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WAR CABINET, 161.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on
Tuesday, June 12, 1917, at 1 P.M.

Present :

The PRIME MINISTER (*in the Chair*).

<p>The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.</p> <p>The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.</p>	<p>The Right Hon. G. N. BARNES, M.P. Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. SMUTS, K.C.</p>
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The following were also present :

<p>The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.</p> <p>The Right Hon. A. CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Secretary of State for India.</p>	<p>The Right Hon. SIR E. CARSON, K.C., M.P., First Lord of the Admiralty.</p> <p>Major-General SIR G. M. W. MACDONOGH, K.C.M.G., C.B., Director of Military Intelligence.</p>
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Major L. STORR, *Assistant Secretary*.

The Report of the
Mesopotamia
Commission.

1. THE War Cabinet resumed the discussion adjourned from the Meeting on the previous day (War Cabinet 160, Minute 16). The main arguments for and against publication of the Report were briefly recapitulated and, where necessary, emphasised, and certain further arguments were advanced in support or in criticism of the conflicting points of view.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that, while he was in no way disposed to press his point unduly, he was opposed to publication for the following reasons: In his opinion it was highly undesirable to focus public attention upon the grievous mistakes of the past, more especially as everything tended to show that the drastic and comprehensive measures adopted to remedy the deplorable state of affairs that had existed during the earlier stages of the campaign had proved eminently satisfactory, while the present conduct of our operations in that theatre left little, if anything, to be desired. The Report would open up a very wide field of criticism which would not be confined to Indian administration since the War broke out, but would extend over the last ten years and would be directed against successive Secretaries of State, Viceroys, and Commanders-in-Chief. So long as the War was in progress he had grave doubts of the expediency of opening up so large a question. The present Government in this country stood on firm ground. They had nothing to conceal and nothing to fear. He was in no way convinced by the representations made on the previous

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day, on the analogy of the Dardanelles Report, nor did he regard either the Mesopotamia Commission or the Military Authorities as specially qualified or fully competent to judge any question of policy, the determination of which must rest with the Government alone. His own belief was that the Government would be well advised to take Parliament frankly and unreservedly into their confidence at a Secret Session of both Houses; to tell the complete story of the horrors which the Report revealed; to say that these horrors were all past history, and to assure Parliament that they were confident that there was no possibility of their recurrence; to describe the present satisfactory state of affairs in Mesopotamia, so far as the conduct of operations and military and administrative services were concerned; and to impress upon Parliament that the publication was untimely, unnecessary, and, at the present juncture, impolitic, as it would inevitably shock the public, our Colonies, and our Allies; it would further depress the war-weary, it would give a handle to the unpatriotic, the pacifist and the agitator, and it might definitely place in opposition to the Government that particular portion of the press which had always given only grudging and lukewarm support to the War.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, who had originally pressed in the House of Commons for the appointment of the Dardanelles and the Mesopotamia Commissions, concurred in Mr. Balfour's view, and agreed that a full and frank statement to Parliament in Secret Session would, they might reasonably hope, persuade both Houses that publication before the conclusion of the War was inadvisable.

On the other hand, it was urged that a Secret Session would afford no escape from the difficulty; that the Commission had expressly prepared a Report in a form suitable and designed for publication, and that there was a statutory obligation to lay the Report before Parliament as soon as possible, while a special clause of the Act of 1916 necessitated publication as soon as the medical inquiry was completed. It was again submitted that Parliamentary and public pressure would prove irresistible; that most of the facts were already known to a large portion of the nation, through the medium of private letters and personal statements of officers and men who had returned from Mesopotamia; that the House of Commons had grown more and more out of touch with the electorate; and that a statement in Secret Session would consequently not allay, but only excite suspicion in the country.

In support of the view that the contents of the Report might have a disastrous, or at least an alarming, effect not only on the British nation, but also upon Colonial and Allied opinion, especially at a time when signs were not wanting that national enthusiasm everywhere needed stimulating, it was suggested that the Prime Minister of Canada in particular would be highly embarrassed by the publication at the very moment when he was concentrating all his efforts upon his endeavour to introduce conscription in the Dominion. It was also suggested that, in any future difficult military situation, the publication of the Report might lead the troops to distrust the Higher Command and to think that there was a repetition of the strategical faults which are criticised in the Report. It was further pointed out that this was the only country which took the view that publication of documents of this character was desirable or even permissible in war time; and that no French Government would dream of revealing to their nation the breakdown of the French medical arrangements during their recent offensive.

In regard to the reflections contained in the Report on the present system of government in India, the Secretary of State for India laid stress on the urgent necessity of very early action being taken by the War Cabinet in regard to the question of Indian reforms. The Report was a powerful indictment of at least one branch of Indian administration, and both at home

and in India there was a strong and increasing feeling that a thorough overhauling and reconstruction of that system were necessary. In his opinion, and in that of the present Viceroy, it was essential that the British Government should take the matter in hand at once and announce without delay the measures they proposed to take, in order to reassure and satisfy the public in this country, and in India especially, where there were symptoms of growing impatience and unrest. The Viceroy had, only that morning, made an appeal to him to urge upon the War Cabinet the necessity of prompt action.

The Prime Minister agreed that the matter should be considered by the War Cabinet at the first convenient opportunity.

The War Cabinet decided—

To adjourn the discussion until their Meeting on the following day. In the meantime the Prime Minister undertook to see Lord George Hamilton, the Chairman of the Commission, that afternoon, and to discuss generally the question with him; and also to consider whether it would be possible, by private consultation with certain members of the House of Commons who might be regarded as political barometers, to ascertain beforehand the probable attitude of the Commons if the proposal to take both Houses into the confidence of the Government by a frank statement were adopted, and if the Government left the question of publication during the war to be decided by Parliament in Secret Session.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

The Law Officers of the Crown, and the Judge Advocate-General, should be asked for their legal opinion as to the proper action which should be taken, under Civil and Military Law respectively, if the Cabinet considered that proceedings should be instituted against the several officials mainly and directly responsible for the gross and culpable mal-administration revealed in the Report. The Secretary was provisionally instructed to take the necessary steps to give effect to this decision.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
June 12, 1917.

