CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Wednesday, December 10, 1941, at 6 P.M.

Present:
The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. A. GREENWOOD, M.P., Minister without Portfolio.
The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The following were also present:
The Right Hon. Sir EARLE PAGE, Special Envoy from the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia.
The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.
The Right Hon. L. S. AMERY, M.P., Secretary of State for India and Secretary of State for Burma.
The Right Hon. Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.
The Right Hon. R. S. HUDSON, M.P., Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries (Items 4-5).
The Right Hon. BRENDAN BRACKEN, M.P., Minister of Information.

Mr. RICHARD LAW, M.P., Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office (Items 1-3).

Secretariat:
Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.
Mr. L. F. BURGIS.
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The Prime Minister referred to the grievous loss which we had sustained by the sinking of H.M.S. Prince of Wales and H.M.S. Repulse.

The loss of these two ships, coming on the top of the disaster which the Americans had sustained at Pearl Harbour, entirely changed the balance of naval forces in the Pacific. Until the position could be brought round, we should have to suffer considerable inconveniences: our shipping would be exposed to enemy attack, and we might have to take a lot of punishment in this area.

There were other important developments in the general war situation. First, the United States was now in the war with us. Secondly, there was no doubt that the German armies had suffered a serious defeat on the Russian front—a defeat which, if the Russians were able to exploit it, might have very important consequences. Thirdly, so far as the battle in Libya was concerned, we could now say that the tide had definitely turned in our favour and that Tobruk had been relieved. These developments far outweighed the immediate consequences of the position in the Far East, serious as they were.

The Prime Minister said that he proposed to make a statement in Parliament on the general situation on the following day, in the course of which he would announce the change which had been made in the Command of the Eighth Army in the Western Desert.

The War Cabinet took note of these statements.

Further discussion took place on certain aspects of the situation in the Far East, and is recorded in the Secretary's Standard File of War Cabinet Conclusions.

The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (W.P. (41) 295) setting out the conditions on which, in the view of the Ministers concerned, British approval might be given to a scheme for the transfer to the Spanish flag of 300,000 tons of French shipping now idle in the Mediterranean. It was most unlikely that the Spanish and Vichy French authorities would agree to all these conditions. The Spaniards had, however, asked for our views, and a draft telegram to His Majesty's Ambassador at Madrid was annexed to the Memorandum.

The War Cabinet—

1. Approved the despatch of the draft telegram annexed to W.P. (41) 295.
2. Authorised the Ministers concerned to agree to some measure of modification in the conditions proposed, at their discretion, provided that they were fully satisfied that the resulting deal would be in our interest.
4. The War Cabinet had before them Memoranda by the Lord President of the Council (W.P. (G) (41) 147) and the Minister of Supply (W.P. (G) (41) 146).

The question at issue was whether 7,000 agricultural workers should now be called up for service in the Armed Forces. These men formed part of a total of 22,000 men whom it had been agreed should be taken from agriculture into the Services during 1941, but whose call-up had been deferred.

In discussion, the following points were made:

(i) The Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries referred to the large number of men which agriculture had already contributed to the Armed Forces. How could the industry be expected to give increased production in 1942 with fewer men?

(ii) The Secretary of State for Scotland said that Scottish agriculture was already short of 4,000 skilled men. It was impossible to make another 1,500 men available for the forces and at the same time bring under cultivation another 200,000 acres.

(iii) The Minister of Labour and National Service asked the War Cabinet not to disturb the balance of the man-power plan, which had been devised with great difficulty. Agriculture had retained more men under 25 than any other industry in proportion to its numbers.

(iv) The Prime Minister thought that the 7,000 men ought to be called up. This was not a large contribution. But its withholding would expose the agricultural industry to reproach that it had held back its young men in the hour of their country's direst need.

(v) Reference was made to the difficulties experienced in getting in the harvest owing to shortage of labour and to the fact that certain crops (e.g., sugar-beet) had not yet all been lifted. It was agreed that, subject to the exigencies of the military situation, the Army authorities would have to give help on a big scale at harvest time.

After further discussion, the War Cabinet—

Agreed that the 7,000 men should be called up, without further deferment.

5. The War Cabinet were informed that the position of Members of Parliament under the National Service Acts had been raised in the House of Commons that afternoon.

The Minister of Labour and National Service said that he had informed the House that the position of M.P.'s under the National Service Bill (No. 2) was precisely the same as under the existing National Service Acts. He had been asked to give a firm undertaking that he would not use his powers to give directions to M.P.'s. He had replied that he thought the matter should be dealt with independently of this Bill (which did not change the position in this matter) and should be raised with the Prime Minister. Two new Clauses dealing with this matter had been put down and would probably be discussed when consideration of the Bill was resumed in the House on the following day.

The Prime Minister referred to the decisions on this matter which had been reached in the last war and at the beginning of the present war, and which had been reaffirmed rather more than a year
ago. The principle governing the practice in this matter should, he thought, be that M.P.'s were liable under the National Service Acts and that it would be undesirable to confer statutory exemption. But every M.P., besides his duties as a citizen, owed service to the Legislature. It must be left to each Member to settle whether he would devote himself wholly to service as a Member of the Legislature, or whether he would undertake some other form of National Service. Furthermore, if an M.P. decided that he would take service in the Armed Forces of the Crown, he should be allowed, if he so desired, at a later date to change his option and to be released from further military service, provided, of course, that reasonable notice was given.

The War Cabinet—

Expressed general agreement with these views, and took note that the Prime Minister would deal with the matter on the following day, in answer to a Private Notice Question.*

6. The War Cabinet were informed that a telegram had now been received from our High Commissioner in Dublin stating that Mr. de Valera invited the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to pay a visit to Dublin. The visit should be attended with as little publicity as possible.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs said that from the terms of the telegram it appeared that what Mr. de Valera had to tell him was not of some change in Eire's attitude, but rather the reasons why he did not see his way to make any change at the present time.

The War Cabinet—

Thought that it was nevertheless desirable that the Dominions Secretary should accept this invitation, and authorised him to proceed accordingly.

7. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council (W.P. (G) (41) 149).

This Memorandum explained that the policy of price stabilisation set out in the White Paper (Cmd. 2694) had hitherto been maintained. But, besides the award made by the Agricultural Wages Board of a national minimum wage of 60s. a week to agricultural workers, claims for substantial wage increases by the engineers and shipbuilders were now being heard by the National Arbitration Tribunal. Negotiations were also proceeding on a claim by the railwaymen. If these claims resulted in substantial increases in wage rates over a wide field, the policy of price stabilisation would be seriously jeopardised. Nevertheless, the Lord President's Committee had been satisfied that it would be difficult for the Government to make any new declaration of policy while applications to the Arbitration Tribunal were still sub judice. They thought, however, that it should be our aim to be ready with a new wages policy to arrest the inflationary process, and that this should be applied as soon as the present wage cycle had been completed, and, in any event, before next year's Budget was introduced.

In discussion, the view was expressed that there was no certainty that there would be any clear dividing line between the end of one wage cycle and the beginning of another. It was essential that the position should be tackled before the inflationary

* See Annex.
tendency got out of control. No room should be left for growth of the feeling of discontent which already existed in the Forces at the high rates of pay of munition workers.

The suggestion was made that the Government should at once state publicly that they proposed to announce a new wages policy as soon as the cases now before the National Arbitration Tribunal had been disposed of. The view was, however, expressed that this step was premature until decisions had been reached as to the new policy to be adopted. Emphasis was also laid on the undesirability of taking action which would be interpreted as an attempt to interfere with the hearing of the claims now before the Tribunal.

After further discussion, the War Cabinet—

Endorsed the Conclusions of the Lord President’s Committee, on the understanding that proposals for dealing with the matter would be submitted to the War Cabinet as quickly as possible, with a view to a new statement of policy being announced as soon as the cases now before the Arbitration Tribunal had been disposed of.

Great George Street, S.W. 1,
December 10, 1941.

ANNEX.

House of Commons, December 11, 1941 (Hansard, Column 1096).

National Service Acts.

(Members of Parliament.)

Sir P. Harris (by Private Notice) asked the Prime Minister whether he has any statement to make about the position of Members of Parliament under the National Service Acts?

The Prime Minister (Mr. Churchill): Yes, Sir. I am glad to take this opportunity of explaining the position of Members of Parliament under the National Service Acts.

In the view of His Majesty’s Government, it would not be appropriate to confer on Members of Parliament a statutory exemption from the obligations which they share in common with everyone else. Members of Parliament have, however, also the high duty of service in the Legislature, and they must themselves be the judges of how that duty can best be performed. They are therefore given a free choice by virtue of their position as Members of Parliament and not as a favour. This was the position in the last war, and has always been maintained in the present war. Furthermore, if a Member of Parliament joins the Armed Forces of the Crown, and later decides that he wishes to devote his whole time to Parliamentary duties, arrangements are made for his release from military service for that purpose, provided, of course, that reasonable notice is given to arrange for his relief.

Considering the very large number of Members serving with the Forces, and the many questions that may arise in the combining and reconciling of their duties, it is very satisfactory that there has been so little difficulty in practice.
THE PRIME MINISTER said that he had received a reply from President Roosevelt about his proposed visit to the United States, suggesting that he should go early in January and should meet him at one of the West Indian islands. He (the Prime Minister) was not satisfied, and thought that it was important that the visit should take place at a much sooner date, although it was immaterial to him where the visit took place. He had sent a message in this sense.

SIR EARLE PAGE said that, if the visit was postponed, it might be desirable that the First Sea Lord should go at once to the United States in order to concert an agreed strategic policy with the Americans.

THE PRIME MINISTER pointed out that Admiral Little, our Naval Representative on the Joint Staff Mission, was in close touch with Admiral Stark. But in any case he was hoping that his visit would take place in the near future.

...
7th February, 1942.

Dear Speed,

The Prime Minister has been consulted as to whether it is necessary that any steps should be taken to make known - e.g. by Question and Answer in the House - the ruling which he gave in the case of a Member of Parliament serving in the R.A.F.V.R., namely, that such an Officer should not be posted abroad if, in his own opinion, service overseas would conflict with his duty to his constituents.

The Prime Minister's view is that a Member's first duty is to the House of Commons, and even though he may have entered one of the Services he may apply for relief and when this can be conveniently effected he can return to Great Britain for his Parliamentary work. He would not thereby be debarred from taking up other work with the Forces, if such work were thought useful to the public. It follows from this that if a Member who has been doing useful work with the Forces at home and has combined this work with his Parliamentary duties, belongs to a unit which is ordered abroad, he should be allowed to transfer and not be forced to resign unless there is no other useful work that he could do at home. These cases, however, should be rare, and it ought to be possible, in the Prime Minister's view, to prevent them reaching a point at which any difficulty arises through a conflict of duties. He therefore does not regard it as necessary that there should be any public announcement of the ruling given in this particular case. The only action which is being taken is to send copies of this note to the Private Secretaries of the three Service Ministers. Mr. Churchill proposes that, if the Ministers have no comments, the scheme should be operated forthwith. Could you please let me know if your Secretary of State agrees?

E.B.B. Speed, Esq., M.C.,
War Office.

Similar letters to:-

R.H. Melville, Esq.,
Air Ministry.

C.G. Jarrett, Esq.,
ADMIRALTY.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd.) J.M. MARTIN.
Deep Speech

The Prime Minister has been informed as to
be necessary and any answer should be
in the House. I have also been told by the
informed that he was in the case of a Member of
Parliament who had been reported out of
order in the Commons. It is to the
Commons.

Dear Sir,

The Prime Minister, in view of the fact that a Member's
speech is not the House of Commons, may have spoken
in the House. I have been informed that he was in the case of a
Member of Parliament who had been reported out of
order in the Commons. It is to the
Commons.

Yours sincerely,

(Your Signature)