SOUDAN AND AFGHANISTAN.

THE VOTE OF CREDIT

SPEECH

DELIVERED BY THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.,

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON

MONDAY, APRIL 27TH, 1885,

REVISED BY HIMSELF.

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THE VOTE OF CREDIT.

The House then went into Committee of Supply, and the Vote of Credit for £11,000,000 was brought on.

Mr. Gladstone (who was on rising loudly cheered from the Ministerial benches) said—Sir Arthur Otway, I will, Sir, endeavour to explain as clearly as I can the nature and grounds of the vote which we now submit, trusting to the indulgence of the Committee, because I am conscious—I have, I am sorry to say, for months past been conscious—of an habitual hoarseness which may make the function of listening very disagreeable and irksome.

I trust that the Committee, at least in some degree, now understand that, if there is anything unusual in the nature and character of this vote, it arises, not out of a caprice of ours, still less out of an unmanly intention of avoiding controversial debate adverse to ourselves, but out of the nature of the case. We have before us a case, Sir, for which in a material point there is no precedent known to me. We propose a vote of credit amounting to eleven millions of money ; six millions and a-half being likely to be spent in what we term "special preparations," and being secured from being spent for any other purposes ; four and a half millions being likely to be spent in and in connection with the Soudan, but being in a degree that I cannot at present define capable of being spent for another purpose—that is to say, the same purpose as our special preparations. And I ask leave of the Committee to repeat my words, that, adhering to the policy we have announced to the House of holding the Soudan forces available for service elsewhere, I believe that we have had absolutely no option except either to ask the House to vote money which may be wanted in the Soudan, with the power to use it for the purpose of the special preparations, or else to vote twice over a very large and uncertain sum of money, to which course, I believe, strong and just and even insurmountable objection might be taken. Moreover I will point out that, until it is shown that there is some other course open to us, the objection with regard to the special nature of this vote entirely falls to the ground and is worthless.

Sir, the peculiarity in the case to which I refer is, of course, this : I know of no instance, either in or beyond my own recollection, since the financial system of this House was well developed (and, indeed, it hardly had come to be thoroughly developed when I first became a member of this House) in which it has been the duty of the Government to propose to the House at one and the same time two very large sums of money for military purposes, one of which, the second, may run into the first,

although the first is not to run into the second. We ask it upon this ground: It is essentially bound up with the policy of holding the large force now in the Soudan available for transfer and for service elsewhere. That is the justification of the course which I agree with my hon. friend, the member for Cambridge (Mr. W. Fowler), should be taken upon no ground except that of strong necessity, and of making the best choice we can between rival inconveniences. I certainly, for one, would never have dreamed of taking it on any other ground, and I believe that I am speaking for my colleagues when I so speak.

It is thought by some that we take this course because it evades a vote of censure upon us on account of our policy in the Soudan. It appears to be assumed that it would have been competent to members of the Committee to say, first of all, that they would give us the money for special preparations, and, secondly, give us the money for the Soudan vote, but that in giving the money for the Soudan vote they would combine with it a vote of censure upon the Government. Sir, I believe that it would not have been competent, either in point of form or in point of substance, for the Committee to have taken that course. I do not think that it is upon record that an attempt has ever been made to take such a course. This the Committee may do with perfect consistency—they may give the money for the Soudan, founding that vote on the necessity which has been created, and they may reserve to themselves the discretion of censuring the Government, notwithstanding that they have voted the money. Surely that doctrine is sound, because, otherwise, why vote the money for the special preparations until you are satisfied that in everything which touches them we deserve your approval? I do not suppose that you are quite prepared to affirm, as one gentleman has declared to-night, that we and not Russia are responsible for the difficulty in which we stand. (An Hon. Member: Hear, hear.) Another hon. gentleman cheers, so that there are two persons, at any rate, who will be in the predicament of either refusing money for special preparations or else of being content to reserve to themselves for some future occasion the power which they undoubtedly possess, and may very legitimately exercise, of censuring us for the wrong principles upon which we have proceeded, or for the want of judgment with which we have endeavoured to apply the right principles.

There appears to be a mistaken idea pervading the minds of young members of this House, and, indeed, of some old ones, that the granting of a vote of credit which it is not intended to refuse is an usual occasion for bringing the Government to trial upon matters to which the vote relates.

Lord R. Churchill.—Your party did it in 1878.

Mr. Gladstone.—I am very much obliged to the noble lord. My memory goes back to 1878, and it goes back somewhat further. I do not bring forward a proposition of this kind without being prepared to examine and to stand by it. As the noble lord challenges me to begin with that extraordinary precedent, I may say that we had in 1878 a vote of credit proposed to this House which is without parallel in our history. We fought that vote of credit upon principle. We objected to the most dangerous precedent then established. We objected to the

purpose which it had in view. I will on this occasion save hon. members the trouble of doing what they are fond of doing—of paying me the compliment of quoting me—and I will quote myself. Someone said to-night, "I wish the right hon. gentleman would read the speech he made in 1878." It was a most unkind wish. He could not have doomed me to a task more irksome and unacceptable; but, anticipating what was likely to happen, I was beforehand with the hon. member, and I do not think there is one word which in the same circumstances I should not be ready to repeat. I hope the noble lord will, when any former speeches of his are referred to, be always in a position to quote them with as much security. On that occasion I ventured to say:—

"So far as I know, there is no case where a Conference of the Powers of Europe has been called together, where those Powers, as a preliminary to its assembling, have increased, or taken powers to increase, their naval and military establishments."

I believe no novelty more astounding in form and in substance is to be found than the astonishing proposal that, when the Powers of Europe were about peacefully to meet for purposes of the highest deliberation, to be conducted by pacific means, in the common interest, and with the highest authority in the civilised world, that peaceful meeting was to be disturbed by the clash of arms, and that one of the Governments which are to take part in the proceedings of that assembly is to spend six millions in military preparations for the sake, forsooth, of strengthening its hands.

Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett.—What about Alexandria?

Mr. Gladstone.—Interruptions of that kind are totally irrelevant, and are hardly compatible with the decencies of this House. If it be true that on this occasion, with respect to the money we ask for the Soudan, there is a disposition to refuse it upon principle—if the case is really analogous to that of 1878, when our desire was not to grant one farthing of those £6,000,000 for what we deemed to be unlawful and evil purposes—if that parallel prevail, by all means let opposition be made to what we now propose in whatever way you may like to make it. But I understand, on the contrary, that you are prepared to vote the money, and it is on that supposition that I argue. It appears to be said that we asked for information. What information had we given us? I hold all the information given, and it was this, as I summed it up at the time:—

"I have heard a great deal said about the vote of £6,000,000 being intended to strengthen the hands of the Government, to protect British interests, and to put us on a footing with other Powers."

I should like to know, after receiving information such as that, in what point were we one jot the wiser? We knew nothing of what was to be done. We knew nothing of the Salisbury-Schouvaloff agreement. We knew nothing of secret covenants with other Powers although the Powers of Europe were to be assembled in Council. We knew nothing of Anglo-Turkish treaties; we knew nothing of the occupation and administration of Cyprus in particular, to be taken in defiance of the

Treaty of Paris and the law of Europe. All these things were concealed. These were the matters on which we ought to have had information, and if we had had it I am not sure that even the last Parliament would really have voted the £6,000,000. But, Sir, undoubtedly, if that is the sort of information that you want we can give it : we want the hands of the Government strengthened, we want British interests protected, we want British honour guarded. All these generalities, which were all that we extracted from you upon a former occasion, we are ready to return ; but we have not the audacity to pretend that, in paying you off with such coin as that, we think we are really giving you political information.

Sir, the fact is that, so far as I am aware, it has not been the practice of this House to choose votes of credit as occasions for general discussion of the matter to which they refer. I will appeal in support of what I have said to the evidence of facts. There are certain occasions which I will not quote, because if we were in the middle of a great war like the Crimean War, and after providing so many millions for the Navy and so many for the Army, my right hon. friend (the Chancellor of the Exchequer) were to demand a vote of credit over and above, there then could be no occasion for discussion, for the policy of the war must be a thing notorious to, and accepted by, the House and the country. Votes of credit of that kind may be given without discussion. I will take another case when it was not so. It was a vote of credit proposed when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Indeed, it was a double vote of credit proposed in 1860 for the purposes of the China War. We began on the 16th of March by proposing a vote of £850,000. The hour was late, and the necessity was great. There was no statement, and no debate. There was merely a protest made that the vote was only allowed to pass on account of the great urgency of time in connection with our financial needs. On the 19th the vote was reported in the regular mode, and debate arose. But the debate which did arise was entirely upon military detail and nothing else; and, although undoubtedly that vote was upon a very serious subject of policy —a subject which required discussion, and which obtained discussion—it was not discussed on the occasion of the vote. In the month of July we had to propose, unfortunately, a very much larger vote for purposes connected with the same expedition. In that month what happened was this : We had sent to China in the interval certain offers of peace. These offers had failed. Military operations became necessary, and we had to ask for no less than £3,356,000 on the 12th of July. Again there was no statement of policy in connection with it. There was, again, a military debate. Late in the evening, Sir John Pakington—not Mr. Disraeli, who demanded no discussion upon it—said he would like, at the end of the speech, a fuller explanation as to the definite objects of the war ; and Lord Russell, in the space of a very few minutes, said he thought that the right hon. gentleman, belonging to the former Government, was as much responsible for the war as the Government then in office, and that the terms of peace then offered were quite reasonable. So that there was no discussion on either of those occasions—practically no discussion and no arraignment of the Government.

But, Sir, it may be said, and said truly, that the war was going on. Therefore, I will quote a case which will amply make good what I have said, and when no war was going on. This was the case of the vote of credit which it was my duty to propose when I was Prime Minister in 1870. It was a vote of £2,000,000 of money. On the 1st of August Mr. Disraeli raised a debate on the critical state of affairs on the Continent of Europe. It was in the course of that debate that I stated the intention of the Government to ask for a vote of credit without defining the purposes of the vote further than this—not very much unlike the information we got in 1878. I said :—

"We are neutrals in the war. We are on terms of unequivocal friendship with both the parties, and our object is to maintain a dignified and friendly position."

That, Sir, was the statement made by me on the part of the Government on the 1st of August. On the 2nd of August, no war existing, we being in no way a party to any quarrel, being in no difficulty and in no danger—though we had an object in view, of which the House was aware, like the public, in a general way—we asked the House, without a word of statement, for the £2,000,000, and without a word of objection it was given. On the 8th of August Earl Granville produced a Treaty in the House of Lords, and I produced a Treaty in the House of Commons which we had concluded with a view to the neutrality of Belgium. Some discussion then took place. Mr. Disraeli, in particular, said that he thought the proceeding was a good and a manly proposal. There was a general concurrence in the House, and such short debate as took place was not of a contentious character. But what I am contending is that that debate occurred a week after the vote of credit. The vote of credit had nothing to do with it, and the circumstances in which the vote of credit was proposed were again deemed to be circumstances which made it wise not to choose that moment for a general discussion on the merits of the question.

Well, now, Sir, what is the present case? I am not at all surprised that gentlemen in this House should say that the Government are censurable in their determination to ask no money in the present vote for the prosecution of offensive operations in Egypt. I think that is a question of a dignity and order perfectly warranting the conduct of any one who may think fit to call the attention of the House to it at a proper time; and if any vote of censure is to be moved on the Government for such a purpose from the proper source, and with proper authority, it will have from us every proper attention and accommodation. We shall give every opportunity for its being discussed, whatever its issue is to be. But what we wish to do now is simply to make understood the purposes of this vote, and to give the opportunity which it has been the custom of the House to use, though I do not wish to tie it down to that custom, for discussing the military provisions which it is the object of the vote to make. The first thing we ask is a vote of four and a-half millions for the Soudan, as being likely to be spent in the Soudan, but with the plain declaration, which is the basis on our part of the whole of these

proceedings, that as far as we are concerned, and quite apart from any wider opinions that any of us may entertain against the proceedings in the Soudan, we are all determined, so far as we are concerned, that the Soudan shall not by anything hereafter to be done offer an impediment to the full discharge of the duties of the Empire, with the whole purpose and the whole power of the Empire, in whatever quarter of the world they may happen to lie. For this reason, avowedly and undisguisedly, we ask you to give us this money because the troops are now in the Soudan. We cannot say how much of it may be spent there, because it is possible that none of it may be spent there, except in connection with certain specified objects there or for bringing the men home. We ask you distinctly to give it to us with an unfettered discretion to apply it elsewhere for higher purposes and for higher duties, if necessary. I hope that is intelligible, and I hope that will not be mixed up with any question of technical fidelity to rules for voting money which on every ordinary occasion we are most desirous strictly and rigorously to maintain.

With regard to the Soudan portion of this vote, explaining it as I have now explained it, the state of the case is this: I have nothing of a substantial character to add to what I stated on the 20th of April, when, on the part of the Government, and in words agreed upon with and by my colleagues, I said that we had found it necessary to review the whole situation of the Empire, and that we considered the time to be one at which it was necessary to hold its entire resources well in hand for use and for application wherever they might be wanted. If the Committee does not agree with that proposition, let them reject the proposal we now make. If the Committee does agree in the proposal, they may canvass, they may criticise, they may censure, they may expel and eject the present Government, if they like, and most welcome they will be; but they cannot withhold from us the money which we ask. I wish broadly to draw this distinction between the granting of the money on a vote of credit which we ask, and the reservation of the amplest liberty on the part of the House to discuss the merits of the question, and to visit upon the heads of responsible and guilty Ministers a vote of censure, or whatever penalty they may deserve.

At the same time, while that is really the substance of the proposition that I make on the part of the Government as the basis of this plan, the Committee may naturally remind me that it is not the first declaration made this year on the subject of the Soudan. On the 19th of February, when the House met, I made a declaration on behalf of my colleagues not less formal, not less binding, than that to which I have now referred. I therefore go back to the 19th of February and the discussion of that evening, and to the decisions which at that time I announced to the House as having been taken by the Cabinet, and having received the sanction of Her Majesty. When on the 4th of February we heard of the betrayal of Khartoum, the Cabinet was of course summoned, and it was gathered together next day. The desire of the Cabinet at that time was to endeavour to prevent the spreading of the disturbance, to do everything that could be done on behalf of General Gordon, if he were alive—and at that time we had no means of

judging whether he was alive or not, or even whether he was continuing resistance or not—and if possible, of course, to go forward at once to the accomplishment of the purpose of Lord Wolseley's expedition. That was our starting point. As I stated on the 19th of February, Lord Wolseley pointed out to us that we must move forward from that starting point. There were, he told us, two plans of military operations, one based on the idea of taking Khartoum, and the other based upon the abandonment of that object. We thought, Sir, that we were not justified, under the circumstances of the hour, in the abandonment of that idea; and we therefore adopted the plan pointed out by Lord Wolseley, which was meant to reserve to us a full discretion upon the facts as they then stood before us to go forward to Khartoum at a later period, presuming it to be impracticable to effect its capture immediately, and presuming, of course, that Parliament should be found disposed to sanction such a plan, and that we ourselves, on further consideration, should find reason still to adhere to it. On that ground we founded the statement that I made on the 19th of February, and retained to ourselves in full the power to march to Khartoum.

I referred at that time to various circumstances, and I think that, upon an impartial view, or upon any intelligent view, it must be admitted that many of those circumstances have since that period undergone serious change. In the first place, the heroic General Gordon, we know, has sealed his purpose with his blood. Of that we had no knowledge whatever at the time when we came to the decisions of, I think, the 6th of February. We saw at that time, as the world saw, an indefinite but possibly a very great danger in the effect that might be produced both upon Egypt and with regard to the defence of Egypt, and likewise in other quarters of the East, by a simple policy of retirement in the face of a triumphant pretender to the dignity of a prophet. The Mahdi was then triumphant, and his position was a very grave fact in the case before us. That position is greatly altered. In the flush of his triumph he attempted to move down the river, but not many days were required to show to him the vanity of that operation. He retired to Khartoum. He has retired from Khartoum. He is attacked in his own seat. Left to themselves and not immediately menaced by us, a rival or rivals have started up, and the Mahdi is not the formidable character that he was in the first week of February. As to the defence of Egypt, Sir, we in no way relax the obligations under which we hold ourselves to stand. In my announcement last Monday on the part of my colleagues we declared that we held to that duty, as we had held to it before. As respects the general effect upon the East of the betrayal of Khartoum, what we had then to contemplate was that if we had ordered a retirement of our forces—a retirement accompanied with general inaction in the East—we should have had to compute the probable or possible effect, not in Egypt only, but beyond Egypt—throughout the East and in the Indian Empire—of that retirement. That was the alternative before us then. I could almost wish it were the alternative before us now; but it is not so; and the policy that is necessary in the existing circumstances, which I shall say nothing to exaggerate or to worsen—

the policy that is before us now is of necessity a policy of preparatory action in the East, which puts wholly out of view any apprehensions that either a timorous or a prudent man might have entertained in the first week of February in connection with possible moral effects of the betrayal of Khartoum, and the apparent triumph of the Mahdi.

There were other smaller, or rather, narrower considerations, although very far indeed from being unimportant. I mentioned to the House at that time that there were several topics which we were unwilling summarily to brush aside; though we did not bind ourselves to do anything beyond what might be found reasonable and practicable in regard to them. One of them though I did not give it a very prominent place, was whether the possession of Khartoum would enable us to impose a serious check upon the prosecution of the Slave trade. I may say that an examination does not at all tend to show that the possession of Khartoum would have any vital or any very appreciable influence on that evil traffic. A very important consideration, both at that moment and throughout the whole of last year, was this—to whom did General Gordon hold himself bound in honour at Khartoum? General Gordon was under the belief, and that belief we derived from his telegrams, sporadic as they unfortunately were from the necessity of the case, that a large portion of the population of Khartoum were deeply bound up with him in interest and feeling, and that their fate was dependent upon his. But the evidence positive and negative before us—what we have heard and what we have not heard, connected with the betrayal of Khartoum—does not, so far as it goes, support that belief of General Gordon. What is quite plain is this, that with his heroic character and his extraordinary gifts he exercised a power of fascination upon a few of the natives and soldiers who were in personal contact with him, and there is much reason to suppose that he mistook that for a general attachment of the soldiers, and even for something more. We have no reason to suppose that any considerable body ever attached themselves to him, and we have no reason to suppose that the general population of Khartoum—though I have no doubt some of the immediate adherents suffered in their lives or fortunes—suffered by what has taken place. There was, further, a consideration with respect to the establishment of a government at Khartoum; but there again we are not entitled to assert of our own knowledge or conviction, that the government of Khartoum is at this moment worse than it was four or five years ago. As regards the Egyptian garrisons one or two of the smaller garrisons have quite recently been relieved, and the principal garrisons hold their ground. We are not able to say what is their exact condition, what are the motives of their present conduct. We are not able to say that it is not in their power, if they cease to represent Egyptian supremacy in the Soudan, to leave the country. That is a question on which we can give no positive opinion. We never have admitted that we were bound to use the forces and sacrifice the blood and the treasure of England in the heart of the Soudan for the relief of those garrisons whom we did not send there, and with whose despatch we had no concern whatever. Though we should have been very glad, had it been in our power, to assist them in removal, it would

have been a piece of guilt and folly were we to make that a capital object of our policy, and to expend British life and treasure in relieving them. This is only a reference to changes or modifications of circumstances, but I shall say no more on the Soudan. I go back upon my main proposition.

That proposition is that it is a paramount duty incumbent upon us to hold our forces in the Soudan available for service wherever the call of duty and honour may summon them in the service of the British Empire. I have heard with great satisfaction the assurances of hon. gentlemen opposite that they are disposed to forward in every way the grant of funds to us, to be used, as we best think, for the maintenance of what I have upon former occasions described as a "National and Imperial policy." Certainly, an adequate sense of our obligations to our Indian Empire has never yet been claimed by any Party in this country as its exclusive inheritance. In my opinion, he would be guilty of a moral offence and gross political folly who should endeavour to claim, on behalf of his own Party, any superiority in that respect over those to whom he is habitually opposed. It is an Imperial policy in which we are engaged.

With respect to this vote, I have, indeed, heard comments upon the smallness of the vote. But it is the largest vote of credit that has been asked, as far as I know, within the last seventy years, unless it were in the time of the Crimean War. What I wish to observe is this, that the vote is a little larger than it looks, because while it is stated at six and a-half millions, in the first place, it is cotemporaneous with a large increase of charge in the annual estimates for the Army and Navy, dealt with by the House in the course of its regular duty. In the second place, possibly, and more or less probably, it contemplates receiving a considerable addition from the other branch of this vote of four and a-half millions which we have put down as likely to be spent in the Soudan; and thirdly, and more important than either of these two items, which I do not hold to be trivial, it must be borne in mind that this case is primarily an Indian case of military preparations. Those who want to know what is the total amount of effort now going forward, and the total amount of the charge likely to be entailed by the present preparations upon the subjects of Her Majesty, would require to know, which we certainly do not yet know—what will be the cost of the vigorous and effective measures which, as we hope and believe, are being taken in India, to enable the Government of that country to meet its share of the present obligations.

A demand for information is always a plausible demand, often a reasonable demand, never a demand to be treated with anything but respect. Let us consider what is the present position and what is the mode of conduct on the part of the Government adapted to that position. It is not a case of war. There is no war before us, actually, or I may even say, perhaps, proximately—although I am slow to deal with epithets that are, of course, liable to some latitude of interpretation. I am not called upon to define, and I should find much difficulty in defining, inasmuch as it does not depend upon any choice of mine or my colleagues, the degree of danger that may be before us. We labour, we have laboured, and shall continue to labour, for an

honourable settlement by pacific means. One thing I will venture to say with regard to that sad contingency of an outbreak of war, or a rupture of relations between two great Powers like Russia and England —one thing I will say with great strength of conviction, and great earnestness in my endeavour to impress it upon the Committee, and it is this : we will strive to conduct ourselves to the end of this diplomatic controversy in such a way as that, if, unhappily, it is to end in violence or rupture, we may at least be able to challenge the verdict of civilised mankind, upon a review of the correspondence, upon a review of the demands made and refusals given, to say whether we have, or whether we have not, done all that men could do by every just and honourable effort to prevent the plunging of two such countries, with all the millions that own their sway, into bloodshed and strife, of which it might be difficult to foresee the close.

In my opinion, the question before the Committee at this moment—not the final question—but the question at this moment is a simple, I might say even a narrow question, though in itself a great and important question. What we present to you is a case for preparation. Is there, or is there not, a case for preparation ? Look at the facts before you. Try them by that test and by no other. Do not let us urge our own foregone conclusions about the misconduct of Russia or any one else ; do not let us enter into the judicial part of the case—only into that part of it which is prudential. Upon that aspect of the case, and upon that alone, asking for no credit as to the future and no acquittal as to the past, we say it is a case for preparation. All the facts that are within your knowledge are enough to make it your bounden duty so to prepare. Therefore, Sir, if I am asked for more information my answer is this—it is impossible for us to give you full information. We could not, at this moment, open up the correspondence that has been going on. We could not lay before you the unsifted information, still less the rumours, that have reached us. We could not enable you, by any possibility, to judge of a question that has not yet reached a state of maturity for judgment. The evidence is not complete. The development is simply going forward. Do not let us too sanguinely count on a favourable issue. At the same time do not let us despair that reason and justice may, on both sides, prevail over narrower and more unworthy feelings. We cannot give all the information we possess. If we did give it, it would not place you in a position for conclusive judgment. Were we to give part, we should infallibly mislead you ; and, therefore, we stand simply upon what is patent and notorious, and say that, on those patent and notorious facts with which the whole world is acquainted as well as we are, there is a case, and abundant case, for preparation.

Now, Sir, in order to show that I do not speak wholly without book, shall I, in a very few moments before I sit down, sketch rudely and slightly an outline of those patent and notorious facts ? The starting-point of our movement in this case is our obligation of honour to the Ameer of Afghanistan. He stands between us and any other consideration of policy or of danger. Our obligations to him are not absolute. We are not obliged—God forbid that we should ever be obliged—to

defend him, or to defend anybody else, were he misled into a course of tyranny against the just resentment of his subjects. We are not bound, contrary to our just duty, to sustain him, even in a course of folly. We are bound by no such obligation; but we have a contingent obligation to give him our aid and support; and I think everyone who hears me will say that that obligation should be fulfilled in no stinted manner, if it really be a living obligation, contingent only upon this one condition, that his conduct is such as we can honestly approve. That is the present condition of affairs in connection with the Ameer of Afghanistan.

I have stated distinctly to the House that there have been full communications between him and the Viceroy, and that the language which he holds, and the principles which he announces, are those which absolutely entitle him to call upon us in concert and in council with him, acting for him and as far as we can acting with him, to protect him in the possession of his just rights. Well, Sir, in this view a plan was framed for the delimitation of the frontier between himself and what was until yesterday Turkoman territory, but has now become by a rapid process Russian territory. I am not about to enter into any invidious comment. We have made, under the force of circumstances, very rapid progress ourselves in various quarters of the world, and the idea which, beyond all, I desire to carry along with me in every step of this painful and anxious process, is a determination to make every allowance and every concession to those with whom we are dealing that we should claim, and that we should expect for ourselves. Therefore I only say this territory has rapidly become Russian, and Russia, as the head of this Turkoman country, is now in immediate contact with Afghanistan. A plan was framed for the delimitation of the frontier. That plan has, unhappily, been intercepted in the sense that it has not yet taken effect in action. The question of the delays in the progress of that plan is a question that may have to be carefully examined hereafter. I am not about to examine these delays now. I am not about to make them in any way a matter of charge, but I must point out the injurious effect that they have had in practice; for they led to advances —to military advances upon debated ground that were obviously, and on the face of them, and in a high degree dangerous—dangerous to peace, dangerous to goodwill, dangerous to the future settlement of the question.

Aware of those dangers, we set ourselves to work to bring about an agreement with the Government of Russia, by which we hoped they might in a great degree be neutralised. That agreement was concluded on the 16th of March, although it has passed by the date of the 17th of March, inasmuch as, I think, that was the day on which it was telegraphed by Sir Ronald Thomson to Sir Peter Lumsden. The Committee will perhaps recollect the substance of that agreement and my announcement of it in this House. It made a deep impression on my mind. The agreement consisted of a covenant and of a reservation. The covenant was that the Russian troops should not advance nor attack provided the Afghan troops did not advance nor attack. That was the covenant. There followed the reservation, and the reservation was,

"unless in the case of some extraordinary accident, such as a disturbance in Penj-deh." I well recollect the feeling which the reading of that reservation created in the House. The same feeling had been created in our own minds before we announced it in the House. It was obvious that we were just as much entitled to insert reservations on our side. I only now refer to this matter in order to exhibit, as well as I can without injustice, the spirit in which we have endeavoured to proceed—a spirit of liberal construction and interpretation wherever we thought we could apply it without sacrifice of honour or duty. I think it will be admitted that exception might have been taken to that reservation as covering God knows how many and what contingencies, had we been disposed to examine it in a spirit of cavilling or of criticism. But we determined to give credit for its having been conceived—yes, we thought it our duty and we acted upon that duty—to take it as conceived in honour and good faith. We so construed it, and I do not repent having so construed it. I do not say that the construction is shown to have been wrong, but, come what may, I shall not repent having put that construction upon it. However, it was so taken, and I am bound to say that, although I think the House was somewhat startled by the reservation, it was generally, and I believe wisely, accepted by the House as a binding covenant. Sir, it was a very solemn covenant. It was a covenant involving great issues. There were thousands of men on the one side and on the other—on the one side standing for what they thought their country, on the other side standing for what they thought likewise their patriotic duty, standing in the face of one another without a definite cause to contend for, but placed in a position of dangerous contiguity, and with the peril of bloody collision. This engagement came in to stand between the living and the dead, to stand between the danger and the people who were exposed to it, and we hoped and we believed that it would be recognised as one of the most sacred covenants ever made between two great nations with the strictest fidelity, and that if, unhappily, a deviation occurred there would be a generous rivalry between the two Powers to search it out to the bottom and to exhibit to the world how that deviation had come about, and who was the person, or who were the persons on whom lay the responsibility. All this, Sir, remains in suspense.

What has happened? A bloody engagement on the 30th of March followed the covenant of the 16th. I shall overstate nothing. At least I shall not purposely overstate anything. I hope I shall not inadvertently overstate anything. All I shall say is this—that that woeful engagement on the 30th of March distinctly showed that one party or both had, either through ill-will or through unfortunate mishap, failed to fulfil the conditions of the engagement. We considered it to be, and we still consider it to be, the duty of both countries and, above all, I will say for the honour of both countries, to examine how and by whose fault this calamity came about. I will have no foregone conclusion. I will not anticipate that we are in the right. Although I feel perfect confidence in the honour and intelligence of our officers, I will not now

assume that they may not have been misled. I will prepare myself for the issue; and I will abide by it, as far as I can, in a spirit of impartiality. But what I say is this—that those who have caused such an engagement to fail, ought to become known to their own Government, and to the other contracting Government. I will not say that we are even now in possession of all the facts of the case. But we are in possession of many; and we are in possession of facts which create in our minds impressions unfavourable to the conduct of some of those who form the other party in these negotiations. However, I will not wilfully deviate from the strictest principles of justice in anticipating anything as to the ultimate issue of that fair inquiry which we are desirous of prosecuting, and endeavouring to prosecute. The cause of that deplorable collision may be uncertain. What is certain is that the attack was a Russian attack. Whose was the provocation is a matter of the utmost consequence. We only know that the attack was a Russian attack. We know that the Afghans suffered in life, in spirit, and in repute. We know that a blow was struck at the credit and the authority of a Sovereign—our ally—our protected ally—who had committed no offence. (Hear, hear.) All I say is, we cannot in that state of things close this book and say: "We will look into it no more." We must do our best to have right done in the matter.

Under these circumstances, I again say, there is a case for preparation, and I hope that the House will feel with me, after what I have said about the necessity we are under of holding Soudanese funds available for service elsewhere. I trust that they will not press upon us a demand for time which can have no other effect than that of propagating here and elsewhere a belief that there is some indecision in the mind of Parliament; whereas I believe that with one heart and one soul, and one purpose only, while reserving absolute liberty to judge the conduct of the Government and to visit them with its consequences, they will go forward to meet the demands of justice and the calls of honour, and will, subject only to justice and to honour, labour for the purposes of peace. (Loud and prolonged cheering.)

The Vote of Credit was then agreed to.

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