The Disarmament Conference has resumed its labours with a debate on the Plan put forward by the Government of France. That debate, whether it be judged by the close and informed argument of the speeches which were made, or by the interest with which it was followed, was inferior to none of the previous debates which the Conference has had.

The impression which was left in the minds of some of those who heard it was one of pessimism. They found in the speeches a definite contradiction, an undisguised conflict, in the points expressed especially in the points of view of the most powerful States represented in the Conference; and they found no hint of the means by which this conflict could be removed. There is to be a result, some compromise must be made; but the debate, they said, gave no indication of the lines which such a compromise could follow.

On other people — and I was among them — the debate made a different impression. I saw in it a current of thought, continually growing in strength, which I had not heretofore discerned. It was expressed most clearly by the British Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr Eden, who said in plain terms that the time had come when the Conference must make
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because the Governments, in whose hands rests the power to make
decisions, seemed to be unwilling to take the risks which
making decisions would involve.

I believe that period of the Conference has passed, and
that we are now entering the phase of the Conference in which
the definite preparation of the Disarmament Treaty must be
accomplished. To my mind, the fact is of capital importance.
We have had a long period of preparation, examination by experts,
and of exchange of general views. There is no aspect of the
Disarmament problem upon which we have not accumulated a vast
store of useful material on which the delegations do not
know what position they respectively take up. No one can
complain that any question has not been adequately considered
and prepared. We are adequately for the task which must now be
undertaken.

If he has rightly understood what the members of the
General Commission have said, if we are indeed entering the
period when definite decisions about disarmament must be taken,
that means that the next few weeks and months will be the most
critical stage of the Conference's existence. We are within
measurable distance of knowing whether governments will make
the compromises required to bring success, or whether they will
take the responsibility of allowing the Conference to fail.

In what conditions will this decisive stage in the work
of the Conference be begun?

As President of the Conference, I was presented the other
day with a Joint Declaration drawn up by those International
Organisations who voiced the wishes of the peoples to the
Conference on February 6th 1932. In this Declaration the
spokesman of organised international public opinion claimed
that during the year since the Conference began general
thinking about disarmament had made great progress. They
claimed that "the conceptions of what the Conference might and
should achieve have steadily progressed under the pressure of
opinion and the strength in logic of the case for disarmament".

I believe that the authors of this Declaration were right. And it is not only public opinion which has moved forward. Governments have made official proposals to the Conference which, a year ago, would have seemed Utopian. The Government of the United States have proposed, among other things, the total abolition of all tanks and all large mobile artillery and the reduction by approximately one third of the Navies of the World. In their proposals they made no provision for the replacement of remaining units in the categories of warships which Germany is not allowed to have — the capital ship of over 10,000 tons displacement, aircraft carriers, submarines. The Government of Great Britain have proposed the total abolition of military and naval aviation of every kind and the organisation of some effective international control over civil aviation to prevent its abuse for purposes of war. The Government of France have proposed the reduction both of the number of Land Effectives and of their period of service, and they prepared a scheme for unifying the Land Forces of all European Continental countries upon a model of short term national militias. These three examples show how greatly the ideas of governments, even of the most powerfully armed countries, have developed in the last twelve months.

Moreover, the Conference has received the agreement made by the Five Powers on December 11th 1932 — an agreement by which "one of the principles that should guide the Conference .... should be the grant to Germany and to the other Powers disarmed by the Treaty, of equality of rights in a system which would provide security for all nations," — and the spokesman of more than one government which took part in the negotiations for this agreement have declared that Equality must be sought not by Rearmament of Germany and her Allies but by the Disarmament of others.

These are surely grounds for thinking that members of the
Conference should enter on the new phase of their work with hope.

Yet no-one who understands the situation can doubt that in the mind of every delegate there is misgiving and apprehension. If opinion has moved forward, "confidence" has gone back. No-one voiced that feeling more plainly than the Foreign Minister of Spain. He spoke of the "most serious crisis through which the Covenant and the Pact of Paris are at present passing", and he went on to say that the "real source of the insecurity prevailing among peoples today must be sought in the growing scepticism of the value of international pacts, scepticism that is spreading more and more as their weakness is demonstrated by bitter experience". Again, I believe that the Foreign Minister is right. Without that "confidence" it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make a Disarmament Treaty. Confidence has been diminished because belief in the efficacy of the new international law has decreased less, because distrust between different countries has increased. If, therefore, the Conference is to reach a result it is vital that confidence should be restored.

How can that be done? I believe it can only be done if every Delegation seeks, by a conscious and sustained effort of good will, to understand the point of view of others, to keep the supreme purpose of strengthening international law continually before its eyes, and to conduct its negotiations with the deliberate conviction that the success of the Conference is the supreme interest of its own nation as of every nation in the world. Translated into practical terms that means that delegations must be ready to work, not in a spirit of partisanship or of obstinate adherence to one set of proposals as against another set of proposals, but on the contrary in a position to draw freely all that is best from the pool of ideas which are now at its disposal. It means that they must be ready to give up some things to which they attach importance, in order that a treaty which will seem fair to all may be arrived at. It means that
they must be ready not only to reduce their armament but to prove to each other and to their peoples that they are firmly determined to make the League of Nations a living institution, a real and vital guarantee of international peace. And when they have proved their determination to make the new method of peaceful settlement replace the old arbitration of war, they must complete their work by drawing up a Treaty which shall effect immediate and substantial reductions in armaments, visible to all the world.  

It is only in this spirit, only with these fundamental principles in mind, that the Conference can succeed. I for one, still believe in its success — for I have yet to meet the men who will face the responsibility of letting it fail.