

NAVAL POLICY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES
Sir,—As you have done me the honour of commenting on my efforts to encourage people to invest their savings in warship weeks in a leading article in to-day's issue, perhaps you will be good enough to allow me a little space to reply to it and also to Mr. Alexander's statement published to-day, in which he tries to bypass his responsibility as First Lord for the disastrous limitations imposed on the British Navy by the London Naval Treaty of 1920. In 1922 Great Britain, U.S.A., Japan, France, and Italy—in the interests of economy—agreed in the Washington Naval Treaty that Great Britain and the U.S.A. should have parity in capital ships and aircraft carriers, and that the other nations should have a ratio corresponding with their relative strength at that time. Apart from certain limitations as to displacement and armament of new cruisers, each nation was left free to maintain as many cruisers and small craft as it considered necessary for its own security and the protection of its sea communications, a proviso which our Admiralty insisted upon.

The London Naval Treaty of 1920, however, besides forcing us to scrap five valuable capital ships, destroyed this vital provision and permitted Japan—whose aspirations in the Far East were already stirring, but who had only local responsibilities—to build up to three-fifths of the whole British Empire's strength in all categories of ships, while we had to mark time in order to allow her to do so. France and Italy declined to jeopardize their security in like manner and left the Conference—free to build what they liked—but even this did not warn our Government of the folly of such a one-sided and dangerous agreement. Thus Great Britain, against all naval advice, proceeded to sign away, for the next six years, her power to protect her world-wide sea communications. This decision was disastrous, not only in cutting down the numbers of ships and personnel, but because it left shipyards derelict, their skilled men unemployed, and no apprentices trained, so that when in 1937 the treaty came to an end and danger was imminent we no longer had the means to expand the Fleet rapidly, and we started this world war with a completely inadequate Navy, and many thousands of our seamen have had to pay with their lives for the folly of a naval disarmament policy imposed on this country by people blind to the lessons of history.

For more than 10 years I have been trying to wake up the country to the fact that unless we restored our Navy we would lose command of the sea and with it would go the British Empire. Eight years ago I went into Parliament solely to fight for the restoration of our sea power. These warship weeks have provided opportunities of reminding our people that their freedom and very existence depend on our ability to recover the sea power which the present generation have failed to provide. To this end I have been appealing to my audiences to lend all they can spare to build ships; but lending money is not enough, it is a question of getting the most out of it in the least possible time, and unless every one puts 100 per cent. effort into the war output, and the Government can be induced to put a stop to the way in which money is being squandered, we are heading for disaster.

I have been overwhelmed with letters bearing out my contention that there is mismanagement, idleness, and absenteeism in the dockyards and shipyards, and much of my evidence comes from workmen themselves. I have also been sent copies by workmen of the official notices on this subject put up by the authorities in Portsmouth and Sheerness dockyards, of which surely Mr. Alexander cannot be ignorant. I have never mentioned the effect of excessive wages on the characters of boys and girls, as your leading article suggests, but surely there can be no two opinions of this, judging by the evidence of the law courts, as reported in the Press. The denunciation of the "cost plus per cent." system of contracting has come to me from many authoritative sources, and people will have far more confidence in lending their money if they know that pressure is being brought to bear on the Government to put a stop to a state of affairs which is recognized as a crying scandal all over the country.

Judging by my enormous postbag, I think most of my shots have hit their target all right.
Yours, &c., ROGER KEYES.
House of Commons, March 19.