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ABDICATION OF THE CZAR.

HC Deb 15 March 1917 vol 91 cc1419-26

10.0 P.M.

Sir HENRY DALZIEL I intervene only for a moment in order to invite the Leader of the House to make a statement on a matter which is indirectly dealt with in this Vote and which, I am sure, is of considerable public interest. For many days there have been rumours, some of them very wild, about the condition of affairs in the country of one of our Allies, namely, Russia. I was hopeful this afternoon that as this Vote dealt with advances to our Allies the Leader of the House perhaps might have given us some information which I doubt not is already in the possession of the Government as to matters in Russia. No doubt from high public policy he refrained from mentioning the matter. But I think that, after all, the House of Commons is the place where important information should be conveyed to the nation. I am sure that no one would endorse that more than the Leader of the House himself. I want to ask the Leader of the House whether he can give us any information before we separate to-night as to the internal condition in the country of our great Ally, Russia. Is it true that the Czar has abdicated? Is it the case that the Duma has refused to be dissolved and has placed under arrest the members of the Russian Cabinet? It is important not only to the Government but important to the country and, above all, to the success of the great War in which we are engaged, that the House of Commons should be taken as fully as possible into the confidence of His Majesty's Government. For my part, so far as I have read the news that has come to hand, I think there is nothing to be alarmed at so far as this country is concerned. I would invite the Leader of the House, if he can, to give us a reassuring statement in regard to the situation. A revolution at any time is undoubtedly a disturbing factor, and more especially at the present time, but so far as the information which has reached this country is concerned—and there has, of course, been information for several days which has not been published—it points to the fact that those who have caused this revolution are not only sincere friends of this country, but that they are anxious to ally themselves with us to carry this War to a successful issue. In fact, I would invite the Leader of the House to say that this is no pro-German success, and that, so far as we can judge from the result, it is really an anti-German movement. I hope, therefore, that in a matter of this importance, especially when we are passing money which I understand will probably reach our Allies, it is pertinent to ask the Government to make some statement, first of all, to allay the many wild rumours that are in progress; and, secondly, to give us a reassuring statement as to the general situation.

Mr. BONAR LAW I quite agree with my right hon. Friend that in a matter of this gravity it is the duty of the Government, if it is in their power, to give the House of Commons all the information which can be safely imparted to it; and I am strongly of the opinion with him that the House of Commons is the proper place in which information of that kind should first be communicated to the public. But I am sure the House will not be surprised that until to-night it has not been possible for me or the Government in any way to give any information as to what was happening in Russia. Revolution, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, is a serious thing at any time. It is very serious not only to the country affected, but to our Allies in a time of war. The first news we had of any serious trouble in Russia came by telegram on Friday night last. It was to the effect simply that there were disturbances in the streets. Since then we have had daily telegrams giving more or less authentic news—I mean it came from our Embassy, but they themselves had not all the possible means of obtaining accurate information in the circumstances which existed in Petrograd. But by degrees it became plain that Petrograd was becoming more or less under ordered rule, and that the rule was a rule over which the President of the Duma was exercising control. It was a fact also that almost from the outset the soldiers, and we are informed also the sailors, had taken the side of the Duma and the result has been, so far as information has reached us, that there has not been any serious loss of life. I am not sure that this is the case, but we have had no

indication that there has been serious loss of life in Petrograd. The reason I am able now to say something about it to the House of Commons is that only tonight a message was received from our Ambassador to the effect that a telegram had been received from the Duma announcing that the Czar had abdicated and that the Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovitch had been appointed Regent. I should be glad to give a reassuring statement. In what I have said there is a measure of comfort to us, who are the Allies of Russia, in the comparative tranquility with which this change has been conducted. There is also this comfort, and a real comfort, that all our information leads us to believe that the movement is not in any sense directed towards an effort to secure peace, but, on the contrary, the discontent—this is the substance of all our information—is not against the Government for carrying on the war, but against it for not carrying on the war with efficiency and with that energy which the people expect. I have told the House all I know in this matter. They will understand that it is not possible for me to say more, but I can assure them that if any authentic information reaches us at any time I shall at once communicate it to the House of Commons.

Mr. H. SAMUEL I am sure the House will have heard with thankfulness that the great events which have taken place in Russia have passed off so far as the Government is aware without serious loss of life, and the House, I am quite certain, will rejoice at the statement of the Leader of the House that these changes are not likely in any way, so far as the Government is informed, to impair the solidarity of the great alliance between ourselves and the other Powers engaged in this war, and is likely, if it has any result upon the war at all, to secure that it shall be prosecuted with even greater vigour and energy than hitherto.

Mr. DEVLIN The House is grateful to my right hon. Friend for his promptitude in calling forth the announcement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am sure to those of us who believe in the triumphant vindication of democratic principles and democratic authority in all countries in Europe we must rejoice at what we believe to be a successful blow for democratic government in Russia. I am very glad to hear too from the right hon. Gentleman that the attitude of those who have taken part in this revolution has been an attitude which will tend to a further strengthening of all those in Russia who are associated with the Allies in the successful prosecution of the War. While we all rejoice, as I certainly do, at this vindication of the authority of the democratic power in Russia, we ought to draw a moral from it in this House. We have witnessed to-day a House of Commons engaged in the task of carrying a Vote of Credit of £60,000,000, and it has been somewhat of a humiliation to find that in a matter so vitally affecting the nation and the Empire the Ministerial Benches have been practically empty, notwithstanding that on those benches we have Ministers, Under-Secretaries, and Sub-secretaries, and the secretariat outside the House, which is the latest form of political wisdom that has been created. It is, in my judgment, a regrettable incident in the history of our political institutions that so little interest should be manifested in this question by those who constitute the Government, and those who hide behind the tails of the Government. We have had two counts. My colleagues and I prevented the House from being counted out twice. I should like to know where all those Gentlemen were. They are not all engaged in the successful prosecution of the War. They are not in the War Cabinet. They are not Cabinet Ministers, they are Secretaries, and the least we can expect in respect and justice to the House of Commons is that these Gentlemen would be in their places to keep a House for the right hon. Gentleman (Mr. Bonar Law). I understand that the Secretarial Staff which sits behind the Cabinet Ministers were engaged to-day in looking for each other at the request of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I know anything I say here would have no effect upon them, but at all events they ought to take an example from the right hon. Gentleman himself. I know he wants no compliments from me, but I will offer this opinion, that no Leader of the House has ever shown a greater example of performance of duty, at all cost, with all due attention to the House and respect for its dignity.

When my right hon. Friend (Sir H. Dalziel) intervened we had just heard a very interesting speech. The hon. and gallant Gentleman (Major Hamilton) told us a number of most amusing incidents in connection with the comedy that is carried on at the St. Ermin's Hotel. I do not think he is a lawyer. I think he is a soldier. It is a curious commentary on the conduct of British affairs that you are always getting soldiers to do civilian work, and you are always getting civilians to do soldiers' work.

Major HAMILTON I think my hon. Friend is a little unfair. I am a soldier since the War. I joined the Army in September, 1914. Unfortunately, after having made four efforts to get abroad, I have never been allowed to go abroad. I feel now that any use I might have been in the Army in instructing recruits is passed. There are plenty of other officers who can instruct them. I have, therefore, taken up civilian duties. I am now in civilian clothes, and I hope I shall be out of the Army in a week.

Mr. DEVLIN I make no complaint. I am quite sure that in the Army—and I believe it is true—he has played a very heroic part, and I am sure that he is willing to continue. I am not commenting on him as an individual, I am dealing with the system. I did not know of his official existence at all until he gave us MB character sketch. He told us that he spent his time answering questions put to him by the lord mayors and mayors of cities and towns in this country. He is not a lawyer, and I think it is a considerable waste of time on the part of a gentleman who might be engaged in some more useful occupation. The reason I refer to it is that the lord mayors and mayors in England are much more fortunate in their relationship to the National Service authorities than those who are representatives in this House. When this Bill was on Report stage Member after Member rose from these Benches to ask a germane question with regard to the future administration of the National Service Act in Ireland, but we could not get a single answer from the Minister. We asked him who was to be the Director-General, but he remained as silent as a tomb. If that was such a great State secret, we asked who would be the Under-Secretaries to the Director-General, but he was equally reticent. We could get no information whatever as to who was to conduct the National Service scheme in Ireland under this voluntary system. The reason why we were rising, Member after Member, from these Benches on this point was because, in regard to the National Service scheme, if it is to be successfully carried out, we do not want the same mistakes and blunders made that were made in connection with voluntary recruiting for the Army. We wanted to know whether men of influence, authority, and efficiency were to carry out this work in Ireland. We did not get a single answer. I would respectfully suggest to the Leader of the House that the Chief Secretary for Ireland should be invited to allow the hon. Gentleman opposite to come down to this House, and having successfully answered the questions of forty-nine lord mayors and mayors of England, to answer the representatives of Ireland on the question of National Service.

I believe that in these times when everything is subordinated to war issues, and when we are asked to make the tremendous sacrifices that these Islands are making for the prosecution of the War, we ought not to forget the fundamental principles that lie at the root of our constitutional system, for the greatness of this nation depends upon the respect that is due to the House of Commons as the exponent of the nation's will. If a stranger is brought to this House, as I have brought many New Zealanders, Australians, and Canadians, and he finds that on a great financial issue of this character, when sixty millions of public money are being Voted, there is an empty House of Commons and, still worse, empty Government Benches, and a vast staff behind the Ministers, let those of us who still cling to the ancient and now despised doctrine that public will does count in the determination of public affairs—let us remember that the House of Commons is the last thing left to us for the preservation of the liberties of these Islands.

Mr. BONAR LAW I have just received another communication which I would like to read, but before doing so I may say one or two words. I have listened with pleasure to the speech of the hon. Member who has just sat down. He made one suggestion to my hon. Friend that, instead of answering lord mayors and provosts, he should come here and answer questions. Judging by my experience in the House of Commons, I may say that I would rather he be heckled by a thousand lord mayors than by my hon. Friend.

Mr. FLAVIN Why do you not solve the Irish question?

Mr. BONAR LAW I am now beginning to think myself not an old Parliamentary hand, but nearly an old Member of Parliament, and I have heard Governments attacked on many grounds, but I think that even the hon. Gentleman who spoke last will agree with me that this is the first time a Government has been attacked on the ground that it is neglecting its business because a sufficient number of Members of the House were not present to form a quorum. But,

though I venture to say this in passing, I should like to add that I am personally grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said about myself. What is more important, I am greatly pleased by what he said as indicating, I hope, the feeling of himself and his friends, as well as to the desire which he feels for the successful production of the War. The telegram to which I have referred does not give much news, but, so far as it goes, it is reassuring. It is to this effect: "A telegram just received from Paris states that the Naval Attaché of the Russian Embassy there reports that railways and public services are working again." If I might, I should like to make an appeal to the House. It does not matter to the Government, because we shall not take any other business, but, after all, this is a very serious incident in the history of the War, and I think it would be to the advantage of the House of Commons if we did not continue to discuss it, and I would, therefore, suggest that the Motion should now be carried.

Question put, and agreed to.

Resolution to be reported To-morrow; Committee to sit again To-morrow.

The remaining Orders were read, and postponed.