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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS UNION.

President—VISCOUNT GREY OF FALLODON, K.G.

A British Organisation founded to promote the formation of a World League of Free Peoples for the securing of International Justice, Mutual Defence, and Permanent Peace.

OUR IMMEDIATE DUTY.



BY

The Rt. Hon. LORD ROBERT CECIL, K.C., M.P.

The League of Nations Union,
22 Buckingham Gate, London, S.W. 1.

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THE Treaty of Peace signed at Versailles on 28th June has now been ratified by the Government of Germany, and only ratification by three others of the principal Powers is required to establish the Covenant of the League of Nations as part of the public law of the world. Having failed in their earlier prophecies that the League would never come into being, those who do not believe in its principles now assure us that it will infallibly break down. They play on our British suspicion of a novelty, in particular an abstract novelty, and make capital out of the shortcomings of the Peace Treaty, its sins of commission and omission. Marshal Foch told a body of journalists the other day that the secret of victory was to have no doubts. In war, he who doubts is lost. The maxim is true of all great enterprises, but where as in war the doubts of a few may render vain the faith of the millions, in the greater enterprises of peace the faith of the millions is bound to prevail in the long run. The present constitution of the League of Nations, as defined in the Covenant, may be defective. But the conception of the League of Nations is firmly rooted in the faith, the will, the humanity of millions of common people, and they may be trusted to insist on such modifications in the first structure as will cure its defects.

But the cost of any failure may be so enormous as to plunge in bankruptcy the civilisation we know, and it is of vital interest to us all to make the present Covenant work. I believe there is no valid reason why it should not ;

but it will never work smoothly and certainly unless the true spirit of international goodwill is developed among the member nations. In a democratic age everything depends on public opinion. This means that the public must have an opinion on international affairs, and that its opinion must be right.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE UNION.

In this connection the League of Nations Union occupies a double position. **It both represents a section of public opinion itself, and it has the power to influence masses of public opinion outside.** Its function is at once to bring pressure on the organs of Government, on Ministers, and on Parliament, and to induce the nation as a whole to do the same.

As regards the first of these functions, the Union must press for the loyal fulfilment by the British Government of its obligations under the Covenant in the spirit as well as in the letter. It must insist on the publication of all international agreements to which the British Empire is a party, on our disengaging ourselves from any entanglements contrary to the spirit of the League, on the reduction of our armaments "to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations," on the submission of appropriate issues to international tribunals and the willing acceptance of their awards, and on our shouldering our share of the responsibility for maintaining right by agreeing, in the last instance, to apply the economic and military sanctions demanded by the League; in a word, on the subordination of what may appear immediate British interests to the interests of all humanity, in the confidence that the peace and harmony of the world are, in the long run, the greatest of British interests.

It will also be the duty of the Union to help to form opinion on the subject of improvements in League organisation, and to press for the proposal by the British representatives of such additions or modifications as reason and experience show to be desirable. **It is foolish to keep pulling up a plant to see how it is growing,** and I think the Covenant

in its present form should be given a fair chance. But over and above two necessary measures which are not amendments of the Covenant, but rather steps in the fulfilment of its spirit—I refer to the admission of the late enemy Powers at an early date and to the initiation of practical steps towards a reduction of armaments—there are certain directions, I believe, in which we may work for the improvement of the scheme embodied in the Covenant.

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE COVENANT.

First, with regard to **popular representation.** The constitution of the Assembly of the League, it is true, does not forbid the inclusion in that body of national representatives other than the nominees of Governments. But there is no guarantee that such non-governmental members will be chosen; and in any case the facts that the members of each national delegation are limited to three, and that these three cast only one vote between them, must prevent the Assembly from filling the *role* of a real popular representative body. Aware of this, some supporters of a League of Nations have demanded that the Assembly should be converted into such a body. I do not agree with them. **The Assembly supplies a real want;** there must be some body composed of the representatives of the Governments, some conference of the member States, in which official decisions can be taken. **But there are strong arguments for having, in addition to the Assembly, a body of the representatives of the popular element in each member country, their method of selection being left to the country concerned.** The creation of such a body does not require any amendment of the Covenant; for I do not suggest that this House of Representatives should be given legislative powers. But I do think that by debating and passing resolutions, or even by drafting treaties for the approval of the Assembly, it could do valuable work. It would give to politicians of the different countries outside the administrations a means of getting to know and work with one another; it would lead to horizontal, rather than vertical, divisions on questions of international interest, and would thus show the collective weight of views held, it may be, only by a minority in each country; it would ventilate

grievances and so act as a safety-valve ; and finally it might, if successful, pave the way for a closer institutional union between peoples.

Another direction in which I think we might work is towards strengthening the provisions designed **to secure a judicial, rather than a political, settlement of disputes.** Opinion has developed in recent years in favour of compulsory arbitration in certain classes of disputes. There are considerable difficulties in the way of the admission of this principle and I doubt if at present it is practicable. The first step is to improve international judicial machinery. Arbitration by arbitrators appointed *ad hoc* is an unsatisfactory expedient. But when the Permanent Court of International Justice has been founded and given proof of its capacity I have no doubt it will attract to itself for settlement many disputes which ought to be, but are not, referred to arbitration.

On these matters anything the members of the League of Nations Union can do to stimulate investigation and discussion, and to keep them in the mind of the Government and Parliament will, I am sure, not be wasted.

But the main thing to be insisted on is that the Union will only, and should only, have weight with our rulers if it represents a strong body of national opinion. The one answer to the question whether the League will succeed is that it depends on the peoples.

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The British character is by nature practical, and is not apt to acclaim a new enterprise till it has seen how it works. But the League is such a practical necessity, such an obviously common sense affair, and moreover its constitution follows so closely the lines of Anglo-Saxon political thought, that we may be sure of its acceptance by the public opinion of this country, if it is honestly and clearly explained. And when they once understand what the League is and what it requires of them, I believe the response of the British peoples will be worthy of their international reputation.

There are two urgent matters which will test their understanding and their temper. They are the two matters I have already touched on: the admission of the enemy States and the reduction of armaments. Both must be effected at an early date if there is to be confidence in the sincerity of the Governments which have established the League, and, as the result of such confidence, peace. There is a right and a wrong moment for everything, but it is of great importance that both these necessary measures should be kept in view, and the mind of the country prepared to accept and demand them.

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