

1914.
NEW ZEALAND.

SPEECH OF THE RIGHT HON. H. H. ASQUITH

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON THE OUTBREAK OF WAR.

Laid on the Table of the House of Representatives by leave.

(By Cable.)

THE following is a summary of the speech delivered by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons in proposing a vote for £100,000,000 for measures of security of country, to conduct naval and military operations, assisting food-supplies, promoting continuance of trade, industry, and business communications, and expenses arising out of the existence of war.

After referring to the strenuous and persistent efforts to secure peace, the Prime Minister laid stress on communications made by the German Chancellor on the 29th July, in which he offered, in return for British neutrality, that Germany would not make territorial acquisition at the expense of France, but declined to give this assurance as regards French possessions. He offered to respect the neutrality of Holland, but would only promise to respect Belgian integrity when war was over. The Chancellor observed that English neutrality in the present crisis might form a basis of a future understanding. This proposal in effect granted assent behind the back of France to annexation by Germany of the whole of the French extra-European possessions, and bartering away treaty obligation with regard to Belgian neutrality. The House had read the pathetic appeal of the King of the Belgians, and when the Belgians were fighting for their lives what would the position of Great Britain have been if they had assented to this infamous proposal, and what return would have been made for the betrayal of friends and dishonour when under obligation? Nothing but a promise given by a Power which at the very moment was announcing its intention of violating its treaty and inviting us to do the same. If the Government had temporized they would have covered themselves with dishonour and betrayed the interests of the country of which they were trustees.

The Prime Minister referred to the offer of the British Government if peace could be preserved and some arrangement made to which Germany could be a party by which she could be assured that no aggressive or hostile policy would be pursued against her or her allies by Britain, France, and Russia jointly or separately. The earnestness and sincerity of this offer was obvious. In spite of great provocation, His Majesty's Government had persisted to the very last moment in efforts for peace, and war had been forced upon them, but they had thought it their duty to go to war because they believed, and the country believed, that the cause was just. Great Britain was fighting in the first place to fulfil a solemn international obligation, which in private life would have been regarded as an obligation not only of law but of honour, and secondly to vindicate the principle that small nationalities were not to be crushed in defiance of international good faith by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering Power. No nation ever entered into a great controversy with a clearer and stronger conviction that it was fighting not for aggression, not for the maintenance of its own selfish interests, but in the defence of principles the maintenance of which was vital to the civilization of the world. It was essential that all the resources of the Empire should be thrown into the scale, and for that purpose he asked for a vote of credit for £100,000,000; and he announced the decision to add 500,000 men to the Army. The Government was encouraged to do this without sanction by their sense of necessity, by the knowledge that India was prepared to send certainly two divisions, and that every one of the self-governing dominions spontaneously and unasked had already tendered to the utmost limits of their possibilities both in men and money every help they could afford the Empire in a moment of need.

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