

Extract from Hansard, 25th November 1941

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes (Portsmouth, North)

I have listened to-day to suggestions by several hon. Members about ways of speeding up the processes of the war in various directions. I want to draw attention to a way in which I think the war should be speeded up, but before doing so I must refer to a matter which was given great publicity in the Press last week and which has caused much comment and speculation. There has been no official statement, and I feel I owe some explanation to the House. My appointment as Director of Combined Operations was given me by the Prime Minister on 17th July, 1940, but it was not disclosed, by direction of the Chiefs of Staff. The reason was rather flattering to me. I was given to understand that it might prematurely cause alarm and despondency to the enemy. Among other executive responsibilities of my office were included the raising, organising and training of the special Service troops now known as Commandos and of the ships, landing craft and naval personnel associated with them. I also had command of this splendid amphibious striking unit.

Hon. Members have no doubt seen photographs and films of the work of the Commandos in the Lofoten raid, which have now been publicly released, although their part in it was kept secret at the time. My executive responsibilities, however, were withdrawn five weeks ago on the advice of the Chiefs of Staffs Committee. I was informed that the Commandos were being handed over to the Army. My office as Director of Combined Operations was abolished on 19th October. One of the reasons for my dismissal suggested in many comments in the Press was that I was now too old to lead shock troops. The command of such a force does not necessarily mean that one leads it into action on all occasions, any more than the commanders in chief of an Army or Royal Air Force personally lead the forces they command, and whose actions they direct. Of course, this is a young man's war, and I assure the House that my one object has been to give youth its chance and to make good use of my force against the enemy, which, as I had considerable experience of amphibious warfare, and intimate contact with new German methods—during the Belgian campaign—was evidently the reason why the Prime Minister entrusted me last year with the development of this new force and the training of its young leaders. The Prime Minister no doubt hoped that I would be able to assist him to deliver amphibious strokes, akin to those which played so decisive a part in the campaigns of the great Pitt. To this end I spent many weeks, personally training and preparing my force, and we were eager and ready to act a year ago. I can assure the House that the Prime Minister was as keen as I was to act vigorously and face hazards to achieve great results which—if we had been allowed to carry them out—might have electrified the world and altered the whole course of the war.

But, in his first enthusiasm, the Prime Minister, I think, underestimated the possibility that my appointment would be unwelcome to one section of the war machine, whom I had criticised earlier in the war, and the difficulties I should therefore be up against. I cannot help thinking that when the Prime Minister spoke in this House on 7th May last, he had in his mind some of the heart-breaking frustrations and disappointments we had lately suffered. Replying to a speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George), he said: My right hon. Friend spoke of the great importance of my being surrounded by people who would stand up to me and say No, No, No. Why, good gracious, has he no idea how strong the negative principle is in the constitution and working of the British war-making machine? The difficulty is not, I assure him, to have more brakes put on the wheels; the difficulty is to get more impetus and speed behind it." [OFFICIAL REPORT, 7th May, 1941; col. 937, Vol. 371.] After 15 months' experience as Director of Combined Operations and having been frustrated in every worthwhile offensive action I have tried to undertake, I most fully endorse the Prime Minister's contention of the strength of the negative power which controls the war-making machine in Whitehall. It is very hard on the Prime Minister that history should repeat itself so cruelly. In 1915 he tried to deliver an amphibious stroke which, if persevered in, could not have failed to succeed, but the hesitations and the indecisions of the war-machine of that day defeated us, and eventually Gallipoli ended in a well-conducted evacuation.

[§ Mr. Gallacher \(Fife, West\)](#)

On a point of Order. Most important statements have been made by the hon. and gallant Member, and there is not a representative of the War Cabinet on the Front Bench. I think that is a scandal.

[§ Mr. Deputy-Speaker \(Sir Dennis Herbert\)](#)

The hon. Member must know by this time that that is not a point of Order.

[§ Sir R. Keyes](#)

A German General—Hans Kannengiesser Pasha—who was with the Turkish army, in his book on the Gallipoli campaign, paid a great tribute to the fighting qualities of the British troops and their energetic commanders in the field, but was very scathing about the working of our war machine. He said:

Conversations, minutes and reports always preceded the decisive meetings which again continually postponed the vital decision. So, valuable time was lost, and at the Front that moment was lost which contained the possibility of success. He went on to say: The leadership of a war cannot be entrusted to a limited liability company. In his "World Crisis" the Prime Minister calls attention to the mistakes and errors which were committed in Downing Street and Whitehall in the Gallipoli campaign. He says: The errors and miscarriages which took place on the battle-field cannot be concealed, but they stand on a

lower plane than those sovereign and irretrievable misdirections. This all occurred before my right hon. Friend the Member for Carnarvon Boroughs seized the reins of Government and, with utter disregard for personal considerations, eliminated the faint-hearts and instilled in his war machine an admirable will to victory, to which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister as Minister for Munitions contributed in no small measure by giving a tremendous impetus to the production of war material. To-day we have another fighting Prime Minister, and no one who has heard his speeches can doubt his will to victory, but unfortunately he is handicapped, not only by the same kind of machine in Whitehall as in the last war, but now it has even greater force, and, apparently constitutional power. It is, of course, necessary to employ highly trained Staff officers to work out details and plans, but Inter-Service committees and subcommittees which have sprung up since the last war and have flourished exceedingly in peace-time have, in this war, become almost the dictators of military policy instead of the servants they should be of those who really should bear all the responsibility. By concentrating on the difficulties and dangers of every amphibious enterprise suggested, they have hitherto succeeded in thwarting or delaying execution until we have either been forestalled, or action has been taken too late to ensure success. Indeed, in my opinion, until the Staff system is thoroughly overhauled, we shall always be too late in everything we undertake.

[§ Earl Winterton \(Horsham and Worthing\)](#)

Has the hon. and gallant Member applied those considerations to what is going on in Libya?

[§ Sir R. Keyes](#)

Yes, I have. It is a little difficult for me to comment on actions that are in progress—quite impossible. After all, I have to be discreet. I have been reminded quite lately by receiving a copy of the Official Secrets Act—which I think was rather unnecessary—that I might almost be confined to the Tower for an indiscretion, but I think that the Noble Lord will find, as time passes, and events come out, that my intervention to-day is opportune and its object will be appreciated. I was referring to the staff in Whitehall, not that in the field. If the Noble Lord had waited a moment, he would have heard me go on to say that secret and swift decisions, surprise and speedy action, are the essence of success in offensive war—brilliantly illustrated by our campaigns in Africa. You will not get any of these, however, while dependent for decisions and actions on the cumbrous machine in Whitehall from which we have been suffering since the war started, and by which all offensive amphibious projects are either strangled before birth or mangled after endless discussions in the many committees.

I have an unbounded faith in our ultimate victory, but victory will be delayed whilst, in Whitehall phraseology, "Every stone is turned and every avenue

explored" for imaginary dangers and difficulties to prevent action being taken, and the glorious vista of the goal beyond is shrouded in a fog of indecision. The great leaders of the past have always emphasised the value of time in war—Drake, Napoleon and Nelson; but time passes, and as long as procrastination, the thief of time, remains the keynote of the war machinery in Whitehall, we shall continue to miss each opportunity, during the lifetime of that opportunity.

I have never concealed my affection and great admiration for the Prime Minister. I have always deplored that he was excluded from successive Governments during those anxious days when disarmament continued until war seemed inevitable. As with many others who stood by him in the hour of adversity, it has been an intense gratification to me to see him head of the State, giving a tremendous lead to the world, the hope of the freedom-loving world. But I think that we in this House, the representatives of the people who have so bravely stood by him through thick and thin and have had unbounded faith in his ultimate ability to lead us to victory, can best serve him by enabling him to carry into action those splendid, vigorous declarations that he makes, and by helping him to remove some of the brakes, which seem to work automatically whenever dangers and hazards appear, in this war machine of Whitehall.

[§ Mr. Hamilton Kerr \(Oldham\)](#)

The House always listens with the greatest respect to the interventions of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for North Portsmouth (Sir R. Keyes). Amphibious operations have always been very dear to the heart and the genius of the British people. Whether it is Drake singeing the King of Spain's beard or my hon. and gallant Friend singeing Hitler's moustache, we have always believed that the best form of defence was that of attacking the enemy's coasts. The House was exceedingly moved by the speech of my hon. and gallant Friend, and I personally feel that charges of that nature demand an authoritative reply, which I hope will be forthcoming in due course.