

K/4-(59)

CONFERENCE

ON

ELECTORAL REFORM.

LETTER FROM MR. SPEAKER TO THE PRIME MINISTER.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty.



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1917.

Speaker's House, S.W.,
January 27, 1917.

DEAR PRIME MINISTER,

I HAVE much pleasure in informing you that the Conference on Electoral Reform has now completed its work, and that I am authorised to report to you the resolutions at which it has arrived.

You will doubtless remember the circumstances in which it originated, but for the sake of greater accuracy I will venture to detail them.

During the debate on the second reading of the Special Register Bill on the 16th August last, Mr. Asquith, who was then Prime Minister, in the course of his speech used these words:—

“With regard to the Parliament which is going to undertake the work of reconstruction after the war, it is eminently desirable that you should provide an electoral basis which will make that Parliament reflective and representative of the general opinion of the country, and give to its decisions a moral authority which you cannot obtain from what I may call a scratch, improvised, and makeshift electorate. Let us by all means use the time—those of us who are not absolutely absorbed in the conduct of the war—in those months to see if we cannot work out by general agreement some scheme under which, both as regards the electorate and the distribution of electoral power, a Parliament can be created at the end of the war capable and adequate for discharging these tasks, and commanding the confidence of the country.” (Official Report, vol. 85, p. 1906.)

During the same debate Mr. Long, who was then President of the Local Government Board, said:—

“I myself believe that if we agreed amongst ourselves, and the Government offered any assistance which they could, and which, I believe, they would gladly do, to set up—I will not say a Committee, because that is not exactly what I mean—but a representative Conference, not only of parties, but of groups, a Conference which would really represent opinion on these three subjects: electoral reform, revision of your electoral power when you have got it, and registration, I believe—and I do not speak altogether out of books—that such a Conference of earnest men, holding strong views, bitterly opposed to each other, if they were face to face with these difficulties, when we are all longing with a great longing to see something of a better prospect for our country in the future, would produce an agreed system for all three questions upon which the great mass of opinion of the people of this country could come together.”

And again later in his speech he used these words:—

“I believe that a Conference such as I have suggested would have a great result. I hope that in the short time during which Parliament is released from its duties we shall all turn our attention to this question. If my honourable friends in any quarter of this House, or outside of this House were to invite me to help to get together such a Conference I would do it with the utmost pleasure. I believe that is the way in which we are more likely to find a solution to these problems than any other plan of which I have yet heard. It was recommended by the honourable gentleman the Member for Stockport in a speech he made, as being put forward either in public or private by many of those who have given time and attention to this question. I venture to say to the House it is our duty, one and all, not to criticise the Government or to find fault with this Bill, but to set ourselves to find a solution which may be a lasting settlement of a very old and difficult problem.” (Official Report, vol. 85, pp. 1949–1950.)

The idea seemed to find favour, and soon afterwards I accepted an invitation from the Prime Minister to convene a Conference of members of both Houses of Parliament and to preside over it. The Members of Parliament and Peers whom I selected appeared to me to be eminently representative of the various shades of political

opinion in Parliament and in the country upon the special topics connected with Electoral Reform. Their numbers were as nearly as possible proportionate to the strength of pre-war parties in the House of Commons.

On the question of Woman Suffrage I endeavoured to obtain an equal division of opinion, so far as it could be ascertained, but many obvious difficulties presented themselves in discovering the views of gentlemen upon that important topic.

Eventually the following Peers and Members of Parliament accepted my invitation: the Marquess of Salisbury, Earl Grey, Viscount Bryce, Viscount Gladstone, Lord Burnham, Sir Ryland Adkins, Right Honourable Sir Frederick Banbury, Sir John Bethell, Sir William Bull, Colonel James Craig, Colonel Page Croft, Mr. Ellis Davies, Right Honourable W. H. Dickinson, Right Honourable Sir R. Finlay, Mr. Goldstone, Right Honourable Laurence Hardy, Mr. Maurice Healy, Right Honourable George Lambert, Sir J. Larmor, Mr. Macmaster, Mr. J. Mooney, Mr. T. P. O'Connor, Mr. Peto, Mr. Pringle, Right Honourable Sir Harry Samuel, Mr. Scanlan, Mr. MacCallum Scott, Right Honourable Sir John Simon, Mr. Turton, Mr. Stephen Walsh, Mr. Wardle, and Mr. Aneurin Williams.

Before the Conference met, however, Lord Bryce and Mr. Laurence Hardy were obliged through illness to withdraw their acceptances, and Mr. Mooney also found himself unable to take part in the proceedings. Their places were taken by Lord Southwark, Sir Robert Williams, and Mr. Brady.

Mr. W. T. Jerred, C.B., Assistant Secretary to the Local Government Board, acted as Secretary to the Conference.

The Conference met for the first time at the offices of the Local Government Board on the 12th October last, but all subsequent meetings have been held in Committee Room 15 at the House of Commons.

The terms of reference were as follows:—

To examine, and, if possible, submit, agreed resolutions on the following matters:—

- (a.) Reform of the Franchise.
- (b.) Basis for Redistribution of Seats.
- (c.) Reform of the System of the Registration of Electors.
- (d.) Method of elections and the manner in which the costs of elections should be borne.

After our discussion had proceeded for some time, we were so unfortunate as to lose the assistance of Lord Grey, who was prevented by illness from attending, but as I was in constant expectation that he might be able to resume his attendance I did not invite any other gentleman to take his place.

Sir Robert Finlay also, on his acceptance of office as Lord Chancellor in your Government, was compelled, to the regret of all his colleagues, to leave us.

On the 14th December Lord Salisbury, Sir F. Banbury, and Colonel Craig found themselves unable to continue to assist us, and resigned their positions as members of the Conference. Their places were taken by Mr. C. B. Stuart-Wortley (now Lord Stuart of Wortley), Mr. Touche, and Mr. Archdale, and it is perhaps only fair to mention that some of the conclusions of the Conference were arrived at before they became members of it.

You will remember that when we had reached this point I consulted you as to the desirability of continuing our labours, and you expressed the desire of His Majesty's Government that the work of the Conference should proceed.

Altogether the Conference held twenty-six sittings, the last of which took place on the 26th instant, when I was authorised to report to you the result of our deliberations. This appears in the following series of resolutions:—

I.—*Registration of Electors.*

1. The qualifying period for registration as a Parliamentary elector shall be reduced to six months.
2. There shall be a revision of the register every six months.
3. The qualifying period shall be six months prior to the 15th January and 15th July in each year.
4. The time between the preparation and coming into force of the register shall be shortened.

5. The foregoing resolutions (Nos. 2, 3, and 4) shall not apply to Ireland which, owing to different conditions, may require special treatment.

6. In England and Wales a Registration Officer shall be appointed in every county and borough who shall be, in the case of a county, the Clerk of the County Council, and, in the case of a borough, the Town Clerk.

7. An appeal from the decision of the Registration Officer shall lie to the County Court.

8. In the opinion of the Conference, the cost of registration should be a charge upon the local rates, subject to a contribution of one-half to be made by the State.

II.—*Reform of the Franchise.*

9.—(a.) Every person of full age, not subject to any legal incapacity, who, for the qualifying period, has resided in any premises, or has occupied for the purpose of his business, profession, or trade, any premises of a clear yearly value of not less than 10*l.*, shall be entitled to be registered as a Parliamentary Elector.

(b.) For the purposes of this resolution no change shall be made in the law relating to the joint occupation of business premises.

(c.) A franchise based upon the foregoing qualifications shall be substituted for all existing franchises.

Provided that the representation of the Universities shall be maintained.

10. The qualification to be registered as a Parliamentary Elector shall not be lost by removal to different premises within the same constituency, or from one constituency to another in the same borough or county (including the administrative County of London), or to different premises in a contiguous county or borough.

11.—(a.) A person shall not vote at a general election in more than one constituency.

Provided that a person shall be entitled to one additional vote in another constituency in respect of the occupation of his business premises, or in respect of any qualification he may have as a University voter.

(b.) For the purpose of this resolution the expression "constituency" means any county, borough, or combination of places, or university or combination of universities, returning a member or members to serve in Parliament, and where a county or borough is divided for the purpose of Parliamentary elections, means a division of the county or borough so divided.

12. The law relating to the franchise and registration shall be codified.

III.—*Redistribution of Seats.*

13. This Conference accepts as governing any scheme of redistribution the principle that each vote recorded shall, as far as possible, command an equal share of representation in the House of Commons.

14. It is desirable that there shall be a Redistribution of Seats in accordance with the following general rules :—

(i.) The number of members of the House of Commons for Great Britain shall remain substantially as at present.

(ii.) In the application of this principle the information at the disposal of the Conference indicates the taking of 70,000 as the standard unit of population for each member.

(iii.) A county or borough (other than the City of London) with a population of less than 50,000 shall cease to have separate representation.

(iv.) A county or borough with a population of 50,000, but less than 70,000, shall continue to have separate representation.

(v.) A municipal borough or urban district with a population not less than 70,000 shall become a separate Parliamentary borough.

(vi.) A county or borough at present returning two members shall not lose a member if the defect in the population is 20,000 or less.

(vii.) A member shall be given for 70,000 and for every multiple of 70,000, and an additional member for any remainder which is not less than 50,000.

- (viii.) The boundaries of Parliamentary constituencies shall, as far as practicable, coincide with the boundaries of administrative areas.
- (ix.) The City of London shall continue as at present to return two members.

15. Existing boroughs entitled to return two members shall not be divided.

16. Where there are contiguous boroughs which, if formed into a single constituency, would be entitled to return not less than three nor more than five members, it shall be an instruction to the Boundary Commissioners to unite such boroughs into a single constituency.

(This resolution would only become applicable in the event of a system of Proportional Representation being adopted, as recommended in a subsequent resolution.)

17. It shall be an instruction to the Boundary Commissioners to take the population as estimated by the Registrar-General for July 1914, instead of the population according the census of 1911.

18. It shall be a recommendation to the Boundary Commissioners, after ascertaining local opinion, to segregate as far as possible adjacent industrial and rural areas in forming constituencies within any county.

19. Where, under the application of these rules, a borough loses its right to separate representation in Parliament, it shall be competent for the Commissioners, after having ascertained local opinion on the subject, to combine such borough with any other such borough or boroughs lying within the county, or with any other borough in the same county having separate representation, instead of merging it in the adjacent county division.

20. Where an ancient Parliamentary borough loses its representation, the county division in which the borough becomes merged shall be named after the merged borough.

21. Where districts of burghs in Scotland comprise burghs in different counties, or where under the foregoing rules a Parliamentary borough which is a district of burghs would lose representation, it shall be an instruction to the Boundary Commissioners to consider the desirability of regrouping the burghs or adding neighbouring burghs in the same county, regard being had to their size, to a proper representation of the urban and rural population, and to the distribution and pursuits of such population :

Provided that the representation of the county is not thereby affected.

As regards Ireland, the Conference desires to place on record that, on the subject of redistribution, it has carried on its deliberations from the point of view of Great Britain only.

IV.—*University Representation.*

22. (a.)—The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge shall continue to return two members each ; the electorate shall be widened, and, in order to secure a proper representation of minorities, each voter shall be allowed to vote for one candidate only.

(b.) The Universities of Durham, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Bristol, and the University of Wales, shall receive representation ; these universities shall be grouped with the University of London so as to form a single constituency returning three members elected on the system of a single transferable vote.

(c.) The combined Universities of Edinburgh and St. Andrews and of Glasgow and Aberdeen shall also be grouped so as to form a single constituency returning three members under the system of a single transferable vote.

(d.) As regards all Universities the obtaining of a degree shall be the basis for electoral qualification.

V.—*Method and Costs of Elections.*

23.—(a.) A Parliamentary borough which would be entitled on a basis of population to return three or more members shall be a single constituency.

Provided that a constituency entitled to return more than five members shall be divided into two or more constituencies each returning not less than three nor more than five members.

(b.) The election in any such constituency shall be held on the principle of proportional representation and each elector shall have one transferable vote.

(c.) For the purposes of this rule the Metropolis (excluding the City of London) shall be treated as a single area and divided into constituencies returning not less than three nor more than five members.

24.—(a.) At a general election all polls shall be held on one day.

(b.) All nominations shall take place on one day.

(c.) There shall be an interval of eight days between the day of nomination and the day of poll.

25. Returning Officers' charges should be paid by the State on a scale to be fixed by the Treasury.

26. The duties of Returning Officer in England and Wales shall be discharged by a deputy Returning Officer, who shall be in the case of a county the Clerk to the County Council, and in the case of a borough the Town Clerk.

27.—(a.) Every candidate at the election of a Member of Parliament for any county or borough shall be required to deposit with the Returning Officer, at the time of his nomination, the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds.

(b.) If a candidate is not elected, and the number of votes polled by him does not exceed in the case of a single or double member constituency one-eighth of the total number of voters polling, or in the case of a constituency returning three or more members, one-eighth divided by the number of members to be elected, the deposit instead of being returned to the candidate shall be forfeited to the Treasury.

(c.) For the purposes of this resolution the number of "voters polling" shall mean the number of ballot papers counted other than spoilt ballot papers; and where the election is held under the system of a single transferable vote, the number of "votes polled" by a candidate shall mean the number of votes polled by him as first preferences.

Although the question of candidates' expenses does not appear to be strictly within their terms of reference, the Conference is strongly and unanimously of opinion that the expenditure at present entailed in fighting a contested election is unjustifiable, and should be materially reduced. This, the Conference considers can only be effectively carried out by an alteration in the maximum amounts at present allowed under the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act, 1883. The Conference accordingly resolved that—

28.—(a.) The following maximum scale of expenses shall be substituted for the maximum scale contained in Part IV of the First Schedule to the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act, 1883:—

Sevenpence per elector in a county.

Fivepence per elector in a borough other than a borough returning three or more members.

Fourpence per elector in a borough returning three or more members.

(b.) Where there are joint candidates the total amount of the expenses of the joint candidates shall not exceed one and a half times the scale allowed for a single candidate.

(c.) A duly nominated candidate, or a number of duly nominated joint candidates, shall be allowed one free postage.

In this connection the Conference has had its attention drawn to a growing and, as it considers, mischievous practice by which, at the time of an election, political and other organisations incur expenditure in the furtherance of the views of particular candidates. The practice is, in the view of the Conference, a contravention of the spirit of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act. The Conference realises the difficulty of dealing with the matter, but thinks that some amendment of the Act is very desirable, and resolved that—

29. Any person incurring expenditure by holding public meetings or issuing advertisements or publications for the purpose of furthering the election of a candidate,

shall be guilty of a corrupt practice unless such expenditure is authorised by the candidate and returned as part of his election expenses.

30. The Ballot Act shall be made permanent.

VI.—*The Local Government Register.*

The franchise for Local Government purposes is so closely connected with the Parliamentary franchise that the Conference thought it desirable to deal with the matter, and resolved that—

31.—(a.) In substitution for all existing franchises for Local Government purposes every person who for a period of six months immediately preceding the 15th day of January and the 15th day of July in any year has occupied as owner or tenant any land or premises in a Local Government area in England and Wales shall be entitled to be registered and to vote as a Local Government elector in that area.

(b.) For the purpose of this resolution neither sex nor marriage shall be a disqualification, provided that a husband and wife shall not both be qualified in respect of the same premises.

(c.) The Conference makes no recommendation with regard to the Local Government franchise in Scotland or Ireland.

VII.—*Soldiers and Sailors*

32.—(a.) It shall be the duty of the Registration Officer to ascertain, as far as possible, the names and addresses of all persons of full age who ordinarily reside in his area, but who are serving in His Majesty's forces, and such persons shall be qualified to be registered and to vote as parliamentary electors within that area.

(b.) In the case of a person who has served in His Majesty's forces during any part of the qualifying period, residence in a constituency for one month immediately preceding the 15th January or the 15th July, as the case may be, shall be a sufficient qualification.

All the resolutions under the foregoing sub-heads I to VII were agreed to unanimously.

VIII.—*Woman Suffrage.*

The Conference decided by a majority that some measure of woman suffrage should be conferred. A majority of the Conference was also of opinion that if Parliament should decide to accept the principle, the most practical form would be to confer the vote in the terms of the following resolution :—

33. Any woman on the Local Government Register who has attained a specified age, and the wife of any man who is on that Register if she has attained that age, shall be entitled to be registered and to vote as a parliamentary elector.

Various ages were discussed, of which 30 and 35 received most favour.

The Conference further resolved that if Parliament decides to enfranchise women, a woman of the specified age, who is a graduate of any University having parliamentary representation shall be entitled to vote as a University Elector.

IX.—*Miscellaneous.*

The Conference resolved unanimously that :—

34. The maintenance in any asylum for lunatics or idiots of any person for whose maintenance any other person is responsible shall not disqualify such other person for being registered as a Parliamentary elector.

The following resolutions were passed by a majority :—

35. This Conference, having considered the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, is of opinion that no person who has received poor relief other than medical relief for less than thirty days in the aggregate during the qualifying period, shall be disqualified for being registered as a parliamentary elector.

36. At any election in a single member constituency where there are more than two candidates, the election shall be held on the system of voting known as the alternative vote.

37.—(a.) Provision shall be made to enable any person who is on the Parliamentary Register in any constituency to have his name entered in a List of Absent Voters, and to record his vote as such, provided that he satisfies the Registration Officer that the nature of his employment will render it probable that he will be compelled to be absent from the constituency on the day when the poll will be taken.

(b.) The Absent Voters' List shall be prepared at the same time as the ordinary Register, and should remain in force during the currency of that Register.

(c.) A printed ballot paper shall be sent to every voter at the address registered by him for the purpose in such form and manner as will secure the secrecy of the ballot.

(d.) The ballot paper shall be returnable by post on or before the polling day, accompanied by a statutory declaration of identity in a prescribed form.

(e.) A person whose name is on the Absent Voters' List shall not be entitled to vote otherwise than as an absent voter.

In conclusion, I should like to bear witness to the admirable temper and conciliatory disposition which all the members of the Conference showed in grappling with the difficulties confronting them. They were convinced, I feel sure, of the great desirability of amicably settling these thorny questions, and of finding a solution for issues fraught with the possibility of engendering grave domestic strife and internal friction. They were desirous of rendering, at a time when the national energies were almost wholly centred upon the successful prosecution of the war, a service which might prove of the highest value to the State, and result in equipping the nation with a truly representative House of Commons, capable of dealing, and dealing effectively, with the many and gigantic problems which it will have to face and solve as soon as the restoration of peace permits of their calm and dispassionate consideration.

As a last word, I should like to say, on behalf of all the members of the Conference, how deeply they are indebted to Mr. Jerred for his unfailing courtesy, his untiring energy, and his accurate acquaintance with the technicalities of electoral matters, all of which gifts he placed unreservedly at the disposal of the Conference.

Yours very truly,

JAMES W. LOWTHER.

To the Right Hon. the Prime Minister.

Printed for the use of the Cabinet. February 1917.

CONFIDENTIAL.

K/4-(60)

AS I was responsible for what is known as the Speaker's Conference, I ask leave to press upon the Cabinet that we should take advantage of an opportunity which may never recur and decide to legislate on the lines of the report.

The Conference was composed of thirty-two members, and the fact that they have arrived at a unanimous conclusion on the most important questions submitted to them is really a very remarkable one. I think that it is essential that reference should be made to the Conference in the King's Speech, and a statement made that legislation will be introduced accordingly. I give below a few details as to the present situation.

The present Parliament, elected in December 1910, met on the 31st January, 1911, and under "The Septennial Act, 1715," its existence might have continued until the 31st January, 1918. By section 7 of "The Parliament Act, 1911," however, five years was substituted for seven years as the maximum duration of Parliament. This was extended by "The Parliament and Registration Act, 1916," to five years and eight months, and again extended by "The Parliament and Local Elections Act, 1916," to six years and three months. The result is that the life of the present Parliament will, in the absence of further legislation, expire on the 30th April next.

It will be observed that a further extension of eight months from the 30th April, which would carry us to the end of this year, would still keep the life of the present Parliament within the limits of the Septennial Act.

By "The Parliament and Registration Act, 1916," above referred to, the Parliamentary Register which came into force on the 1st January, 1915, is to remain in force until Parliament makes provision for any special registers, or otherwise directs, and the ordinary registration machinery is meanwhile stopped.

As this machinery cannot be restarted without the intervention of Parliament, the doubt arises whether it would be practicable to provide for the making of a new Register on the old lines, having regard to the conclusions arrived at by the Speaker's Conference.

Unless the life of Parliament is further prolonged a General Election must be held on the old Register. That Register is not only very stale, but, owing to the normal and abnormal movements of the population in the last two and a half years, can hardly be regarded as a satisfactory reflex of the electorate. And it is becoming more unsatisfactory as time goes on. Even if the life of Parliament is prolonged, a General Election

seems inevitable before next January, and the question of the Register is therefore of the utmost importance, and must in any case be faced at an early date.

If the life of Parliament were prolonged to the end of the present year and a Bill introduced in the early part of the Session and passed without much delay, a new Register would be available by about November.

Such a Bill, based on the agreement arrived at by the Speaker's Conference, would be accompanied by a Redistribution of Seats Bill. This Bill could be introduced simultaneously with some blank schedules as in 1884, and Boundary Commissioners would be appointed by administrative act. They would proceed with the necessary adjustments of areas immediately after the second reading of the Bill, and their work would probably be completed in some six or eight weeks.

W. H. L.

February 2, 1917.

F/166/5/1

This is not an ordinary question of
Extending the franchise - it is a question
not extension -

It is common ground that after
the war there must be a period of
reconstruction in trade industry - in
social & economic questions - in imperial
relations which will determine the
course of events for all who live in the
Empire for generations -

So it is imperative that these
evermore problems should be decided with
consulting the millions who have risked
their lives to make it possible to give the
right decision -

Take ^{any of} our boys in any class of
life. Had they been at home with no
connections or lodgers they would all &

probably not have acquired a vote

Now the boy who for medical usefulness
or other reasons stays at home gets a vote - these boys

Will have some

votes

The American is invited to

Express an opinion as to the future of this

Country - the gallant fellows who every
day face death for that country are not

safe or responsible enough to have a say
in that matter because political agents say
you may be safe if you trust them too far

We have trusted the honour of Britain
to them - & they have not failed us - let us
trust them in the land they were
not betray the land they were

UNDER SAME DIRECTION:-
DE VERE HOTEL, KENSINGTON, W. | GRAND PUMP ROOM HOTEL, BATH.

TELEPHONE NOS:
1091 & 1092 KEMP TOWN.

"CRESCENT HOTEL, BRIGHTON"
TELEGRAMS,

BRIGHTON.

ROYAL CRESCENT HOTEL,



K/4-(59)

ORDERS OF THE DAY.

Mr. Asquith,—Electoral Reform Conference,—That this House records its thanks to Mr. Speaker for his services in presiding over the Electoral Reform Conference, and is of opinion that legislation should promptly be introduced on the lines of the Resolutions reported from the Conference.

As Amendments to Mr. Asquith's Motion (Electoral Reform Conference):—

Mr. Arnold Ward,—

Line 2, leave out all after "Conference," and insert "but declines to consider during the war the controversial subject of woman suffrage, proposals for which have twice been rejected by this Parliament."

Mr. Mackinder,—

Mr. Watson,—

Mr. Currie,—

Mr. Macleod,—

Mr. Dalrymple,—

Mr. Christopher Johnston,—

Line 2, leave out all after "and," and insert "accepts the Report of that Conference as the basis of electoral reform, it being understood that Ireland is included unless otherwise provided for, and also that the Second Chamber will be reformed on a representative basis and strengthened, but is of opinion that, in view of the difficulty of dealing with questions of such complexity at the present time, provision should be made for an interim register in case an election should be necessary before the end of the war."

Mr. Salter,—

Sir Francis Lowe,—

Sir J. D. Rees,—

Sir Henry Craik,—

Colonel Chaloner,—

Mr. Percy Harris,—

Major Henry Terrell,—

Mr. Joynson-Hicks,—

Mr. Steel-Maitland,—

Mr. Neville,—

Sir Philip Magnus,—

Sir Charles Hunter,—

Captain Burgoyne,—

Commander Bellairs,—

Mr. Samuel Roberts,—

Mr. Blair,—

Sir George Younger,—

Line 3, leave out all after "introduced," and insert "to obtain an immediate register and to provide means of voting for those electors who are absent on naval and military service, but, save as aforesaid, considers that the attention of Parliament should be wholly devoted to the prosecution of the war."