In this last week the House of Representatives has been debating the Social Services and the Repatriation Bills which give effect to the concessions announced by the Treasurer in his Budget.

Important as these two measures are to the wellbeing of many thousands of Australians, they have been overshadowed by the Prime Minister’s Statement on Suez and by Dr. Evatt’s reply. The Government’s attitude on this vital problem is, I feel, quite clear. It is also realistic and we as members of this great Australian Commonwealth must not flinch if reality is unpleasant.

The Suez Canal is not important for passenger traffic, it is not even vital for trade between Australia and Great Britain but it is vital to millions of people in Western Europe. There was a time when the industries of these countries depended upon coal but now the industries of Great Britain and of Western Europe will grind to a stop if their supplies of oil are cut off. The greater part of these essential supplies come from south of the Canal. There are not the ships to carry the required quantities around the Cape of Good Hope and Western Europe has not the dollar resources to buy oil from U.S.A. except for a short time as emergency measures. The Canal must be kept open to all the free ships of the world and the chief users cannot be blamed for wanting some guarantee that this will be done. It is true that Nasser has said he will not break the 1888 Convention guaranteeing free passage to all nations but it is also true that he has already torn up an agreement with the Suez Company 12 years before time. How much can the word of a Dictator be trusted in this matter. More positive guarantees of free passage must be achieved.

The whole difficult and intricate problem has now gone to the U.N.O. Because of the power of Veto in the Security Council, which has been used by the Russians about 50 times and by the rest of the world only about 4 times, the difficulty of reaching a just and adequate decision in the U.N.O. will be great. (Nevertheless this could well be the hour of supreme trial for this young organisation designed to achieve international justice.)
No problem since the end of the last great war has been more fraught with grave danger or with such extreme possibilities of disaster, not only for the British Commonwealth but for all the Free World.

It will be the greatest possible triumph for the U.N.C. if it can achieve a satisfactory and just solution of this extreme problem, if it cannot the consequences will be unhappy indeed. One point alone brings out the significance, Russia and America probably now possess sufficient atomic weapons to destroy the world as we know it. This fact must alter the diplomacy and the tactics used in the settlement of any dispute.

Even though we place our faith in the United Nations, it would be folly not to look beyond to see what alternatives are left in the event of failure. They seem to be: (a) economic sanctions, (b) further negotiations while maintaining vital principles, (c) resignation to doing nothing with Egypt left in virtual control of the employment and prosperity of millions of people in Western Europe, or (d) force.

Dr. Evatt unhappily adopted an attitude that will not help the western powers in their negotiations. He opposed economic sanctions because of their cruelty to individuals in Egypt, not realising the cruelty and hardship that would follow to many British citizens if Egypt blocked the Canal. He said the maintenance of vital principles would limit the scope of negotiations and was not necessary. This view, I believe, is unworthy of a leader who holds the same post that once belonged to Chifley and Curtin. No man or country can afford to set aside principles.

I hope and pray that U.N.O. will succeed but if it does not one of the alternatives, or a combination of the alternatives, I mentioned must be followed.
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