

SINKING OF GERMAN WAR VESSELS.

HC Deb 25 June 1919 vol 117 cc294-302 294

§ Motion made, and Question proposed, "That this House do now adjourn."— [Mr. Pratt]

§ *Commander BELLAIRS*

When my right hon. Friend the First Lord of the Admiralty made his statement yesterday about the sinking of the German Fleet at Scapa I asked two questions, and I cannot say that I was satisfied with the answers. The first answer seemed to me evasive, and I am very certain the second answer was erroneous. The first question I asked dealt with the circumstances under which the German Fleet was interned instead of surrendered. My question was directed to ascertaining whether we pressed our demands with vigour and determination. I know that the French admiral pressed his demand for the surrender of the German Fleet with energy and determination. I know that the admirals presented a case for surrender; but what I am not satisfied about is whether the admirals, and the Prime Minister in backing them, pressed the British case for surrender with energy and determination. Since the Americans are criticising us in connection with the sinking of the German Fleet, it is just as well that the House should understand and it was the American Admiral Benson who asked for the internment instead of the surrender. What I desire to point out is this: Field-Marshal Foch got all his, 295 military demands granted and I cannot understand why our naval demands were not granted. We stand as a naval Power relatively to other Powers—and by our history that view is justified—in a much more prominent position than France does as a military Power. I think we were right to back France in her military demands, and France was willing to back us in our naval demands. With such backing I cannot understand why it was that the German Fleet was not surrendered, and I cannot help suspecting that we proved ourselves too vacillating. In these matters which concerned the renown of the Navy the naval representatives must act in the spirit of the words written on the sword of prudence presented to Charles James Fox: Consider well, weigh strictly right and wrong. Resolve not quick, but, once resolved, be strong. It was absolutely essential that on such a question as the surrender of the German Fleet that we should have stuck to our point. What actually happened was this, that we had run the usual gamut of failure in war. "Order, counter-order, disorder." First was the right view that the German Fleet should be surrendered and then came the counter-order that the German Fleet should be interned in a neutral port, and subsequently another counter-order that the German Fleet should be interned at Scapa, rendering us the custodians under impossible conditions, and then came the disorder by which the German Fleet was scuttled under our very eyes. It is possible, if permission is obtained, to publish the minutes of the proceedings of the Inter-Allied Naval Council to show where the blame rests, and in any case if my right hon. Friend knows that the British Admirals made any final protest he can at least publish that final protest to show that they acted with vigour, and that they were completely overruled. My second question was how to get at the facts? I pleaded for a public court-martial. My right hon. Friend answered: There is one thing necessary previous to holding a court-martial and that is to have someone to try. The House laughed, and I presume the laughter was at my expense, but I am absolutely right in thinking that a court-martial can inquire without a specific charge being brought against anyone. There have been hundreds and hundreds 296 of such cases in the history of the Navy, and my right hon. Friend ought to have been told that by his advisers since he has been seven months at the Admiralty. There have been courts-martial to inquire into the loss of ships where the officers and men have

conducted themselves with great gallantry and great skill and where everything that was done redounded to the credit of the Navy. It is quite possible to inquire into all the facts concerning the loss of the German Fleet, and if my right hon. Friend will turn up "Hickman's Naval Courts-martial," page 169, he will see there An order for a court-martial to inquire into the conduct of the officers and men of a ship lost is no charge, and a sentence given thereon would be null and void. It would be merely a court of inquiry and therefore could not legally award any description of punishment. That is the kind of court-martial I was referring to. Courts of inquiry differ from military courts in that they are not on oath, and are merely informal affairs conducted in secret, and the proceedings are never published and are meant simply to guide the admiral in his view of the situation. The only way we can have a public inquiry, and an inquiry on oath, is by holding a court-martial. I want to ask my right hon. Friend four other questions. The German belief has turned out right. The ships were interned. Why, when every single newspaper announced that the German ships were surrendered, did not the Admiralty then correct that view, instead of waiting to make their public gesture 222 days later, when the disaster had happened? If my right hon. Friend will look at any one of the newspapers published at the time the German Fleet was brought over, he will find they all described it as surrender. If he looks at the "Times" index, he will find it described as surrender, and if he turns to the "Times" of 22nd November, 1918, he will see the headline "Surrender of the German Fleet." Throughout the article he will find it described as surrender. That would have been the time to have-corrected a wrong impression. Secondly, I would like to ask my right hon. Friend was there any doubt at any time that the Germans would scuttle their ships? The German orders were that their ships should never be surrendered. There was not a case in the whole of this four years and a half of war in which we captured a German ship, except one or two submarines, and even in those cases the attempt had been made to scuttle them. The invariable practice was to scuttle the 297 ship, and that was in accordance with German orders. The third question I wish to ask is, why was there a difference in the case of the U-boats and that of the ships? The U-boats were surrendered. I know of no special reason why there should have been any difference. The fourth question is, why, on the critical day when the Germans were likely to scuttle their ships—at that time the forty-eight hours' extension was not known—was Admiral Fremantle, with his guarding squadron, exercising at sea? The Admiralty yesterday issued a statement that even if guards had been on board the ships it would have been impossible to prevent the ships being scuttled. If British crews had been on board the ships it would have been quite possible to take from the German soldiers, who knew nothing about the valves of the ships, caretakers to work under the orders of the British, guards, to keep the ships clean, and so forth. It would have been quite impossible in that case to scuttle the ships.

There is one other thing I wish to say, and that is with reference to a criticism one constantly hears, that it is a good thing this happened. I have read that in the newspapers. In my judgment no worse thing could possibly have happened. In the first place, the Admiralty's demand was that the ships should be destroyed. It was therefore above all things necessary that our good faith should not be for one moment in doubt by such a thing happening as happened to the German High Seas Fleet when it was scuttled. There is no question in the mind of anybody in England that our good faith is in any doubt, but anyone who reads the Press comments in America, Italy, and France cannot help seeing that we are blamed, and our Fleet is blamed, for what has happened. It is not so many years ago that "perfidious Albion" was a popular cry on the Continent, and it is most unfortunate that anything should lead to a revival of that cry. We were also in a position of trust. We were practically the watchdog of the League of Nations. Therefore, it is very unfortunate again that this thing should have happened. But there is another form of trust. Those who went to Versailles were the

guardians of the renown and honour of the British Navy. That renown and honour depend on the fact that the British Navy has seldom failed in its history. There is a great history of continuous victory attached to it, and that history is due to the fact that its counsels have been inspired by consistent courage, informed by war-like wisdom, and therefore rewarded by splendid success. Those who went to Versailles seem to me to have made that renown a matter of barter and compromise in council. I think it most unfortunate that they should have exceeded the terms which the Admiralty themselves now regard as rendering it almost inevitable that the ships would be scuttled, and terms which have to a great extent brought discredit upon the Navy. In asking for an inquiry I cannot help reflecting that the wheel of failure has turned full circle in this War. It commenced in failure in the escape of the "Goeben," due to Admiralty orders, and it has ended in failure with the virtual escape of the German fleet right under our noses, and I ask for a public inquiry because I believe the result of that inquiry would be to show that no blame attaches to the Navy afloat, but that the blame attaches to those who saddle the Navy with impossible conditions.

§ *The FIRST LORD of the ADMIRALTY (Mr. Long)*

I find it very difficult to understand the reasons which led the hon. and gallant Gentleman to raise this question in this form. He makes speeches in the House of Commons. He writes articles in the newspapers. They are not always the same. I thought to-night he was going to voice here the charge he has made elsewhere, namely, the failure, as he describes it, of the British Navy, a charge which I absolutely repudiate as being in any way justified by what has been the policy of the British Navy. [An HON. MEMBER: "NO !"] It is no good for hon. Members to say "No," and to try to cover this up by some sort of rhetoric of this kind. You cannot distinguish between the British Navy afloat and the British Navy ashore, and you have no right to come here and, because an admiral is for a short time in Whitehall, to try to draw invidious distinctions between him and the admiral who happens to be afloat. The one object of this action of the hon. and gallant Gentleman to-night is to draw a distinction between the admiral in Whitehall, the First Sea Lord, and the admiral who is commanding afloat. The hon. and gallant Gentleman began his remarks—and I am very glad he did—by saying I answered the question which he addressed to me yesterday, and that my first reply was evasive and my second was erroneous. I am quite aware 299 that he does not accept my word in the House of Commons as being conclusive or even correct. I am quite content to let what I say in this House on any occasion as to its accuracy rest between myself and the House of Commons and the country and myself, and let them judge between the hon. and gallant Gentleman and myself. He made the charge, but he did not attempt to substantiate it, and he has no right to accuse a Minister or anyone else of making evasive replies unless he is able to substantiate the charge by something more real than he has submitted to-night.

With regard to the hon. and gallant Gentleman's charge that I was erroneous, the same remark applies, namely, that he indulges in charges against Ministers or others which he fails altogether to justify. But he went on to tell us that he knows all the facts. He knows what the French did, what the Americans did, and what the English did. Then why ask for information? Why does he suggest that what every other country did was right, and the only country that failed was our own? Why was it necessary to make these charges against those who were responsible for our naval advice at this time? The hon. and gallant Member's questions are addressed, not to the action of the Admiralty or the advisers of the Admiralty. His criticisms are really upon the heads of the Governments who in Paris conducted the negotiations and decided the conditions; to raise, as he has done, the action, not of the Board of Admiralty, not of the naval advisers of the Board of Admiralty, not even of the First Lord

of that day, but of the heads of the Government, the representatives of the Government, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, who are the two delegates in Paris, for they were the people who decided these questions. The question I was asked yesterday was: What advice had our naval advisers given? The hon. and gallant Gentleman there and then tried to differentiate between the advice given by the admiral in command afloat and the advice given by the admiral at Whitehall. There is no distinction to be drawn between the advice given.

§ Commander BELLAIRS

The advice was the same.

§ Mr. LONG

The hon. and gallant Gentleman admits it now. Why, then, in 300 his question yesterday did he refer entirely to the advice given by the admiral afloat? The hon. and gallant Gentleman denies it now. But in the question addressed to me he referred to the advice given by the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet. The advice given at that time was the same by any admiral. They all agreed. All I am entitled to deal with now is the action of the naval advisers of the Government at that time. The advice was the same whether given by the naval advisers afloat or those at Whitehall. The hon. and gallant Gentleman asks: Did they pursue the case with sufficient vigour? What right has he got to make that charge here? He has not produced one atom of evidence. His policy here is to make charges, vague charges without information, and then to fish about for evidence in the hope that some admission of the Minister may enable him to justify the case, and go further on. What right has the hon. and gallant Member to suggest here that the naval advisers of the Government or the heads of the Government did not pursue their case with vigour? I said yesterday, and I repeat it, that we have no right here to review this case, to extract it from the whole case involved in the Peace negotiations, to take one particular case as to whether the German Fleet should be interned or surrendered, and to ask now for a review of the actions of our representatives in Paris. To do that, to do as the hon. and gallant Gentleman must do, to condemn their action, and to say that they did not really hold up England's end—I say he has no right to do this because he thinks they have in one respect failed. My answer yesterday to the hon. and gallant Gentleman as to the action of our naval advisers was characterised by him to be evasive and my statements erroneous. What I say in answer to that is to repeat them here, and leave the opinions of the country to judge whether I am given to making either evasive or erroneous statements when I make them after full notice and after full examination of the facts of the case. The hon. and gallant Gentleman indulged in some cheap sneers about my reply to his demand for a court-martial, and he says now, in order to bolster up his case, that we are in the habit of holding courts-martial into the loss of ships. Certainly; but he knows perfectly well that there is no comparison to be drawn between that and what has happened now. It may be 301 possible and it may be our duty to have a court-martial upon the action of the German admiral, but the hon. and gallant Gentleman is trying to establish a case against the Admiralty and against the Admiral Commanding-in-Chief in Scotland. It is quite impossible to understand what the charges are either in his articles or in the speeches which he makes here. He asked me why was Admiral Fremantle away with the Fleet on the fourth day when this occurred.

§ Commander BELLAIRS

dissented.

§ Mr. LONG

Was that not the hon. and gallant Gentleman's question?

§ Commander BELLAIRS

It is a plain question, not a charge.

§ Mr. LONG

I asked the hon. and gallant Gentleman whether it was the question?

§ Commander BELLAIRS

Yes, that is the question substantially.

§ Mr. LONG

Why was Admiral Fremantle away on the fourth day—the critical day? The hon. and gallant Gentleman is very wise after the event. He seems to have foreseen that on this particular day the Admiral who believed, as he has announced that he believed, that the Armistice was at an end, and therefore that this particular act of treachery would be committed. I know that the hon. and gallant Gentleman believes that if his advice were taken the British Admiralty and the British Navy would be much better managed than it is now, but for my part I am prepared to defend Admiral Fremantle in doing what I think was his mere ordinary duty in taking his Fleet out for exercise.

I do not think that anybody was in a position to have anticipated that on that particular day the Germans would scuttle their ships. He says that he could have prevented it. It is no good my telling him what I have told him before because he does not agree with me—that it was impossible for us to prevent it—but everybody knows that once the question was decided against surrender and in favour of internment there was no possible method by which you could prevent it.

§ Commander BELLAIRS: Hear, hear !

§ Mr. LONG

The hon. and gallant Gentleman cheers that statement. Then in that case why did he ask me why Admiral Fremantle was cruising with his Fleet?

302 What did it matter whether he was cruising or was not? If the hon. and gallant Member cheers my statement that there was no possible means by which once you had decided upon internment as against surrender you could prevent the ships being scuttled, what on earth does it matter whether Admiral Fremantle was cruising with his Fleet or not? What could he have done. Does the hon. and gallant Gentleman suggest that he should have turned his guns upon the ships. Would that have done any good? He tells us that the American and French Press have suggested that we connived at that. I am very sorry to have heard an English Member of Parliament make that statement in this House. The hon. Member realised that he had made a mistake, and he went on to say that, of course, nobody believes it. We are very

familiar with that form of statement—that is to say "nobody believes it" first of all, but "we know such and such a thing is said" —the commonest form of trying to take away people's characters. I regret to have heard that in this House, and I regret that it has appeared in the Press. I sent a communication to Paris to-day in which I said it was absolutely unthinkable that the British people could have been guilty of such an act as to connive at the destruction of this fleet anywhere, and above all in their own waters.

§ Commander BELLAIRS

Hear, hear !

§ Mr. LONG

The hon. and gallant Gentleman cheers that statement, but what was the information he wanted to get. He asks us questions which require really no answer, and he proceeds to answer them himself. He desired to make an attack upon the British Admiralty and the naval advisers. He did not make it here, but in an article in a newspaper, and then he comes here and asks for an inquiry. We shall do what we think is right in regard to this occurrence, and the heads of the Government will decide the exact course to be taken, and we are not going to be deflected in our action by the hon. and gallant Gentleman, who raises these questions to bolster up his charges, which he does not attempt to justify either here or in any other quarter.

It being half-past Eleven of the clock, Mr. SPEAKER adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.

§ Adjourned at half after Eleven o'clock.