Viscount Cecil's Presidential Address to the General Council of the League of Nations Union, London, November 20th, 1942
We meet in the full tide of the first great success we have had since the Battle of Britain. I am not going to enlarge on that, it is not part of our business, except to say that it is the prelude of final victory—which I have always been convinced we should attain—and it is the prelude of any settlement we may be able to establish after the war. The central fact we have to grasp in our organisation is that our work will become more and increasingly urgent as we get nearer to the final victory.

I am very glad to notice that a good many people who have hitherto remained silent—leaders both on this side of the Atlantic and on the other side—are beginning to speak of the settlement after the war. I noticed the other day that Mr. Law, the Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, explained to the House of Commons that European peoples were getting more and more confident that our victory would be the end of the war, and they were asking what we were going to do with our victory when we got it. I believe that is profoundly true—and I want to say that when that victory will come no one of us can know. It may come this year or next year or some time (I will not conclude that well-known verse because I am convinced it will come; therefore “never” is inappropriate), but whenever it comes it will be a tremendous call to the people of this country and to us of this Union to exert ourselves in establishing a settlement which may really be a settlement for some time to come—I hope for ever.

Dr. Gilbert Murray said to me the other day that he was struck with the fact that though, at the outset of this war, there was a great deal of very natural discouragement on the part of the advocates of the League of Nations, yet, in his judgment, that was passing away and there was growing up all over the country a revival of the idea of the League. I believe that is true. I think there is a re-growth of the idea of the League of Nations, and I attribute it to a very natural cause, namely, that as the war proceeded, particularly after the Atlantic Charter, it was seen that it had become an absolute necessity for us to have some kind of organisation to maintain peace in the world. And when people began to discuss what kind of organisation that should be, they were driven to the proposition that something on the lines of the League offered the best chance of a permanent settlement; it was the Greatest Common Measure of agreement that could be found on this question. I observe, for instance, in the letter I was reading to you yesterday that Field-Marshal Smuts is clearly of that opinion. He talks about rebuilding on the foundation that we had erected, the structure of the new League, and other speakers seem to me, in all directions, coming round to that proposition. The Lord Privy Seal, Sir Stafford Cripps, made a speech recently—one of the most detailed speeches coming from Ministers—on what he looked for in regard to the settlement after the war. He did not say directly whether he was in favour of the League of Nations, but the whole of his argument and the whole of his proposals were on the same lines as the League. He talked about an international air force that should be under the control of the central authority; he talked about a general World Council which, as far as I could see, was indistinguishable from the old Assembly of the League; and he talked about subsidiary organisations in various parts of the world. Here he was a little less precise than in other parts of his speech, but he seemed to conceive something in the nature of the Little Entente or the Scandinavian understanding which should fit into the main organisation of the general council. If that be compared with the Union's Statement of Policy World
Settlement after the War you will see that there is very little substantial difference, if any, between Sir Stafford’s views and our own.

I take these merely as instances. We have had similar pronouncements, more or less pointing the same way, from the other side of the Atlantic and from a great many of the Continental statesmen who are present in this country.

Sir Stafford made one observation which I rather want you to consider carefully. He emphasised very strongly that the smaller Powers would have to give up a portion of their sovereignty. We all admit that, if we have thought about it at all. If you are to have an organisation for peace, all those who come into that organisation must give up the right of making war except under the conditions which are set out under the Covenant of the League and which must be set out in any organisation for peace. But I want to make two observations.

It was not the small Powers that brought the League to grief—it was the failure of the Great Powers to act up to their obligations. I do not want to go back on past controversy, but that seems to me abundantly established by the facts.

The second proposition is this—that I am perfectly convinced that you must build your new organisation without trying to destroy that principle of nationality which is so strongly implanted in the peoples of the world. After all, nothing has been clearer in these years than that the peoples of different countries are prepared to sacrifice all they have—liberty, property, life itself—in defence of their country, in defence of the principle of the independence of the country to which they belong, and with that tremendous feeling which has displayed itself all over the world it is nonsense to talk about abolishing nationality or sovereignty. You can induce people to accept such limitations of sovereignty as all shall agree to on behalf of peace, but they will not—and I do not wish that they should—abandon their pride in their own nationality and the patriotism which they feel so strongly.

Let us just consider what it was that the League set out to do. The League of Nations, and the League of Nations Union in consequence, exists for the maintenance of peace. That is the principal and chief object set out very clearly in the preamble of the Covenant, which says: by promoting international co-operation and what we now call collective security the State Members will maintain the peace of the World. These were the two methods pointed out in the Covenant, international co-operation and security; that is to say, an agreement among the nations that they would, in fact, prevent aggression. These are the two objects, and I think it is very important that we should maintain our clear view of what we stand for in this organisation. We cannot transform our organisation into a means of general reform in pursuit of this or that theory of economics. That is not our purpose; our purpose is the maintenance of peace and the prevention of aggression. It is clearly set out in the Covenant and it is, I think, right to confine our efforts to that great cause, because it must be the basis of all progress and all advance. If you do not have peace in the world, you may forget any ideas of progress and advance of a domestic character. The means which were suggested in the Covenant are, first, an agreement amongst the peace-loving nations that they will combine to suppress aggression, and secondly, the provision of a system of peaceful settlement of all international differences. It is quite true that the Covenant goes on to say—and I go on to say—that that is not enough, but that is the first step. A barrier against war in the first place; just as when you are clearing a flooded site you must first get rid of the water and build your dam round the district you are going to improve. But that is only the first step;
when you have done that you can proceed effectively to promote, with every hope of success, such improvements as you can get the nations to agree to. I do not want you to stop there. But do not, I beg you, be betrayed by your anxiety for reform into forgetting that the first thing you have to do is to secure peace. After that, general progress. Among other things, as soon as possible there must be a general reduction of armaments; but do not let us give any undertakings that we will reduce armaments until we are satisfied that the danger from aggression is past. And in the meantime we must insist that those countries which have shown themselves on more than one occasion to be determined on a policy of aggression must remain disarmed until they have abandoned that policy.

That, briefly, seems to me to be the lines on which we ought to move forward.

Now I want to say one other thing. I am not quite sure whether all our distinguished leaders have really got into their souls and the marrow of their bones the immense difficulties that are going to face us in the peace. I look with positive dismay on the facile prophesies of a new order, a new heaven and a new earth which find their place in political speeches on one side or the other. Believe me, we are in for an extremely difficult period after the war. I do beg you to consider what is the condition of large tracts of Europe at the present time, and it certainly will not be any better, it will be worse by the time we reach the peace. The whole of the governments of many countries have been destroyed; Czechoslovakia, practically no government left except a dictatorship from Berlin; Yugoslavia, the most vigorous part of the population wandering in the mountains and forests of that country and maintaining guerilla war; the occupied districts of Russia in much the same situation, and so it is in many of the other countries. This is the situation you will have to deal with. I say you, as representing the British citizens—you will have to deal with this frightful confusion caused by the mad and wicked policy of the Axis Powers. You will have to restore things somehow; you will have, in the first place, to minister to the acute wants of these people, the starvation that is getting worse and worse in Europe; you will have to restore order and you will have to do something which is more difficult, you will have to create the confidence between man and man without which civilised government is impossible. I think that can be done, but it cannot be done by people who have their minds fixed on some distant form of social and economic reform independent of the urgent necessity for re-establishing civilisation in so many parts of the world. By all means go on thinking of it when you have done that, but do not let it for a moment interfere with the most urgent part of your duties, which is to lay a foundation on which the new structure can be built.

I know these remarks will not be very popular with everyone. We are out to make a real settlement of the world; if we do not do that, in another twenty or thirty years we shall be faced with the same situation as we are faced with now, and far worse; but every time we fail, every time we show that our efforts to organise and preserve peace are useless, every time that happens it will be more difficult to establish civilisation in this world. Therefore that is the urgent thing we have to do.

And I return to what I said just now. The key to the position is not with the Small Powers, but with the Great Powers. They are the people who have the actual physical power to preserve peace. I had the duty of studying the position of the different Powers at Geneva for a good many years, and I came to the conclusion, which I believe every honest man will come to also, that where the Great Powers were determined on peace and were carrying out a vigorous
peace policy, the Small Powers were only too anxious and ready to assist in every way they could. Where the Great Powers were not ready to take that lead or risk, the Small Powers were unable to do anything effective to preserve the peace of the world. The whole thing rests with the Great Powers. I do not mean to say they are not greatly helped when the Small Powers assist them. But with the lead of the Great Powers the Small Powers will always be ready to assist. Therefore we must see that we in this country do not forget the horrors of war too quickly, as we did perhaps in the twenty years which have intervened between the two wars. Do let us remember what it is that we are going through now, not so much in this country, but all over the world. Read the impartial accounts of the horrors that are being carried out in Russia, Greece, Yugoslavia, Norway and and many other countries, and reflect, as I do reflect, that had our country pursued a more courageous and a more vigorous policy during those twenty years there is every reason to believe that we should not now be enduring these evils. We really must not let it happen again.

We in this society have been entrusted with the great standard of Peace; we have, I believe, a cause which, if we can make it prevail, will maintain the peace of the world. That is a tremendous responsibility for all of us. Do not let us, for any reason whatever, however good, however plausible, abandon that chief and essential part of our duty, because if we do we shall be answerable for the consequences—and the consequences are too terrible to contemplate.

I do hope you will reflect on what I say and, putting aside any prejudice you may have, that you will really make up your minds to redouble your efforts to bring to a successful conclusion the great cause we have in hand.