

IMPERIAL DEFENCE

“TELESINUS”

IS it necessary to consider the defence of the Empire as a whole against possible aggression? If it is necessary, is it being done? If it is being done, is there reason to suppose that the Empire as a whole will accept the results and act on them?

These are important questions, but of unequal importance; the third is the most important, and the answer to it is the least satisfactory.

The preamble to the Statute of Westminster, 1931, contains the latest authoritative definition of the Empire as an organization, and it has behind it the authority both of the parliament of the United Kingdom and of the Imperial Conference of 1930. “The Crown is the symbol of the free association of the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and . . . they are united by a common allegiance to the Crown.” The Lords and the Commons do not interfere with the six self-governing Dominions, nor do the parliaments of the six interfere with one another or with the United Kingdom. But representatives of the seven (with a very recent eighth) met a year ago at Ottawa to consider their economic relations, and they will no doubt meet again, as they have done in the past, to discuss other subjects. They regard themselves as associated, freely but definitely, in a special degree, and (so far as can be foreseen, and with some qualifications) in permanence.

As these nations are specially and permanently associated, and as some of them are responsible for greater or smaller dependencies in various stages of administrative evolution, defence—if it is necessary at all—must interest them as a body. And it seems clear that the world in general regards the means of defence as a necessary part of a nation’s life. Most of the organized nations have renounced war as an instrument of national policy, and almost at the same time have admitted the necessity of a limited protection against misunderstandings or forgetfulness on the part of their co-signatories, or aggression by a Power not yet convinced that aggressive war is an international crime. Further, they have rejected the French proposal to pool protective resources.

The defence of the Empire as a whole is therefore not an academic question, and it is treated quite seriously by most of the eight nations which govern themselves. The Colonial Conference of 1907, the Imperial Conference on Defence in 1909 and the Imperial

Conferences of 1911, 1923 and 1926 considered it at length, and His Majesty's Government in Great Britain has a permanent Committee of Imperial Defence whose work has been of supreme value to the Empire. But it is open to doubt whether periodical discussion among very busy statesmen and their technical advisers, combined with continuous work by a purely United Kingdom Committee, is a good guarantee of effective common action in a crisis. The Empire sprang to arms in August, 1914. The problem of common defence had already been most fully ventilated, and the "War Book" was ready for the emergency; but heroic improvisation was needed for the Empire as a whole, and for that necessity we paid, from Salisbury Plain to the Euphrates, a great price. What continuous thinking had been done was not Imperial; what Imperial thinking had been done was discontinuous. To-day, with decentralization completely carried out, we need continuous consultation more and we have it less; in 1930 it was found "impossible to arrange any plenary discussions on Imperial Defence". As a result of Ottawa, a special Committee is considering the possibilities of economic consultation and review in the intervals between meetings of the Imperial Conference. The same question must, in all our interests, be asked as regards defence.

The history of the Committee of Imperial Defence contains more than one illustration of the difficulties to be overcome. Founded by the late Lord Balfour in 1904, it is intended to co-ordinate policy with strategy. It has no executive power. It consists, in theory, of the Prime Minister of Great Britain and any persons whose attendance he thinks desirable; in practice it has a larger nucleus comprising ten or eleven Ministers, the Naval, Military and Air Chiefs of Staff, and the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury. The Prime Minister from time to time directs the issue of invitations to other personalities, from any part of the Empire, who appear to have special qualifications for the business to be discussed. Behind this elastic membership are a permanent Secretariat (representative of the fighting Services and India) and numerous standing or *ad hoc* sub-committees.

From 1904 to 1909 the Committee approached and completely studied the relation of defence to policy in the light of the changed political grouping of Europe; and from 1909 to 1914 it prepared in detail for possible trouble. The result of the second phase of its work was the "War Book", and the result of the War Book was the precision with which the Fleet and the Regular and Territorial Armies proceeded, on the declaration of War, to carry out their duties. The Dominions, without exception and without hesitation, accepted the British attitude as their own and took up arms;

but such War Books of their own as they had played little part in their military action. The plans laid in the United Kingdom were admirably laid, but went no further than her existing forces went; such plans as had been laid in the Dominions were swept away. Between the United Kingdom and the Dominions (except, to a very limited extent, India) there were, apparently, no plans at all; it was a matter of spontaneous offers and glad acceptances.

The ten years preceding the Great War, during which the Committee of Imperial Defence laid its plans, were marked by the discussions of the subject at the Colonial Conference of 1907, by the Imperial Conference on Defence in 1909, and by a gradually more frequent attendance of eminent Dominion representatives at the Committee's meetings. They were also marked by a British effort, decisively defeated, to secure the continuous representation of the Dominions on the Committee.

On the 30th May, 1911, a meeting of members of the Imperial Conference was held at the Committee's office. The meeting discussed a proposal made to the Conference by Sir Joseph Ward that the High Commissioners should be summoned to the Committee "when naval and military matters affecting the overseas Dominions were under consideration"; but the meeting agreed (1) that the Dominions ought to be represented, on these occasions, not by the High Commissioners but by responsible Ministers, and (2) that each Dominion ought to establish, on any model that appealed to it, a Defence Committee. In the published resolutions the first of these decisions was reduced to the vague and ineffective form "That one or more representatives, appointed by the respective Governments of the Dominions, should be invited to attend meetings of the Committee...when questions of naval and military defence affecting the overseas Dominions are under consideration".

These resolutions were communicated to Mr. (later Sir Robert) Borden, the new Canadian Prime Minister, in London on the 1st August, 1912. He provisionally accepted them, and added "that he saw no difficulty in one of his Ministers, with or without portfolio, spending some months of each year in London in order to carry out this intention". (Two years later Sir George Perley came to London as High Commissioner. He had been for three years, and he remained for three years more, a member of the Canadian Government). The Colonial Secretary, by letter dated the 10th December, 1912, communicated Mr. Borden's views to the Governments of Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and Newfoundland, and enquired whether they desired "to adopt some such method of more continuous connexion in naval and military affairs" with the Committee. But for various reasons none of the

four Dominions accepted the invitation, and the South African Government expressed its complete satisfaction with the existing system of periodical conferences in London and occasional written consultation with the Committee when the need arose.

During the War years, the Committee was merged in successively more powerful Cabinet Committees; from March, 1917 to November, 1919 the Imperial War Cabinet, using the Committee's machinery but wielding supreme executive power, brought the self-governing nations of the Empire into continuous consultation and decision. From November, 1919 (with a short interruption in 1921) the Committee of Imperial Defence resumed its name and its peace-time composition and functions.

The Imperial Conference of 1923 recommended as a guiding principle for the Empire the "primary responsibility of each portion of the Empire represented at the Conference for its own local defence".

The "Salisbury Committee" (a sub-committee of the Committee which sat from March to November, 1923) referred in its report to the advantages of Dominion participation in the Committee's work, but made no useful recommendation on this point.

In the Imperial Conference of 1926 Mr. Baldwin delivered a speech which dealt with the origin, composition and history of the Committee, and closed with a general invitation to those present to "make further use of this elastic machinery". The only definite response came from South Africa: Mr. Havenga invited the Committee, and Mr. Baldwin agreed, "to review the policy of South African coastal defence".

It remains to be added that two important steps have recently been taken to secure what may be called the accurate representation of Dominion Cabinets in London. In 1930 the Liberal Government in Canada, which had just appointed Mr. Vincent Massey as High Commissioner in London, was defeated and resigned, and the new Government accepted (if it did not invite) Mr. Massey's resignation and appointed Mr. G. Howard Ferguson, a Provincial Conservative Premier, in his place. This year the defeat of the Labour Government in Australia preceded, by a few months, the expiration of the term of office of a Nationalist High Commissioner; the new Government decided not to fill the vacancy, but appointed Mr. S. H. Bruce as Minister, without portfolio, in London.

If experience shows that the effective defence of the Empire as a whole can be secured best by the continuous work of an Imperial consultative body; if it is clear that no such body now exists; if the present tendency of Dominion Governments is to appoint a Cabinet

Minister, or a politician enjoying their full confidence, to represent them in London;—the problem is not only set but answered. The Minister in London, responsible to his colleagues and his parliament, with a small permanent office, can provide the continuous element of Dominion representation on the Committee of Imperial Defence—and on the Committee of any other Imperial interest which the Empire may find that it needs to consider. His character as an active politician will form a guarantee of stability in Imperial policy rather than the reverse, for all parties that attain to power will be faced in turn with the same problems, the same previous decisions, and to a great extent the same Imperial colleagues. In that consideration lies also the answer to such doubts as may be excited by the names of Ireland and India.

Ireland is now regarded as at economic war with Great Britain; despite her rapidly growing armies, she is not yet committed to military operations. At Ottawa she failed to reach any economic agreement with Great Britain; but it can hardly be doubted that a few years, or even months, of participation in an Imperial Economic Committee on which her Government was represented by a Minister would have made economic hostilities less likely. Contact with the Ministers of other Governments, with the realities of Imperial relations as a whole, with the difficulties of other countries and with their resources in reserve,—that is what Mr. de Valera's Government lacks, and may fall miserably if it does not gain.

India is a stronger case in point. India has in London both a Secretary of State and a High Commissioner. The authority of the Secretary of State and his office over the Indian Government, absolute in theory, varies very widely with the personal interest that he takes in India. The High Commissioner is the agent of his distant Government, located in close neighbourhood to its master and therefore speaking with considerably less authority than the High Commissioners of the self-governing Dominions. Neither has, in fact, formed the essential link; and, although the Secretary of State has been from the beginning a customary member of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the military operations of the Indian Government in 1914-18 were carried on in purely spontaneous and improvised partnership with the British Government. Contact between offices in Whitehall was no substitute for contact between Simla and Whitehall Gardens. If India remains in the Empire, her help in Defence will be more effective if her Government is directly and continuously represented in London; and whatever form her Government may take, it is more likely, on those terms, to appreciate realities and to co-operate in facing them.