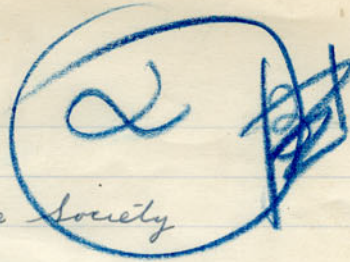


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Best
all
round.



The Royal Empire Society

Essay Competition, 1945

Class A

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"The Imperial Conference, Past, Present and Future."

x In 1881, at the time of Queen Victoria's jubilee, advantage was taken of the presence in London of the Prime Ministers of the self-governing colonies to hold discussions on questions of colonial defence. Again in 1891 discussions took place after the celebration of the sixtieth year of Victoria's reign. When the Colonial statesmen were again in London for the coronation of King Edward VII another colonial conference met to discuss the political and commercial relations of the Empire, as well as matters of (its) naval and military defence. The idea of conference between the self-governing members of the Empire thus had its beginning in those great state events towards the close of last century. Although the conferences came about more or less accidentally and the discussions of these early colonial conferences were of a very tentative nature, it was apparently realized that they could be of great value, for in 1901 a further ~~and~~ conference was called, which, in its first resolution constituted the Imperial Conference as we know it, as a regular institution. The Conference was to consist of the Prime Ministers of Great Britain and the self-governing colonies, ~~and~~ the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and representatives of the

various governments, if so desired, and it was to meet every four years. A permanent secretarial staff was appointed to carry on the business of the Conference between meetings and if necessary, special subsidiary conferences between representatives of the governments concerned were to be called to discuss matters that required detailed attention between meetings.

Accordingly the first Imperial Conference met in London in 1911, and although its work had been crystallized in the manifesto of the previous conference, the Dominion representatives did not have the certain knowledge of equality with the representatives of Great Britain which they later acquired. The Conference was mainly concerned with bringing the self-governing Dominions into closer co-operation with the Motherland in various matters of trade, and with making the commercial laws of the Dominions more uniform where they affected British Shipping. It was also agreed to set up a Royal Commission to report on the trade and resources of the Dominions with a view to their development. The right of the Dominions to be consulted on British foreign policy so far as it concerned them, was also recognized at this first Imperial Conference and the first step towards the equality they now share with Great Britain in foreign affairs was taken when a resolution was passed that the Dominions should be allowed to withdraw if they wished from treaties formerly

had been hit the to
contracted by which they were bound.

When war broke out in 1914 the Imperial Conference which would have been held in 1915 was postponed, but the Great War, far from hindering the development of co-operation between the self-governing parts of the Empire, marked no little progress towards the consummation of the ideals of the Conference. It was obviously necessary that the Dominion governments should direct their own countries' war effort, but it was equally necessary that full co-operation should be maintained, and this co-operation was brought about by the formation in 1916 of the Imperial War Cabinet which met with abundant success.

In 1911 another Imperial Conference was held to discuss post-war Imperial Policy and development, especially with regard to trade. The most important resolution of this Conference however had to do with inter-imperial relations and stated that 'any readjustment of constitutional relations after the war must preserve all the present Dominions as autonomous partners in the British Commonwealth of Nations, with India as an important portion of the same.' Thus the problem of defining the relations of the Dominions with Great Britain, which had been shelved since the 1911 Conference, was again brought into prominence, and although the federation of the Empire was definitely rejected, the constitutional problem was postponed till a conference to be called as soon after the end of hostilities as was

possible. Although another Imperial War Conference was held the following year, the constitutional problem was hardly touched on and only matters of immediate significance were discussed.

By the end of the Great War the British Commonwealth had become an established fact. The autonomy of the Dominions had been preserved and their right to a voice in foreign affairs had been recognized by the part they had played in the Imperial War Cabinet and by their separate signing of the Peace Treaty. The new status of the Dominions, however, had not ~~be~~ yet been defined and a great deal of the business of the Imperial Conferences of 1921, 1923 and 1926 had to do with this problem. For the rest, the Empire was more strongly united in its policy of co-operation than ever. Apart from foreign affairs which still claimed an important place the Imperial Conference in the years of peace was mainly concerned with economic co-operation, and even Imperial defence was hardly discussed until war clouds began to gather again in 1937 and 1938.

When the first post-war Imperial Conference met in 1921 it was not certain whether it would be constituted on the lines of the War Cabinet or of the old Conferences, for after the 1911 Conference the constitutional problem had been left in abeyance. It was decided however and definitely stated at this Conference that no constitutional amendment was necessary.

Henceforward the ideas of federation and an Imperial Government were dead and the ideas of complete national self-government, coupled with habitual consultation on everyday matters, and co-operation on great issues were very much alive and in practice. There was a complete swing away from federation culminating in the famous definition of the new status by the 1926 Imperial Conference which defined the Dominions as 'autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations'.

In the realm of foreign affairs the Conference of 1921 took no action beyond asserting the importance of consultation on Imperial policy. Nor did the Imperial Conference of 1923 suggest any improvement in the machinery of consultation, though it did, however, consider the problem of treaties and recommended that the Dominions should have the power to contract treaties in their own right, but that they should first have a proper regard for their possible affect on the other parts of the Empire. The Imperial Conference of 1926 made it clear that the self-governing Dominions were now free to carry on completely separate foreign activities. The Home government now had absolutely no control over the Dominions and even the Governors-General no longer represented the British Parliament, but were appointed by the Dominion Parliaments to represent the

King.

From the very first one of the main aims of the Imperial Conference had been the development of the Dominions' resources by an increase in Empire trade. During the war, ~~During~~ however, trade problems were non-existent, for the war absorbed whatever the Dominions could produce. But with the coming of peace war markets disappeared, and it became necessary for the Dominions to find new markets for their increased productivity, and so it came about that one of the chief tasks of the Imperial Conference was to further economic co-operation amongst the members of the Commonwealth not only to arrange markets for their goods, but also as an aid to industrial and trade development in the Dominions.

In 1923 a special economic Conference was held concurrently with the Imperial Conference, which it completely overshadowed in importance, and a series of resolutions were adopted on such matters as overseas settlement within the Empire, air and sea communications, currency, exchange and cables and wireless; but that which excited the most interest was the progress made in the scheme for the development of Empire resources by conceding a tariff preference to Empire goods. The United Kingdom Government enumerated a list of goods on which they proposed preferential tariff rates, but unfortunately the government was defeated on that issue in the House of Commons and had to resign, giving way to a free-trade government. The Baldwin

government returned to office, however, in 1924 and the United Kingdom was then, for the first time, able to reciprocate to a small extent in the preferential tariff system which had so long been a part of the Dominions' trade policy.

By 1930 the position had again been reversed and when the Dominion and United Kingdom delegates met at the Imperial Conference of that year for the purpose of promoting the economic unity of the Empire, the Prime Minister of Great Britain was an uncompromising Free Trader. Mr. R. B. Bennett speaking on behalf of Canada, spoke for all the Dominions when he proposed a large scheme of Imperial Preference as a solution of the Empire's trade problems, but his proposal was definitely turned down by Great Britain. The Conference was almost a complete failure and, indeed was only saved from being a fiasco by a decision to convene a special Imperial Economic Conference in 1932 at Ottawa.

In the year after the Imperial Conference of 1930 the way was cleared a little for the coming Economic Conference by the advent of a National Government to power in England which deemed it expedient, owing to the exceptional circumstances created by the existing financial crisis, to enact a protective tariff on all goods. The delegates assembled in Ottawa, therefore, with high hopes which, however, were only imperfectly realized. A number of bilateral trade agreements were concluded and

for the first time a general system of preferential trade within the Empire was established, this being made possible by the fact that Great Britain now had protective duties which could be lowered.

The economic system that was evolved at Ottawa did not last long. It was only a matter of a few years before most of the Dominions renounced their Ottawa agreements; by the time of the next Imperial Conference in 1931 the Dominions, while still adhering to the principles of Imperial Preference, demanded in chorus that everything possible be done to promote liberal international trade for purposes of political appeasement.

The Empire in 1931 found itself in a rather difficult position. From the end of the Great War it had pursued a vigorous policy of disarmament, and not only was the army very small, and the airforce greatly reduced, but ~~at~~ even the Royal Navy had been seriously cut down. The defences of the Empire had been sadly neglected for they were not thought necessary and subject ~~to~~ dismissal in a few words at the post-war Imperial Conferences. When the Conference assembled therefore in 1931 the Empire's defences were completely inadequate in view of the military power possessed by the Axis in Europe, and the Conference made its main task the formulation of some means of co-ordinated re-armament and defence. The Dominions could not then have realized the full implications of events in Europe and were unwilling to

X accept large financial or military obligations and when Britain proposed its 5-year arms programme the Dominions declined to give it their support. They had already fought one Empire war and British policy in Europe seemed to be about to implicate them in another and therefore, while quite prepared to implement a plan to increase the Empire's defences, they were not prepared to incur a huge debt through having to go to the aid of some European country. On the other hand Great Britain not only had commitments in Europe but was also morally bound to finance the defence of the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand had enormous responsibilities there but were not financially able to undertake them fully. Thus what from a purely utilitarian view was an unjust burden was imposed on the people of Great Britain, for although British might was essential to the safety of Australasia, Australia and New Zealand's well-being was in no way essential to Great Britain.

X With these conflicting political outlooks it was inevitable that the members of the Conference of 1937 should fail to form a cut-and-dried defence plan. The Dominions had realized their political freedom in 1923 and 1926 and were now quite determined to use it in order not to be drawn into another 'English' war. Nevertheless after the Conference the Dominion governments all diligently pursued ~~var~~ expensive defence policies and when the blow fell in August 1939 the Dominions, though

far from being prepared, unhesitatingly arrayed themselves by the side of the Mother Country.

Although during the war just ended no Imperial War Conferences were convened nor any Imperial War Cabinet sessions held, it did not mean that the nations of the British Commonwealth were not in complete co-operation. The Empire at war was as one nation as far as its war effort was concerned and each country made such a contribution as it was best able to do. For instance the Empire Air Training Schemes in Canada and Rhodesia trained airmen from the whole Empire; the industries of Canada and Australia provided much-needed war material both for themselves and for England; and all the Dominions exported great quantities of food to Britain. The British Commonwealth came through this war as closely united as it ever was and, by conducting an Empire Conference in London before the delegates left for the World Organization Conference at San Francisco, held in the middle of this year, it showed the world that it had no intention of severing those ties of unity, though the new world be vastly changed.

The recent conference was different from previous Imperial Conferences in that the subjects of discussion were not those of purely Empire significance for the purpose of furthering the Empire's

interests. The delegates met in London as representatives of world citizens to give their thought to the proposals for the World Organization. There was no intention of creating a British bloc at San Francisco but as members of a family, Britain and the Dominions hoped that, by a frank interchange of views, they could bring forward some proposals at San Francisco to overcome some of the weaknesses of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals.

On the broad principles of the proposed organization the delegates were in agreement, although widely differing views were held on some of the proposals. Canada, Australia and New Zealand thought that too much power would be vested in the proposed Security Council whereas Great Britain, supported by South Africa maintained that, as the great Powers were the only ones that could either make or prevent world wars, the smaller nations should be prepared to make some sacrifices to their position. They agreed however on several points; namely that the interest of the smaller powers should be safeguarded against a possible tendency on the part of the Security Council to override them; that the Dumbarton Oaks proposals were not perfect; and that machinery should be provided for periodic reviews of the scope, procedure and powers of the new organization. The British countries determined at the Conference

to strive separately at San Francisco for 'clarification, expansion and improvement' of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. The Conference showed that the Dominions had greatly differing views and that they were very decided in those views; but the free discussion of the Conference had the value that the points of variance could be examined and appreciated by all the Commonwealth.

x The Imperial Conference has now played a major part in the development of the Commonwealth for nearly half a century. Its constitution, built up as it is mainly on custom, is intensely democratic, for unless a proposal is unanimously supported, it is rejected — there is no coercion of a dissenting power. Nor is any matter too insignificant for discussion. Any member may ~~be~~ introduce any subject and it will receive the full attention of the Conference, and to list only some of the less important ones — immigration, sea, air and cable communications, customs, currency, wheat trade and films — is to show how unlimited is the scope of the Conference. It must be remembered, however, that the Imperial Conference has not now, nor is ever likely to have any absolute constitutional power and that although great numbers of resolutions have been passed in its meetings, quite often the individual governments have rejected them or taken action on them only in an amended form.

What ever the future of the Conference

may be, it is certain that some such organization must be maintained if the British Empire is to survive. The Empire at present is considerably weakened both financially and materially and its various countries are now more than ever dependent on one another's co-operation. In one hundred years the Dominions have developed tremendously, but although they have built up their own industries, with the possible exception of Canada they could not stand independently of the rest of the Empire, for their whole economy depends on the co-operative system in vogue before the war. More than anything, however, the Dominions rely on Britain to conduct their foreign affairs of the Empire. The whole of the diplomatic machinery of the Empire is operated by Great Britain. The Dominions have neither the resources nor the ability to conduct all their own foreign affairs, and as it has often been said, the equality of status which the Dominions share with Great Britain in the Empire, does not mean equality of function. The Dominions have only a small population and can never hope to attain to the status of great world Powers; but together, so long as they can agree in their foreign policy, they can make the British Empire one of the greatest and most self-sufficient powers the world has ever known. It follows therefore that as long as most of the

Canada

burden of maintaining ~~A~~ relations with other countries falls on Great Britain, — and we cannot yet foresee when that will cease to be the case — the Imperial Conference must continue to provide an opportunity for discussion of all the details of foreign policy.

Perhaps the greatest argument for the retention ~~of the~~ and development of the Imperial Conference is that the British Empire is neither static nor decadent. The very elasticity of the constitution of the Imperial Conference makes it easily adapted to new conditions and capable of extension. Thus as the present Crown Colonies and Mandates gradually receive self-government they can be admitted into the Imperial Conference as India was in 1918 and as Southern Rhodesia was at the conference in Ottawa in 1932.

The British Commonwealth has just emerged from the greatest struggle of its, and also of the world's, history, very considerably weakened. Now it has to find its place in a new world, which, but for it, may have been a vastly different one. This new world of ours, we hope, will be free of petty jealousies and carefully guarded nationalisms; but at the ~~present~~ recent Imperial Conference, the British Empire showed clearly that while it intended performing its full duty, and more, as a citizen of the world, it had no intention of severing all its family ties. The Empire has a lot of ground to

make up ~~its~~ to regain its former stature and ~~power~~ prosperity. but through co-operation in the Imperial Conference we can be sure of a united British Empire and a united Empire can in future make an even greater contribution to the world than it has done ever before.

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