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STRONG ACTION DEMANDED – A retype from a newspaper article published in July 1918

The question of the treatment of enemy aliens was discussed yesterday at a conference of representatives of metropolitan borough councils held in Westminster City Hall. Sir George Welby, Mayor of Westminster, who received the delegates, said he hoped their deliberations would result in more stringent measures being taken.

Mr H.J. Ormond Mayor of Stoke Newington, who presided, said that the subject was of immediate national concern. In December last [1917] there were 30,000 male aliens in internment camps and exemptions were allowed to 13,500, all supposed to be registered. Favourable treatment had been allowed for various reasons – because of long residence in this country, because the men had married English wives, had sons in the British Army, or because they belonged to subject races known to be antagonistic to their rulers. These reasons were not applicable to all the 13,000, but so far as aliens came within these categories it had been urged that it would be unnecessarily harsh treatment to intern them. But, he asked, was this to weigh against the actual hardship inflicted on millions of our own people? [Hear, hear] Long residence was no guarantee of good faith, and the influences of wives might be overrated. Women had been used for the purpose of obtaining information. Sons might be serving in the Army unwillingly, and fathers might or might not have the same views as their sons. Race antipathies had large exceptions. The arrangements were not conclusive. We ran great military risks by allowing enemy aliens to remain at large.

There were neutrals also among us who could act as spies and underground agents and should be put under close supervision: but as a first step all enemy aliens should be interned, and after that other safeguards could be considered. On economical as well as military grounds the step was necessary. A man with a foreign name must not be allowed to obtain the good will of the business the British subject had to leave to serve his country. His countrymen bitterly resented the failure of the Government to give protection to British subjects. Producers and dealers were interested, and if we allowed the policy of peaceful penetration to proceed we shall suffer severely. If, as Lord Robert Cecil had said, a German under supervision would do less harm than a German at large, then he would be less harmful interned and under supervision, which often meant very little. The treatment of civilian prisoners in Germany had been most harsh, and of our sailors and soldiers horribly cruel. We were justified for our own interest not in imitating those cruelties, but in taking precautions for our own safety. We were fighting for our lives and must not have enemies at large among us. [Cheers]. He moved:-

That this Conference of Metropolitan City and Borough Councils strongly urge upon His Majesty's Government that all male enemy aliens of the age of 18 years and upwards should be interned and so remain during the continuance of the war.

Mr Gordon [Stoke Newington] seconded the proposal, and said he would have been glad to have made it somewhat stronger.

DANGER OF DELAY

Mr P Conway [Westminster] said it was the strong feeling of every council represented that the Government must no longer delay in dealing with a state of things fraught with great danger. He

moved to amend the motion by leaving out the word "male", and expressing strong resentment at the presence of aliens in prohibited areas and demanding remedy for other grievances.

Mr Handover [Mayor of Paddington] seconded the amendment. London, he said, had been too long the dumping ground for experiments. He suggested that all the Mayors of London, should go in procession as a deputation to the Prime Minister at breakfast time and wait until he would receive them. [Laughter.] It was of no use sending a pious resolution: they must make their influence felt.

Mr D H Macartney [Stepney] said it was time for the Government to realise that we were at war with the enemy at home as well as at the front. The feeling was very strong in Stepney. Mr A W Matthias advised some definite remedy being suggested for dealing with the danger from naturalised Germans and Austrians, who were the more dangerous because they were intimately acquainted with our social life. Mr T E Hewitt [Southwick] said if hide-bound permanent officials hindered the internment of enemy aliens, they ought to be turned out lock stock and barrel. Though he would be the last to favour mob-law, he would remind the Government that they were playing with fire.

End of retype.