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# THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS



[Russell.]

LIEUT.-GENERAL THE RT. HON. J. C. SMUTS,  
commanding the British forces in the victorious  
East African Campaign.

## A SPEECH MADE BY GENERAL SMUTS

*On May 15th, 1917*

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The Speech made by General SMUTS on May 15 at the banquet given in his honour by members of both Houses of Parliament was one of the finest and most statesmanlike utterances that the war has produced. If the British nation did not realise fully before, it assuredly will understand now what a noble ornament and strong pillar of the Empire it possesses in the soldier-statesman who has been representing the Union of South Africa in the Imperial War Conference. Hitherto we have thought of him principally as a brilliant soldier—how brilliant the records of his campaigns in what were once German East and South-West Africa are the best witness—but, great as his military services have been, the future may well reveal political services even more valuable still. This is always a rare—and sometimes a dangerous—combination of genius, but we know from General SMUTS'S speeches where his dearest hopes are centred, that he hates war, though he is a master of its art, and that all his ambitions are set upon being of service to his fellow-countrymen in South Africa and to the Empire to which he is proud to belong. The British Empire is, indeed, fortunate when the soldier who but fifteen years ago was its sturdy and dangerous opponent in arms, now comes with laurels won against a common foe, and, within the walls of the British Parliament itself, delivers an address cordial in friendship, and instinct, as are few utterances of our time, with political wisdom and understanding.—*Daily Telegraph*, May 17, 1917.

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## SPEECH OF GENERAL SMUTS

EVER since I have come to this country, about two months ago, I have received nothing but the most profound and charming kindness and hospitality, which has culminated in this unique banquet to-night. I appreciate it all the more because I know it is given at a time when the greatest storm in the world's history is raging, and when nobody in this country or great city feels inclined to indulge in any festivities or banquets. When I return home I shall be able to tell the people of South Africa that I have been received by you not as a guest, not as a stranger, but simply as one of yourselves. (Cheers.) Speaking with a somewhat different accent, and laying a different emphasis on many things, as no doubt becomes a barbarian from the outer marches of the Empire—(laughter)—and one whose mind is not yet deeply furrowed with trenches and dug-outs—I would like first of all to say how profoundly thankful I am to Lord French for the words which have fallen from his lips. Your expressions in regard to myself are largely, I feel, undeserved. At any rate, I accept them as coming from an old opponent and comrade in arms. I know they are meant in the best spirit, and I accept them as such.

Your words recall to my mind many an incident of those stirring times when we were opposing commanders in the Boer War. I may refer to two. On one occasion I was surrounded by Lord French—(laughter)—and was practically face to face with disaster. Nothing was left me but, by the most diligent scouting, to find a way out. I ventured into a place which bore the very appropriate name of Murderers' Gap—(laughter)—and I was the only man who came out alive. One account of that stated that one Boer escaped, but he probably had so many bullets in him that he would be no further danger. (Laughter.) I survived to be your guest to-night. (Cheers.) Two days after I broke through—blessed words in these times—

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(laughter)—and on a very dark night, I came to a railway, which I was just on the point of crossing, when we heard a train. Some of us felt inclined to wreck and capture that train, but for some reason or other I said, "No, let it pass." You can imagine my feelings when some time afterwards I learned that the only freight on that train was Sir John French with one or two A.D.C.'s, moving round from one part of his front to another to find out how I had broken through. (Laughter.) If I had not missed that chance he would have been my guest, no doubt very welcome, though no doubt embarrassing. (Laughter.) Fate has willed otherwise. I am his guest. (Cheers.)

### THE SPIRIT OF COMRADESHIP.

Those were very difficult and strenuous days in which one learned many a valuable lesson, good for all life. One of those lessons was that under stress of great difficulty practically everything breaks down ultimately, and the only things that survive are really the simple human feelings of loyalty and comradeship to your fellows, and patriotism which can stand any strain and bear you through all difficulty and privation. (Hear, hear.) We soldiers know the extraordinary value of these simple feelings, how far they go, and what strain they can bear, and how ultimately they support the whole weight of civilisation. That war was carried on by both sides in a sportsmanlike spirit, and in a clean, chivalrous way—(cheers)—and out of that calamity has been produced the happy state of affairs that you see to-day in South Africa, and which led to a new basis on which to build the larger and happier South Africa which is arising to-day.

I am sure in the present great struggle now being waged you will see some cause leading to lasting results. Here you have from all parts of the British Empire young men gathering on the battlefields of Europe, and whilst your statesmen keep planning a great scheme of union for the future of the Empire my feeling is that very largely the work is already done. The spirit of comradeship has been born in this campaign on the battlefields of Europe, and many of the men from the various parts of the Empire will be far more powerful than any instrument of government that you can elect in the future. I feel sure that in after

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days, when our successors come to sum up what has happened and draw up a balance-sheet, there will be a good credit balance due to this common feeling of comradeship which will have been built up. Now once more, as many ages ago during the Roman Empire, the Germanic volcano is in eruption, and the whole world is shaking. No doubt in this great evolution you are faced in this country with the most difficult and enormous problems which any Government or people have ever been called upon to face—problems of world-wide strategy, of man-power, communications, food supply, of every imaginable kind and magnitude, so large that it is almost beyond the wit of man to solve them, and it is intelligible that where you have so many difficulties to face one forgets to keep before one's eye the situation as a whole. And yet that is very necessary.

### GERMANISM SWEEPED OUT.

It is most essential that even in this bitter struggle, even when Europe is looming so large before our eyes, we should keep before us the whole situation. We should see it steadily, and see it whole. (Hear, hear.) I would ask you not to forget in these times the British Commonwealth of nations. (Hear, hear.) Do not forget that larger world which is made up of all the nations that belong to the Empire. (Hear, hear.) Bear in mind that after all Europe is not so large, and will not always continue to loom so large as at present. (Cheers.) Even now in the struggle the pace of Europe is being permanently slowed down. Your Empire is spread all over the world, and even where the pace is slowed down in one portion it is accelerated in another, and you have to keep the whole before you in order to judge fairly and sanely of the factors which affect the whole.

I wish to say a few words to-night on this subject, because I think there is a tendency sometimes to forget certain aspects of the great questions with which we are now confronted. That is one of the reasons why I am glad the Imperial Conference was called at this time, apparently a very opportune moment, and yet the calling of this Conference at this time has already directed attention once more to that other aspect of the whole situation



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which is so important to us. Remember, it is not only Europe that we have to consider, but also the future of this great commonwealth to which we all belong. It is peculiarly situated; it is scattered over the whole world; it is not a compact territory; it is dependent for its very existence on world-wide communications, which must be maintained or this Empire goes to pieces. In the past thirty years you see what has happened. Everywhere upon your communications Germany has settled down; everywhere upon your communications of the whole globe you will find a German colony here and there, and the day would have come when your Empire would have been in very great jeopardy from your lines of communication being cut.

Now, one of the by-products of this war has been that the whole world outside Europe has been cleared of the enemy. Germany has been swept from the seas, and from all continents except Central Europe. Whilst Germany has been gaining ground in Central Europe, from the rest of the world she has been swept clean; and, therefore, you are now in this position—almost providentially brought to this position—that once more you can consider the problem of your future as a whole. When peace comes to be made you have all these parts in your hand, and you can go carefully into the question of what is necessary for your future security and your future safety as an Empire, and you can say, so far as it is possible under war circumstances, what you are going to keep and what you are going to give away.

### GOVERNMENT OF THE FUTURE.

That is a very important precedent. I hope when the time comes—I am speaking for myself, and expressing nobody's opinion but my own—I feel when the time comes for peace we should not bear only Central Europe in mind, but the whole British Empire. As far as we are concerned, we do not wish this war to have been fought in vain. We have not fought for material gain, or for territory; we have fought for security in the future. (Hear, hear.) If we attach any value to this group of nations which compose the British Empire, then we, in settling peace, will have to look carefully at our future safety and security, and I hope that will be done, and that no arrangement will be made

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which will jeopardise the very valuable and lasting results which have been attained. (Hear, hear.)

That is the geographical question. There remains the other question—a very difficult question—of the future constitutional relations and readjustments in the British Empire. At a luncheon given recently by the Empire Parliamentary Association I said, rather cryptically, that I did not think this was a matter in which we should follow precedents, and I hope you will bear with me if I say a few words on that theme, and develop more fully what I meant. I think we are inclined to make mistakes in thinking about this group of nations to which we belong, because too often we think of it merely as one State. The British Empire is much more than a State. I think the very expression "Empire" is misleading, because it makes people think as if we are one single entity, one unity, to which that term "Empire" can be applied. We are not an Empire. Germany is an Empire, so was Rome, and so is India, but we are a system of nations, a community of states and of nations far greater than any empire which has ever existed; and by using this ancient expression we really obscure the real fact that we are larger and that our whole position is different, and that we are not one nation, or state, or empire, but we are a whole world by ourselves, consisting of many nations and states, and all sorts of communities under one flag. We are a system of states, not only a static system, a stationary system, but a dynamic system, growing, evolving all the time towards new destinies.

Here you have a kingdom with a number of Crown colonies; besides that you have large protectorates like Egypt, which is an empire in itself, which was one of the greatest empires in the world. Besides that you have great dependencies like India—an empire in itself, one of the oldest civilisations in the world, and we are busy there trying to see how East and West can work together, how the forces that have kept the East going can be worked in conjunction with the ideas we have evolved in Western civilisation for enormous problems within that State. But beyond that we come to the so-called Dominions, a number of nations and states almost sovereign, almost independent, who govern themselves, who have been evolved on the principles of your constitutional system, now almost inde-

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pendent states, and who all belong to this group, to this community of nations, which I prefer to call the British Commonwealth of nations. Now, you see that no political ideas that we evolved in the past, no nomenclature will apply to this world which is comprised in the British Empire; any expression, any name which we have found so far for this group has been insufficient, and I think the man who would discover the real appropriate name for this vast system of entities would be doing a great service not only to this country, but to constitutional theory.

The question is, how are you going to provide for the future government of this group of nations? It is an entirely new problem. If you want to see how great it is you must take the United States in comparison. There you find what is essential—one nation, not perhaps in the fullest sense, but more and more growing into one; one big State, consisting of subordinate parts, but whatever the nomenclature of the United States Constitution, you have one national State, over one big, contiguous area. That is the problem presented by the United States, and for which they discovered this federal solution, which means subordinate governments for the subordinate parts, but one national Federal Parliament for the whole.

### GROWTH OF FREE NATIONS.

Compare with that state of facts this enormous system comprised in the British Empire of nations all over the world, some independent, living under diverse conditions, and all growing towards greater nations than they are at present. You can see at once that the solution which has been found practicable in the case of the United States probably never will work under our system. That is what I feel in all the empires of the past, and even in the United States—the effort has been towards forming one nation. All the empires that we have known in the past and that exist to-day are founded on the idea of assimilation, of trying to force different human material through one mould so as to form one nation. Your whole idea and basis is entirely different. You do not want to standardise the nations of the British Empire. You want to develop them into greater nationhood. These younger communities, the offspring of the Mother Country, or territories like that of



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my own people, which have been annexed after various vicissitudes of war—all these you want not to mould on any common pattern, but you want them to develop according to the principles of self-government and freedom and liberty. (Cheers.) Therefore your whole basic idea is different from anything that has ever existed before, either in the empires of the past or even in the United States.

I think that this is the fundamental fact which we have to bear in mind—that the British Empire, or this British Commonwealth of nations, does not stand for unity, standardisation, or assimilation, or denationalisation; but it stands for a fuller, a richer, and more various life among all the nations that compose it. (Hear, hear.) And even nations who have fought against you, like my own, must feel that they and their interests, their language, their religions, and all their cultural interests are as safe and as secure under the British flag as those of the children of your household and your own blood. It is only in proportion as that is realised that you will fulfil the true mission which you have undertaken. (Cheers.) Therefore, it seems, speaking my own individual opinion, that there is only one solution, that is the solution supplied by our past traditions of freedom, self-government, and the fullest development. We are not going to force common Governments, federal or otherwise, but we are going to extend liberty, freedom, and nationhood more and more in every part of the Empire.

### UNION UNDER A MONARCHY.

The question arises, how are you going to keep this world together if there is going to be all this enormous development towards a more varied and richer life among all its parts? It seems to me that you have two potent factors that you must rely on for the future. The first is your hereditary kingship. (Hear, hear.) I have seen some speculations recently in the papers of this country upon the position of the kingship of this country; speculations by people who, I am sure, have never thought of the wider issues that are at stake. You cannot make a Republic in this country. You cannot make a Republic of the British Commonwealth of nations, because if you have to elect a President not only in these islands, but all over the British Empire, who will be the ruler and representative

of all these peoples, you are facing an absolutely insoluble problem. Now, you know the theory of our Constitution is that the King is not merely your King, but he is the King of all of us. He represents every part of the whole Commonwealth of nations. If his place is to be taken by anybody else, then that somebody will have to be elected by a process which, I think, will pass the wit of man to devise. (Hear, hear.) Therefore let us be thankful for the mercies we have. We have a kingship here which is really not very different from a hereditary Republic, and I am sure that more and more in the future the trend will be in that direction, and I shall not be surprised to see the time when our Royal princes, instead of getting their Consorts among the princelings of Central Europe, will go to the Dominions and the outlying portions of the Empire. (Prolonged cheers.)

I think that in the theory of the future of this great Empire it is impossible to attach too much importance to this institution which we have existing, and which can be developed, in my opinion, to the greatest uses possible for its future preservation and development. It will, of course, be necessary to go further than that. It is not only the symbol of unity which you have in the Royal ruler, but you will have to develop further common institutions.

Everyone admits that it would be necessary to devise better machinery for common consultation than we have had hitherto. (Hear, hear.) So far we have relied upon the Imperial Conference which meets every four years, and which, however useful for the work it has done hitherto, has not, in my opinion, been a complete success. (Hear, hear.) It will be necessary to devise better means for achieving our ends. A certain precedent has been laid down of calling the Prime Ministers and representatives from the Empire of India to the Imperial Cabinet, and we have seen the statement made by Lord Curzon that it is the intention of the Government to perpetuate that practice in future. Although we have not yet the details of the scheme, and we have to wait for a complete exposition of the subject from his Majesty's Government, yet it is clear that in an institution like that you have a far better instrument of common consultation than you have in the old Imperial Conference, which was called only every four years, and which discussed a number of subjects which were not really of first-rate importance. After all, what

you want is to call together the most important statesmen in the Empire from time to time—say once a year, or as often as may be found necessary—to discuss matters which concern all parts of the Empire in common, and in order that causes of friction and misunderstanding may be removed. (Hear, hear.) A common policy should be laid down to determine the true orientation of our Imperial policy.

### COMMON FOREIGN POLICY.

Take foreign policy, for instance, on which the fate of the Empire may from time to time depend. I think it is highly desirable that at least once a year the most important leaders of the Empire should be called together to discuss these matters, and to determine a common policy, which would then be carried out in detail by the various executive Governments of the commonwealth nations. This Imperial Council or Cabinet will not themselves exercise executive functions, but they will lay down the policy which will be carried out by the Governments of the various parts of the Empire. A system like that, although it looks small, must in the end lead to very important results and very great changes. You cannot settle a common policy for the whole of the British Empire without changing that policy very considerably from what it has been in the past, because the policy will have to be, for one thing, far simpler. We do not understand diplomatic finesse in other parts of the Empire. (Laughter.) We go by large principles, and things which can be easily understood by our undeveloped democracies. If your foreign policy is going to rest, not only on the basis of your Cabinet here, but finally on the whole of the British Empire, it will have to be a simpler and more intelligible policy, which will, I am sure, lead in the end to less friction, and the greater safety of the Empire. (Hear, hear.)

Of course, no one will ever dispute the primacy of the Imperial Government in these matters. Whatever changes and developments come about, we shall always look upon the British Government as the senior partner in this concern. When this Council is not sitting the Imperial Government will conduct the foreign affairs of the Empire. But it will always be subject to the principles and policy which have been laid down in these common conferences

from time to time, and which, I think, will be a simpler and probably, in the long run, a saner and safer policy for the Empire as a whole. Naturally, it will lead to greater publicity. There is no doubt that, after the catastrophe that has overtaken Europe, nations in future will want to know more about the way their affairs are conducted. (Hear, hear.) And you can understand that, once it is no longer an affair of one Government, but of a large number of Governments who are responsible ultimately to their Parliaments for the action they have taken, you may be sure there will be a great deal more publicity and discussion of foreign affairs than there has ever been.

### BRITISH EMPIRE'S MISSION.

I am sure that the after-effects of a change like this, although it looks a simple change, are going to be very important, not only for this community of nations, but for the world as a whole. (Hear, hear.) Far too much stress is laid upon the instruments of government. People are inclined to forget that the world is getting more democratic, and that forces which find expression in public opinion are going to be far more powerful in the future than they have been in the past. You will find that you have built up a spirit of comradeship and a common feeling of patriotism, and that the instrument of government will not be the thing that matters so much as the spirit that actuates the whole system of all its parts. That seems to me to be your mission. You talk about an Imperial mission. It seems to me this British Empire has only one mission, and that is a mission for greater liberty and freedom and self-development. Yours is the only system that has ever worked in history where a large number of nations have been living in unity. Talk about the League of Nations—you are the only league of nations that has ever existed; and if the line that I am sketching here is correct you are going to be an even greater league of nations in the future; and if you are true to your old traditions of self-government and freedom, and to this vision of your future and your mission, who knows that you may not exercise far greater and more beneficent influence on the history of mankind than you have ever done before?

In the welter of confusion which is probably going to follow the war in Europe you will stand as the one system

where liberty to work successfully has kept together divers communities. You may be sure the world such as will be surrounding you in the times that are coming will be very likely to follow your example. You may become the real nucleus for the world-government for the future. There is no doubt that is the way things will go in the future. You have made a successful start; and if you keep on the right track your Empire will be a solution of the whole problems.

### PRIZE WITHIN OUR GRASP.

I hope I have given no offence. (Cheers and cries of "No, no.") When I look around this brilliant gathering, and see before me the most important men in the Government of the United Kingdom, I was rather anxious that we should discuss this matter, which concerns our future so very vitally—a matter which should never be forgotten even in this awful struggle, in which all our energies are engaged. Memories of the past keep crowding in upon me. I think of all the difficulties which have surrounded us in the past, and I am truly filled with gratitude for the reception which you have given me, and with gratitude to Time, the great and merciful judge, which has healed many wounds—(hear, hear)—and gratitude to that Divinity which "shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." (Hear, hear.) I think of the difficulties that still lie ahead of us, which are going to test all the nations fighting for liberty far more than they have ever been tested in the past, and I hope and pray that they all may have clearness of vision and purpose, and especially that strength of soul in the coming days, which will be more necessary than strength of arm. I verily believe that we are within reach of priceless and immeasurable good, not only for this United Kingdom and group of nations to which we belong, but also for the whole world. But, of course, it will depend largely upon us whether the great prize is achieved now in this struggle, or whether the world will be doomed to long, weary waiting in the future. The prize is within our grasp, if we have strength, especially the strength of soul, which I hope we shall have, to see this thing through without getting tired of waiting, until victory crowns the efforts of our brave men in the field. (Loud cheers.)







