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Middle East (Situation): Debated in the Commons Chamber, Monday, 3 December 1956

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Summary:

In July 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) nationalized the Suez Canal Company, surprising the world. The government of France, in whose capital of Paris the company was headquartered, and the British government, the company's plurality shareholder, sought to reverse nationalization in court, but failed—even though they clad their case in the language not of imperial self-interest but, rather, of international public interest. The time in which such language was somewhat acceptable, even at home, was passing, and the Suez Crisis played a big part in this final act.

At the same time, the two governments early on after the canal nationalization decided to remove Nasser by force, for re-compensation was not their central concern. France believed Nasser was enabling the FLN, which in 1954 had started Algeria's War for Independence, and Britain wanted some say in the canal, which had for decades been its worldwide empire's "swing-door," as a member of parliament, Anthony Eden (1897-1977), called it in 1929. In August 1956 France began discussing a joint operation with Israel, which wanted Nasser gone, too, and the Red Sea opened for Israel-bound ships. In early October the two were joined by Britain. On the 29th, Israel invaded the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. On the 30th, France and Britain gave Israel and Egypt a 12-hour ultimatum to cease hostilities, or they would intervene—and Anglo-French forces bombed Egyptian forces from the 31st and on November 5-6 occupied the canal's northern tip. Although a power play, "Operation Musketeer," like the court case, could not be an open imperial move anymore, then, and did not present itself to the world as such. No matter: especially in colonies and postcolonial countries, people were outraged.

More problematically for France and Britain, Washington was incredulous. This Middle Eastern affair triggered the worst crisis of the 1950s between America's rising international empire and Europe's descending empires, and indeed clarified and

accelerated that descent. President Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969) fumed that Prime Ministers Anthony Eden and Guy Mollet (1905-1977) had disregarded his administration's opposition to military action. Worse, they had deceived him about their intentions. And worst, their attack on Egypt undermined the supreme US tenet: Soviet containment. The Americans were by association tainted by their NATO allies' imperialist move while the Soviets looked good—on November 5 they offered Egypt troops and threatened to nuke London, Paris, and Tel Aviv—and that although they had just repressed an uprising in Hungary.

On the very day of the ultimatum, October 30, Eisenhower washed his hands of that move on live US television, and the US mission at the UN organized a cease-fire resolution vote in the Security Council. France and Britain vetoed it. Although sharing its European allies' emotions about Nasser, the US administration withheld critical oil and monetary supplies from them to bring them to heel and withdraw from Egypt—after which, it promised, they would be warmly welcomed back. It ceased most bilateral communications and froze almost all everyday social interactions with its two allies, even cancelling a scheduled visit by Eden. And it badgered its allies at the UN, supporting an Afro-Asian resolution that on November 24 called Israel, Britain, and France to withdraw forthwith. On December 3, the British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd took the floor in the House of Commons.

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The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

(Mr. Selwyn Lloyd)

With your permission. Mr. Speaker, and that of the House, I wish to make a statement.

Last Thursday, I was able to give the House only an interim account of my visit to the United Nations. I promised to speak more fully today when our conversations with the French Government had been completed. Since Thursday I have also been able to get further clarifications of the position from New York and we have been in touch with the Commonwealth Governments.

Her Majesty's Government and the French Government have now taken certain decisions. We are in complete agreement about them. These decisions follow upon the two Resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 24th November. The first Resolution called for the withdrawal of the Anglo-French forces forthwith. But, as I told the House, Mr. Cabot Lodge, the representative of the United States, interpreted "forthwith" to mean a phased withdrawal. That was exactly the expression which we had used ourselves.

The second Resolution was equally important. It called for the early clearance of the Canal and the restoration of its use to international shipping, and entrusted the Secretary-General with the task of making the necessary arrangements.

Before commenting on these two Resolutions I think it right to remind the House of the broad framework within which the events of the last few months must be considered. In view of the debate next Wednesday and Thursday, I believe that this reminder may be helpful.

For the last ten years we have been living with a worldwide struggle going on between Communism and the free world. The introduction of nuclear weapons has made a global war unattractive to the aggressor. The Soviet, therefore, has used the methods of political subversion from within and military pressure from without.

The existence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has halted the direct advance of Russia across Europe to the sea. But all the time there has been an open flank in the Middle East which Russia has been making a determined effort to turn. Certain factors have developed there to her advantage. There have been hostilities smouldering between Israel and the Arab States, and the United Nations has so far not been able to solve that problem at all. The situation has been deteriorating rather than improving. At the same time, Colonel Nasser has come to power with his plans for the aggrandisement of Egypt and the subjection to his domination of the material resources of the Arab countries. The seizure of the Suez Canal was part of that design.

The Arab-Israel tension has afforded opportunity for Soviet mischief making. The large supply—

Mrs. Castle

On a point of order. Is it in order, Sir, for the Foreign Secretary to take the time of the House now to make his next Wednesday's speech on the Suez question?

Mr. Speaker

It is quite in order.

Mr. Donnelly

May I seek your guidance, Mr. Speaker? It is one of the accepted traditions of this House that statements are statements of fact, not arguments. When a Minister of the Crown makes a statement, with no Question before the House—[An HON. MEMBER: "He should be listened to."]—the House is in considerable difficulty if he indulges in argument.

Mr. Speaker

Nothing whatsoever has been said which in in any degree out of order. What are questions of fact and not are very frequently matters of opinion.

Mr. S. Silverman

Further to that point of order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman himself said he was making this statement having regard to the debate next Wednesday and Thursday. While, of course, it has always been the custom of the House to permit

Ministers to make at the end of Questions, when there is no Question before the House, statements of fact or statements of policy, what the right hon. and learned Gentleman appears to be doing is entering upon a full discussion of international affairs over the past ten years. If that is in order, will it be in order for the rest of the House, in questioning him afterwards, to ask him questions about that?

Mr. Fell

Is it not perfectly clear, Mr. Speaker, that had the Foreign Secretary not attempted to make a very full statement today he would immediately have been accused by the Opposition of withholding facts?

Mr. Speaker

No point of order has been raised yet.

Mr. Lloyd

The Arab-Israel tension has afforded opportunity for Soviet mischief making. The large supply of Soviet arms to Colonel Nasser put him very much under Soviet influence. The Bagdad Pact gave a measure of security against direct Soviet penetration from the North, but the arming of Syria and Egypt was no doubt intended to turn its flank also.

Let there be no misunderstanding. The situation was deteriorating. It was one which sooner or later was likely to lead to war. The only doubtful question was the scope or extent of that war. A general conflagration in the Middle East would have been disastrous for many countries, not least our own. It was against that background that on 29th October major hostilities began between Israel and Egypt.

The French and British Governments decided immediately to intervene. We are quite sure that, by our timely action, we not only rapidly halted local hostilities, but forestalled the development of a general war throughout the whole Middle East and perhaps far beyond. I am sure that the whole House would like to pay tribute to the conduct of the fighting Services who performed their task so skilfully and, at the same time, took great care to minimise casualties and damage. As soon as the two parties agreed to a cease-fire, we also gave orders to cease our military action.

Our second purpose was to interpose a force to prevent the resumption of fighting. That is one reason why we made the request to station detachments in Port Said, Ismailia and Suez for a temporary period. The Prime Minister made it clear at the time that this would only be for a temporary period. Then on 1st November he stated that we should be glad if the United Nations would take over the physical task of preserving peace. The conception of an international force came into being and gained rapid support. We believe that the character and composition of the force will shortly make it capable of carrying out these obligations. I gave details of the build-up last Thursday. I will not repeat them. We have to remember that the strength of the force depends not only on its actual size but on the sanction that lies behind it. It is perhaps worth recalling that the position in Berlin has been held for ten years by a small force because behind it lay the whole organised strength of the Atlantic Alliance.

So far as the composition of the United Nations Emergency Force is concerned, the Secretary-General has made it clear that it is for his decision. With regard to its functions, these are in accordance with the Assembly Resolutions of 2nd, 5th and 7th November. The Secretary-General has also made it clear that it is for him and the Assembly to decide when its tasks have been discharged.

Another vitally important result of our actions has been that the Russian designs have been exposed and dislocated. It is to be hoped that the free world will use the breathing space that we have provided to frustrate them altogether. But there are serious dangers ahead in the Middle East. Although Russia has suffered a reverse—

Mr. Paget

On a point of order. Owing to the noise, I was not quite able to hear. Did the right hon. and learned Gentleman say that Russia has suffered a reverse?

Mr. Lloyd

Although Russia has suffered a reverse—

Hon. Members

Oh.

Mr. Speaker

Order. Mr. Sehwyn Lloyd.

Mr. Lloyd

Although Russia has suffered a reverse, she is seeking to tighten her grip upon Syria to restore her position. I believe that the whole free world will welcome the statement by President Eisenhower warning the Soviet Union of the dangers of intervention in the area of the Bagdad Pact Powers. We must also be watchful to see that Russia does not violate the Assembly Resolution of 2nd November enjoining a ban on the delivery of military goods to the area of hostilities.

Two important objectives have, therefore, been achieved. The war has been stopped and an international force has been put into position to prevent its resumption.

There are, however, other important matters to which I must refer. The first and most urgent need for us and the whole world is—[HON. MEMBERS: "A new Government"]—that the Canal should be reopened and the freedom of navigation restored. Under the Resolution to which I have already referred these duties have been clearly placed upon and accepted by the United Nations. The Secretary-General has entrusted executive responsibility to a team which includes men of the very highest calibre and worldwide reputation, such as Mr. McCloy and General Wheeler. This shows that technical considerations have been uppermost in his mind. We have made it clear, for our part, that all the resources which we have been able to assemble will be made available to this team to be used as and how they may decide.

I am satisfied, from the discussions with the Secretary-General, that he will press on with his task with the utmost speed and that every effort will be made to proceed without delay with the clearance of obstructions below Port Said, using all available equipment found necessary by the United Nations authorities. It is planned to proceed with the greatest possible despatch with the survey and diving operations which are a necessary preliminary, and that the actual work of clearance will begin as soon as technically possible.

In other words, I am satisfied, from the discussions with the Secretary-General and the assurances which I have received from him, that he will press on with his task without delay and that work will begin as soon as technically possible and that its progress will not be dependent upon other considerations.

The French and British Governments have come to the conclusion that the withdrawal of their forces in the Port Said area can now be carried out without delay. They have instructed the Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Keightley, to seek agreement with the United Nations Commander, General Burns, on a time-table for the complete withdrawal, taking account of the military and practical problems involved. This time-table will be reported as quickly as possible to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Given good faith on all sides, it can be carried out in a short time.

In preparing this time-table, the Allied Commander-in-Chief has been told to ensure that proper regard should be had to the maintenance of public security in the area now under allied control. The United Nations Commander has been asked to make himself responsible for the safety of any French or British salvage resources left at the disposition of the United Nations Salvage Organisation. The Secretary-General has accepted this responsibility.

In making communications to the Secretary-General to this effect—and copies will be circulated in the OFFICIAL REPORT—the two Governments have again drawn attention to the treatment of British and French nationals in Egypt.

Another matter of great importance is the long-term future of the Canal. The position with regard to that is this. The Secretary-General will promote as rapidly as possible negotiations on the basis of the following matters: first, the six requirements set out in the Security Council's Resolution of 13th October; secondly, the conversations between the Secretary-General and the Foreign Ministers of France, Egypt and myself in New York; thirdly, the Secretary-General's letter to the Egyptian Foreign Minister of 24th October, setting out a basis for the negotiation of a system to conform to the six principles and the Egyptian acceptance thereof of 2nd November. I believe that we shall reach an agreement providing adequate guarantees that the six requirements

will be met. Her Majesty's Government, of course, adhere to their view as expressed in the Resolution voted on by the Security Council on 13th October with regard to the 18-Power proposals.

Lastly, there is the question of a long-term settlement of all the problems in the area. I believe that our action has done a great deal to produce conditions in which progress can now be made.

Israel should withdraw from Egyptian territory. We have said this repeatedly. With regard to the Gaza strip, it is our view that Israel should withdraw from that also and that the Strip should be made a United Nations responsibility. I am sure that that would be the best solution of a difficult problem. A just settlement of the refugees is an essential condition of a final settlement, together with agreement about frontiers, water schemes, and other matters. All this, I know, has been said before but at the present time we have the knowledge that there is being stationed in the area a substantial United Nations Force charged with the duty of keeping the peace. That, I am certain, will contribute to the final settlement, which is the prerequisite of stability in the area

Therefore, I claim that we have stopped a local war. We have prevented it spreading. The extent of Soviet penetration has been revealed. We have caused the United Nations to take action by the creation of an international force. We have alerted the whole world to a situation of great peril. We have created conditions under which there can be hope of wider settlements. Of course, there will be heavy costs to bear, but they would have been far greater if our action had not been taken, and it is now for the United Nations and its member States to see that this opportunity is turned to good account.

Mr. Bevan

May I express the hope, Mr. Speaker, that the statement we have just heard from the Foreign Secretary will not be regarded as a prototype of similar statements by Ministers in the future? It contained about 75 per cent. argument and about 25 per cent. information.

We are glad, and the whole country and the world will be glad, to hear that the French and British Governments have at last decided to pull the troops out of Egypt. It has been done with great reluctance and under great pressure, but, at last, the decision has been taken.

Secondly, we are also glad to hear that Her Majesty's Government are no longer attempting to dictate conditions to the United Nations and that they have retreated from their former position of attempting to make the future of the Canal attendant upon the decision to withdraw their troops. We sympathise with the right hon. and learned Gentleman in having to sound the bugle of advance to cover his retreat.

On this side of the House we are also glad to hear that the French and British Governments are now prepared to take up the discussions about the future of the Canal at the point they had reached before the action was taken.

May I ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman also to note that we have paid special attention to his explanation that the Government have uncovered a Soviet threat in the area? We would have thought that if they had this information they might have shared it with the United States and the Commonwealth Governments. I am bound to say, in conclusion, that having regard to the obvious embarrassments of the Government, I feel that I would be a bully if I proceeded any further.

Mr. Lloyd

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will remember his last words in the future. There are one or two inaccuracies in his statement which I would like to point out to the House. First, it is quite untrue to say that we ever said that we sought to impose a settlement of the Canal by this action. The right hon. Gentleman should verify his quotations and examine the record, when he will see that both the Prime Minister and I said specifically during the debates in the early part of November that we had no intention of seeking to impose, by force, a settlement of the Canal. That is the first inaccuracy.

The second inaccuracy is the taking up of the discussions about the future of the Canal where they had been left off. The right hon. Gentleman will observe that the

letter of 24th October from the Secretary-General had not been replied to by the Egyptian Government at that date. Since this action has been taken the Egyptian Government have accepted that letter. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] That is true. The letter is dated 3rd November, and, therefore, it is not correct that we are taking up the discussions exactly where they were left off. Nevertheless, we are taking them up in good faith, and I repeat my belief that it will be possible to achieve a settlement.

As for the question of Russian intervention, I should have thought that it would have occurred even to hon. Gentlemen opposite that a great deal more information has been discovered since this operation than existed before.

Mr. Fort

In view of what my right hon. and learned Friend has said about the arrangements he has made with the Secretary-General for having the Canal cleared as soon as possible, can he tell us whether the technical discussions have yet started, the stopping of which his right hon. Friend the First Lord of the Admiralty complained about in his notable speech on Friday?

Mr. Lloyd

So far as I know, General Wheeler is proceeding today to Cairo. He is a man of great experience. I think that his name is well known to many hon. Members of the House. As far as I know, he will get on with the job straight away, as soon as he and his experts arrive.

Mr. Bellenger

Could the right hon. and learned Gentleman say how long it will take to complete the operation of withdrawal?

Mr. Lloyd

No, Sir, I cannot; nor do I think that anyone can until the necessary survey has taken place.

Captain Waterhouse

The statement of my right hon. and learned Friend was long and detailed and I am sure he will realise that many of us would like to have an opportunity of considering it in detail before we make any statements of our own views upon it. But at this stage I should like to say to my right hon. and learned Friend that every one of us realises that in so far as his policy has not succeeded, it is hon. and right hon. Gentlemen opposite who must bear a considerable measure of the responsibility.

Mr. Grimond

May I ask the Foreign Secretary, first, if it really is the view of the Government that their policy has not succeeded because of the Opposition, could they not resign?

Secondly, can the right hon. and learned Gentleman say whether, in his view, there is any Resolution of the United Nations which lays an obligation upon the Secretary-General to keep United Nations forces on the Canal until the ultimate solution of the Canal problem is found?

Mr. Lloyd

No, Sir. The position is that those forces should remain on the Canal until the functions given to the Force under the appropriate Resolutions have been carried out. One of those functions has to do with keeping the peace between Israel and the Arab States. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I think, therefore, that the hon. Member can form his own conclusions as to which is likely to happen first.

Mr. Bevan

May I ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman, in view of the statement that the policy of the Government has not succeeded, and that so many statements have been made in secret, what policy has not succeeded? Will he tell us? I thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman had made a statement showing that Her Majesty's Government have succeeded. Now, which policy has not succeeded? Will he tell us?

Hon. Members

Answer.

Mr. Speaker

Captain Waterhouse.

Captain Waterhouse

May I make it clear that, as usual, the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Ebbw Vale (Mr. Bevan) has misquoted me? I said, in so far as the policy may not have succeeded.

Several Hon. Members

rose—

Mr. Speaker

Order, order. I should point out that I do not think it is the responsibility of the Foreign Secretary, in addition to his heavy responsibilities, to explain what was stated by the right hon. and gallant Member for Leicester, South-East (Captain Waterhouse).

Mr. Bevan

On a point of order. If that be the case, Sir, then I imagine that it is for the Foreign Secretary to say so.

Mr. Speaker

I do not think it is.

Mr. Lloyd

I only say that I believe that the actions which we took have achieved the results which I set out. I will only add that the arguments of certain right hon. Gentlemen opposite are very present on the lips of the enemies of this country.

Hon. Members

Oh.

Mr. Speaker

Order, order. I must be able to make myself heard. Mr. Bennett.

Mr. F. M. Bennett

With regard to the apparently disputed contention that British intervention—

Mrs. Castle

On a point of order, is it in order, Mr. Speaker, for the Foreign Secretary to describe the United States of America as an enemy of this country?

Mr. Speaker

That is not a point of order.

Mr. Bennett

With regard to the apparently disputed contention that British intervention prevented the spread of the war in the Middle East, may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend whether he took note of the official broadcast from Cairo yesterday by President Nasser, in which he said directly that it was because of British intervention that the forces of Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were called off from joining in?

Several Hon. Members

rose—

Mr. Speaker

Order. All this seems to be a matter of debate. I am looking forward with great interest to Wednesday and Thursday. Mr. Gaitskell.

Mr. Gaitskell

Even the humiliating position in which the Foreign Secretary finds himself does not justify the remark which he made just now. I would ask him to explain what he means by it. Does he mean that the United States is an enemy of this country? Does he mean that Canada is an enemy of this country? With which countries are we still at war, or are we no longer in a state of armed conflict with Egypt? Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman, in general, please indicate what he means by "enemies of this country"?

Mr. Lloyd

I certainly did not include the United States or Canada. The fact was that the most fertile quarry for quotations against Her Majesty's Government which was used by the enemies of this country was the speeches of the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gaitskell

May I ask the Foreign Secretary to answer my question? What does he mean by the phrase "enemies of this country" [HON. MEMBERS: "You."] Hon. Members must see that that does not quite make sense in relation to what the Foreign Secretary said. Will the Foreign Secretary kindly answer my question? Will he, at the same time, indicate the exact condition of relations with Egypt now? Are we still in a state of armed conflict with Egypt, or are our relations normal? What is the position?

Mr. Lloyd

Relations with Egypt certainly are not normal. We have no diplomatic relations with Egypt.

With regard to the right hon. Gentleman's asking who are the enemies of our country, I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman might have been expected to make up his own mind about that.

Mr. Elliot

Has my right hon. and learned Friend's attention been called to the statement by the Secretary-General of the French Socialist Party, that the British Socialists were more concerned with securing the overthrow of Her Majesty's Government than with securing peace in the Suez Canal area?

Mr. M. Stewart

Does not the Foreign Secretary remember that among the objectives announced in relation to the venture was the protection of the life and property of British nationals in Egypt? In that connection, has he observed a letter in The Times, stating that one of these unfortunate people who has been turned out of Egypt has been advised by his Department to apply to the National Assistance Board? Will he, when he can spare time from making abusive replies, pay attention to the position in which these unfortunate victims of the vanity and ineptitude of Her Majesty's Government are placed?

Mr. Lloyd

I do not know what the hon. Gentleman calls "an abusive reply". That was certainly an abusive question. However, I shall not treat it in that manner. We are very concerned about the matter which he has mentioned. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Home Secretary is going into the matter and we shall do everything we can to ensure that the lot of these people is alleviated.

Mr. Patrick Maitland

By way of further elucidation of the Foreign Secretary's very long statement, could he clear up one point which may be in the minds of some of us who have tried to study it? Does he regard the several hopes and beliefs to which he has referred as conforming with the terms of the cease-fire, namely, that we would hand over to a United Nations Force competent to secure and supervise the attainment of certain objectives?

Mr. Lloyd

I certainly think that the existence of the international force in that area will produce conditions in which those objectives can be attained. As I have previously said, it will not actually be the duty of the international force to clear the Canal, but I think the fact that it is in the area will produce conditions in which the Canal can be speedily cleared.

Mr. Bevan

Surely that was not the purpose of the supplementary question. Has not the right hon. and learned Gentleman evaded the purpose of the question? My right hon. Friends and I understand that it was related not only to the clearance of the Canal, but to the future operations of the Canal. Do we understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman to think that one of the purposes of the United Nations Force in Egypt is to secure the future of the Canal?

Mr. Lloyd

I think it depends upon the construction that one puts upon the operative paragraph 4 of the Resolution of 2nd November, in which there is a reference to the securing of free transit through the Canal. I do not myself consider that it is the duty of the international force to secure or supervise a long-term agreement about the future of the Canal, but the international force will be in the area during the period of the negotiations and I believe that the pacification which it will secure will be of the greatest possible assistance with regard to the success of the negotiations.

Mr. J. Amery

Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that, whatever differences there may be on Middle Eastern policy on this side of the House, all of us wholeheartedly condemn the part played by the United States, by the party opposite and by a small handful of hon. Members on this side of the House in bringing us to the humiliating withdrawal which he has just announced?

Mr. Lloyd

I do not for one moment accept that the withdrawal is humiliating. If my hon. Friend will study the statement which I made, I think he will come to the same conclusion.

As for the question of the position of the United States and other individuals and Governments, I really think that that is more a matter for debate than question and answer.

Mr. Gaitskell

Is the Foreign Secretary aware that the attitude of the Opposition here has done more than anything else to maintain Anglo-American friendship, to preserve the unity of the Commonwealth, and to ensure that at least some confidence in the future reputation of Great Britain continues to exist in other parts of the world?

Mr. Gresham Cooke

Reverting to the question of the British internees in Egypt, of whom there are about 680, as well as 30 British nationals imprisoned by the Egyptians, will my right hon. and learned Friend give an assurance that British troops will not be finally withdrawn until the internees have been released or until a satisfactory, absolute guarantee about their release has been given?

Mr. Lloyd

I could not give such a guarantee to my hon. Friend today, but the matter is one upon which I made very strong representations to the Secretary-General, and I know that they were passed on. I believe that there has been a certain alleviation of the position since then. I think it better to leave it on that basis for the time being.

Mr. Beswick

The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that in his view the course of events has been deflected by the actions of Her Majesty's Opposition. Can he say with rather more precision what course he imagines events would have taken had the Opposition not taken the action which they did? Had he in mind that we should have occupied the whole of the Canal area, or is he simply thinking that we should have maintained our troops in Port Said?

Mr. Lloyd

I did not pay the Opposition the compliment of saying that I thought that they had altered the course of events. I said that some of the arguments which had been used by certain right hon. and hon. Gentlemen opposite had frequently been on the lips of our enemies.

Sir I. Horobin

Can my right hon. and learned Friend say—and he is one of the few people we can believe at the moment—

Hon. Members

Oh.

Mr. M. Stewart

Does not the hon. Member's remark constitute a serious imputation on, at any rate, some hon. Members of the House? Ought we not to know at least to which hon.

Members the hon. Member is referring, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker

If we construe the words strictly, they impute a slander on, if anybody, the greater part of the human race, with the exception of the Foreign Secretary.

Sir I. Horobin

Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure us, now that we have agreed to withdraw our Army from Egypt with no effective safeguards for our vital interests, that the necessary American consent will be forthcoming, in due course, to bringing back our Prime Minister from Jamaica?

Mr. Healey

In view of the Foreign Secretary's earlier remark about the use made of certain Opposition arguments, may I ask whether he is aware that Government action during the last four weeks has been the biggest free gift to Communist propaganda since the war? Is he further aware that his ridiculous and degrading apologia will do nothing to disguise the fact that this country has suffered its most serious diplomatic humiliation since Munich? If he wishes to draw some credit from the catastrophe, will he consider the possibility of putting forward the Prime Minister's name for the Nobel Peace Prize on the ground that he has given a conclusive demonstration that aggression does not pay?

Mr. Lloyd

One would almost gather from some supplementary questions that hon. Members opposite would have liked the war between Egypt and Israel to have continued, and that they would have liked it to spread to other countries in the Middle East. We do not take that view.

Mr. P. Noel-Baker

As the Foreign Secretary is clearing up some of the facts of what has happened in the last five weeks, may I ask him some questions about the facts to which he has referred this afternoon? He spoke of the conversations between himself and the Egyptian Foreign Minister and the Secretary-General in New York and the Secretary-General's letter of 24th October. Did Her Majesty's Government make any answer to that letter, or did they make any answer to the Egyptian proposal for a meeting in Geneva on 29th October to continue the conversations on the Canal?

The Foreign Secretary said that since the two parties agreed to a cease-fire, we gave orders to cease our military action. Is it not a fact that the Egyptians said on 2nd November that they would cease fire if Britain, France and Israel did, that on 3rd November Israel said that she would cease fire if Egypt did, that we landed our troops on 5th November and that we ceased fire only on the night of 6th November?

Mr. Lloyd

If the right hon. Gentleman will permit me time to examine the question of the cease-fire—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Yes, that is not unreasonable. My recollection is that Israeli acceptance of a cease-fire was conditional, based on certain conditions which Egypt did not accept.

The communication of the Secretary-General was primarily directed to Egypt and I think, therefore, that it was for us to know Egyptian reactions to it first of all.

Mr. Fell

Can my right hon. and learned Friend tell us what was meant by that part of his statement dealing with the clearance of the Canal—I believe that he said that the Secretary-General said that the clearance of the Canal would take place under General Wheeler—when he told us that it would be as soon as tactically possible—[HON. MEMBERS: "Technically."] I am sorry, technically possible? I do not think that, in fact, that alters it a great deal from my original question. What does "technically possible" mean?

Is it not a fact that it would have been "technically possible" by using British and French equipment, to have gone in days ago to start clearance of the rest of the Canal? Does "technically possible" mean waiting for Egyptian or other agreement to the using of our equipment by our people? If so, does it not amount to this, that we

are not worried about what is practically possible, but are being hamstrung by the words "technically possible" meaning when Egypt agrees to what we want to do?

Mr. Lloyd

I said that work would begin as soon as technically possible and that progress would not be dependent on other considerations.

We have to realise that this is a United Nations operation now. It has been handed over with the agreement of Egypt, as well as the agreement of Britain and France, to a United Nations agency. In General Wheeler we have one of the most experienced men for that job. He is going there and, as I understand, it he has the right to use whatever he wants technically for that purpose. The reason it has not started up to now is that General Wheeler has not been there and it is only with today's announcement that it has been possible to complete United Nations arrangements.

Mr. P. Noel-Baker

The Foreign Secretary said that the Secretary General's letter of 24th October about a full settlement of the Canal issue was primarily addressed to Egypt.

Mr. Lloyd

That is my recollection.

Mr. Noel-Baker

The Egyptian proposal for a meeting at Geneva on 29th October was primarily addressed to us. What answer did we make?

Mr. Lloyd

I will have to verify my memory about that. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] That is not unreasonable. I will say this definitely: when we broke off our discussions in New York—when they were broken off—it was always contemplated that in certain circumstances they would be renewed. The question of a meeting at Geneva had been mentioned before we left New York. As far as an answer to the specific query is concerned, I will have to check.

Sir I. Fraser

Is it not now plain to hon. Members, to the country and, indeed, to the world that the United Nations is now on trial? May we not all hope on all sides of the House that it may succeed?

Mr. Daines

Can the Foreign Secretary say whether the Prime Minister is aware of the content of his statement? If so, when was he aware of it?

Mr. Lloyd

The Prime Minister is in full agreement with the policy which has been announced today.

Mr. Warbey

Can the Foreign Secretary say whether it is at all likely that the United Nations Force will remain in the Canal Zone after the Canal has been cleared?

Mr. Lloyd

That is not a matter for me. It is not a matter for Her Majesty's Government. That is a matter for decision by the United Nations authorities.

Mr. Doughty

Is the Foreign Secretary aware that most hon. Members on this side of the House would wish to dissociate themselves from the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East (Sir I. Horobin) and that, in spite of the recent differences between ourselves and the United States, we look forward to working with them in the Middle East and other parts of the world in a friendly manner in the future?

Mr. Paget

On a point of order. In view of that last supplementary question, might it not be for the convenience of the House if those who agreed with the first part of it put their hands up. and those who—

Mr. Speaker

Order. That is as disorderly a point of order as I have ever heard.

Mr. J. Griffiths

In view of the fact that the Conservative Party is completely torn from top to bottom, does not the Lord Privy Seal think that he now owes it to the country to resign and go to the country?

Mr. C. I. Orr-Ewing

Referring to my right hon. and learned Friend's statement—he said that the suggestion had been put forward that the Gaza strip should become United Nations territory—can he say whether that idea could be extended, so that there could be an insulating territory between Egypt and Israel, running from the Gulf of Aqaba right up to Gaza, thus ensuring that there will not be a resumption of the Fedayeen raids which gave rise to this action?

Mr. Lloyd

I understand that we are to have a debate on Wednesday and Thursday. I think it would be better if that point were discussed then.

Mr. Dugdale

May we be informed when the Prime Minister was first told about the Government's decision and whether, in fact, he replied, giving his approval, before the decision was finally announced?

The Lord Privy Seal

(Mr. R. A. Butler)

Yes, Sir. I should like to inform the House that I sent the Prime Minister a message containing the full terms of our statement this afternoon—

Hon. Members

When?

Mr. Butler

I sent it to him directly we had had our exchanges and obtained our assurances from New York.

Hon. Members

When?

Mr. Butler

I must be allowed to make my own statement and to respect those official communications which must be respected.

I received a reply this morning from the Prime Minister saying that he was fully in agreement with his Cabinet colleagues, and that the policy which we have put before the House has his firm support.