

Note to the reader: When the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917, Winston Churchill who would later become Prime Minister of England, was Minister of Munitions in David Lloyd George's war cabinet. Churchill was Colonial Secretary in 1922, for which the Palestine Churchill White Paper is remembered.

In 1939, Churchill took emphatic opposition to the proposed 1939 White Paper, reiterating what he said in 1922, "His Majesty's Government have no intention of repudiating the obligations into which they entered towards the Jewish people." Churchill believed the government in 1939 was in direct breach with the promises made by him and his colleagues early in the 1920s, especially the proposed halt in Jewish immigration.

Most remarkable in Churchill's commentary is his acknowledgment that the Arabs in Palestine did not help HMG during WWI, and that it was T.E Lawrence with whom he consulted who did not believe the post WWI settlement was inappropriate. His praise for the Zionist enterprise is notable, his lack of it for the Arabs noticed. Almost a full year after he made the following House of Commons speech, King George IV appointed him Prime Minister of Great Britain, a position he held until 1945.

Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill
House of Commons, May 23, 1939

I say quite frankly that I find this a melancholy occasion. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook (Mr. Amery), I feel bound to vote against the proposals of His Majesty's Government. As one intimately and responsibly concerned in the earlier stages of our Palestine policy, I could not stand by and feel solemn engagements into which Britain has entered before the world set aside for reasons of administrative convenience or – and it will be a vain hope – for the sake of a quiet life. Like my right hon. Friend, I should feel personally embarrassed in the most acute manner if I lent myself, by silence or inaction, to what I must regard as an act of repudiation. I can understand that others take a different view. There are many views which may be taken. Some may consider themselves less involved in the declarations of former Governments. Some may feel that the burden of keeping faith weighs upon them rather oppressively. Some may be pro-Arab and some may be anti-Semite. None of these motives offers me any means of escape because I was from

¹Remarks by Winston Churchill in the British House of Commons, 23 May 1939; also sited in appendix of documents appended to the Hearings on the Jewish National Home in the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Debate on Res 418 and 419, Seventy-eighth Congress, Second Session, 8,9,15 and 16 February 1944, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1944.

the beginning a sincere advocate of the Balfour Declaration, and I have made repeated public statements to that effect.

It is often supposed that the Balfour Declaration was an ill-considered, sentimental act largely concerned with the right hon. Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George), for which the Conservative party had no real responsibility, and that, as the Secretary of State said yesterday, it was a thing done in the tumult of the War. But hardly any step was taken with greater deliberation and responsibility. I was glad to hear the account which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook gave, derived from the days when he was working in the Secretariat of the War Cabinet, of the care and pains with which the whole field was explored at that time. Not only did the War Cabinet of those days take the decision, but all Cabinets of every party after the War, after examining it in the varying circumstances which have arisen, have endorsed the decision and taken the fullest responsibility for it. It was also endorsed in the most cordial and enthusiastic terms by many of the ablest Conservative Private Members who came into the House when a great Conservative majority arrived after the General Election at the end of 1918. It was endorsed from the very beginning by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

I make him my apologies for going back as far as 20 years, but when you are dealing with matters which affect the history of two or three thousand years, there is no reason why the continuity of opinion should not be displayed. My right hon. Friend, on the 12th October, 1918, said:

“The sympathy of the British Government with Zionist aspiration does not date from yesterday... My father was anxious to find such a territory within the limits of the British Constitution.... Today the opportunity has come. I have no hesitation in saying that were my father alive today he would be among the first to welcome it and to give it his hearty support.”

Then other members of the Government, most distinguished members who were then Private Members in the House – a brilliant crop, if I may say so, in their young first fresh fight – made a strong effort. The Dominion Secretary, quite a slim figure on the benches up here was heavily engaged. There were also the Minister of Health, the Home Secretary and, above all, the Prime Minister; and this is the memorial they sent us. I abridge it, but not in such a way as to alter its sense. I may in abridging it diminish its force, but its force is evident from the extract:

“We, the undersigned, having cordially welcomed the historic Declaration made on 2nd November, 1917, by His Majesty’s Government” – that is, the Balfour Declaration –

“that it would use its best endeavors to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine now respectfully and solemnly urge upon His Majesty’s Government the necessity of redeeming this pledge by the acceptance of a Mandate under the League of Nations.”

Here was this statement which was made and which was put forward, and while I say I do not compare the responsibility of private Members with that exercised by Ministers of the Crown or by the head of the Government, nevertheless I think, when all is said and done, that the Zionists have a right to look to the Prime Minister to stand by them in the days of his power. They had a special right to look to him because he was not only giving effect to his own deep convictions, but was carrying forward the large conceptions of his father whose

memory he reveres and whose renown he has revived. I was not a member to the War Cabinet in the days when this pledge was given. I was serving under it as a high functionary. That was the position of the Secretaries of State. I found myself in entire agreement with those sentiments so well expressed by the Prime Minister and his friends when they were sending in their memorial.

When I went to the Colonial Office it was in this spirit that I wrote this dispatch, under the authority of the Cabinet, which is quoted so much in the White Paper now before us. Great use is made of this dispatch of 1922 in the White Paper. It is sought to found the argument of the White Paper largely upon it. I stand by every word in those lengthy quotations which have been made from what I wrote. I would not alter a sentence after the 16 years that have passed, but I must say I think it rather misleading to quote so extensively from one part of the dispatch without indicating what was its main purpose. The particular paragraph would do little to cool down the ardor of the Zionist and little to reassure the apprehensions of the Arabs. The main purpose of the dispatch was clear. This is what I said in paragraph (1):

“His Majesty’s Government have no intention of repudiating the obligations into which they entered towards the Jewish people.”

I then proceeded to say that the Government would refuse to discuss the future of Palestine on any basis other than the basis of the Balfour Declaration. Moreover, the whole tenor of the dispatch was to make it clear that the establishment of self-governing institutions in Palestine was to be subordinated to the paramount pledge and obligation of establishing a Jewish National Home in Palestine. In taking up the position on behalf of the Government of the day I really was not going any further than the views which were ardently expressed by some of the ablest and most promising of our backbenchers at that time. The fact that they are leading Ministers today should, I think, have gained for the problem of Palestine a more considered and more sympathetic treatment than it has received.

Last night the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs used a surprising argument. He suggested that the obligation to introduce self-governing institutions into Palestine ranked equally with the obligation to establish a Jewish National Home. In this very dispatch of mine, which represented the views of the entire Government of the day, the greatest pains were taken to make it clear that the paramount duty was the establishment of a National Home. It said on page 6:

“The position is that His Majesty’s Government are bound by a pledge which is antecedent to the Covenant of the League of Nations, and they cannot allow a constitutional position to develop in a country for which they have accepted responsibility to the principal Allied Powers which may make it impracticable to carry into effect a solemn undertaking given by themselves and their Allies.”

There is much more to the same effect. It seems to me that the Under-Secretary of State had some reason to complain of the manner in which he had been briefed on this subject, because his argument was exactly contrary to the tenor of the dispatch from which the Government have quoted with a strong expression of approval and agreement wherever they have found it possible to assist their case.

Now I come to the gravamen of the case. I regret very much that the pledge of the Balfour Declaration, endorsed as it has been by successive Governments, and the conditions

under which we obtained the Mandate, have both been violated by the Government's proposals. There is much in this White Paper which is alien to the spirit of the Balfour Declaration, but I will not trouble about that. I select the one point upon which there is plainly a breach and repudiation of the Balfour Declaration – the provision that Jewish immigration can be stopped in five years' time by the decision of an Arab majority. That is a plain breach of a solemn obligation. I am astonished that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, of all others, and at this moment above all others should have lent himself to this new and sudden default.

To whom was the pledge of the Balfour Declaration made? It was not made to the Jews of Palestine; it was not made to those who were actually living in Palestine. It was made to world Jewry and in particular to the Zionist associations. It was in consequence of and on the basis of this pledge that we received important help in the War, and that after the War we received from the Allied and Associated Powers the Mandate for Palestine. This pledge of a home of refuge, of an asylum, was not made to the Jews in Palestine but to the Jews outside Palestine, to that vast, unhappy mass of scattered, persecuted, wandering Jews whose intense, unchanging unconquerable desire has been for a National Home – to quote the words to which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister subscribed in the Memorial which he and other sent to us:

“The Jewish people who have through centuries of dispersion and persecution patiently awaited the hour of its restoration to its ancestral home.”

Those were the words. They were the people outside, not the people in. It is not with the Jews in Palestine that we have now or at any future time to deal, but with world Jewry, with Jews all over the world. That is the pledge which was given, and that is the pledge which we are now asked to break, for how can this pledge be kept, I want to know, if in five years' time the National Home is to be barred and no more Jews are to be allowed in without the permission of the Arabs?

I entirely accept the distinction between making a Jewish National Home in Palestine and making Palestine a Jewish National Home. I think I was one of the first to draw that distinction. The Government quote me, and they seem to associate me with them on this subject in their White Paper, but what sort of National Home is offered to the Jews of the world when we are asked to declare that in five years' time the door of that home is to be shut and barred in their faces? The idea of home to wanderers is, surely, a place to which they can resort. When grievous and painful words like “breach of pledge,” “repudiation” and “default” are used in respect of the public action of men and Ministers who in private life observe a stainless honor – the country must discuss these matters as they present themselves in their public aspect – it is necessary to be precise, and to do them justice His Majesty's Government have been brutally precise. On page II of the White Paper, in Sub-section (3) of paragraph 14 there is this provision:

“After the period of five years no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it.”

Now, there is the breach; there is the violation of the pledge; there is the abandonment of the Balfour Declaration; there is the end of the vision, of the hope, of the dream. If you leave out those words this White Paper is no more than one of the several experiments and essays in Palestinian constitution-making which we have had of recent years, but put in those

three lines and there is the crux, the peccant point, the breach, and we must have an answer to it.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs may use his great legal ability. He is full of knowledge and power and ingenuity, but unless this can be answered, and repulsed, and repudiated, a very great slur rests upon British administration. It is said specifically on page 10 of the White Paper that Jewish immigration during the next five years will be at a rate which, if the economic absorptive capacity allows, will bring the population up to approximately one-third of the total population of the country. After that, the Arab majority, twice as numerous as the Jews, will have control, and all further Jewish immigration will be subject to their acquiescence, which is only another way of saying that it will be on sufferance. What is that but the destruction of the Balfour Declaration? What is that but a breach of faith? What is it but a one-sided denunciation – what is called in the jargon of the present time a unilateral denunciation – of an engagement?

There need be no dispute about this phrase “economic absorptive capacity.” It represented the intentions of the Government and their desire to carry out the Palestinian Mandate in an efficient and in a prudent manner. As I am the author of the phrase, perhaps I may be allowed to state that economic absorptive capacity was never intended to rule without regard to any other consideration. It has always rested with the Mandatory Power to vary the influx of the Jews in accordance with what was best for Palestine and for the sincere fulfillment – one must presuppose the sincere fulfillment – of our purpose in establishing a Jewish National Home there. It was never suggested at any time that the decision about the quota to be admitted should rest with the Jews or should rest with the Arabs. It rested, and could only rest at any time, with the Mandatory Power which was responsible for carrying out the high purpose of the then victorious Allies. The Mandatory Commission of the League of Nations, as was mentioned by the spokesman for the Opposition when he opened the Debate this afternoon, has recognized fully that the Mandatory Power was entitled to control the flow of immigration, or even to suspend it in an emergency. What they are not entitled to do, at least not entitled to do without reproach – grave, public, and worldwide reproach, and I trust self-reproach as well – is to bring the immigration to an end so far as they are concerned, to wash their hands of it, to close the door. That they have no right whatever to do.

I cannot feel that we have accorded to the Arab race unfair treatment after the support which they gave us in the late War. The Palestinian Arabs, of course, were for the most part fighting against us, but elsewhere over vast regions inhabited by the Arabs independent Arab kingdoms and principalities have come into being such as had never been known in Arab history before. Some have been established by Great Britain and others by France. When I wrote this dispatch in 1922 I was advised by, among others, Colonel Lawrence, the truest champion of Arab rights whom modern times have known. He has recorded his opinion that the settlement was fair and just – his definite, settled opinion. Together we placed the Emir Abdullah in Transjordan, where he remains faithful and prosperous to this day. Together, under the responsibility of the Prime Minister of those days, King Feisal was placed upon the throne of Iraq, where his descendants now rule. But we also showed ourselves continually resolved to close no door upon the ultimate development of a Jewish National Home, fed by

continued Jewish immigration into Palestine. Colonel Lawrence thought this was fair then. Why should it be pretended that it is unfair now?

I cannot understand what are the credentials of the Government in this matter of Palestine. It is less than two years – about 18 months if I remember aright – since they came forward and on their faith and reputation, with all their knowledge and concerted action, urged us to adopt a wholly different solution from that which they now place before us. The House persuaded them then not to force us into an incontinent acceptance of their partition plan, and within a few months, though they did not thank us for it, they had themselves abandoned and discarded it as precipitately as they had adopted it. Why, now, should they thrust this far more questionable bundle of expedients upon us? Surely it would only be prudent and decent for the Government, following the advice given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he was a private Member in 1930, following the opinion of the jurists of those days, to ascertain the view taken by the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, before whom these proposals are to go, before claiming a parliamentary decision in their favor.

I cannot understand why this course has been taken. I search around for the answer. The first question one would ask oneself is foreshadowed in a reference made in the speech by my hon. Friend, and is this: Is our condition so parlous and our state so poor that we must, in our weakness, make this sacrifice of our declared purpose? Although I have been very anxious that we should strengthen our armaments and spread our alliances and so increase the force of our position, I must say that I have not taken such a low view of the strength of the British Empire or of the very many powerful countries who desire to walk in association with us; but if the Government, with their superior knowledge of the deficiencies in our armaments which have arisen during their stewardship, really feel that we are too weak to carry out our obligations and wish to file a petition in moral and physical bankruptcy, that is an argument which, however ignominious, should certainly weigh with the House in these dangerous times. But is it true? I do not believe it is true. I cannot believe that the task to which we set our hand 20 years ago in Palestine is beyond our strength, or that faithful perseverance will not, in the end, bring that task through to a glorious success. I am sure of this, that to cast the plan aside and show ourselves infirm of will and unable to pursue a long, clear and considered purpose, bending and twisting under the crush and pressure of events – I am sure that that is going to do us a most serious and grave injury at a time like this.

We must ask ourselves another question, which arises out of this: Can we – and this is the question – strength ourselves by this repudiation? Shall we relieve ourselves by this repudiation? I should have thought that the plan put forward by the Colonial Secretary in his White Paper, with its arid constitutional ideas and safety catches at every point, and with vagueness overlaying it and through all of it, combines, so far as one can understand it at present, the disadvantages of all courses without the advantages of any. The triumphant Arabs have rejected it. They are not going to put up with it. The despairing Jews will resist it. What will the world think about it? What will our friends say? What will be the opinion of the United States of America? Shall we not lose more – and this is a question to be considered maturely – in the growing support, and sympathy of the United States than we shall gain in local administrative convenience, if gain at all indeed we do?

What will our potential enemies think? What will those who have been stirring up these Arab agitators think? Will they not be encouraged by our confession of recoil? Will they not be tempted to say: "They're on the run again. This is another Munich," and be the more stimulated in their aggression by these very unpleasant reflections which they may make? After all, we were asked by the Secretary of State to approach this question in a spirit of realism and to face the real facts, and I ask seriously of the Government: Shall we not undo by this very act of abjection some of the good which we have gained by our guarantees to Poland and to Rumania, by our admirable Turkish Alliance and by what we hope and expect will be our Russian Alliance? You must consider these matters. May not this be a contributory factor – and every factor is a contributory factor now – by which our potential enemies may be emboldened to take some irrevocable action and then find out, only after it is all too late, that it is not this Government, with their tired Ministers and flagging purpose, that they have to face, but the might of Britain and all that Britain means?

It is hoped to obtain five years of easement in Palestine by this proposal; surely the consequences will be entirely the opposite. A sense of moral weakness in the mandatory Power, whose many years of vacillation and uncertainty have, as the right hon. Gentleman admitted yesterday, largely provoked the evils from which we suffer, will rouse all the violent elements in Palestine to the utmost degree. In order to avoid the reproach, the bitter reproach, of shutting out refugees during this time of brutal persecution, the quota of immigration may be raised, as we were told by the Secretary of State, and may be continued at an even higher level in the next five years. Thus, irritation will continue and the incentive to resist will be aggravated. What about these five years? Who shall say where we are going to be five years from now? Europe is more than two-thirds mobilized tonight. The ruinous race of armaments now carries whole populations into the military machine. That cannot possibly continue for five years, nor for four, nor for three years. It may be that it will not continue beyond the present year. Long before those five years are past, either there will be a Britain which knows how to keep its word on the Balfour Declaration and is not afraid to do so, or believe me, we shall find ourselves relieved of many oversea responsibilities other than those comprised within the Palestine Mandate.

Some of us hold that our safety at this juncture resides in being bold and strong. We argue that the reputation for fidelity of execution, a strict execution, of public contracts, is a shield and buckler which the British Empire, however it may arm, cannot dispense with and cannot desire to dispense with. Never was the need for fidelity and firmness more urgent than now. You are not going to found and forge the fabric of a grand alliance to resist aggression, except by showing continued examples of your firmness in carrying out, even under difficulties, and in the teeth of difficulties, the obligations into which you have entered.

I warn the Conservative party – and some of my warnings have not, alas, been ill-founded – that by committing themselves to this lamentable act of default, they will cast our country, and all that it stands for, one more step downward in its fortunes, which step will later on have to be retrieved, as it will be retrieved, by additional hard exertions. That is why I say that upon the large aspect of this matter the policy which you think is a relief and an easement you will find afterwards you will have to retrieve, in suffering and greater exertions than those we are making.

I end upon the land of Palestine. It is strange indeed that we should turn away from our task in Palestine at the moment when, as the Secretary of State told us yesterday, the local disorders have been largely mastered. It is stranger still that we should turn away when the great experiment and bright dream has proved its power to succeed. Yesterday the Minister responsible descanted eloquently in glowing passages upon the magnificent work which the Jewish colonists have done. They have made the desert bloom. They have started a score of thriving industries, he said. They have founded a great city on the barren shore. They have harnessed the Jordan and spread its electricity throughout the land. So far from being persecuted, the Arabs have crowded into the country and multiplied till their population has increased more than even all world Jewry could lift up the Jewish population. Now we are asked to decree that all this is to stop and all this is to come to an end. We are now asked to submit – and this is what rankles most with me – to an agitation which is fed with foreign money and ceaselessly inflamed by Nazi and by Fascist propaganda.

It is 10 years ago since my right hon. Friend used these stirring words:

“A great responsibility will rest upon the Zionists, who, before long, will be proceeding, with joy in their hearts, to the ancient seat of their people. Theirs will be the task to build up a new prosperity and a new civilization in old Palestine, so long neglected and misruled.”

Well, they have answered his call. They have fulfilled his hopes. How can he find it in his heart to strike them this mortal blow?