

THE PEACE BALLOT: PEACE HISTORY CONFERENCE April 17th 2010

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Imperial War Museum. I am delighted to have been asked once again by Bruce to deliver a paper on an aspect of peace history from the era of the two World Wars. Some of you who have attended earlier Peace History conferences may recall that I have spoken previously on the history of the League of Nations, the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, the 1932 Disarmament Conference and the 1915 Henry Ford Peace Ship. Today, I have chosen to speak on the now almost forgotten 1935 Peace Ballot, but which was, and remains, the largest privately-held referendum ever held in this country. And, which with the Iraq Enquiry and the on-going conflict in Afghanistan featuring in the present election campaign, (April-May 2010), retains more than an element of topicality.

“You Shall Decide Peace or War” read the brave and optimistic words on a League of Nations Union poster announcing the Peace Ballot. Historian of the inter-war Conservative Party Graham Stewart has described the Union as “an interest group dedicated to furthering the work of Geneva and led by what in a later generation would be known as the ‘chattering classes’”. The prime mover for the Ballot was Lord (Robert) Cecil of Chelwood, a former government minister, and a passionate supporter of, and believer in, the League of Nations and the idea of collective security. Put simply, the purpose of the Ballot was “to demonstrate that the British people were behind the Government’s expressed wish of making the support and extension of the authority of the League of Nations a cardinal point in Britain’s policy,” and also “to have an important influence on peace movements in other countries.”

When it had been created after the end of the First World War, the League of Nations had been seen by many people, not only in Britain, but throughout the world, as the guarantee that the Great War would indeed be “the war to end war”. But by 1934, when the Ballot was announced, there was a great feeling, in Britain and worldwide of disillusionment about the League. From the start, America had refused to join, despite it being the brainchild of President Woodrow Wilson; in 1931, Japan had defied it and invaded Manchuria, and in October 1933, Hitler had taken Germany out of both the League and the moribund Disarmament Conference at Geneva.

There were calls, especially from the right-wing of the Conservative Party, including influential ex-cabinet minister Leopold Amery, that Britain should loosen its ties to the League and pursue a policy of “isolationism”, similar to that of the United States, and just concentrate on the Empire. The most extreme apostle of this policy was the mercurial Canadian-born newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook. He advocated in his “Daily Express”, which at that time was the largest-selling daily newspaper in the country, with a circulation of 2.25 million copies, that Britain should leave the League altogether and concern itself henceforward with purely British interests.

But it is to *another* newspaperman, Mr C J A Boorman, the editor of the “Ilford Recorder”, goes the initial credit for the holding of the Peace Ballot. Boorman was a leading member of the Ilford branch of the League of Nations Union. And in January 1934, by means of his paper and with the aid of some 500 voluntary workers, he showed in the words of the League of Nations Union Handbook for 1936, “that the ordinary citizen and his wife were deeply interested in the great problems of world peace and could, and would give considered and intelligent answers if clear and fundamental questions were addressed to them.” Boorman posed four questions which were open to all residents of Ilford over the age of 16 to answer. The first asked “Should Great Britain remain in the League of Nations?” 21,532 answered “Yes” a 3,954 “No”. Then they were asked “Should the Disarmament Conference

Continue?” Again, unsurprisingly the vast majority 20,472 were in favour with 4,960 against. But the third question elicited a more surprising response. It asked “Do you agree with the part of the (1925) Locarno Treaty which binds Great Britain to go to the help of France or Germany if one is attacked by the other?” Only 5,898 said “Yes”, while 18,498” replied “No”.

The results were announced on 8th February 1934 at Ilford Town Hall. They greatly impressed Lord Cecil, a liberal Tory but something of a “loose cannon” who often acted impulsively and had been Minister of Blockade in the Lloyd George wartime coalition government, and later, in the mid-1920s, Foreign Office minister under Austen Chamberlain, with responsibility for the League of Nations. In 1927 he had resigned from the Baldwin government to devote his energies to furthering the cause of the League of Nations. His tremendous efforts on behalf of the League and Collective Security were to earn Cecil the Nobel Peace Prize ten years later in 1937. Speaking of the Peace Ballot later in the Lords, he was to tell his fellow peers:

“It was brought to our notice that a Questionnaire of this type had been distributed and answered in a particular district of London with great success. By universal agreement among lovers of peace, they had all worked together-no division of Parties or Churches or anything of that kind-and a very successful result had been achieved. We said: ‘Well, what can be done in one district can be done in all.’ That was the whole genesis of the idea, nothing else.”

On 1st March 1934, Lord Cecil put his proposal before the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union. Though Cecil’s main idea was approved, there was concern that the Union would be unable to carry out the scheme by itself. And also, that even if outside co-operation was obtained, the Union could not accept the considerable financial responsibilities that a ballot such as Lord Cecil envisaged would entail. But, in a remarkably short space of time, these difficulties were overcome and at a conference held on 27th March, a draft of questions was discussed, a plan of campaign considered, and an executive committee-the National Declaration Committee- was set up under the chairmanship of Lord Cecil. Cecil was aided by the formidable Dame Adelaide Livingstone, who was described by historian Sir John Wheeler-Bennett in his memoirs as having done during the First World War: “remarkable work at The Hague in arranging the exchange of prisoners of war. She was the first woman to hold a major-general’s commission and one of the first Dames of the British Empire to be created.” The redoubtable Dame was to write the official history of the Ballot which was published in June 1935 by the left-wing, at this stage fellow-travelling, publisher Victor Gollancz, who was also responsible for the Left Book Club.

The National Declaration Committee met for the first time on 11th April 1934. At that meeting, Dame Adelaide’s official account rather bravely and honestly records:

“One proposal which arose in the course of the discussion was that, in view of the unfortunate effect which a lukewarm response to a large-scale ballot might have on the prestige of the League in this country, it might be wiser to confine it to twenty or thirty typical districts. But vision and courage won. A cautious test vote in a few districts was discarded in favour of a bold attempt to take the Ballot on a national scale.”

In the event, the best turn outs were recorded in the traditional non-conformist counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and in large towns and cities like Leicester. In Wales, an amazing 62.3% of the population was polled and the 42 constituencies

with the highest turnout were all north of a line from the River Severn to the Wash. The lowest turnout was recorded in Sussex.

And at this stage, the National Declaration Committee thought that a final vote of from four to five millions would be “generally regarded as the measuring rod of success.” And to ensure the Peace Ballot’s success the Committee recruited a formidable array of the country’s “great and the good”. The Archbishops of Canterbury, York and Liverpool were all supporters, as were fifty bishops, the Chief Rabbi and all the leaders of the Non-Conformist churches. From the world of the theatre, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Sybil Thorndike, Miles Malleson and Diana Wynard all gave their support, and so too did the renowned cricketer Sir Jack Hobbs. Authors Rose Macaulay, A. A. Milne, and E. M. Delafield wrote in favour of Ballot. And Sir Norman Angell, whose Nobel Peace Prize forms part of the display in the inter-war historical gallery here at the Imperial War Museum, H. A. L. Fisher, Professor J. B. S. Haldane and Sir Arthur Salter were among other public figures who pledged their support for the Peace Ballot.

The Ballot, Lord Cecil and his fellow National Declaration Committee members believed, would prove Lord Beaverbrook wrong, and that the majority of the British people did in fact still retain great belief in the League and its work to prevent war. To this end, the Union now prepared five questions which were sent out in the autumn of 1934 to its branches throughout Britain. Some 500,000 volunteers were involved in the canvassing, itself a remarkable achievement, and incredible 11,640,066 adults or 38.2% of the population over 18 responded to the questions. There was a multiplicity of coloured leaflets accompanying the campaign, but a yellow one from the National Declaration Committee read:

“In this ballot you are asked to vote only for peace or war-whether you approve of the League of Nations or not, whether you are in favour of international disarmament or not. And by voting for the League of Nations you are helping not only your country, but the other countries of the world, to maintain Peace and abolish war with all its horrors.”

And a pamphlet endorsed by the religious leaders, mentioned above, urged people to make the Ballot “an outstanding declaration that there shall be no more war.”

It is true to say that the National Government, still formally headed by the increasingly gaga Ramsay Macdonald, but dominated by Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, who became prime minister again in June 1935, were unhappy about the Ballot. Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon, a brilliant lawyer but unloved by his peers, attacked it in the House of Commons on 8th November 1934, accusing the League of Nations Union of having a socialist bias. In this he was supported by former Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain, of whom Churchill once famously said Austen always played the game-and always lost it.” Even Anthony Eden, regarded as the government’s most enthusiastic supporter of the League of Nations wrote that: “these problems are in fact too complicated for any useful purpose to be served by attempting so to simplify them as to render them capable of a simple answer yes or no.” And the sinister Joseph Ball, who headed the Conservative Party’s Research Department, who was to later indulge in underhand dirty tricks against Tory opponents of Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement like Eden himself and also Churchill and Duff Cooper, wrote to Baldwin that the yellow leaflet was “a dishonest statement, the sort of statement that I should be ashamed to be associated with.”

Naturally enough, there had been the dire warnings from Lord Beaverbrook in the "Daily Express" about the "Ballot of Blood", as he had dubbed it. On 25th October 1934 he warned his readers:

"The plebiscite will drag you and your children into war on behalf of the League of Nations, a moribund institution which is a convenient instrument of ambitious and unscrupulous powers in Europe."

And again on 17th November 1934 he thundered:

"The League of Nations is now a greater danger to peace than the armament makers, and I do not deny that they are a danger. Tear up the ballot paper. Throw the pieces in the waste-paper basket. Turn away from Europe. Stand by the Empire and Splendid Isolation."

Lord Lytton, one of the few Tory grandees who was in support of the League of Nations Union, thought that Beaverbrook was shooting himself in the foot with such rhetoric, telling a Foyle's literary lunch:

"By talking about the "Blood Ballot" the press has ensured for our canvassers an interested welcome."

And, far from heeding Lord Beaverbrook's advice and tearing up their papers, when the results of the Ballot were announced on 27th June 1935, it was announced that 11,090,387 people had voted "Yes" to the Ballot's first question which asked "Should Britain remain a member of the League of Nations?" while only 355,883 had answered "No".

The second question was: "Are you in favour of an all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement?" To this 862,775 answered "No" and 10,470,489 "Yes".

Question number three asked: "Are you in favour of the all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement. The "Nos" totalled 1,689,786 while those in favour numbered 9,533,558.

The fourth question was: "Should the manufacture and sale of the armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement. 10,417,329 voted "Yes" and 775,415 "No".

The fifth and final question was divided into two parts, and was drafted thus:

- "Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop-
- (a) by economic and non-military measure,
 - (b) if necessary by military measures.

To part (a) 10,027,608 answered "Yes" and 635,074 "No", and to part (b) the responses were 6,784,368 "Yes" and as many as 2,351,981 "Nos".

Despite the terrific success in obtaining such a large number of participants, the canvassers had not always met with plain sailing as social historian and left-wing activist Noreen Branson recalled:

“...It meant calling at houses where the house-holder shouted at you and looked as though he might throw things at you, and at houses where the people were totally indifferent and apathetic. It meant having discussions with people who had strong opinions, and giving explanations to those who were puzzled. In rural areas it meant long journeys on foot to collect forms from isolated farms and villages.”

And more than one historian of the period has acknowledged that the finding of half a million volunteers, who were linked together by special newsletter called the “Ballot Worker”, nine issues of which were published between February and July 1935, was, as I said earlier, a more significant achievement than finding eleven and a half million people prepared to complete a form delivered and collected from their door. But again, it has been remarked about the volunteers, many of whom were women, that they undertook the task and the “drudgery it entailed because they felt they were bringing the will of the people to bear on an untrustworthy government.”

And so what did British statesmen and politicians make of this resounding affirmation of public support for the League of Nations and its principles? Winston Churchill, at this time out of office since 1929, at odds with his party over India, and at best a previously lukewarm supporter of the League, was to recall in his memoirs:

“The Peace Ballot seemed at first to be misunderstood by Ministers. Its name overshadowed its purpose. It of course combined the contradictory propositions of reductions in armaments and forcible resistance to aggression. It was regarded in many quarters as part of the Pacifist campaign. On the contrary, Clause 5 affirmed a positive and courageous policy which could at this time have been followed with an overwhelming measure of national support. Lord Cecil and other leaders of the League of Nations Union were, as this clause declared, and as events soon showed, willing, and indeed resolved, to go to war in a righteous cause, provided that all the necessary action was taken under the auspices of the League of Nations. Their evaluation of facts underwent considerable changes in the next few months. Indeed within a year I was working with them in harmony upon a policy which I described as ‘Arms and the Covenant’.”

The events to which Churchill referred was the crisis over Abyssinia, (present day Ethiopia), which reached a climax at the beginning on 3rd October 1935 when Mussolini’s Italian forces invaded the country. When the Peace Ballot results were announced, the Duce had been planning for some time to invade and colonize Abyssinia in order to establish a New Roman Empire in Africa. Ruled by Ras Tafari, who as Emperor assumed the name of Haile Selassie, Abyssinia was a slave-trading primitive autocracy, and thus an unlikely candidate to gain support from liberal-thinking people in Britain. But, Abyssinia was a member of the League of Nations-ironically admitted in 1923 on Italian insistence against strong British and French objections-and thus entitled to protection of fellow members from aggression. The British Government were in a dilemma. Either they retained the friendship and support of Mussolini, then regarded as an important and potential ally against Nazi Germany, and thereby betray both Abyssinia and the League of Nations. Or they stand up for the principles of the League and international law, and by doing so face the possibility of war with Italy and the loss of a partner against Hitler. Either way it was an unenviable decision, and made worse for the National Government by the knowledge that a general election was in the offing that autumn.

In fact, just before the announcement of the results of the Peace Ballot, the Cabinet met and agreed to a plan outlined by the new Foreign Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare. The prissy Sir Samuel has not been treated kindly by historians. Even at the time he had the nickname of “Slippery Sam” and Churchill’s friend Lord Birkenhead described

him as being descended from a long line of maiden aunts. He was however a hard-working, practical, and efficient, if unloved, minister. Working for the secret service during the First World War, Hoare had channelled large sums of money to Mussolini. This was in order that the then out-of-office Milan politician and newspaper editor, should effectively lobby to keep Italy in the war after the disastrous Battle of Caporetto in October 1917. Now Hoare suggested that the Duce could be bought off by the partitioning of Haile Selassie's empire. Italy would get the lion's share of the country, all of which, if the invasion went ahead, she would sooner or later get in any case. But after the results of the Peace Ballot, there was a radical rethinking of the Government's position. The Cabinet now began to talk about honouring British commitments in order to confront Mussolini because this was, in the words of the official minutes: "the present trend of development of public opinion in this country."

In his 1950s memoirs of the inter-war period "Nine Troubled Years", a well-argued but essentially flawed defence of appeasement, Sir Samuel, now elevated to the peerage as Lord Templewood, wrote disparagingly of the Peace Ballot:

"The so-called ballot emphasised the already obvious fact that the country stood for peace. The questions had, however, been so worded that they had no bearing on the actual state of the world. They gave the impression that we could depend on collective security when four of the Great Powers stood aloof, and they kept discreetly in the background the need for British rearmament. The real question that should have been asked: "Do you support British rearmament in the interests of peace?" was carefully avoided. The result was the strengthening of all the pacifist influences at a time when peace was being threatened, and an encouragement to the complacent in their belief that no special effort was necessary to strengthen British defences."

Moreover, Hoare continued:

"The Opposition at once exploited the situation for an attack on the Government for increasing the Air Force and for failing to make quicker progress in the disarmament discussions in Geneva."

Hoare was also of the opinion that:

"The Ballot had an even more unfortunate effect on the Continent. At the very moment when France on one hand was being weakened by a series of political crises, and Hitler was consolidating his power in Germany, the impression was spread abroad that England was for peace at any price."

But as the Labour front bench spokesman on foreign affairs Hugh Dalton wrote in his memoirs about the significance of the results of the Peace Ballot:

"A Government, supported by such majorities in the electorate, would rightly regard itself as holding a shattering popular mandate. But the British Government had no wish to be furnished with such a mandate."

One of Hoare's colleagues in the Cabinet when the Peace Ballot results were announced was 37 year old Anthony Eden, the Lord Privy Seal with the additional and new title of Minister of League of Nations Affairs in the Conservative-dominated National Government. Eden of course will be forever more associated with, and damned for, the Suez Affair of 1956. But in the 1930s, he enjoyed a popularity with the public, both at home and abroad, that any of our present-day politicians would envy. As Robert Graves and Alan Hodge wrote in their social history of Britain in the

inter-war years “The Long Weekend”, in the 1930s, Eden was “a popular figure-young handsome, smartly dressed and with the reputation of being not only a good diplomat but honourable in the best British tradition.” In his memoirs of the inter-war years, “Facing the Dictators”, Eden gave this assessment of the Peace Ballot, coming as it did as Mussolini threatened Abyssinia:

“The strength of British feeling in favour of the League was exemplified by the results of the Peace Ballot, which were organized at the end of June. This ballot, organized by the League of Nations Union under Lord Cecil, consisted of questions to which ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers were to be given.”

As I said earlier, in Eden’s view the questions asked were too complex for such a simple answers. In particular he cited Question 5, which as you recall asked:

Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by

- (a) Economic and non-military measures?
- (b) If necessary, military measures?

Eden continued:

“Ten million people answered part (a) in the affirmative, while only 635,000 said ‘no’. The answers to part (b) were considerably different. 6,784,000 men and women voted for military sanctions and 2,351,000 against.”

Looking back from the vantage point of the early 1960s, Eden was of the opinion that:

“These declarations took on a closer significance in view of Mussolini’s now thinly veiled intentions, (against Abyssinia). The separation of economic and military sanctions implied that the former could be applied against an aggressor without any risk of provoking war. This was not so. I doubt also whether it was sufficiently realized by the balloters that the brunt of military sanctions would fall upon Great Britain. None the less, the eleven and a half million who answered the questionnaire did not merely record a pacifist vote. Some of them at least were prepared to use force in a righteous cause.”

Nearly a month after the results were announced, on 23rd July 1935, Eden with Hoare and the new Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin received a delegation from the Peace Ballot’s National Declaration Committee. Baldwin was notoriously uninterested in foreign affairs, and despite holidaying each year at Aix-Les-Bains never bothered just once to make the short journey to the League of Nations headquarters at nearby Geneva. In December 1938, after his successor Neville Chamberlain’s now notorious three flights to Germany that September, Tory MP and fervent Chamberlain admirer Henry “Chips” Channon wrote in his diary:

“Certainly Baldwin as Prime Minister during these recent weeks, would not have behaved in the superhuman way that Chamberlain did. He would not have flown to Berchtesgaden-not he. He wouldn’t have known where it was.”

But now faced by the result of the Peace Ballot, which Lord Cecil felt “has exceeded our most sanguine expectations”, Baldwin was compelled, at least in public, to modify his opinion of the League, which, when he did think about it, he regarded as a good means of achieving conciliation among its members. But at the same time thought it

of doubtful worth as an instrument to deter potential aggressors. In 1934, Baldwin had gone as far as to attack a collective peace system as being “perfectly impracticable”. But now, he told the NDC deputation the League of Nations was the “sheet anchor of British policy”. Moreover he recognised that the Peace Ballot’s object had been:

“To show the Government that we have a large volume of public opinion behind us in the efforts which we are today making to maintain the authority of the League of Nations.”

A week later on 30th July 1935, in the House of Commons, Baldwin was asked by Liberal MP Geoffrey Mander:

“Whether his attention has been drawn to the result of the National Peace Ballot, submitted to him by a recent deputation which shows that 11,627,765 persons recorded their votes, showing a percentage of 97% in general support of the League of Nations, and that three persons out of every four who voted were in favour of military sanctions if necessary for the preservation of world order through the machinery of the League: and whether the Government will frame their foreign policy in conformity with the public opinion of the country as thus disclosed?”

The Prime Minister replied:

“The result of the Peace Ballot communicated to me by a deputation on this subject last week showed that out of approximately eleven and a half million ballot papers filled in, some six and three quarter millions answered “ Yes” to the question relating to military sanctions. As regards the last part of the question, the Government’s policy has been explained in the speeches of Ministers. This policy remains founded upon the League of Nations, and, as I said to the deputation on Tuesday last, I was glad of the opportunity of emphasising that the Government intend to persist in the policy hitherto pursued.

And at the end of August at the Foreign Office, Hoare conferred with a body of the “great and good” which included Tory grandee former Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain, Liberal leader Sir Herbert Samuel, and Britain’s wartime premier David Lloyd George, as well as Lord Robert Cecil. The consensus of their opinion was that the results of the Peace Ballot had demonstrated clearly that Britain should be guided by her obligations to the Covenant of the League of Nations or else “ a great wave of public opinion, (as manifested by the results of the Peace Ballot), would sweep the Government out of power.”

And so, while British secret diplomacy continued to try and keep Mussolini on board in anti-Hitler coalition, it was evidently clear that the Government would have to make a positive and public stand in favour of the League. Hoare thus went to Geneva to address the League Assembly on 11th September 1935. “Chips” Channon recorded in his diary:

“Sam Hoare has made a great impression by a terrific Geneva speech in which he backs up the League of Nations, and pledges Britain’s word to uphold the Covenant, provided the rest of the world does likewise.....”

Hoare’s speech contained three main assurances. He began by reaffirming Britain’s support of the League and the British people’s interest in collective security. He pointed out that the fulfilment of the Covenant was a collective obligation, as Channon noted, and he ended with this statement of the Government’s position:

“In conformity with its precise and explicit obligations, the League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and particularly for steady and collective resistance to all unprovoked aggression.... There, then, is the British attitude towards the Covenant. I cannot believe that that the attitude will be changed so long as the League remains an effective body and the main bridge between the United Kingdom and the Continent remains intact.”

And earlier in his speech Hoare had made a direct reference to the Peace Ballot when he told the Assembly:

“The recent response of public opinion shows how completely the nation supports the Government in the full acceptance of the obligations of League membership. It is to the principles of the League and not to any particular manifestation, that the British nation has manifested its adherence.”

The firmness and unequivocal nature of Hoare’s speech created an immense impression at Geneva and beyond. The Belgian statesman Paul Hymans thought that it gave a clear message that, “The British have decided to stop Mussolini, even if this means using force.” Anthony Eden, no great admirer of Hoare whom he called in private “Aunt Tabitha”, was of the same opinion. But Hoare’s words failed to deter Mussolini, and on 3rd October 1935, Italian forces invaded Abyssinia. Three weeks later Baldwin announced that a General Election would be held on 14th November 1935.

In the meantime, we saw earlier Lord Beaverbrook’s extreme distaste both for the Peace Ballot and the League of Nations. But “The Beaver” was by no means alone in Fleet Street in holding these views. And two right-wing papers “Morning Post” and the “Daily Mail” paid the Peace Ballot the compliment of imitation. On 18th February 1935 the “Morning Post” announced a “National Test Vote”, a referendum on thirty questions concerning British foreign and domestic policy. The questions appeared in the next ten editions of the paper. To encourage its readers to respond, the paper offered three prizes to those readers who sent in the most duly signed forms. On 18th March 1935, it was announced that some 45,182 votes had been cast, (the paper’s circulation at this time was around 150,000 and slipping badly, and two years later it was absorbed by the “Daily Telegraph”).

To the crucial question “Are you in favour of reliance mainly on the League of Nations to prevent war?”, in complete antithesis to the Peace Ballot results, some 60% of respondents replied “No” and only 30.7% “Yes”. And the question “Are you in favour of increasing our defences?” got a 82.4% “Yes” vote and only 10.6% “Noes”.

In September 1935, it was the turn of Lord Rothermere’s “Daily Mail” described then as being “ imperialist, isolationist...(and) an enemy to all socialists, pacifists and disarmers.” The “Mail’s” poll demonstrated all too clearly the power of the asking the right question to get the wished-for answers from the right audience. With Mussolini’s Abyssinian adventure imminent, the “Mail’s” ballot professed concern was “to ascertain the real feeling in this country in this Abyssinian dispute”. Replies had to be received, on postcards for which the paper stumped up the postage, by 5th October 1935, thus taking in the very day of the Italian invasion, 3rd October 1935. The results, verified by chartered accountants, were given in percentages only with no indication of the numbers involved. They appeared in the paper on 7th October 1935 and contained no “Don’t Knows”, a category, a post-war historian sardonically

considered, "with which the unequivocal readers of the 'Mail' were apparently unacquainted."

They read as follows:

1. "Are you in favour of economic sanctions by the League against Italy?" "Yes": 25.2%, "No": 74.8%

2. "Are you in favour of military sanctions by the League against Italy?" "Yes": 16.78%, "No": 83.22%

3. "Are you in favour of Great Britain remaining a member of League of Nations?" "Yes": 31.08%, "No": 68.92%

4. "Are you in favour of Great Britain rearming in the air and on sea and land?" "Yes": 95.4%, "No": 4.6%

And Lord Beaverbrook himself refused to give up his crusade against the Peace Ballot. On 22nd November 1934, the results of the referendum were announced for the village of Scaldwell in Northamptonshire. 117 out of 150 adult inhabitants of the village had taken part in the Peace Ballot and there was an overwhelming majority in favour of the League of Nations. Immediately, the "Daily Express" rushed a team of its own so-called "experienced representatives" up to Scaldwell to conduct its own house to house canvass on the question: "Are you in favour of Great Britain isolating herself from all foreign entanglements, treaties and understandings, and refusing to engage her armed forces-Navy, Army and air force-in any war unless our territory or that of our Dominions and Possessions is menaced?" According to the "Express" 52 persons answered "Yes", 51 refused to answer as they had already taken part in the Peace Ballot, but not one person had voted "No". In a front page article on 24th November 1934, the paper announced that "The Ballot of Blood is Exposed and Found False. Although partisan in the extreme, the "Daily Express" campaign against the Peace Ballot did raise doubts, in the words of one historian, about the "knowledgeability and real intentions of those participating."

Writing just over two years later in 1937, former diplomat and National Labour MP Harold Nicolson said of the Peace Ballot:

"The more sceptical among us hailed the Ballot as a demonstration that the British people were overwhelmingly pacifist. Yet at the same time we distrusted it as an indication that that the public supported the League so long as it stood for peace and disarmament and would not support it once it became clear that the defence of the Covenant might lead to war."

Nicolson's impressions were confirmed during the 1935 General Election campaign when he was a National Government candidate for Leicester West. A constituent wrote to him:

"Dear Sir

Can you assure me that you stand for the League of Nations and Collective Security and will oppose any entanglements in Europe?"

Nicolson noted:

"At several meetings held in my constituency and elsewhere I read that letter aloud and watched carefully for a response. Only in rare and isolated cases did my audience at once see that the above formula was self-contradictory nonsense."

Nicolson, who was to later to be a member of the Eden group of anti-appeasers, the so-called "Glamour Boys", and a wartime junior minister under Churchill, concluded:

"My experience with this letter convinced me that the Peace Ballot, (valuable though it had been), was not a considered expression of national determination, but an expression of ill-considered national desires. In other words, it expressed what the whole country wanted to *happen*: it did not express what they were prepared to *do*."

But undoubtedly, Sir Samuel Hoare's seemingly tough stance at Geneva and Baldwin's public affirmations of governmental support of the League of Nations and its Covenant, brought many votes by League supporters to the National Government in the November 1935 General Election. But then, less than a month later disaster struck. On his way to a skating holiday in Switzerland, Sir Samuel stopped off in Paris to confer with his French opposite number, the notoriously untrustworthy and anglophobic Pierre Laval about Abyssinia. Since his execution for treason on 21st October 1945- ironically enough considering his intense dislike of Britain, Trafalgar Day-Laval has been treated much more roughly by historians, French and British, than Sir Samuel. He will be forever associated with the wartime collaborationist Vichy regime of which he and Marshal Petain were the leading lights, and of its shameful complicity in the Holocaust. But even before the war Laval was seen by members of the British ruling establishment as a shady, sinister and corrupt politician, much more keen to appease Mussolini, than abide either by the Covenant of the League or the spirit of *Entente Cordiale*.

A lot of legends grew up and still persist about the infamous Hoare- Laval Pact of December 1935, but basically it was more or less the same as the plan discussed and agreed upon in the British Cabinet six months before. Mussolini was to get two thirds of Abyssinia, while Haile Selassie was to retain sovereignty of the remaining third of his empire. Having agreed on this with Laval, Hoare carried on to Switzerland where he blacked out on an ice rink breaking his nose. His misfortunes were compounded when the news of his Pact were leaked from the Quai d'Orsay, the French foreign office. Harold Nicolson recorded that:

"Scarcely half an hour after this agreement was known in Paris, public opinion rose in revolt. The lobbies of the House of Commons buzzed with anger and within a few minutes it became evident that either Sir Samuel Hoare and his agreement must be jettisoned or the Government would fall. Bowing to the storm Mr Baldwin dismissed his Foreign Secretary and the agreement became null and void."

The heavily bandaged Hoare returned from Switzerland and journeyed up to Sandringham to surrender his seals of office to the dying King George V. A few days later, the King told Hoare's successor Anthony Eden:

" I said to your predecessor: 'You know what they're all saying, no more coals to Newcastle, no more Hoares to Paris.' The fellow didn't even laugh."

At the time it was felt that the remarkable explosion of public opinion, seemingly a "direct exercise of democratic control over foreign policy", proved that the result of the Peace Ballot had been clear indication of the national will, and that the British electorate were ready to risk war on behalf of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Britain's lead in taking economic sanctions against Italy was seen as further proof of the power of the Peace Ballot, not only in Britain itself but also abroad. Henry Stimson, US Secretary of State under President Hoover between 1929 and 1933 claimed in a broadcast:

“ This autumn the League in its treatment of the war crisis between Italy and Ethiopia, has taken more vigorous action and accomplished more signal results than ever before in its history. I believe that this has been largely due to the recent referendum taken in Great Britain to find out the views of the British public as to collective action in support of the League. Very largely as a result of this proof of the attitude of the British people, the British Government has shown a vigour and confidence in its leadership in the League which it has never shown before.”

And Spanish diplomat and peace activist Salvador de Madariaga, whose country was soon to be plunged into a bloody civil war thought too that:

“It happens that England, (sic), over-riding her own insularity, has given a decisive lead towards international solidarity, a task for which her national genius seems to have predestined her.....The development has been most marked in the result of the plebiscite organised by the League of Nations under the direction of Lord Cecil, to whom the world can never be sufficiently grateful for his public spirit, national and international. The plebiscite showed that English (sic) public opinion was favourable to the Covenant, the whole Covenant and nothing but the Covenant. Hence, so far as England,(sic),is concerned, the Covenant is already an effective law.”

Eduard Benes, the Czech foreign minister and president of 16th Assembly of the League that autumn was equally admiring. And the veteran South African statesman Jan Smuts agreed. Writing to the League of Nations Union, he congratulated it on “the marked effect which its propaganda has produced on public opinion”, adding:

“The British Government has served the cause of the world and the League well, and one cannot help feeling proud of Eden and the stand he has made on behalf of the collective system and of legality in international affairs. The application of the sanctions policy in actual fact is an enormous step in advance, and I trust will have a marked effect not only in the Abyssinian case, but also in other future cases, and will serve as a warning against international adventures of this kind in future.”

Alas, this was not to be. The imposition of sanctions, but not those of oil which would have ground the Italian invasion to a halt, failed to deter Mussolini and by May 1936 he completed his conquest of Abyssinia, using poison gas and terror bombing. Eden’s youth and relative inexperience prevented him from having stronger voice in Cabinet, against colleagues like Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain, who went behind his back to publicly denounce sanctions as “the very midsummer of madness”. Eden’s colleague Duff Cooper was of the opinion that back in September 1935, Britain should have backed up Hoare’s words at Geneva with action:

“...if we had unhesitatingly imposed every economic sanction ourselves, by a blockade prevented others from assisting Italy, closed the Suez Canal to Italian shipping, and at the same time mobilised the fleet, we should have rendered it quite impossible for Italy to continue the war unless she had been prepared to use force against Great Britain.....All the smaller powers that were members of the League were pledged to aid us...It would have been the end of Mussolini and the end of Fascism, a triumph for the League of Nations and a warning to the Nazis.”

In his memoirs “Old Men Forget”, Duff Cooper further wrote:

“If there had been a great leader in a high position at that time he *might* have rallied the country to support such a policy, and if Great Britain had led, the smaller nations would have followed. It is a curious fact the British, who fight with the most glorious

courage and the toughest tenacity, have such a horror of war that they will never support a policy which entails the slightest risk of it. “

In conclusion, as regards the Peace Ballot itself, Dr Lorna Lloyd, Britain's foremost historian of the League of Nations, has been rather dismissive of the experiment, writing of it:

“This massive pronouncement affected the presentation of British policy during the League's attempt to handle the ensuing Abyssinian crisis, but it did not influence the substance of what Britain did, and in private the government could dismiss the LNU as a collection of do-gooders and cranks.”

And in the words of Ronald Blythe in his history of England in the Twenties and Thirties, “The Age of Illusion”:

“The Peace Ballot of 1935 marked the pinnacle of thirties pacifism and at the same time revealed the limitations of the League of Nations. This nation-wide knocking on doors and beating of breasts quite drowned the sounds from German dockyards, where the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* were being laid down.”

Thank you very much.