TEN YEARS OF THE LEAGUE

BY

LORD ROBERT CECIL

Reprinted from the October 15, 1929, Number of
THE LIVING AGE
for Members of the League of Nations Association
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Progress toward Peace

By Lord Robert Cecil

From the Daily Telegraph, London Conservative Daily

As we gathered at Geneva on the site where the League's new headquarters will rise, it was impossible not to recall the crowded and busy days of discussion at the Conference of Paris and the sittings of the Committee charged with the drafting of the Covenant and the final adoption of its proposals by the Conference. Several of my old colleagues of the Covenant Committee—M. Venizelos, once more holding the reins of power in Greece; General Smuts, to whom the Covenant owes so much; M. Hymans, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Belgium; Signor Scialoja, of Italy—live to see, and, I hope, take courage from, the outcome of their labors.

I could have wished that Woodrow Wilson, whose courage and determination made the League possible, and Léon Bourgeois, who brought the critical acuteness and logical spirit of France to the building of it, could have lived to share our gratitude for all that the recent ceremony has symbolized. For behind this removal of the centre of our new international community from the inadequate shelter of a cosmopolitan hotel and a second-rate concert hall to a dignified and abiding home lie a great truth and a great hope.

The truth is that the League of Nations has become, instead of a frail experiment, an indispensable organ of coöperation for the great part of the Governments of the world. The hope is that acceptance of this truth will soon be strong enough among the peoples of the world to
oblige their Governments to put aside the costly and hate-provoking implements of conflict that survive from an age of armed rivalry and are now so flagrantly inconsistent with the cooperation centred in Geneva, which increases yearly in effectiveness.

Then and then only shall we see a League strong enough to stifle any outbreak of lawless violence, however formidable the aggressor. Herein lies the chief task of the decade before us; but, before looking ahead, it is fitting that we should take stock of the present situation and recall the progress of the League of Nations during the ten years that are past.

PUBLIC opinion upon the League of Nations in many countries still lags behind reality. The League as it lives and works to-day is something very different from the comparatively impotent organization, still overshadowed by remains of the great Allied machine of war, which groped its way into European life nine or ten years ago. Yet it is, I find, still by the standards of 1921 or 1922, if not of 1919, that vast numbers of people judge the multifarious activities of the League to-day. This is perhaps due to the profound disillusionment produced in the public mind by the disastrous political and economic consequences of the War and the inability of the new League, in which so many hopes had been reposed, to put the world quickly to rights.

The refusal of the United States of America in March, 1920, to ratify the Peace Treaty or to enter the League seemed, in the eyes of many, to be a deathblow to the new institution. Some religious leaders, though by no means all of them, already reluctant to commit themselves to support of the League, were less than ever disposed to entangle eternal verities with what seemed likely to be an ephemeral political experiment. Very few of the great newspapers of Europe or America either troubled to have special representatives to follow the League's work, or were able to resist in their editorial columns the prevailing cynicism or pessimism concerning its future.

Hardly anywhere among the peoples of the defeated powers were any voices to be heard in favor of an institution vitiated, as was commonly believed, by the domination of their victorious enemies. Those who remained steadfast in their belief in a great future for the League of Nations were described, as a matter of course, as unpractical idealists with their heads in the clouds.

Three factors, I believe, have particularly contributed to establishing the prestige of the League after so troubled an infancy—the calibre of the Secretariat; the early and successful encounters of the League with the political realities of a ruined Continent; and the establishment of contact between the League and public opinion. Upon this last point, I am convinced that the voluntary League of Nations societies
now at work in forty different countries have rendered the League an
inestimable service.

The competence and integrity of the International Civil Service
assembled by Sir Eric Drummond at the Secretariat and by M. Albert
Thomas at the International Labor Office were among the happy
surprises of post-War Europe. Herein the critics were quickly con-
founded. For, instead of a babel of officials each intriguing on behalf
of his own Government—which was freely prophesied—the world woke
up to find a body of expert men and women of forty nationalities work-
ing strenuously and smoothly for a common end. By deeds more elo-
quent than words the League’s staff have made it clear that the organ-
ized community of nations is an ideal worth living for and—as shown
by the self-sacrifice of those who gave their lives to save Europe from
typhus and cholera in 1920—worth dying for.

It WOULD be difficult to exaggerate what the world owes to the
Secretary-General himself and to the system of continuity and cohe-
rence which he has given to the work of the Council, the Assembly, and
the many technical conferences of the League. His international posi-
tion is extraordinary. Everyone trusts him—no one is jealous of him.
M. Albert Thomas’s vigorous personality has not only imposed a re-
markable standard of efficiency upon his office, but shamed not a few
procrastinating Governments into ratifying conventions for improved
conditions of labor.

To Señor Madariaga all of us who work for international disarma-
ment owe a real debt of gratitude. To Sir Arthur Salter, the architect
of Austrian reconstruction, of the financial schemes which saved Hun-
gary, Greece, and Bulgaria from insolvency, and of the World Eco-
nomic Conference, Europe is in no small degree indebted for the
comparative tranquillity which it now enjoys.

If the calibre of the League’s personnel did much to win respect
for that institution, this was soon justified by the League’s first encoun-
ters with grave emergencies. Many of the tasks committed to the League
by the clauses of the Peace Treaties were, indeed, somewhat embar-
brassing. The administration of the Saar and of Danzig and the deter-
mination of the Polish-German frontier, following upon the Upper
Silesian plebiscite, were among those which certainly brought no popu-
ularity to the League. It was otherwise with the unforeseen aftermath
of the War. Dr. Nansen’s achievement in restoring to their homes, from
1920 to 1922, 427,000 hapless prisoners of war, scattered through
Russia and Central Europe, was a great human service swiftly—and
economically—discharged, which made it no longer possible to judge
the League purely by political prejudices or preferences.

In 1921 began, under Dr. Nansen’s guidance, the task which soon
became a Herculean one, of providing food, medical attention, and ultimately work and homes, for hundreds and thousands of Russian and Armenian refugees. His dramatic appeal to the Assembly in 1922 to come to the aid of the panic-stricken fugitives from Asia Minor, when news of the burning of Smyrna came to Geneva, will not soon be forgotten in the annals of the League.

It is now possible to look back upon a great work of mercy almost completed, for of 1,500,000 refugees in Greece all but a few are now settled in towns or on the land and furnished with productive employment. It was, then, a League to which a vast number of human beings already owed their safety, if not their very lives, that in the four years from 1922 to 1926 faced, one after another, the political crises likely to lead to war, which, under the terms of its Covenant, were referred to it for peaceful settlement. There is hardly a single international frontier between the Baltic Sea and the Near East concerning which the Council was not called upon to mediate, or arbitrate, or conciliate.

The first threat of its enforcing sanctions to stop aggression availed to arrest Yugoslav incursions into Albania in 1921. In the next year its judgment upon the sovereignty exercised over the Aaland Islands was accepted by Finland and Sweden. Its minor interventions between Czechoslovakia and Poland, between Austria and Hungary, and upon several of the Balkan frontiers were no less successful. The régime which it established for the much contested city of Memel was accepted as a model for a great international port. The Council promptly arrested hostilities between Greece and Bulgaria in October, 1925, and its settlement of the Mosul frontier between Turkey, Iraq, and the British Empire did much to establish its prestige as a pacific agency among the Great Powers.

If it failed to secure a satisfactory settlement in the matter of the Vilna controversy, if it did not obtain complete justice in the crises which culminated in the Italian bombardment of Corfu in 1923, Mr. Baldwin is, I believe, right in insisting, as he has often done, that it was due to the pressure of the League and its power to focus public opinion upon the contending parties that neither conflict degenerated into war.

More convincing, probably, to the unbiased observer of international politics than the negative successes of the League of Nations in stopping a recrudescence of fighting in a war-weary world was the remarkable constructive work to which I have alluded. The Financial Conference of Brussels in 1920 had far-reaching effects in winning over the majority of European Governments to a system of sound public finance after the inflation and disorganization of the War period. But its virtues appeared to many theoretic. Severely practical was the finan-
cial restoration of Austria, begun, after the Allies had despaired of the task, in October, 1922, and completed in a couple of years.

To this achievement of good European statesmanship, which saved Central Europe from an unknown extent of economic ruin and revolutionary chaos, I trace the beginning of that most encouraging confidence of great British and American financiers in the League, which made it comparatively easy in future for it to raise or guarantee loans for such purposes as the financial rehabilitation of Hungary or the settlement of the refugees in Greece and Bulgaria. The last three years of the League’s work have—doubtless as a result of this increased confidence both of financiers, Governments, and public opinion—borne valuable fruit in the promotion of coöperation in almost all the spheres in which Governments stand in need of mutual assistance, from the organization of communications and transit to the mobilization of medical science in the interests of the health of all nations.

THE World Economic Conference of 1927 is, perhaps, the greatest example of this new conception of world-wide coöperation in action. But it by no means stands alone. The International Labor Organization has been equally active, and it can now point to twenty-seven International Conventions which have received 362 ratifications, and to at least as many recommendations accepted in the interests of just and humane conditions of labor, and to 700 laws passed by various national legislatures as the consequence of its endeavors.

It is not enough to organize the routine of peace. I am the last to depreciate continuous and consistent coöperation by Governments through the League in such matters as through traffic on railways; simplifying customs formalities; withstanding the spread of disease; the betterment of trade; the protection of any class of human beings which is exploited upon an international scale; or any such useful purpose. But I cannot believe that even the cumulative result of these useful and necessary measures will suffice to deter nations steeped in age-long rivalries from going to war, once national passions have been roused.

The knowledge that the League, even as it is at present constituted, provides ample opportunities for seeking a peaceful solution for any international difficulty is, of course, a powerful deterrent to war, provided these alternative methods of settlement are well known to the public and provided they are trusted.

But it is vital that supporters of the League should not live in a fool’s paradise. Let us boldly look the chief danger to the League in the face. How can ordinary people be expected to have that confidence in the League’s power to effect a just settlement which some of us have, even if the means of pacific settlement are improved, as I hope to see them improved, so long as members of the League as a whole, and particu-
larly its most powerful members, are armed to the teeth? I have been attacked for lack of judgment because I insist, in and out of season, upon the need of making Article 8 of the League's Covenant really effective—that is, upon reducing the armaments of the world so considerably that all may see that they are not intended for attack according to the old laws of the jungle. But I remain more than ever convinced that what saps the faith of the multitude in the League, as it exists after these ten encouraging years of life and work, is the sense that the Governments composing it are insincere, and insincere because they are perpetually prepared for war.

There is no need to exaggerate the actual strength of naval, military, or air armaments of a particular power. It is perfectly true that the British Army, for instance, has been reduced, even compared with its pre-War standard. Even though concrete expression has yet to be given to the abandonment of rivalry between the British and American fleets (which in their heart of hearts all good Englishmen and all good Americans desire), still, something has been done in that direction by the Washington Treaties, and we have declared definitely against competition with America. I know, too, that the numbers of the conscript armies of France, Belgium, and several other European states have been reduced.

But I believe a skilled and observant critic could point to increases in efficiency which for strategic purposes more than make up for any diminution in numbers or in the size of the ships. This is abundantly true of the air forces of the world, where the danger to be feared comes not so much from the number and size of aéroplanes as from the increase in speed and horse power during the last two years. It is no exaggeration to say that there is a beginning of a race in air armaments, at least so far as quality and technique are concerned, very comparable to the old race in naval armaments.

To renounce war as an instrument of national policy and thereby to fortify very greatly the Covenant system for the prevention of war is all to the good. But, as has been said often enough on both sides of the Atlantic, reduction of armaments is undoubtedly the acid test of sincerity for countries that accept the Kellogg Pact. It is, therefore, to my mind, useless for the League of Nations to multiply its efforts for the best possible organization of the community of nations in peace time if the moral foundation upon which it rests is constantly to be undermined by a suspicion of insincerity among the ordinary men and women of the world; the more so as all governmental organizations are only too apt to be suspected of ulterior motives.

It is now an old story how, since 1921, we have labored in one Commission after another, under the League of Nations, to bring about
a general treaty for a reduction and limitation of armaments by international agreement, which is the only way by which armaments can be effectively reduced. The Preparatory Disarmament Commission, created two years ago, has done much and may do much more.

Among the Governments of Continental powers who have become devoted to the conscript system there is already a welcome disposition to reduce the number of men engaged upon military service at any given time, and consequently the number who would form the effective national army in an emergency, by reducing the period of service. In this direction—that is, in the gradual diminution of the annual contingent of recruits; in the reduction of the period of service; and in the restriction of military budgets and war material—there is real hope of progress. The ideal military organization of Europe would be the universal adoption of something like the Swiss system of a civic militia, which, though useful for the actual defense of territory, has never been and will never be a menace to any of its neighbors.

It is, I know, the avowed policy of Great Britain to bring about such an agreement between America and the other naval powers as will provide not only for a real equality between the English and American fleets, but for the reduction of all classes of naval vessels. Not only will such an agreement have great intrinsic value; its importance as an example for military and air reductions can hardly be overestimated. For naval disarmament by itself is no solution of the problem.

Who is there who believes that the reduction of British and American fleets would by itself make peace more secure? Its importance from the point of view of world peace is not that it will secure peace, but that without it we cannot get that general reduction of armaments which will do so. Once Britain and America are agreed, they can use their great influence to bring about the lessening of the forces of land and air. It may well be that their cooperation might banish aeroplanes from private warfare, and leave them reserved for the maintenance of peace and order on behalf of international authority.

There is no difficulty in formulating our adequate programme of international disarmament. The great problem is to get it adopted. The policy laid down for this country at Geneva is adequate and inspiring. If we succeed in advancing arbitration, in realizing a combination of the Kellogg Pact with the Covenant, in making effective the Finnish proposal for financial assistance in time of war, in remodeling the German proposal for providing better means for the prevention of war, in doing something to control the manufacture and traffic in arms, and finally in drafting a skeleton treaty of disarmament, much will have been done. Is it too much to ask for the support of all sections of my fellow countrymen in this great and beneficent task?