

Motto : Rerum Cognoscere Causas.

How Far is the Principle of Self-government
recognised in the British Empire to-day ?

The British Empire presents to the greater part of the world an insoluble enigma. It is well known how enormously Germany misjudged its condition and capabilities at the outbreak of war, but it is wrong to call their judgment a mere ignorant blunder. Learning and scientific enquiry are carried to a high degree of perfection in Germany, and the Germans would not have been content to remain ignorant of the facts relating to the British Empire, an institution which vitally affected their aims for the future. The opposite was really the case: they had studied the British Empire more thoroughly than any but a very few Englishmen, and they undoubtedly knew more about it than the majority of the peoples which constituted it.

Yet they were hopelessly misled: they were misled by the word 'British', and the word 'Empire'; they were misled by all the other terms which ^{were} associated with it; they were misled by the demands of Canadian Prime Ministers, the speeches of Australian statesmen, and the agitations of Indian democrats. And if the German mentality made them unusually prone to these errors, it must not be thought that other men were free from them. If the latter have an idea which is nearer to the truth, it is because they rely more on hearsay than on fact, which after all, is not a very wholesome condition of affairs. It means, in a few words, that the principles on which the British Empire is founded and by which it is maintained are not at all apparent to the world.

It is a commonplace of Political Science that the British Government has no written Constitution. The machinery of government works on a complicated system of

unwritten laws, tacit understandings and conventions, and the implication of a host of enactments, referring to all sorts of external subjects. The same conditions are found in the Constitution of the British Empire. It has grown up gradually, almost imperceptibly, and every separate state of the Empire has its own particular relations with the Central Authority. Moreover, whenever a new state has acceded to the Empire, or a new grant of self-government has been made, advantage has been taken of previous experience in similar cases, of the effect of time in disclosing faults and weak places, and of the ideas and practice of foreign nations. And all the time a mass of tradition and precedent is growing up, forming that unwritten law which is so typical of Anglo-Saxon government, and imparting to each dominion its own individuality.

So it comes about that in order to arrive at the principles which maintain the British Empire, there is no alternative but to take the practical conditions of each dominion, and find the ideas underlying them, and compare these ideas with the results of a similar process in the case of the other dominions, until the common ^b case is discovered. It is a mathematical process: we must find the Highest Common Factor of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

The process need not be tedious; there is no reason why it should not be thoroughly interesting. But an essay like this can do little more than suggest from the trend of superficial enquiries what the outcome is likely to be. Fortunately it is possible to do that with some prospect of success, because the states of the British Empire can be roughly divided into classes. There are, for instance, two generally-recognised main

divisions of Self-Governing Dominions and Crown Colonies. If we examine the general principles of each of these divisions, we shall find that, since the differences between them are very great, the factors common to both are more likely to be comprehensive. When a connecting link has been discovered between extremes, there should be little difficulty in applying it to intervening cases.

The Self-governing Dominions constitute by far the most important part of the British Empire. If not the major part in point of population, in wealth, in enlightenment, in quality both of inhabitants and natural resources they far outshine the rest of the Empire, though that is by no means beneath consideration in any of these respects. The Self-Governing Dominions comprise the Dominion of Canada, the Federal Commonwealth of Australia, the Union of South Africa, the Dominion of New Zealand and the Colony of Newfoundland. These all possess ample powers of self-government, yet they all vary in their constitution as dominions, and in their connection with the Imperial Government.

2. The oldest possessor of powers of self-government is Canada which obtained such powers in 1867. In forming its constitution it was not forgotten how much trouble had been caused previously by friction between French and English settlers, nor was the lesson of the American Civil War overlooked. So it was enacted that definite and express powers should be given to the provincial governments, and all other powers of self-government were understood to be in the hands of the Dominion Government. A similar strong central government was given to the Union of South Africa in 1909. In Australia, however, the reverse process was adopted, and by the Commonwealth Act of 1900 definite powers were given to the central government, and all else left to State Parliaments.

These differences, however, do not materially affect the theme of our essay. As far as relations with the Imperial Government are concerned, all the Self-governing Dominions have practically equal powers. Not only have they, in nearly all cases, Parliaments consisting of two houses, which exercise (subject to federal rights) almost unfettered powers over the affairs of their communities, but their respective governors, appointed by the Crown, are bound to follow in almost all respects, the advice of their cabinets for the time being. This means that ~~that~~ they have Party-government very similar to that which exists in this country and so far does their legislative independence go, that financial systems quite different from our English system have actually been adopted and commercial relations entered into with foreign states.

We may well ask then, what ties connect these Dominions to the Imperial Government? In actual concrete fact there are four connecting links. First, there are the Dominion Governors, called Governor-General, Governor, Lieutenant-Governor, or Administrator as the case may be. This official, though not invariably appointed by the Crown, is always the representative of the Crown, in whose name he acts, and whose interests it is his first duty to safeguard. In practice the Governor plays very much the same part as the King does in the United Kingdom, and has the same paramount opportunities of influence and example.

The second link is the necessity of the Crown's assent to the legislation of a Colonial Parliament. This veto is a much more real thing than the King's veto on the measures of our Home Parliament, and may be exercised by the Governor, though he generally prefers to transfer the responsibility by 'reserving' it for the pleasure of the Crown.

The third link is provided by an enactment that any provision of a Colonial Act of Parliament, even of a self-governing Dominion, which is inconsistent with the provisions of an imperial Act of Parliament intended to apply to that locality, is void. And this statute brings us to the fourth link, the claim of the Imperial Parliament to the right to legislate for all parts of the Empire. This power is very rarely exercised, and then only in manifestly imperial matters, such as naturalisation, position of aliens, merchant shipping and copyright.

But by far the most important and powerful tie of all is the ^{racial} ~~social~~ sympathy and unifying loyalty of all the inhabitants of the Dominions. The confusion and turmoil of the world during the last few years has taught us the supreme value of this feeling in preserving the integrity of the Empire, and the immense benefits it might confer on the world if it were practically organised. That is the problem of the future as far as the Self-governing Dominions are concerned, to materialise and direct into useful channels this mass of sentiment and latent energy. A hint was given how progress might be made, in the development at the Peace Conference of 1918-19, and in the proceedings of the Imperial Conference of 1921.

The great advance that was made at the Peace Conference was that whereas the representatives of the Dominions enjoyed all the rights, powers and prestige that fell to the British Empire, they also had the rights and powers allotted to small independent nations. The claims made by various Dominion premiers and representatives for greater freedom of action and responsibility were really aimed at eliminating the cumbrous machinery of the Colonial Office, and enabling a sort of Cabinet of Dominion Ministers to carry on the executive work of the Empire.

As for the Imperial Conference of 1921, many important decisions were made, generally on questions of foreign policy. But on the question of the Constitution no forward steps were taken. It was agreed that the time was not ripe for assembling a Conference with the definite object of drawing up a Constitution for the British Empire. But the state of affairs that had been virtually in existence since the Peace Conference received some measure of official recognition. Prime Ministers were to communicate between themselves instead of officially through the Crown. Three suggestions for future co-operation were made; Continuous Consultation of Ministers, Annual Conferences, and the appointment of Resident Dominion Ministers in England. From this it looks as if the solution will be the gradual growth of a Joint Executive, seeing that the idea of Imperial Federation is now fully discredited. The point to notice in this connection, however, is how thoroughly we have been justified in our optimism. To give at one stroke such ample powers of self-government was considered absolute lunacy by the outside world, but if it has watched subsequent developments, a good deal of envy must have been mingled with its contempt. The muscles and sinews of the Empire, instead of being atrophied by being forcibly contained in rigid supports, have been exercised to the full, and, as a result, the Dominions have acquired a frame that is at once strong, active and alive. As the Dominions increase in strength and self-reliance, instead of getting more and more impatient of a 'foreign yoke', they will realise more and more the benefits of being an integral and active part of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

The rest of the British Empire, with the exception of India, which stands in a class by itself, comprises the Crown Colonies. Here again there are great differences between one and another, and varying opportunities

of self-expression are allowed to the inhabitants. Some, such as the Bahama Islands, the Bermudas and Barbados, have a Legislative Council nominated by the Crown, and an elective Legislative Assembly.

In a number of other colonies there is a ~~Legislat~~^{ive} which combines the character of a nominated and elected body. Moreover no Act of Parliament is required to bestow such institutions on Crown Colonies, but only Letters-Patent from the Crown. These ~~legislat~~^{ive}s have almost complete control of local expenditure, and wide influence in opposing unpopular Government measures. There are also Executive Councils, with varying degrees of power in many Crown Colonies.

A larger group of colonies have a 'Council' of members nominated by the Crown, but even this Council has some claim to represent popular opinion, for some of the members are chosen from the private inhabitants. The Governor also is in constant communication with the Colonial Office, and every effort is made to consult the interests both of local conditions and of the Empire as a whole. And in addition, it is intended that as these colonies grow accustomed to the atmosphere of forbearance and political sagacity necessary for the exercise of self-government, that right shall be conferred upon them. One of them, Papua, has become the subject of a novel experiment in being put under the control of the Federal Government of Australia.

We may pass over the few autocratically governed colonies, which are mere military and naval stations, and come to the provinces of British India. To describe adequately the constitution and working of the Government of India would required a considerable volume, admirably divided as it has been, to meet every fresh exigency and development of its history. The last reforms on a large scale were made in 1919,

when the Government of India Act divided the Legislative Council into two chambers, a Council of State, and a Legislative Assembly, one hundred of whose hundred and forty members were to be elected to sit for three years. In addition it was enacted that every member of the Executive Council must be a member of either of these portions of the Legislature.

This, of course, is only a temporary measure, another step on the road to self-government. For, as was officially stated in 1917, "The Policy of His Majesty's Government is that of increasing the Association of Indians in every branch of the Administration, and the Gradual Development of Self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of Responsible Government in India". And without entering into the lively discussion as to the ability of India to govern itself at present, I think it may be stated with truth that the disorders of the past few months show that patience and education are the first necessity. The Hindus are not Anglo-Saxons, with a long tradition of exercising political powers nor an ingrained instinct for self-government.

Perhaps the same may be said about Ireland. A grant of 'Self-government within the Empire', though in a sense it is the utmost we can give, does not relieve us from all responsibility. Granted that the Irish have not the natural aptitude of the English for self-government, the English domination of the last three centuries has done nothing to encourage or educate them in political capabilities. Now we have a splendid opportunity to atone for the past by adopting a benevolent attitude. A few years of ordered self-government will more than reconcile Irishmen to their allegiance to the British Imperial Crown.

In summarising, we may say that the principle of self-government is now, and has been for some years, recognised by our statesmen. Unfortunately there are some reservations to be made. The first is that there is a lamentable ignorance among the masses of the ~~same~~^{true} issues, ignorance which arises on the one hand from selfish and shortsighted feelings of patriotism, and on the other from the demonstrations of the 'Little England' school. This puts a tremendous handicap on the statesman, who must always look to his majority. The other reservation is more vitally concerned with the members of the Empire overseas. Some of them are clearly not fitted to govern themselves, and must be at once controlled and trained with an eye to the future, and others have not been educated to the fact that the Empire is bound together ultimately by common interests. When this fact is realised, self-government enables a natural link to be substitute for an artificial one, and the bonds are more elastic because they depend both on sentiment and enlightenment.

After all, units of self-government are arbitrary, as was discovered by those who drew up the map of Europe in 1919. How if all the big cities of the Empire were to claim autonomy on the lines of Ancient Greece? That is why we must hasten to make the yoke of empire entirely voluntary, and look forward to the day when the difference between a state within the Empire and one without, is that the former is able to achieve its ends more readily, and to enjoy more of the blessings of life, by means of the co-operation of the other members of the Empire. In other words, Imperialism must mean concrete benefits to the individual.

It is perhaps because the individual is forgotten that the British Empire gets scant consideration from intellectuals. For all their protests and

denunciations, the British Empire is an abiding fact, and will play a leading part in the development of the world in the immediate future. Whether it is liked or not, a process of 'Anglicising' (if I may coin a word) a large proportion of the world is continually going on. What this means we may calculate from the studied opinion of a professor who said that if quality of terrain and populations is taken into account, the Anglo-Saxon race controls the destinies of half the world. This imposes upon us a tremendous responsibility, but I think the principle which has leavened our counsels for at least the last half-century, is calculated to bring about the right effect in the most pleasant and lasting manner.

The principle is to emphasise the common interests and aims of the Empire, and to bestow powers of self-government as extensive as those who receive it are capable of assimilating, always paying them the compliment of erring on the side of generosity. Let us not be driven by direct or indirect action to the ignominious and impolitic course of making unwilling gifts. And at the same time let us abandon the reticence we have so long maintained. The Englishman knows, no one better, that deeds are better than words, but we may illuminate our deeds with a few words, for the sake of our less enlightened neighbours, if only to counter the continuous and blatant propaganda of the opposition.
