding her opportunity. Many of the great wars of history have been almost accidentally brought on. There was nothing in the quarrel, such as it was, between Austria and Servia that could not, and would not, have been settled by pacific means. But in the judgment of those who guide and control German policy the hour had come to strike the blow that had been long and deliberately prepared. In their hands lay the choice between peace and war, and their election was for war. In so deciding, as everybody now knows, Germany made two profound miscalculations, both of them natural enough in men who had come to believe that in international matters everything can be explained and measured in terms of material force.

What were those mistakes? The first was that Belgium, a small and prosperous country, entirely disinterested in European quarrels, guaranteed by the joint and several compacts of the Great Powers, would not resent, and certainly would not resist, the use of her territory as a high road for an invading German force into France. How could they imagine that this little country, rather than allow her neutrality to be violated and her independence insulted and menaced, was prepared that her fields should be drenched with the blood of her soldiers, her towns and

villages devastated by marauders, her splendid heritage of monuments and of treasures built up for her by the piety, art, and learning of the past ruthlessly laid in ruins? The passionate attachment of a numerically small population to the bit of territory, which looks so little upon the map, the pride of unconquerable devotion of a free people to their own free State—these were things which apparently had never been dreamed of in the philosophy of Potsdam.

Rarely in history has there been a greater material disparity between the invaders and the invaded. But the moral disparity was at least equally great, for the indomitable resistance of the Belgians did more than change the whole face of the campaign. It proved to the world that ideas which cannot be weighed or measured by any material calculus can still inspire and dominate mankind. That is the reason why the whole sympathy of the civilised world at this moment is going out to these small States —Belgium, Servia, and Montenegro—that have played so worthy a part in this historic struggle.

But Germany was guilty of another and a still more capital blunder in relation to ourselves. I am not referring for the moment to the grotesque misunderstanding upon which I dwelt a week ago at Edinburgh—their carefully fostered belief that we here were so rent with civil distraction, so paralysed by lukewarmness or disaffection in our Dominions and Dependencies, that if it came to fighting we might be brushed aside as an impotent and even a negligible factor. The German misconception went even deeper than that. They asked themselves what interest, direct or material, had the United Kingdom in this conflict. Could any nation, least of all the cold, calculating, phlegmatic, egotistic British nation, embark upon a costly and bloody contest from which it had nothing in the hope of profit to expect? They forgot that we, like the Belgians, had something at stake which cannot be translated into what one of our poets has called "the lore of nicely calculated less or more."

What was it we had at stake? First and foremost, the fulfilment to the small and relatively weak country of our plighted word, and behind and beyond that the maintenance of the whole system of international good will, which is the moral bond of the civilised world. Here again they were wrong in thinking that the reign of ideas, old world ideas like those of duty and good faith, had been superseded by the ascendancy of force. War is at all times a hideous thing; at the best an evil to be chosen in preference to worse evils, and at the worst little better than the letting loose of hell upon earth. The Prophet of old spoke of the "confused noise of battle and the garments rolled in blood," but in these modern days, with the gigantic scale of the opposing armies and the scientific developments of the instruments of destruction, war had become an infinitely more devastating thing than it ever was before. The

hope that the general recognition of a humaner code would soften or abate some of its worst brutalities has been rudely dispelled by the events of the last few weeks. The German invasion of Belgium and France contributes indeed some of the blackest pages to its sombre annals. Rarely has a non-combatant population suffered more severely, and rarely, if ever, have the monuments of piety and of learning and of those sentiments of religious and national association of which they are the permanent embodiment, even in the worst times of the most ruthless warriors been so shamefully and cynically desecrated; and behind the actual theatre of conflict, with its smoke and its carnage, there are the sufferings of those who are left behind, the waste of wealth, the economic dislocation, the heritage—the long heritage—of enmities and misunderstanding which war brings in its train.

Why do I dwell upon these things? It is to say this—that great indeed is the responsibility of those who allow their country —as we have done—to be drawn into such a welter. But there is one thing much worse than to take such a responsibility, and that is upon a fitting occasion to shirk it. Our record in the matter is clear. We strove up to the last moment for peace, and only when we were satisfied that the price of peace was the betrayal of other countries and the dishonour and degradation of our own did we take up the sword.

I should like, beyond this inquiry into causes and motives, to ask your attention and that of my fellow-countrymen to the end which, in this war, we ought to keep in view. Forty-four years ago, at the time of the war of 1870, Mr. Gladstone used these words. He said: "The greatest triumph of our time will be the enthronement of the idea of public right as the governing idea of European politics." Nearly 50 years have passed. Little progress, it seems, has as yet been made towards that good and beneficent change, but it seems to me to be now at this moment as good a definition as we can have of our European policy. The idea of public right—what does it mean when translated into concrete terms? It means first and foremost, the clearing of the ground by the definite repudiation of militarism as the governing factor in the relation of States and of the future moulding of the European world. It means next that room must be found and kept for the independent existence and the free development of the smaller nationalities each with a corporate consciousness of its own. Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Greece, and the Balkan States—they must be recognised as having exactly as good a title as their more powerful neighbours—more powerful in strength and in wealth—to a place in the sun. And it means finally, or it ought to mean, perhaps, by a slow and gradual process, the substitution for force, for the clash of competing ambition, for groupings and alliances and a precarious equipoise, of a real European partnership based on the recognition of equal right and established and enforced by a common will. A year ago that would

have sounded like a Utopian idea. It is probably one that may not, or will not, be realised either to-day or to-morrow, but if and when this war is decided in favour of the Allies it will at once come within the range and before long within the grasp of European statesmanship.

I go back for a moment to the peculiar aspects of the actual case upon which I have dwelt, because it seems to me that they ought to make a special appeal to the people of Ireland. Ireland is a loyal country, and she would, I know, respond with alacrity to any summons which called upon her to take her share in the assertion and the defence of our common interests. But the issues raised by this war are of such a kind that unless I mistake her people and misrepresent her history, they touch a vibrating chord both in her imagination and in her conscience. How can you Irishmen be deaf to the cry of the smaller nationalities to help them in their struggle for freedom, whether, as in the case of Belgium, in maintaining what she has won, or, as in the case of Poland or the Balkan States, in regaining what they have lost or in acquiring and putting upon a stable foundation what has never been fully theirs? How, again, can you Irishmen, if I understand you, sit by in cool detachment and with folded arms while we in company of our gallant Allies of France and Russia, are opposing a world-wide resistance to pretensions which threaten to paralyse and sterilise all progress and the best destinies of mankind?

During the last few weeks Sir John French and his heroic forces have worthily sustained our cause. The casualties have been heavy—Ireland has had her share. But although they have been increased during the last week from the ranks of our gallant Navy by one of the hazards of warfare at sea, of those who have fallen in both services we may ask how could men die better? They have left behind them an example and an appeal. From all quarters of the Empire its best manhood is flowing in. The first Indian Contingent is, I believe, landing to-day at Marseilles, and in all parts of our great Dominions the convoys are already mustering.

Over half a million recruits have joined the colours here at home, and I come to ask you in Ireland, though you do not need my asking, to take your part. There was a time when, through the operations of laws which everyone now acknowledges to have been both unjust and impolitic, the martial spirit and capacity for which Irishmen have always been conspicuous found its chief outlet in the alien armies of the Continent. I have seen it computed—I do not know whether with precise accuracy—but I have seen it computed upon good authority that in the first 50 years of the 18th century, when the penal laws were here in full swing, nearly half a million Irishmen enlisted under the banners of the Empires of France and Spain, and we at home in the United Kingdom suffered a double loss, for, not only were we drained year by year of some of our best fighting material, but over and over again we found ourselves engaged in battle array,

suffering from and inflicting deadly loss upon those who might have been, and under happier conditions would have been, fellow soldiers of our own. The British Empire has always been proud, and with reason, of those Irish regiments and their Irish leaders, and was never prouder of them than it is to-day. We ask you here in Ireland to give us more, to give them without stinting. We ask Ireland to give of her sons the most in number, the best in quality, that a proud and loyal daughter of the Empire ought to devote to the common cause. The conditions seem to me to be exceptionally favourable for the purpose. We have of late been witnessing here in Ireland a spontaneous enrolment and organisation in all parts of the country of bodies of volunteers. I say nothing—for I wish to-night to avoid trespassing upon even a square inch of controversial ground—I say nothing of the causes or motives which brought them originally into existence, and have fostered their growth and strength. I will only say—and this is my nearest approach to politics to-night—that there are two things which to my mind have become unthinkable. The first is that one section of Irishmen are going to fight another, and the second is that Great Britain is going to fight either.

Speaking here in Dublin, I may perhaps address myself for a moment particularly to the National Volunteers, and I am going to ask them all over Ireland—not only them, but I make the appeal to them particularly—to contribute with promptitude and enthusiasm a large and worthy contingent of recruits to the second new Army of half a million which is growing up, as it were, out of the ground. I should like to see, and we all want to see, an Irish Brigade, or, better still, an Irish Army Corps. Do not let them be afraid that by joining the colours they will lose their identity and become absorbed in some invertebrate mass, or what is perhaps equally repugnant, be artificially redistributed in units which have no national cohesion or character. We wish to the utmost limit that military exigencies will allow that men who have been already associated in this or that district in training and in common exercises should be kept together and continue to recognise the corporate bond which now unites them. And of one thing further I am sure. We are in urgent need of competent officers, and we think if officers now engaged in training these men are proved equal to the test, there is no fear that their services will not be gladly, gratefully retained.

But, I repeat, the Empire needs recruits, needs them at once, that they may be fully trained and equipped in time to take their part in what may well be the decisive fields of the greatest struggle in the history of the world. That is our immediate necessity, and no Irishmen in responding to it need be afraid that he is prejudicing the future of the Volunteers. I do not say and I cannot say, under what precise form or organisation, but I trust and believe, and indeed I am certain, that the Volunteers will become a permanent part, an integral and a characteristic part, of the defensive forces of the Crown.

If our need is great, your opportunity is also great. The call which I am making is, as you know well, backed by the sympathy of your fellow-Irishmen in all parts of the Empire and the world. Old animosities between us are dead, scattered like the autumn leaves to the four winds of heaven. We are a united nation, owing and paying to our Sovereign the heartfelt allegiance of men who at home not only love but enjoy for themselves the liberty which our soldiers and our sailors are fighting, by land and by sea, to maintain and to extend—for others. There is no question of compulsion or bribery. What we want we believe you are ready and eager to give—the free-will offering of a free people.

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