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OCTOBER 1, 1954

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.1.

G.P.O. Box 2292.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 70-999.

A Statesman's Speech

WHEN the Rt. Hon. C. R. Attlee was in New Zealand a week ago he was described in some Press reports as a man who might pass unnoticed in the streets. It is not unusual for men of strong character and great ability to give this impression in casual meetings. The popular idea of greatness is too dramatic. It is felt that a man who wins battles should be large and rugged, that a poet's eye should be frenzied, and that a statesman should move as if at the centre of an electric disturbance. Men who look as if they could fill these parts are often encountered; but they are generally citizens of no special prominence, and may sometimes be actors. Mr. Attlee has never felt it necessary to draw attention to himself: indeed, one of the secrets of his strength is a personal stillness which allows him to listen and wait, and to speak scarcely at all until he sees the crucial point of a discussion. But only the unperceptive could see him, even in the streets, without sensing his true stature.

The speech given by Mr. Attlee at the State luncheon had a quietness and restraint which might have made its excellence harder to recognise. Too many of us believe that personal force needs the loud voice, the flourish of word and gesture, and an oratory addressed to the nerves. Mr. Attlee made an appeal to emotion. He was an English statesman who had "undertaken a journey." It had been said of him that he should have stayed at home, or that he should have gone abroad at a more appropriate time. But the journey was completed; and in New Zealand, on his way back to London, he paused long enough to pass on his impressions of Russia and China. People who hold extreme opinions, believing that the curtailed lands are either perfect in all things or evil beyond redemption, could have found no comfort in what he said.

But many New Zealanders share Mr. Attlee's conviction that an attempt to understand other people is not appeasement, and that we do not weaken our defences by looking at such facts as the existence of 600 million Chinese under a form of government which happens to suit them at this stage of their history. The alternative to understanding is the closed mind. "If we were to ignore all such ideologies," said Mr. Attlee, "we would be going in for totalitarianism."

An English statesman, no matter how eminent, must expect to be opposed when he speaks of these matters. It will be said of him that he fails to see how impossible it is to deal tolerantly with people who themselves will not be tolerant. But Mr. Attlee has been in the midst of great affairs. He knows that if relations between West and East are not improved they will become worse, and that it is wisdom and not weakness to explore possibilities of agreement and toleration. The risks of political infection are less dangerous than the risks of war. Principles and beliefs can survive better through their own strength than through a nervous isolation. There was not the slightest trace of superiority when, at the end of his speech, Mr. Attlee quietly mentioned one good reason why democracies can share the world with Communism. British tradition would prevail, he said, "because it is more in keeping with the dignity of the human spirit." In China he had seen for himself the mingling of the old and the new, the evil and the good. And because he is a wise man who knows history, and who knows also—from the inner calmness of his own nature—that fear is the only implacable enemy, he came back with a message for reasonable men. Those who heard him speak were deaf indeed if they could not hear the accents of greatness.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 1, 1954.