

July 7, 1959

Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday 7 July 1959, Committee on Finance - Vote 59--External Affairs [Excerpt]

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Summary:

New Taoiseach Seán Lemass took the unusual step of intervening in a Foreign Affairs debate in July 1959 to defend Frank Aiken's conduct at the United Nations. Trenchant critics on the opposition benches in the Fine Gael party had berated Aiken repeatedly since 1957. Critics inside and outside of the lower house of parliament (Dáil Éireann) asserted that Ireland, "a tiny country" with limited interests, had no right to voice an opinion on global matters which was more appropriately dealt with by the "Great Powers." Worse, Aiken's interventions would create enemies among Irish friends worldwide, most notably in the United States. The tenor of the arguments was that Ireland had no nuclear energy industry and no nuclear weapons aspirations, so such matters should be left to the nuclear powers. It is difficult to avoid the sense that elements in Irish political life appreciated that American and NATO nuclear forces informally protected the anti-communist Republic of Ireland. Lemass ended speculation that he was less of a supporter of Aiken than his predecessor, de Valera. He affirmed that Ireland had a significant contribution to make to the global commons in terms of reinforcing peace and order. Aiken was empowered to continue.

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[...]

The Taoiseach:

I wish to intervene in this debate very briefly, and primarily for the purpose of making it clear beyond doubt that the attitude taken by the Minister for External Affairs in the United Nations Assembly on all the matters to which reference has been made in this debate followed on discussion with the Government and had their prior approval. There is no foundation at all for the suggestion that the Minister was influenced in any way by a purely personal viewpoint which had not been fully debated with the Government and cleared with them before being expressed.

I think this country is fortunate that, at this time, we have as Minister for External Affairs a person who possesses the very special qualifications which Deputy Aiken has. I have had many indications that the speeches made by him at the United Nations Assembly succeeded, because of their clarity and directness, in winning praise and respect from many, even including some who did not fully agree with the views he expressed. His attitude and his conduct at the United Nations Council and in its Assembly have won increasing respect for the viewpoint of this country. They have secured recognition of the fact that this country has a viewpoint and are contributing to the growth of our influence in the United Nations Assembly which can be of importance to us in the future.

We believe in the United Nations and we want to be good members of it. Indeed small countries must support the development of a world organisation such as it and the commencement of the rule of law between nations. But if the United Nations is to be effective in preserving peace, its Assembly must, in our view, be free to discuss any situation existing in the world which appears likely to endanger the peace. We cannot in principle accept a contention that the Assembly should not discuss any proposal brought forward in the context of a threatening world situation merely because one or other of the Great Powers did not wish it. While asserting that principle we must be on our guard at all times to ensure that our position will not be misunderstood, that the interests of friendly States will not be ignored, and of course have consideration also to the suitability of raising an issue at any particular time.

[...]