

British Preparation for the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34: The Controversy over the Plan of Budgetary Limitation

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Although the Geneva Disarmament Conference (1932–34) was the largest international conference of its time since the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, it received little attention or study for a long time. However, in the 1990s, Dick Richardson and Carolyn Kitching ignited new interest in the conference, and since then, there have been many studies about it. According to the new orthodoxy put forth by Richardson and Kitching about the conference, the British government's negative stance to international disarmament was greatly responsible for the conference's failure. At the same time, those studies tend to overlook the role of the second Labour government (June 1929 to August 1931), which took charge of preparing for the Disarmament Conference. This article aims to elucidate the disarmament policy of the Labour government.

Unlike the preceding Conservative government (November 1924 to June 1929) and the National government (August 1931 to June 1935) that followed, the Labour government was sincere in its pursuit of international disarmament. Their disarmament policy was controlled by a strong alliance between Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson and a Conservative politician, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, the British representative to the League of Nations. The government's strategy for the conference was that Britain would take the initiative in achieving a consensus on the budgetary limitation of armament. This strategy came close to success because the United States, which had been the strongest opponent of the budgetary limitation, leant to accepting it under the heavy pressure of the public opinion. The Foreign Office also considered conceding to the French demand for security against Germany in order to reach an agreement at the conference. However, after the Labour government collapsed in August 1931, British disarmament policy drastically changed. Under the National government, the service departments successfully vetoed the Foreign Office's disarmament policy. Had the National government adopted the policy of the former Labour government, the Geneva Disarmament Conference might have succeeded.