BARNETT HOUSE PAPERS
No. 14

FOREIGN POLICY

BY

LORD D'ABERNON

SIDNEY BALL LECTURE
October 31, 1930

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FOREIGN POLICY

THE reflections prepared for your consideration to-day have no pretension to be regarded as a general criticism of the past, nor are they definite proposals for the future. They are, rather, personal impressions formed during a long practical acquaintance with English Foreign Policy, seen sometimes from within and sometimes from without. The object has been to throw a light upon certain aspects of our action in the past, and to consider the possibility of broad principles for future guidance.

The wonderful achievement of the inhabitants of these small islands and the influence they have exercised in the world during the last four hundred years render an examination of the policy by which these results have been attained a subject of unusual interest.

It has been said in another seat of learning that one of the difficulties of treating the subject arises from the fact that English history has always a tendency to shrink into mere parliamentary history, while Parliament itself never shines less than in the discussion of foreign affairs: moreover, there is scarcely a great English historian who does not sink somewhat below himself in the treatment of English foreign relations.

Lest any of you should aspire to fill this gap in English literature, let me warn you that the task will prove not only difficult but dangerous. Seely, the boldest man who made an attempt to systematize and generalize on the subject, sacrificed his life in the effort. The labour involved was too much for mortal nature; navigation was too intricate, leading lights were too faint; he sank under the self-imposed ordeal.

The first fact that impresses the student in a survey of the history of our Foreign Policy is the comparative absence of broad principles set forward in the speeches or declarations of British Foreign Ministers. A reader of *The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy* will

search in vain through the three volumes for a succinct statement of the attitude of Great Britain towards the other European Powers, nor will he discover any declaration indicating definite permanent objectives. The latent force directing action appears rather to have been rough and ready instinct than any definite programme—instinct proceeding from the public rather than from the constructive policy of any Minister or leading Statesman.

A foreign critic of eminence has said with truth:

> 'The achievement of England is in the last analysis not the individual achievement of a single statesman but the collective achievement of the Anglo-Saxon race.'

The conspicuous wisdom of the British public in the matter of policy has been throughout the centuries a source of envy to foreign observers, a feeling accompanied by surprise, for in no country are foreign affairs less studied and less discussed.

Reverting to explicit statements, I have selected a few extracts from those most nearly approaching clear exposition; they will, I believe, bear out and confirm the foregoing remarks.

In the year 1866, at the time of the Conference of London, Disraeli, in his speech on re-election, said:

> 'There is no Power that interferes more than England. She interferes in Asia, because she is really more an Asiatic Power than a European. She interferes in Australia, in Africa, in New Zealand, where she carries on war often on a great scale.'

Gladstone, in his Memorandum to General Grey for the information of the Queen on 17th April 1869, adopts rather a similar attitude to Disraeli in his statement of Great Britain's relation to Europe. He writes:

> 'As I understand Lord Clarendon's ideas, they are fairly represented by his very important diplomatic communications since he has taken office. They proceed upon such grounds as these: That England should keep entire in her own hands the means of estimating her own obligations upon the various states of fact as they arise: that she should not foreclose and narrow her own liberty of choice by declarations made to the Powers, in their real or supposed interests, of which they would claim to be at least joint interpreters. I am pursuaded that at this juncture, opinions of this colour, being true and sound, are also the only opinions which the country is disposed to approve. But I do not believe that on that account it is one whit less disposed than it had been at any time to cast in its lot upon any fitting occasion with the cause it believes to be right.'

Palmerston's motto was:

> 'Never give up a pin's head that you ought to keep and that you can keep; and, even if you think that, in the last extremity, you will not be able to keep it, make as many difficulties as you can about resigning it and manifest a doubt as to whether you should not go to War rather than resign it.'

On another occasion he said:

> 'It is a narrow policy to suppose that this or that country is to be marked out as the eternal Ally or the perpetual enemy of England. We have no eternal Allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and those interests it is our duty to follow.'

It can scarcely be a matter of surprise that Greville, writing of a speech of Palmerston's in 1857, characterizes it as full of jactance and bow-wow, though well calculated to draw cheers from a miscellaneous audience. 'Jactance and bow-wow'—not the most favourable soil for the growth of international confidence and understanding.

If the above quotations are fairly characteristic of our attitude in Foreign Policy, it is easy to estimate the effect of such declarations on Continental minds. The inevitable judgement was that the British Government is at once nebulous and interfering—assertive of an unlimited

right to lecture, and bound to no declared programme of policy. Unpopularity and distrust could not but ensue, and according to our Foreign Ministers ensue they did.

Lord Rosebery stated: 'There is no parallel to the hatred and ill-will with which we are regarded almost unanimously by the peoples of Europe,' and Lord Kimberley, on another occasion, referred to the fact that 'We are very generally hated by all foreigners'. In a private letter, written in 1898, Lord Salisbury wrote: 'The French and German people both hate us.'

Even if the estimates of these high authorities as to our unpopularity are too categorical, or not permanently true, their declarations tend to justify the criticism that there has been something defective, either in our policy, or, more probably, in our method of presenting it.

I shall comment later on the grave detriment this unpopularity occasions, and on the impediment it constitutes to the attainment of legitimate ambitions. I shall also endeavour to analyse what causes have given rise to our unpopularity—apart from those already mentioned.

But, before doing so, let me draw attention to the second fact which impresses the student of our Foreign Policy. This is the striking divergence between our view of ourselves, our methods and our objectives, and the view prevailing among foreign nations. In our own estimation, we are well-meaning, idealistic, liberal, and pacific; perhaps short-sighted and careless, and, above all, irresistibly inclined to deal with events as they arise rather than endeavour to foresee events and to plan a policy in advance. In the foreign view, we are wavering and fickle in our alliances; ruthless in our pursuit of colonial expansion, without regard to the interests of others or to the principles of international morality.

As far back as the seventeenth century England was constantly charged with being unreliable and proud, selfish and quarrelsome in regard to her Foreign Policy. Bossuet, in his sermon on the Queen, declared us to be

more unstable than the sea which encircles us. De Witt, the Dutch Statesman, passed a similar judgement. The opinion recorded in his testament by Charles of Lorraine was of the same nature—that 'the English people is fickle'.

In the succeeding eighteenth century, Peter the Great described us as 'a Power torn within itself and variable in its plans'. A French Foreign Minister, about 1750, observed that 'of all the countries comprised in Europe there is none where the maxims of government vary more often than in England', while, later in the century, Vergennes wrote that 'nothing is so versatile as the policy of the Cabinet of St. James'. In 1774, whilst Minister of Foreign Affairs, he stated: 'We see beside us a restless and greedy nation, powerfully armed and ready to strike at the moment when it may suit her to issue a menace.'

Towards the end of the eighteenth century Franklin and Dean, the American Commissioners in Europe, wrote: 'All Europe is for us. Every nation in Europe wishes to see Britain humbled, having all in their turn been offended by her insolence, which in prosperity she is apt to discover on all occasions.' (*American Dip. Corres.*, vol. i, pp. 278–81.)

Turning to modern times, evidence has become available concerning the feelings of foreigners regarding England. At a recent address at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, delivered by the most outspoken and influential of foreign journalists, M. André Géraud, admitted, notwithstanding his declared admiration and love for this country, that, in France, the frame of mind of the general public was very critical where England was concerned, and advanced the following reasons:

First and foremost, England has withdrawn, in the course of the last ten years, from the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee and from the Geneva Protocol, the result being that all Frenchmen who are interested in public affairs share the feeling that they have a grievance against the British people and Government.

Not only has England withdrawn from the above Pacts, but she has steadfastly refused to place behind the decisions of the League of Nations the power of military force. This point of view has never been understood in France, where the theory is maintained that 'a poacher will not hesitate to trespass if he knows there are no keepers about'. The French do not understand the views put forward by Anglo-Saxons, and when they hear it said that the only result of introducing sanctions will be to incite the aggressor, they begin to wonder if they are not being mocked.

Let us examine briefly the causes of the persistence of these accusations made against us by foreign nations, and endeavour to ascertain which are justified, and which, if any, are susceptible of remedy. The most usual charge made against us is that conveyed by the phrase *perfide Albion*. If this phrase originated, as I believe it did, in the non-payment of financial obligations during the reign of Edward III, it has surely outlived the causes which gave rise to it, for we have the right to claim that, in the matter of financial morality, we have been almost unique amongst nations in the punctual fulfilment of debt obligations.

What, then, are the causes which have brought about distrust and apprehension? Cynical observers state that a country is necessarily disliked if it is especially prosperous. Is not that a narrow and erroneous view? Without underrating the bias that international envy entertains against success, diplomatic skill and a clear enunciation of limited objectives can certainly do a great deal in reconciling foreign nations to achievements and acquisitions.

Another cause of our alleged unpopularity is probably one of which we may be proud. Throughout the nineteenth century England was admittedly the most active and constant friend of liberty. Canning's action in South America is remembered there with gratitude, and regarded as the basis of the political liberty enjoyed. A

distinguished foreign observer declares that even more important than our economic influence has been England's role as champion of spiritual movements. Under the purely humane inspiration of Wilberforce and Clarkson England's influence eradicated slavery everywhere.

A further charge frequently brought against us is that we are wavering, uncertain, and unreliable. The fact that suspicion prevails so widely as to our consistency is detrimental to our prestige with foreign Powers, to our influence with them, and to their readiness to act in co-operation with us. Even Macchiavelli wrote that a Prince or Government should make a great effort to create a reputation for goodness, clemency, and fidelity to engagements. At the present day, and for a political organization like the British Empire, the advantage to be derived from inspiring confidence far outweighs minor considerations.

In a remarkable study of British Foreign Secretaries, Algernon Cecil adverts to the uncertainty which prevailed in regard to England's policy on the eve of the Great War. His words are:

> 'Doubt as to the eventual attitude of England influenced events in 1914 even more powerfully than on former occasions. A high French authority states that on July 30 and 31, the French Government felt England fail her. In Berlin they understood the British Foreign Secretary so little that, on July 29, the Chancellor asked for a Pledge of Neutrality from England in return for an undertaking from Germany that France should lose no foot of soil in Europe. Even in London the German Ambassador, on August 1, so misunderstood the position as to report that, if Germany would leave France alone, England would answer for French neutrality. This impression in the supreme hour of distress was the nemesis of a policy which lacks clearness and decision.'

I turn now to the question whether it would be possible for the British Empire to gain a better reputation abroad

without sacrificing essential objectives and without abandoning those principles which we regard as essential to our reputation and to our duty in the world. It may be that some modification of method might be adopted which would tend to diminish our unpopularity. To this end various suggestions have been made at different times. It has been said that history suggests that a clearer statement *a limine* of the essential points of our policy would arouse less hostility and opposition than the hesitation, ambiguity, and procrastination which characterized our attitude on so many occasions in past centuries.

Two examples of the Foreign Policy of nations may be cited to support this view; one from our own history, and the other from the history of the United States. They are:

(1) The Naval Supremacy Doctrine, enunciated by Great Britain.

(2) The Monroe Doctrine, enunciated by the United States.

In both cases the bold statement of what might have been considered an excessive claim was, for a long period of history, accepted by the world without protest and without expressed resentment. Had a less frank declaration of principle taken place, both claims would—so it is contended—have aroused more acute animosity and opposition.

In the case of Great Britain there can be little doubt that the claim to Naval Supremacy was admitted the more easily, in that we allowed free access for foreign commerce to our Overseas market and that we had not a conscript army of the Continental type.

A corroboration of the same theory may perhaps be adduced. Opposition to an overpowering hegemony in Europe has consistently animated public opinion in England: would not a clearer enunciation that this was our essential policy have averted irritation and resulting complications? This line of policy has been recently

adopted by those past-masters in the art of presenting their case—the French. Apologists of France of great distinction now assert that the essential principle of French policy throughout recent centuries has been an endeavour to resist hegemony in Europe, and to maintain something approaching a Balance of Power. While there is much in the history of France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to justify this view, the unceasing and aggressive wars of Louis XIV, the unexampled exploits of Napoleon, are difficult to explain as inspired solely by a thirst for the maintenance of a Balance of Power. In the case of Great Britain there are no similar exploits to explain away, and our determination to maintain Supremacy at Sea was necessitated as a measure of security against invasion rather than by any desire to obtain domination over other Powers.

It would be foolish to recriminate about the past or to wrangle with France over the purity of our respective claims. If French policy for the future is steadily directed against the establishment of any European hegemony, such an objective would be in harmony with our own, and should facilitate close co-operation between the two countries.

Whatever France's record may be regarding the Balance of Power, she can claim to have been more skilful than ourselves in steadfastly cultivating the support of the weaker Powers of Europe. Throughout the last three centuries, French policy has been marked by a sedulous endeavour to gain the support of the smaller states of Europe. France pushed this policy so far that in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries she developed close contact with the Sublime Porte in order to establish a counterpoise to the overbearing influence of the House of Austria.

In England the propensity has been to afford support to the cause of political liberty, but there has been less clear an inclination to establish friendly relations in Europe on the basis of sympathy. Moreover, the vast

trans-oceanic interests and obligations of England have diverted our attention from the minor amenities of diplomacy in Europe.

The problem of the adaptation of British Foreign Policy to the requirements of our Empire in the East has assumed a new importance since the War. Owing possibly to the fall of the three empires—Russia, Germany, and Austria—or to the wide diffusion of Wilsonian doctrine, the authority of Imperial Government throughout the world has notably weakened. National movements in different countries have created problems that are new to British Government.

An example may be found in Egypt, where, for forty years previous to the War, the British Government had, with extraordinary success, surmounted all diplomatic and international opposition. After the War they found themselves faced with a new situation, and are now experiencing serious difficulty in dealing with a small nation which was, by tradition, completely unmilitary and which had the reputation of being submissive to authority. It is clear that, since the War, some new nationalistic force has come into being which it will require supreme statesmanship to deal with. This applies to India even more than Egypt. In the former vast continent, the change of feeling during the last five years is such as to require radical modification of former conceptions.

If ideas subversive of British authority develop in the East, it is a strong argument for the plea that our Foreign Policy must be so directed as to facilitate and not to impede our Imperial task. It must be so arranged that, by diplomatic action, the stronger—the more virile—more warlike—elements in our Eastern Dominions are not needlessly antagonized.

We have already seen in this brief review that there are two points on which British methods might be modified with advantage and without undue sacrifice. We should be more definite and consistent, thereby increasing our reputation for steadfastness, and we should bear more

closely in mind our Imperial interests when framing our Foreign Policy.

There is a further point of organization which may be worthy of examination. It is generally admitted that the action which, above all others, brought the end of the War definitely nearer, was the clear enunciation of the fourteen points by President Wilson, these being the conditions on which he thought that Peace should be made. This was the first serious attempt to define Victory in terms of Peace, and to furnish Allied Statesmen with a definite policy. Until then, British war propaganda had consisted largely in telling foreign nations what good people we were and how wicked were our enemies. No attempt had been made to prepare for Peace negotiations on sound principles of political wisdom. No one had defined our real war aims.

Other measures, tending towards a reasonable peace, were taken about this time. A new Department was set up in London. A 'Thinking General Staff' was appointed to work out and apply fundamental ideas which might lead to victory and render peace possible. The idea on which this Committee worked was that the Allies could not gain a conclusive military settlement unless they defined their ideas of victory in terms of a reasonable peace. The beneficial effect of thinking out what we were fighting for, and of limiting our demands in case of victory, had unquestionably a powerful influence in terminating the War. German writers have consistently expressed the view that President Wilson's fourteen points were among the most potent causes which precipitated the German collapse.

Two ideas suggest themselves to the mind when considering what was done in 1918. The first is that a 'Thinking General Staff' in this country might be as useful to-day in maintaining peace as it was twelve years ago in preparing it.

If the creation of a 'Thinking General Staff' is found practicable, various models suggest themselves for con-

sideration. The Committee of Imperial Defence has rendered such remarkable national service in co-ordinating the work of different Departments that something on similar lines might be established to study the problems of Foreign Policy; or an alternative might be borrowed from foreign practice—the Council of Elder Statesmen in Japan works out problems independently of current party preoccupation.

The second idea suggested by experience in 1918 is that if, without the creation of any new body, Statesmen made the effort to think out for themselves and formulate for others precisely what the interests of their country require, they would often discover that much that they advocate was not indispensable, if indeed desirable. There would be a greater chance of agreement and of gaining acceptance of more limited claims than under the present practice of vagueness and non-definition.

To-day the organization of Peace is not making practical progress. More might be accomplished if it were recognized that clarity and limitation of objectives are more likely to bring about understanding than vague generalities and undefined ambitions.

It will be found, if the problem is examined in the light of modern circumstances, that there are reasons why such a policy is to-day both easier to adopt and more appropriate than it would have been in the past. The objects of British Foreign Policy in the twentieth century are, without doubt, more commercial and economic than they were previously. The ambition to achieve territorial expansion has given way to the more modest desire to develop commercial intercourse. Up to now, it must be admitted that our success has been mediocre. Possibly we have been too theoretical and have remained in the rut of old-fashioned methods; possibly we have not combined with others whose interest in the matter is similar to our own. It is almost incredible how little we have taken advantage of our position as the largest purchasers of merchandise in the world to exercise pressure in favour of our own ex-

ports upon those from whom we buy. We have allowed free access to those who exclude us, and have submitted without retaliation or effective protest to the closing of one market after another. There is manifest scope for improvement in our methods of negotiation.

Among the early tasks of a 'Thinking General Staff' would be the exploration of the problem whether joint action is not possible between different parts of the British Empire, with a view to preventing aggravation of existing obstacles. Examination is also requisite as to whether joint or combined action is not possible between the British Empire and Free Trade or Low Tariff countries (which, if combined, represent nearly half the importing capacity of the world), and whether such combined action should not, if intelligently directed, achieve better conditions for trade than those which now prevail; conditions which appear likely to become still less favourable unless united action is brought into play.

It may be desirable, in conclusion, to survey the probabilities of the future, and to venture a surmise as to the possible developments of our Foreign Policy. The governing factor will probably be concentration on the Empire and on the increase of commercial and industrial facilities. These must be pursued to the exclusion of minor political objects. If it is true that the eighteenth century policy of political combination and intrigue still lives on in Foreign Chancelleries existing conditions require that it should be relinquished by us, making way for economic negotiations with definite and limited objectives. It must be brought home to Foreign Powers that we intend to base our relationship on mutual exchange, and that we are prepared to give facilities on the basis of reciprocity. Instead of vague professions of friendship and amity we desire commercial conditions productive of advantage to both sides. In the past, phrases of this nature have been freely used on platforms, but they have been translated only rarely into international agreements of a practical nature. The days are past when we should

claim—wisely or unwisely—a general right of interference, and lecture in a tone of superior morality. To-day we have to look nearer home and concentrate our efforts on the development of the resources of our own Empire.

The profound difference which has come over the world since the War necessitates a revision of our attitude towards other Powers. We were supreme in Industry, and, owing to the cheap cost of living here, were able to compete successfully with foreign manufactures, but owing to our payment in full of War Debts and the consequent heavy taxation imposed on all classes, our cost of production has gone up compared with foreign nations, and we are no longer able to compete as successfully as in the past.

Our Supremacy at Sea has also given place to a parity with the United States, which may or not be equally advantageous, but which is a profound modification of our position.

The economic doctrines which we preached to the world have been largely superseded by new conceptions, the result being the imposition of heavy restrictions on international trade. The doctrines of democratic liberty, of which we were the most active champions throughout the nineteenth century, have been superseded in many countries, without apparent loss of prosperity.

In the meantime, our Eastern possessions and connexions have been profoundly troubled by propaganda at once nationalistic and communistic, opening up problems of vast difficulty.

The future demands of us that we should be practical, definite, clear. For the success of this policy it will be essential for Great Britain, while loyally discharging her obligations as a member of the League of Nations, to abstain from unnecessary interference in affairs outside our special sphere.

The problems of our vast Dominions, so inadequately developed, the future government of three hundred million subjects of the British Crown in India, the solution

of unemployment at home, the changed aspect of national defence—so profoundly modified by submarine and air developments—the alteration of our economic position through the substitution of other sources of power for coal—all these require and command concentration. They forbid dispersion and adventure, they preclude quixotism and interference in that which does not vitally affect us. It is not only on the river that the injunction 'eyes in the boat' applies. In the past, the most far-seeing Foreign Ministers were those who guarded carefully against entanglements abroad, and we should be wise to adhere to the policy of Castlereagh and Salisbury in avoiding further international commitments not essential to security.

If I advocate limitation in the sense of restriction of our action to matters of immediate concern to our security and prosperity, I advocate, also, limitation in another sense, namely, the elimination from discussion of claims definitely subversive of our vital interests. There is real peril in weakly extending the limits of discussion to points which we know to be ultimately unacceptable. To encourage false hopes is not to be open minded; it is to permit debate to stray into the danger zone.

Vague responsibilities without definite advantage must be discarded, and an endeavour made to bring about abroad a more intelligent understanding that our policy, though concentrated, is not merely selfish; that it is consonant with the general interest, and conducive alike to the maintenance of peace and the development of international amity.

If Dibelius is right in asserting that England is the single country where patriotism does not represent a threat or challenge to the rest of the world; the single country that invariably rouses the most progressive, idealistic, and efficient forces in other nations, and if he is justified in stating that England covets no territory from any European Power, this attitude of ours should

be broadly proclaimed and adopted as a fixed principle governing and controlling our policy.

Foreign nations have never appreciated—and have not believed in—the humanitarian tinge which has so often coloured English action; they have mistaken it for cant and hypocrisy, but this is a fundamentally erroneous judgement, for no policy not permeated with the ethical spirit attains real popularity in this country.

Were the true character of our mentality and the essential moderation of our aims realized abroad, it would obliterate a good deal of the *perfide Albion* misconception, and counteract the suspicion regarding us which still prevails in many countries, and which I hold to be at once unmerited and detrimental.

In what has been said this evening I trust there is nothing unduly didactic or positive. In an inquiry of this nature it is well to remember the words of Socrates in *The Republic*: 'There can be no doubt about the numerous difficulties in which this question is involved.'

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