

Comments made by Richard Law on the first UNRRA report (Montreal, 18 September 1944)

Caption: On 18 September 1944, in Montreal, the British Representative to UNRRA, Richard Law, comments on the first activities report drawn up by UNRRA, the organisation for aid, mutual assistance and supplies in the United Nations.

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Comments on the Director General's Report

Mr. Richard Law (United Kingdom)

Mr. Chairman, I propose to take advantage of the offer which Governor Lehman has just made to us in order to make some reflections which have been passing through my mind, not only since we got to Montreal but over the past months since the last Council meeting, and some reflections which naturally come into my mind on reading the very excellent *Report* which the Director General has submitted to the Council.

We have a few days, and only a few days, here in Montreal to make those decisions which are going to determine once and for all whether the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration is going to fulfil the bright hopes that we had of it a year ago, or whether this great conception is going to go down in an atmosphere of futility and disillusion. It seems to me that the alternatives are just as bare and just as stark as that. There are only a few days before us ; and I do not intend to detain the Council for more than a few minutes ; but in those few minutes there are some observations which I would like to make to the Council on behalf of the United Kingdom delegation. We are talking to each other in confidence, and we must talk to each other with sincerity as well. I will therefore be frank.

It seems to me to be a fact that in the past 12 months the work which we have all of us in our respective spheres been trying to forward has been going slowly. It is a fact that UNRRA has fallen back in the public mind and in the public esteem. It is a fact that in one way or another the work of UNRRA is being clouded with an atmosphere, a kind of fog of unreality. I say to you gentlemen that unless we can dissipate that fog, unless in the course of our deliberations here in Montreal we can sweep it away with the clear wind of reason, and, above all, of action, it would be better that this great idea of UNRRA had never been conceived at all.

These are unpleasant facts. I believe them to be facts, and I do not particularly like putting them before the Council, but I think we should do well to recognize them as facts. And when the facts are against you, there is only one thing to do, and that is to challenge the facts and to alter the facts, and I hope very much that here at our meeting in Montreal we shall do just that.

I hope that in your own words, Mr. Chairman, a day or two ago, we shall be able here to substitute for planning, real definite action.

In what I am saying I am sure Governor Lehman will acquit me of any criticism of his administration. I am not criticizing the administration of UNRRA. I can think of nothing more valuable than the work which Governor Lehman and his devoted staff have done in the past 12 months ; and they have had to do that work in an atmosphere which has been extremely discouraging.

In a sense the tide has been against the Administration all along the line. The basis of your operations, Governor Lehman, has been largely hypothetical. You have been dealing in the nature of the case with a future which no one can foretell. And what chance has that problematical future had of hitting the headlines in the newspapers or impressing the public imagination, by comparison with the very active splendours of the present ? What chance has UNRRA had of impressing the public mind at a time when the United Nations have been winning tremendous military victories in Russia, in Poland, in the Pacific, in France, in Italy, in Greece, in Belgium, in Holland, and now at last in Germany itself ? There has been no chance at all.

It is small wonder that UNRRA has fallen somewhat in the public esteem. But in spite of that, in spite of that adverse tide, the Administration has done a very great work in laying the ground plan for future activity. But that is not enough. It is our task here to work on those foundations which have been laid, to build upward from that ground plan, and to insure that when the time comes—and it is almost upon us—we have got the bricks and the mortar and everything there and can build the house upon the ground plan which has been laid.

Now this, as it seems to me, is not mainly a matter for the Administration ; it is much more a matter for the

governments which are represented here at the Council. Unless we play our part there is really very little that Governor Lehman and his staff can do about it. It is up to us, as it seems to me ; it is up to the governments of the United Nations. If we fail, Governor Lehman will fail ; and if Governor Lehman fails the outlook is very black indeed for all of us.

So I say to you, Mr. Chairman, and through you to the Council, that it is the determination of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to do everything that is in our power to make a tremendous success of UNRRA. For if this, the first venture in practical peace-time co-operation among the United Nations, fails, nothing is going to succeed. Problems of even wider import than those we are discussing here will remain unsolved. Problems of military security and political security, problems of social betterment and economic stability—all these problems will be unsolved unless the United Nations show themselves capable of salving this more limited problem which faces us now.

Believe me, Mr. Chairman, co-operation among the United Nations cannot be selective. You cannot pick and choose the subjects on which you are going to co-operate. We have got to co-operate over the whole field. If we do not do that, I greatly fear we shall not in the event be able to co-operate over any part of it.

So, it seems to me we must ensure the success of UNRRA, not for the sake of UNRRA ; we must ensure the success of UNRRA for the sake of co-operation among the United Nations as a whole. We must, in short, ensure the success of UNRRA and of this Conference for the sake of the whole future structure of world peace and well-being in the world of men. And that, Mr. Chairman, is the interest which my government has in our proceedings here and in the success of UNRRA.

I have ventured to put these reflections before the Council because I am very anxious that my fellow Council members should know how tremendously important we in the United Kingdom do feel the whole question of the future of UNRRA to be.

A few minutes ago I was bold enough to refer to a certain atmosphere of unreality which, as it seemed to me, had come to pervade the whole proceedings of UNRRA, and it is our principal task here in Montreal to change that atmosphere, to blow it right away, to convince first of all ourselves and then our respective publics that we have finished with theorizing, that we have finished with unreality, that we mean to do business, and that we are here to do business. By the time that this meeting is over we must be in a position to show the world that UNRRA is a practical organization, tuned, fitted, organized to do a practical job in a severely practical world.

It is clearly impossible for me to go over the whole field of the Director General's *Report*, but there are one or two corners of that field in which I would like to wander for a very brief few minutes. It seems to me it is essential that we should realize, all of us, that UNRRA is not a machine, but that it is an organism, and that like any other organism it is capable of growth and designed to grow. It is not something whose precise functions we can define down to the last detail and lay down on a kind of blue print ; it is an organism like a human organism which has got to grow to meet the growing responsibilities which are thrust upon it, just as we ourselves have to grow to meet growing responsibilities. I think that is one of the most important things which we ought to keep in our minds throughout this conference and for as long as UNRRA is in existence.

If that is true, if we do recognize that UNRRA is a growing organism, it seems to me that there are two propositions which flow from that. In the first place, UNRRA should seize any opportunity that offers itself to do a practical job of work. Only in that way will the administration of UNRRA be able to get the administrative experience and the techniques of administration which will be necessary for it to do the much bigger job that it will face in the liberated areas when Germany has finally collapsed, when Japan has finally collapsed. Like any other organism, UNRRA has got to benefit by experience and grow to meet new experiences.

Secondly, Mr. Chairman, it seems to me that we should avoid trying to look too far into the future. The dimensions of the job which UNRRA has got to do cannot really be foretold at this time with any degree of accuracy. We have all seen conflicting reports that have come out of the countries that have already been

liberated. It is a fact that we do not know until we get there whether the condition in the occupied countries will be better than we expected or just about the same as we expected or worse than we expected. We cannot tell that yet, and it is therefore, as it seems to us, a great waste of time to spend too much of our energies in drawing up theoretical plans to meet contingencies which have not yet arisen, and which, when they do arise, will almost certainly be very different from what we expected them to be.

It seems to us, for example, that it is a mistake at this stage to worry too much about theoretical bases of supply. We have got to get hold of all the supplies that we can, but having done that we must get down to organize ourselves to do a real practical job wherever it may be and wherever it may turn up, and it is quite certain that there will be no lack of practical jobs.

I think it should be our task here to concentrate on the immediate jobs and to let the distant future to some extent take care of itself. The future will be taken care of, not by our planning, not by our creating beautiful blueprints at this moment ; the future will take care of itself if UNRRA is competent to do the job which has to be done when it comes to its hand, and UNRRA will get the experience to enable it to do bigger and better jobs as it goes along.

I would like to say one word about our own position in supply matters in the United Kingdom. I would be deceiving you if I said we were satisfied with everything we have been able to do for UNRRA in my own country. We are not satisfied and we hope that opportunity will be given us in the future to do better than we have done. We should like to be able to provide more help than we have done, more help in the way of personnel and more help in the way of physical supplies. But I think the Council is aware of the great difficulties under which we in the United Kingdom are labouring at the present time. We have been at war for five years now. All our energies have been directed to the prosecution of this war and towards achieving victory at the end of it.

I suppose, Mr. Chairman, that there is not one of the belligerent countries which has been more fully mobilized or even as fully mobilized for war as we have. It follows from that, unfortunately from the point of view of UNRRA, that our production for relief supplies has had to be fitted into our programme for war and munitions production, and it has not been easy to do that. But I can assure the Council that we have taken and are continuing to take every opportunity, whenever we get little pockets of empty capacity, of filling them up at once with the production of relief supplies ; and we have done that to quite a substantial amount, as I think the figures in the *Supplementary Report* of the Director General show ; we have done a great deal.

We heard yesterday from General Macready something of what has been done in the provision of supplies during the initial relief period, during the military period. Between the two relief periods we are doing everything we can do at the moment, but I can give the Council the assurance that we shall do everything we possibly can to increase the supplies that we can make available ; and if and when our war production falls off—and it will not fall off so rapidly because, as the Council knows, we intend to play a great part in the Far Eastern war when we have finished the war with Germany—as and when productive capacity becomes available, we shall do everything we can to increase the supplies that we are finding ourselves able to provide for UNRRA.

Apart from the question of supplies, there are one or two other practical matters which I think the Council ought to come to some decision upon before we leave Montreal. First of all there is the question of displaced persons. I think in general we have not realized until quite lately how extremely important that question is. In fact, if UNRRA is able to organize the repatriation of those millions of unfortunate human beings who have been rooted up from their homes among the United Nations as a result of the war, if it is able to do that, if it can organize their repatriation without anarchy, without famine, and above all without pestilence, UNRRA with that alone will have done a job which justified its existence.

As I say, there are practical decisions which have to be taken by this Council meeting if UNRRA is going to be able to do that job, and I hope that when those questions come up for decision we shall be able to act rapidly and with decisive permanence.

Then there are questions of health and welfare, and here again there are practical decisions which have to be taken. We have to find a practical solution to a practical problem. Here again these matters will come before us, and here again we have to act quickly and decisively if UNRRA is to be given a real working chance to do the job we all hope it will do.

I am afraid I have detained the Council longer than I had intended. I would like to re-emphasize the immense importance which the United Kingdom Government attaches to the work of UNRRA. We feel that if we fall down on this job we shall fall down on tasks which are even more important.

The liberation of Europe has already begun. Even in battered London the lights are going up again ; and the lights will go up all over the world. Unless we can make a real job of United Nations co-operation in peace as we have made a real job of it in war, I am quite convinced that, possibly in our own lifetime, we shall find the world plunged again into the darkness of war. I ask the Council to believe that this work which we are doing here is as important as that, and if we fall down on this work the consequences will be absolutely incalculable.