New Zealand’s Attitudes to the Reform of the League of Nations

THE BACKGROUND OF THE MEMORANDUM TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL, 16 JULY 1936

I

When the League of Nations was established, official opinion in New Zealand was generally either unfavourable or apathetic. There was remarkably little discussion of the League in Parliament. One of the few references to it in the early years was an inquiry by C. N. Mackenzie of Auckland East, whether New Zealand was still paying £25,000 annually to the League, and whether this contribution should be reduced to £2,000 a year, in view of the fact that ‘the League was largely fading from the field of international politics, and that its place was being taken by much more practical conferences and pacts, as those at Washington, Genoa, and Cannes.’

Lip service was paid to the League’s ideals, and New Zealand’s role as a mandatory state reconciled some to the cost of belonging to the League. Nevertheless, probably many would have echoed Massey’s opinion that ‘the League is utterly useless and our expenditure in relation to it is wasted’.

The Labour Party in particular was opposed to the League, which it considered to be no more than a society of victor nations intent upon consolidating their position and preserving their victory. In Labour eyes the cause of international peace would be best served by achieving some sort of unity of workers in their own interests, and by organising world resources to eliminate the capitalist competition for materials and markets which led to war. As late as 1932, the Labour Party platform declared its support for ‘the industrial unity of all workers of all countries, for the purpose of superseding capitalism by an industrial democracy, and of forming not a League of Nations but a League of Peoples.’

However, owing in part to the changing international conditions, the Labour Party’s attitude to the League softened throughout the 1930s, and the League gained great importance in its foreign policy.

1 NZPD, CXCI (1921-22), 698.
formulations. There were three principal elements in this about-face. First, with the growing tension and uncertainty in Europe and the Far East, a means of averting war was anxiously sought by most nations. Second, the position of New Zealand as a small, isolated community aroused alarm, as fear of Japan grew and absolute confidence in the British Navy waned. The Labour Party began to look to the League to provide New Zealand with additional security. Third, the Labour Party became convinced that the League’s labour and welfare organs provided a valuable means of improving the living standards of many countries of the world. Thus, the party’s views contained the ingredients of practical self-interest and of genuinely idealistic concern for the world’s problems.

The Labour Party’s policy on the League and that of the Government grew gradually apart through the decade despite a brief drawing together in reaction to Italian aggression in Abyssinia.

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the development and changes in attitude of New Zealanders towards the League of Nations. Attitudes will be examined not with regard to the various international crises of the 1930s, but specifically against the background of attempts to reform the Covenant, to make the League a more vital institution. To those groups which placed their whole faith for New Zealand’s security in the British Navy, the efficiency of the League was largely irrelevant. The League was a convenient forum; a ‘place where nations of the world can discuss affairs of common interest’, and little more. To those who espoused theories of collective security, and relied upon the peace-preserving mechanisms of the League, its efficacy was a vital concern.

The League of Nations never aroused a completely clear-cut party division. There were always conservatives who were firmly attached to the League (although with considerable difference of opinion over whether the League should be consultative or coercive). Similarly, there were Labour members who remained apathetic on the issue. Therefore, references to the ‘attitudes’ of a particular party should be taken to mean the expressed view of a vocal minority, in Labour’s case notably Savage, Fraser, Nash and Parry.

The United-Reform Governments repeatedly stressed their hopes that the League would be an adequate bulwark against the outbreak of another war, but they also readily pointed out the League’s failures and limitations. They placed great emphasis on New Zealand’s unity of interests with Great Britain, and on the advisability of supporting British policy. This led to Forbes’s speech in which he stated that ‘there must be no blinking the fact that if Great Britain became involved in a war, New Zealand would also be involved. This is not only because of the legal position as we accept it in New

AJHR, 1935, A-5, I, Parr’s report on the 15th Assembly of the League. Although this report emphasises the value of the League, it appears to indicate a consultative rather than a coercive conception of it.
New Zealand . . . [but] because the sentiment of this country would inevitably insist on New Zealand standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Britain . . . '5 The implication that New Zealand was legally bound to follow Great Britain to war, and Forbes's parallel statement that such a war could be entered automatically, without even summoning Parliament, were hotly disputed by many, especially members of the Labour Party. The Labour Party admitted New Zealand's common interest with Britain, but placed a different construction upon it. The association with Britain should not preclude an independent foreign policy and certainly should not undermine the authority of Parliament in foreign policy decisions.

No party was completely satisfied with British policy. Forbes, at the 1930 Imperial Conference, was prepared to disagree with the British delegation when he felt New Zealand's requirements were not receiving sufficient attention. New Zealand's much emphasised devotion to the mother-country did not prevent criticism on many occasions. On the other hand, no party denied New Zealand's ultimate reliance on Britain in the event of world war. All governments, Labour or otherwise, maintained their payments towards the upkeep of the Singapore base through the thirties. Party policies had much in common, but they differed as to the relative importance of the imperial connection and of the League of Nations.

The Labour Party's greater optimism over the prospects of the League, therefore, had repercussions on the quality of the relationship between New Zealand and Britain. An important indication of an independent stance was the New Zealand Labour Government's refusal to endorse British policy in the League during the Abyssinian crisis. New Zealand protested against the Hoare-Laval proposals to partition Abyssinia; was reluctant to remove sanctions against Italy; and refused to follow Britain in recognising the Italian conquest.

The differing attitudes to the League of various groups in New Zealand can be seen clearly by their response to the issue of reform. For instance, Forbes's chief reaction to questions such as the General Act for Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, the Convention of Financial Assistance (to victims of aggression) and other amendments to the Covenant, was concern that a uniform imperial policy should be arrived at. The Labour Party was more critical and ready to express independent views.

II

The brief and general nature of the Covenant of the League of Nations made attempts at amending and defining it inevitable. The organisation of the League was constantly being tampered with, and the Secretary-General received many suggestions, both solicited and unsolicited, for the improvement of the Covenant. In no discussion of reform before 1936 did New Zealand play any significant part.

5 NZPD, CCXLI (1935), 82.
However, a brief discussion of the more important attempts at improvement is useful to provide a contrast with New Zealand's later activities.

One of the early major attempts to define and extend the obligations of members was the Geneva Protocol of 1924, under which all signatories would agree to submit all disputes to compulsory arbitration. New Zealand followed Britain in its opposition to the scheme. Sir James Allen, New Zealand's delegate, played a minor role in thwarting the progress of the Protocol when he suggested that the document be submitted to governments, not for approval, but for 'serious discussion'. The Protocol never became operative.

New Zealand showed little interest in the General Act of Arbitration in 1928 but, like the other Dominions, signed after the acceptance of Britain. The Act contains further provisions for conciliation and arbitration, and binds signatories to take no actions contrary to the judicial decisions of the Permanent Court of International Justice, or to arrangements sponsored by a conciliation commission. Again in 1931, New Zealand's signature of the General Act for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes was a natural consequence of Britain's signature.

The enactment with the greatest impact on the international peacekeeping mechanisms, was the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 — the Pact of Paris. This pact was negotiated at the instigation of the United States and France without reference to the League of Nations and with no mention of the Covenant. It bound its 52 signatories to condemn recourse to war as an instrument of national policy, so that the 'solution of all disputes and conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be, which may rise among them, shall never be sought except by pacific means.'

The League of Nations Covenant and the Pact of Paris both aimed to prevent war, but in very different ways. The Pact boldly outlawed war altogether. The Covenant envisaged war as a last resort, when conciliation, arbitration, and material sanctions had all failed. Most attempts to reform the League in the early 1930s were designed to bring the Covenant into accordance with the Pact of Paris.

In 1930, discussions in the Assembly led the League to solicit from its members recommendations of ways to reconcile the Covenant and the Kellogg-Briand pact. The request arrived in New Zealand late, and therefore it was given only perfunctory attention. Forbes wrote to the Secretary-General of the League, complaining that information was often, as on this occasion, too late by the time it reached New Zealand, and that 'in the circumstances the New Zealand Government have no observation to offer at present.'

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7 *The Aims, Methods, and Activity of the League of Nations*, Secretariat publication, Geneva, 1938, p. 60.
8 P.M. 114/1/1, External Affairs papers, National Archives, Wellington.
Newspaper opinion generally echoed his irritation. The Christchurch Press claimed: 'It is necessary for New Zealanders to be informed on such international questions which mean so much to the welfare of the inhabitants of this country.'

By the 1930s most newspaper opinion was sympathetic to the aims and ideals of the League of Nations. Editorials betrayed anxiety that New Zealand should acquit herself well. For instance, the Otago Daily Times claimed that New Zealanders generally supported and appreciated the work of the League, and that therefore they deserved to be more adequately represented. New Zealand throughout the years of the League's existence did not have a special delegate solely to the League, but was represented by its High Commissioner in London. In his absence, his place was often filled by minor officials. In view of the fact that 'other countries sent to Geneva their most honoured and influential statesmen' the article claimed that it was 'desirable that Government should take steps to see that in future it appoints a delegation sufficiently large to ensure that, in the absence of the High Commissioner, some New Zealander of standing may be present who will worthily express the views of the Dominion . . . .'  

The paper's opinion as to the value of the League and imperative-ness of reform was not shared by the government in 1930. It had no opportunity to submit proposals for reform before the deadline, but even with time at its disposal, gave little consideration to the ensuing deliberations and amendments. The revised Covenant was presented to the British Parliament, but not to the New Zealand House of Representatives. On 12 February 1931 Forbes communicated to the Secretary-General that New Zealand was prepared to accept proposed amendments to the Covenant, except for two minor verbal alterations to Articles 11 and 12. In fact, the wording of Forbes's reservations was taken word for word from the notice of British intentions which had been conveyed to the Governor-General of New Zealand by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs on 30 January 1931. The fact that the New Zealand government had devoted no original thought to the issue and was prepared to follow Britain's example was made perfectly clear in a note written by Forbes to the High Commissioner: 'Whether you should append a note to the effect that ratification by New Zealand Government will be made dependent upon the entry into force of a general treaty for the reduction and limitation of armaments should depend on whether His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom . . . . append a note to this effect . . . .'  

The attitude to reform was made similarly explicit in the Prime Minister's instructions to the High Commissioner in May 1931, repeated and endorsed in August 1933: 'We are not especially interested 

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9 Christchurch Press, 18 September 1930.
10 Otago Daily Times, 15 November 1930.
11 P.M. 114/1/1.
12 Forbes to Wilford, 25 May 1931, P.M. 114/1/1.
whether the Covenant is altered or not, (although on the whole we would prefer to leave matters as they are in the meantime) but we are prepared to accept amendments as approved at the last Imperial Conference.'

Although openly unconcerned at the issues involved in the constitution of the League, some New Zealanders were very concerned at the rising costs of the organisation and the financial burden incurred by membership. In the early 1930s New Zealand was in the grip of the depression and cuts were being made in most fields of government spending. When salaries were being cut, and children kept out of schools, many members of the government thought it illogical that the cost of the League should keep rising. During the debate on estimates for the Prime Minister's Department, 1930, the expenditure on the League was questioned, and reductions suggested by three members.

Forbes reported to the High Commissioner that during the overhaul of the economy, a definite suggestion had been made that New Zealand's contribution to the League was out of all proportion to the advantages gained.

The querying of League expenses continued in 1931. An enquiry by J. S. Fletcher (Independent, Grey Lynn) about a £1,200 rise in New Zealand's contribution, brought an assurance from Forbes that the High Commissioner had protested against the 'unjustifiable increase'. On this occasion, the League was defended by Nash and Holland, who claimed that the charges were not at all out of proportion to the work that was being done, and that the importance of the League could not be overestimated.

The extent to which Labour party members were swinging in favour of the League is shown by Sullivan, who in 1930 was questioning New Zealand's proportion of League costs, and who by 1934 was a firm advocate of the League, regardless of its expense.

The New Zealand Government's policy of retrenchment led it to co-operate with several other countries, notably Norway, who shared its concern at the mounting costs of the League. The Government was especially concerned at the proliferation of League activities which seemed to distract the League from its principal purpose of maintaining the peace. It objected also the increase of permanent staff, and thought that Secretariat salaries were too high.

The High Commissioner was instructed not to take any 'unnecessarily prominent part' in matters such as the Portugese proposals for

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13 P.M. 114/1/1.
15 NZPD, CCXXX (1931), 690-1.
16 NZPD, CCXXV (1930), 530.
17 NZPD, CCXXXIX (1934), 13.
a further increase in the number of non-permanent seats on the council\(^{18}\) but always actively to encourage economy.\(^{19}\)

The High Commissioner, Sir Thomas Wilford’s report on the 14th Assembly of the League reflects this preoccupation. He wrote: ‘I share the view which it is reported so many hold in New Zealand “that the continued adoption of so many secondary spheres of activity on the part of the League and the International Labour Office has added too greatly to the League’s budget . . . .” I actively interposed on more than one occasion with the object of reducing the League’s interests to limits which would not involve additional expenditure.’\(^{20}\)

This report produced a long and vigorous attack in the House of Representatives on the Government’s policy with regard to the League.\(^{21}\) The only non-Labour member to speak was Downie Stewart. He supported the idea of the League, but pointed out its inadequacies and advocated a willingness to try alternative guarantees for security in case the League broke down, as it was likely to do.

Six Labour members spoke — Nash, Savage, Parry, Richards, Sullivan, and Semple. They attacked the superficiality of the report, and accused the Government of having too much concern for price-cutting, and none for international affairs. Nash affirmed that the League had not failed, although from time to time it had been ineffective. Its weaknesses were due to the lethargy of governments like New Zealand’s, who therefore had a moral obligation to do better. Sullivan showed concern for New Zealand’s reputation: ‘when a representative of this country goes to the League solely with the expressed intention of bringing about economy in administration, he is rating the country which he represents very low indeed.’\(^{22}\)

The annual debates on supply for the Prime Minister’s Department regularly showed the diverse views of the groups in Parliament. The Government usually displayed anxiety at the cost of the League, and the suspicion that too many of the different functions had no direct relation to New Zealand. Labour Party members maintained the worth of the League, and affirmed that in order to make the League an effective weapon for world peace, it was only necessary to pay greater attention to it and support it financially. The Dominion, in reporting a debate on supply, quoted Savage as saying, I notice there is a drop in the expenses of our delegate to Geneva. I wonder what has happened. Is he taking his lunch with him, or what?’\(^{23}\) (In fact he had said that the expenses of the delegates were so small as to suggest that they must have walked there.)\(^{24}\)

\(^{18}\) 21 January 1932, P.M. 114/4/5.  
\(^{19}\) P.M. 114/1/1.  
\(^{21}\) NZPD, CCXXXIX (1934), 7-15.  
\(^{22}\) ibid., 13.  
\(^{23}\) Dominion, 27 September 1934.  
\(^{24}\) NZPD, CCXL (1934), 151.
In New Zealand, as elsewhere, the depression had undermined whatever spirit of internationalism and co-operation had existed before. The only reform in which pre-Labour Governments were interested was administrative and financial.

III

Whilst the Government remained dubious about the value of the League, the Labour Party had moved far from its former apathetic or anti-League position. The collective security system which it now firmly advocated was a means of preserving the peace, but in theory it committed its supporters to war as a punitive measure if all other ways of deterring aggression failed. Since collective security allowed war as a last resort, the Labour Party was forced to abandon both the pacifist policy which some of its early members had espoused, and its adherence to the principles of the Pact of Paris.

The principle behind collective security was that aggression was always morally wrong. It was the duty of all nations to combine against an aggressor nation and to punish it by material sanctions, and if necessary by military force. This obligation was constant regardless of any nation's interests in a particular dispute. A nation could be called to go to war in a dispute in which it had no direct interest at all, or against one of its own allies. Thus collective security cut across the alliances of traditional balance-of-power politics. Both regional alliances and the collective security system aimed to deter potential aggression by the prospect of retaliation. Both involved the risk of increasing the extent of conflict if the threat they posed was ignored. However, the Labour Party held that collective security provided the world's best hope for peace. To divide the globe into regional pacts, and to try to establish deterrents by building up armies and fleets was to invite trouble, since 'to prepare for war was to get war'.

Since aggression was wrong in all circumstances under a genuine system of collective security, it became difficult for nations which felt themselves to be suffering an injustice to right it. The mechanisms for change within the system were slow, and often impossible to operate. For example, Italy's demand that the Covenant should be separated from the peace treaties was blocked by France, despite a provision in Article 19 for the reconsideration of 'treaties which have become inapplicable and the consideration of international conditions whose continuance might endanger the peace of the world'.

It would seem, then, that an advocate of collective security would believe that the status quo was worth preserving. And, in fact, the Labour Party had slipped far from its earlier conviction that the League was an instrument of the victors for pressing and consolidating their advantage. It now leaned to the view that the League

25 NZPD, CCXLVII (1936), 879.
could provide a means for improving the conditions of all mankind. It held that it was the duty of all Labour movements to lift the living standard of other peoples, and to ensure that all had an equal voice in world affairs: ‘There is no other road to peace, and the only method by which that road can be constructed with any sound foundation inside the existing economy is through the League of Nations.’

Despite the Labour Party’s growing dedication to League ideals, members were never blind to its imperfections. Critics of the Government’s policy constantly pointed out that New Zealand was not getting the most out of its association with the League. She did not benefit fully because it did not participate fully. For instance, more advantage would be felt if New Zealand did not regard itself as a mere echo of Britain. Fraser claimed that New Zealand had a separate point of view which was worth communicating to the League, especially since it was in advance of generally conservative British attitudes.

In 1935, the Government and the Opposition drew together in reaction to Italian aggression in Abyssinia. For the first time the League made an attempt to impose sanctions in order to deter an aggressive course of action. Even though Italy was a traditional ally of Britain’s and New Zealand felt no particular hostility towards it, all parties condemned its invasion of Abyssinia. The issue was declared to be one where party differences were irrelevant. Despite its earlier reservations about the efficacy of the League, the Government rallied to its support in this instance. Forbes declared: ‘We should be failing in our duty to the League, and betraying [our] sense of honour . . . . should we fail at this juncture to undertake our share of the collective responsibility to maintain the solemn Covenant . . . .’

The Government supplied the Leader of the Opposition with information sent by the League and the British Government, with the result that the League of Nations Sanctions (Enforcement in New Zealand) Bill passed quickly and easily through Parliament. The Bill enabled New Zealand’s fulfilment of its obligations under the Covenant to be put into effect by Order in Council, in view of the imminent dissolution of Parliament. It also contained safeguards so that it could not be used to justify conscription, or any person’s being required to serve overseas; or to prevent reasonable criticism of its provisions.

Shortly after the imposition of sanctions, it became obvious that they would be a failure. Not all countries had agreed to impose them; others despite their avowed approval of sanctions continued to trade with Italy secretly. More important, no agreement could be reached to include oil, a vital wartime commodity, within the sanctions.

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26 NZPD, CCXXXIX (1934), 9.
27 NZPD, CCXL (1934), 152.
28 NZPD, CCXLIII (1935), 501.
The League's handling of various international crises is outside the scope of this paper, except in so far as it produced a reaction within New Zealand. However, it became increasingly obvious that the principal drawback to a foreign policy based to any large extent on the League was the proven inadequacy of the League itself. It seemed that the League's failure to cope with Japanese aggression in China and the Spanish Civil War spelled the organisation's ruin. Well before the end of 1935 the collapse of sanctions, the first weapon of the League, and the obvious impossibility of forging the last weapon — combined military action against Italy — reinforced this conclusion. The Coalition's momentary enthusiasm for the League dissipated, and members of the Government returned once more to disputing the value of New Zealand's contribution to the League. It did not occur to them that anything of value could be made of the League at this stage.

The Labour Party did not lose its conviction that the fault lay not in the idea of the League, but in the attitudes of the different governments to it. The following year, Jordan still considered the League ineffective, 'not perhaps because it is not sufficiently equipped, but because the Governments which compose the League have not been prepared to accept the consequences resulting from action'. The Party did not give up hope that the attitude of the member nations could be changed.

The hope was shared by many at Geneva. Optimists hoped that failure of the League would be put to good account as a practical lesson, and that the League would be strengthened, or else rebuilt on a different footing. A new reform movement was born, the official aim of which was to 'improve the application of the principles of the Covenant'.

Before the movement was seriously under way, New Zealand's first Labour Government gained office. It was prepared to play a more active role in the League than New Zealand had done before. On 26 April 1936 the High Commissioner, Sir James Parr, conveyed to the Prime Minister the information that Australian membership of the Council was about to expire, and suggested that New Zealand should take its turn next. Not too much significance should be attached to the fact that New Zealand had its first Council seat under a Labour government, because one seat was always allotted to a Dominion in rotation. Nevertheless, Savage was able to report that the Government had already been giving willing consideration to the fact that New Zealand had its first Council seat under a Labour government, because one seat was always allotted to a Dominion in rotation. Nevertheless, Savage was able to report that the Government had already been giving willing consideration to the question of representation on the Council, rather than shying away from the prospect as an earlier government had done.

On 1 June 1936 Savage sent to Parr his instructions for dealing with the proposed lifting of the embargo on Italy. It was a clear statement

29 Jordan to P.M., 23 December 1936, P.M. 114/4/2.
30 See AJHR, 1936, A-5, 1.
31 'We would of course not wish to apply for a seat.' P.M. to H.C., 29 March 1930, P.M. 114/4/5.
of the Labour Government’s thinking, and an indication that the Government was on its own initiative, before any solicitation from the Secretary-General, concerned once more with the issue of reform. He wrote:

We adhere most firmly to the collective system of supporting and enforcing the peace of the world by means of the principles outlined in the Covenant. We consider therefore that in the case of the breach of freely accepted obligations by Italy in Abyssinia, sanctions should not be abandoned but indeed should be strengthened. We realise however that as New Zealand is unlikely to share materially either in the dangers or in the loss of trade that would be involved in this course, we cannot with propriety complain if other members take a different view. We are prepared to acquiesce in their removal but only on the distinct understanding that at the September meeting of the Assembly the whole question of the Geneva peace structure is reconsidered. In this connection, if any further Committee should be set up to consider amendment of the Covenant, or any other enquiry instituted toward the reconstruction of the League, we should appreciate New Zealand’s representation in view of our forthcoming candidature for the Council.

In early July, the Government received a letter from the Secretary-General, asking New Zealand’s suggestions for improving the operations of the League. The Assembly, under the stimulus of the Italian debacle, had noted the circumstances preventing effective application of sanctions. Since the Assembly remained attached to the principles of the Covenant, it recommended that the Council should invite all members to submit their proposals for increasing the effectiveness of the League. The specific aims of the reforms should be to maintain ‘firm attachments to the principles of the Covenant’; to strengthen the ‘authority of the League of Nations by adapting the application of the principles to lessons of experience’; and to ‘strengthen the effectiveness of the guarantee of security which the League affords to its members’. The proposals were to be received in Geneva by 1 September. Savage responded immediately with a strongly pro-League note, promising immediate consideration of the matter.

There was a diversity of opinion even within the League as to what its role should be. The issues involved were universality; the separation of the Covenant from the peace treaties; the emphasis which should be placed on prevention of war, or on sanctions once war began; the role of regional agreements; and the arrangements to facilitate change. These questions raised the problem of whether the League should be just a consultative body, to encourage the seeking of peaceful settlements of disputes, or whether it should be armed with effective means to deter aggressors.

The prospects for improvement were not good, since even those nations who were interested in reform were divided. Canada and the
Scandinavian countries, for example, welcomed the collapse of commitments to automatic joint action. They wished it to be acknowledged that the League could no longer provide adequate security and that therefore they were not obliged to aid possible victims of German aggression. France and Russia, more directly alarmed at the German threat, wanted League obligations strengthened. But, at the same time, France in its way also undermined the principle of collective security, since it supported regional pacts. Members of alliances had double loyalties, and were unlikely to intervene against an ally if it became an aggressor. Britain vacillated, paying lip service to the ideals of the League, but apparently unwilling to commit itself to supporting collective security as a matter of principle. Britain preferred the right to act only when action suited her own interests.

Undeterred by the difficulties, the New Zealand Government persevered with its deliberations. Its attitude was idealistic, in the high tone of the 1935 annual conference of the Labour Party, which had pledged 'the New Zealand Labour Party to work in the future, as in the past, always against militarism and war, and for international peace and human brotherhood'.

A questionnaire was prepared in the Prime Minister's Department, circulated amongst Cabinet members, and discussed at a Cabinet meeting on 13 July 1936 which was attended by W. J. Jordan, the future High Commissioner. The paper contained ninety questions on foreign affairs, most relating to issues associated with the League; and eighteen dealing directly with ways of reforming and improving the League's operations. A copy of the questionnaire had been submitted to Walter Nash, the Minister of Finance (see App., p. 98). The formulation of the questions themselves, and the answers supplied by Nash provide two indications of the trend of Labour Party thinking which produced the memorandum of 26 July.

The paper deals with the prospect of strengthening the League's provisions, and increasing the rigour of its operations. For instance, one question reveals that the Government had been considering the feasibility of a League force to enforce its sanctions. The resolute position later adopted by the New Zealand Government in its Memorandum to the Secretary-General is already fairly fully formulated.

While the Government was considering its proposals, another cable was received from Parr, in which he intimated that the British Government did not intend to submit proposals to Geneva. Therefore, he personally considered it advisable to act with circumspection — in fact, to take no action at all until there had been consultation with Britain.

Britain was reluctant to formulate concrete suggestions because of the delicate political situation in Europe. Its over-riding concern was

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34 Annual Conference Report, 1935.
35 He succeeded Parr as High Commissioner, 1 September 1936.
to avoid antagonising Germany. It had opposed the Geneva Protocol partly because the Locarno Pact negotiations were due in the near future, and it was opposed to any move which might present a barrier to understanding and compromise with Germany. In view of its concern with Anglo-German relations, Britain was reluctant to strengthen League obligations which might force it into a position in which precipitate action against Germany became necessary. An additional reason for its cautious stance was reluctance to have its military resources, and more especially its navy, used to underpin the League's actions.

On the other hand it was unwilling to relinquish whatever security the Covenant did afford. In a time of mounting crisis, it was considered that every hope should be clung to. There was widespread concern lest the weakness of the League should provide encouragement for aggression. The British Government trod an uncertain path between its view that League obligations should not be increased at all, and indeed should possibly be lightened, and the view expressed by Sir Samuel Hoare in a speech before the Assembly, September 1935: "The League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and in particular for steady and collective resistance to all acts of aggression."36

On 30 July a cable from the British Government confirmed Parr's earlier warning that no action should be taken without consultation with Britain. It stated positively that the United Kingdom would submit no proposals, and continued: 'We feel that it should be very desirable if the Dominion Governments could similarly refrain from putting forward concrete proposals in advance of the meeting of the Assembly.'37

Eden later stated the opinion that in view of the close association between the British and New Zealand Governments for so many years, proposals by New Zealand might be interpreted by foreign countries as a 'kite flown by Britain'. (The New Zealand Labour Party's rejoinder to this was that New Zealand now had a new government.) However, Britain was anxious that it should not be compromised by the views of any Dominion. A conference should therefore be held to ensure that the Empire presented a united front.

Here was a testing point for the New Zealand Government: it must balance its idealistic dedication to League principles against its loyalty to the United Kingdom.

This problem had been an ingredient of a lengthy debate on the League in Parliament two months before. The consensus of Opposition opinion seemed to be that the first attention should be paid to maintaining the privileges and responsibilities of membership in the Empire; and that sympathetic consideration should be given to views put forward by any part of the Empire. One member of the

36 P.M. 114/1/1.
37 ibid.
Opposition had expressed the opinion that in view of the apparent failure of the League, New Zealand’s contribution to Geneva should be diverted to the defence of the Empire.38

On this occasion, the British position was considered carefully. The Prime Minister sent to C. A. Berendsen (Permanent Head of the Prime Minister’s Department) in Geneva, both the British request for inaction, and Parr’s telegram advising caution. The delegation considered the problem under two heads: first, whether, in view of Britain’s hesitation between various alternatives, amendments should be made in New Zealand’s proposals; and, second, whether, in view of British requests, the New Zealand memorandum should be deferred.

Three of the delegation explained to Eden that because of the New Zealand Government’s attachment to the principle of collective security, they wished to know in more detail the United Kingdom’s objections. Eden merely repeated Britain’s concern with the need to secure German collaboration and the need for a unified Empire view. This left the situation much as it was before. Berendsen conveyed the views of the delegation back to New Zealand: Parr is of the opinion that in view of the British request, of the delicate European situation, and of the fact that we appear to be alone amongst Dominions in our contemplated action, we should withhold our note . . . . Jordan attached importance to collaboration with the British Government who must, of course, play a major part in any collective system . . . but never-the-less sees no adequate reason why our note should not be presented.39

R. M. Campbell40 and Berendsen shared Jordan’s view. They pointed out to Eden that New Zealand’s proposals, which at that stage had not been revealed to the British Government, should present no barrier to German collaboration; that views advanced by so small a nation could scarcely upset the balance of Europe; and finally that the Government of New Zealand felt so strongly upon the issue that it wished to take positive action immediately.

Despite the difficulties the Government encountered in bringing the memorandum to light, due consideration was always given to the British view. When the final decision was made, the Government did not lose sight of Britain’s importance, both to the League, and to New Zealand’s own security. Yet these considerations did not outweigh the conviction that with just a few alterations, the League could be made a valuable weapon in the struggle for world peace.

On 28 August Savage cabled Berendsen, requesting him to forward New Zealand’s recommendations to the Secretary-General. Other copies were to be sent to the United Kingdom and to sister Dominions. The only modification to the memorandum was a note appended to the effect that New Zealand would not refuse to consider progress.

38 Colonel Hargest (Awarua), NZPD, CCXLV (1936), 160.
39 P.M. 114/1/1.
40 Economic Adviser to the High Commissioner’s Office.
by stages or by alternative proposals, should its own not be immediately practicable.

The Memorandum was received in Geneva by 31 August. It was one of only five received before the date due.

IV

The first proposition of the Memorandum was that the Covenant was not materially defective, but that it had never been properly applied. The nations could no longer rely on collective security since they had violated their obligations. Jordan elaborated these failings in a speech modelled closely on the memorandum, made before the Assembly on 29 September. Faced with an undoubted breech of the Covenant, he said, members had opposed Italy in Abyssinia only in a ‘partial and incomplete manner . . . . So the nations of the world, acting together for the first time to defend the Covenant, allowed themselves to be deterred from their plain duty. That is the short and sorry tale.’

The memorandum then emphatically recommended strengthening the Covenant’s provisions. Economic sanctions should be made immediate and automatic and should comply with the standard set in Article 16; that is, that all trade, financial and personal relations with Covenant-breaking states should be severed. Economic sanctions should be supported by the certainty of combined military action if sanctions were not effective. The New Zealand Government declared its willingness to play its part in applying the Covenant.

To make the League a greater deterrent to aggression, New Zealand advocated the institution of an international force under the control of the League, to consist of contributions from all member states.

Provision should be made for peaceful change within the League system, so a tribunal should be set up for the ‘ventilation . . . . and rectification of international grievances’. New Zealand recognised the post-war difficulties that were created by the peace treaties, and therefore recommended their separation from the Covenant. These two provisions effectively answered accusations that the League was merely an ‘instrument of the dominant imperialist powers to prevent an encroachment on their preserves by weaker ones’, or worse, ‘an instrument to bring organised Labour into war on the side of Capitalism’. This view was expressed in the independent magazine Tomorrow in an article entitled ‘Abyssinia, the League and the Labour Movement’. The author considered that as the League did nothing to end the capitalist rivalry for markets, wars would inevitably continue. The League, by invoking collective security would

41 All references to Memorandum in AJHR, 1936, A-5. It was drafted by Berendsen before his departure for Geneva. Berendsen enjoyed a very close working relationship with Savage.
42 P.M. 114/1/11.
43 Tomorrow, 18 September 1935. By W. N. Pharazyn, a frequent contributor.
widen the scope of conflict and once more the workers would be involved in a war in which they had no interest.

The Labour Party felt that it actually lay in the hands of workers to stop such wars. If the voice of the peoples of all countries could be heard, it would always be raised against war. Therefore, each country should hold a plebiscite to ascertain whether their peoples would be prepared to undertake automatic sanctions against aggression, and to place armed forces at the disposal of the League. By enlisting the peoples’ support of the League, it could be made a stronger bulwark against war.

Recommendations of a world-wide survey of economic conditions reflected the Government’s hope that the League could be used to raise standards and to remove some of the economic causes of war.

The Government declared itself willing to accept regional pacts, whilst not accepting their desirability in principle. So many countries once again based their security on alliances, that it was impractical to construct a League which did not take them into account.

The over-riding requirement of a really effective League was universality. The New Zealand Government wished to see the way paved for the inclusion of all nations, but concluded that ‘a collective peace system that is not supported by all nations of the world is better than no collective peace system at all . . . .’

Thus the striking features of the memorandum were its emphasis on firm action, introduction of an international peace force, and the national plebiscites to give voice to the ‘peoples of the world, as distinct from their governments’.

The importance of the Memorandum lies not only in its content, but in the opportunity it gave the Government to demonstrate that it had its own point of view to offer, independent of British policy. The memorandum embodied the results of Labour’s increasing dedication to the principles of the League. It was the product of two forces: the conviction that collective security was in the best interests of a small isolated country, and a genuine altruistic concern for international harmony.

The memorandum was of course enthusiastically received by League of Nations Unions throughout the country, and the Government received several messages of congratulation.44 Newspaper opinion also generally favoured the move.45

Favourable opinion was not shared by members of the Opposition. Savage had previously stated, in reference to the League of Nations Sanctions Bill, that no more troops would leave New Zealand. He was now asked to square this statement with the fact that ‘this little country, opposed to the rest of the British Empire, was prepared to push sanctions to the limit and indulge in a threat of war.’46 Opposi-

44 ‘“Thank God for the Labour Government,” said Mr Thomas Todd of Gisborne, when he heard the Memo read.’ Evening Post, 3 September 1936.
45 Evening Post, 18 September 1936; New Zealand Herald, 3 September 1936.
46 NZPD, CCXLVII (1936), 878.
tion speeches claimed that New Zealand had sacrificed its prior loyalty to Britain in a futile attempt to revive a moribund institution. The only consequence could be to involve New Zealand in the disputes of countries over ten thousand miles away in which it might otherwise be unconcerned. The Labour Party countered that if its proposals were accepted, the possibility of war was minimised, and that, in fact, New Zealand would probably never be involved in war again.

This mood of optimism did not last long. Already by 23 September 1936, Jordan was writing privately to Savage: 'The League is absolutely depressing . . . . There is about the same outlook on things international and general, as the New Zealand Government had in 1935. Jordan felt that most nations were not taking the League seriously enough. He complained that various members, whilst still attending the Council, were also conferring privately in a sort of 'hotel diplomacy' which relegated the League to an inferior position.

Twenty-seven statements from members were received by the time the Seventeenth Assembly of the League opened. On 22 October, a Committee of twenty-eight, with New Zealand represented, was established to consider reform. Jordan reported to the Prime Minister that the first four sessions of the committee were devoted to involved and laborious procedural matters. At one stage he had to intervene to prevent the issue being shelved altogether until the following year.

The tone of the communications between New Zealand and Geneva grew increasingly gloomy throughout 1936-8. On 27 December 1937, Savage admitted to Jordan: 'I share your . . . . doubts as to how far in present circumstances, the New Zealand Government's policy of collective security is likely to be made effective. There is, it seems to me, little prospect of substantial progress . . . .'

Ultimately, Jordan's prognostication that no agreement could be reached was justified. The whole issue of reform was swamped in a morass of technical difficulties and divergent opinions; and eventually disappeared in the face of the mounting crisis in Europe.

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47 P.M. 16, Jordan-Savage private correspondence, 1936-40.
49 P.M. 114/1/11.
A sample of questions dealing with the League, submitted to Cabinet members in July 1936. Included are the answers given by Nash.\(^{50}\)

Do you think there can be any security without a fully collective system based on force in the last resort? No

Do you think Article XVI of the Covenant has ever actually been tried? No

If you do not consider the Covenant a satisfactory instrument at present do you propose its amendment either —

(a) by strengthening the enforcement provisions, e.g. Article 16, Yes

(b) by weakening the enforcement provisions? No

In any case how are the enforcement provisions to be strengthened

(a) by stronger economic sanctions, if so, is this likely in view of the fact that the existing sanctions were not operated in the Abyssinian case? Yes

(b) by automatic application of force? Yes

Do you think it possible for Great Britain to bind herself to intervention by force against a declared aggressor in any dispute anywhere, whether directly concerned or not? Yes

Are you in favour of enforcing peace, even to the extent of going to war against a declared aggressor in support of the collective system? Yes

If so, are you in favour of New Zealand going to war against a declared aggressor in support of the collective system? Yes

Do you favour the institution of a specific League Force directly under League control? Yes

Do you consider that the League should confine itself to tasks of conciliation and abandon coercive methods? Both

If you are not in favour of strengthening the Covenant what alternative do you suggest —

(a) do you favour regional pacts? No

(b) do you feel that regional pacts are likely to lead to nothing more nor less than alliances and thus to war? Yes

\(^{50}\) Nash Papers, 2545, National Archives. Another copy, apparently recording the answers of D. G. Sullivan, Minister of Industries and Commerce, is filed in P.M. 114/1/1, Pt. 4.