

# CURRENT MAGAZINES

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## THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH IN THE POST-WAR WORLD

*The Empire Debate*—Editorial, in the *National Review*.

*Australia To-day*—Mr. C. H. Grattan, in *Current History*

*Expanding Horizons*—Editorial, in the *Round Table*.

*Colonies and Freedom*—Mr. Julian Huxley, in *The New Republic*

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What is called, in Scottish idiom, "setting the heather on fire" was the effect of an address delivered by Lord Halifax to the Toronto Board of Trade two months ago. One remembers Byron's phrase about "the mildest-mannered man that ever scuttled ship or cut a throat": seldom, surely, can such fierce tumult have been stirred in Canadian political circles by a speaker so famous hitherto for his gift of conciliation. Mohandas Gandhi, we know, was softened by the charm and the sweet reasonableness of Lord Halifax. But the leader of the C.C.F. and the leader of the *Bloc Populaire* are apparently made of sterner stuff.

The project of closer Commonwealth unity, thus launched so suggestively at Toronto, at once became a principal topic for publicists.

### I

Lord Halifax was speaking on the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Toronto Board of Trade. Quite naturally, he recalled the atmosphere of a century ago in Canada: the discords, the insurgence, the mutual dislike and suspicion of differing races and religions, which had threatened to falsify the fair promise of this new land for settlement. Civil War had broken out only a few years before, and *Lord Durham's Report*, proposing in essence the solution that has since proved so effective, was still—in 1844—widely distrusted as the scheme of an eccentric idealist. Then, as now, so many taking pride in their own realistic cynicism used to talk of human nature's ineradicable disposition to quarrel, and of the wisdom that consists in guessing shrewdly which side will win, so that one may join it in good time. The familiar mood which did so much twenty-five years ago to wreck the League of Nations, and is already—shameful to

acknowledge—at work in some groups to wreck the *Atlantic Charter*!

A moral was drawn by Lord Halifax from these reminiscences. He spoke of the post-war world to which we look forward, and urged a unity of the whole British Commonwealth, deeper and wider than that which Lord Durham conceived for Canada. The speaker had in mind the place which British influence is to occupy, side by side with American influence and Russian influence, in determining a new world order. A few weeks earlier, Field-Marshal Smuts had dwelt upon the need for quick and decisive action by these three powers together, from the very moment when the order is given to "cease fire". There are other members of the group called "United Nations", all entitled to be heard: but long before they can all be heard, long before the "Fighting French"—for example—can clarify the terms of their own mandate from their country, long before we can be quite certain about which voice to trust from Italy or Yugoslavia, the outline of the coming settlement must be shaped. It must be shaped at least provisionally and tentatively. A multitude of problems simply cannot wait: better by far to adjust them somehow, with the risk of mistake, than to postpone all adjustment. Here General Smuts urges earnestly that not Great Britain alone, but the whole British Commonwealth of Nations should appear as partner, side by side with the American partner and the Russian partner, in the all-determining trio.

The scheme urged by General Smuts was one of tremendous amplitude: it included the very daring project of a British Commonwealth of Nations so widened as to bring such countries as the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Denmark within the British partnership. There was some incidental reference to what this would mean for the existing British overseas Dominions, but that was merely marginal, not vital. Lord Halifax, on the other hand, while his mind is plainly working the same way as that of General Smuts, has nothing to say about the future of these other European countries. What occupies his thought is post-war policy inside the British Commonwealth as we now know it.

He wants somehow to secure constant, watchful, united action of all the members within that great group to keep the peace of the world. Some Canadians have shown high resentment at this advice. Here, they say, is a British ambassador to Washington, an Englishman, proposing to Canada the sacrifice of her national independence; proposing that after the war she

should cease to keep her decisions on matters of her action abroad in her own hands, and should share such decisions with Downing Street: proposing to enclose her within some sort of imperial Council, where her voice would count for very little, so that she should obediently supply man-power and money-power for purposes dictated from imperial headquarters.

The usual protest that comes so quickly to the lips —perhaps first and most fluently to French-Canadian lips, but to other lips as well—was at once heard. Mr. Coldwell, of the C.C.F., says that such a change would not strengthen the Commonwealth, but would destroy it. Commonwealth strength, he reminds us, has in the past come from the free, autonomous action of all its members: what he calls "basic unity in disunity". And he dwells on the horror of what might ensue from this proposed centralization. "I would not," he says, "like to see Canada committed in advance to Tory-dominated foreign and colonial policies like those so consistently followed in the past." Col. Drew, on the other hand, the Premier of Ontario, hailed the speech of Lord Halifax in the most glowing terms of admiration and welcome.

It was at least a highly important speech. Coming from the British ambassador to Washington, these proposals are arresting. Ambassadors don't talk unofficially, and among ambassadors Lord Halifax has been particularly discreet of tongue. He can scarcely have spoken as he did without previous consultation with his chief, Mr. Anthony Eden, at the Foreign Office. Neglecting impartially the two sorts of rhetoric—rhetoric of adulation and rhetoric of abuse—by which the argument has since been beclouded, let us look at the text of the speech.

Like General Smuts, Lord Halifax foresees that, for at least a long time to come, the ordering of the post-war world will be the responsibility of Britain, the United States, Russia and China. He, too, realizes that, in Europe, Britain and Russia must lead. With this in prospect, one thing for which he feels special concern is that the British share in such leadership shall not be overborne at every critical point by that of a Power immensely stronger than those little British Isles. How, he asks, can Britain claim equal partnership with giants such as the United States, Russia and China, unless she can undertake burdens comparable to those they undertake? And since the burdens she has borne in the war—not alone, but with the cooperation of her world-wide Dominions—have been such that she may well claim a major part in the victory, why not continue to demand, on the same ground of Commonwealth achievement, a proportionate

influence in the world reconstruction? She can't do this if, after the Peace is declared, there is return to the pre-war status of altogether independent and hence unpredictable fragments called a British Empire because they have the same king, but constantly emphasizing the fact that in foreign policy what Britain does or decides is no guarantee of what a Dominion will decide or do. Looking to the future, and anxious that British influence within the great United Nations combination shall count for as much as British effort in the war entitled the British people to expect, Lord Halifax urges that we thus keep together as a Commonwealth for foreign policy after the Peace.

Not only might British influence in the world partnership be thus augmented. A further consequence would be to augment Dominions influence with Great Britain. Then for the first time, we Canadians should have definite share in determining the policy we have twice had to support (after it had been determined without us) at vast sacrifice of life and treasure. Does anyone object that the change would mean infringement of Canada's sovereign independence? Lord Halifax might well reply—Only in the sense in which it would mean also infringement of the sovereign independence of Great Britain. Think how much she would have yielded of her ancient authoritative prestige in thus admitting Dominions influence for determination of foreign policy.

In short, the idea is this. Regarding foreign affairs, Britain and the Dominions are known to coincide in all great guiding principles. Why not provide machinery for making their united action at a crisis more prompt and hence more effective. In the cases of the two World Wars which a single generation has seen, it required long, and tragic, delay before the United States could decide that the cause of freedom and justice there involved was the American cause too. No one thinks of altering or infringing Dominion autonomy in Dominion affairs—the right symbolized by the *Statute of Westminster*. But why, on those concerns and perils common to the whole Empire, should time and energy be so consumed in the debates of large legislative bodies before action can be taken? Under stress of these warnings, supplied by two World Wars, such men as Mr. Clarence Streit have urged a union of the World Democracies. What Lord Halifax urges is a modest beginning with such union of the members of the British Commonwealth.

## II.

Is this fitly described as an "imperialist" project, in that evil sense which the epithet "imperialist" has of late acquired? A plea for making Empire unity closer is sure to be construed in certain quarters as first move in a fresh scheme of national aggression. How keenly such a purpose is suspected, may be seen from reports spread just now by the enemy. They insinuate that Britain and the United States are manoeuvring against each other to acquire spoil in the colonies of French North Africa, and that the so-called *Angot* in Italy is a joint device against Russia, a means to ensure Anglo-Saxon rather than Slav control on the European seaboard of the Mediterranean.

Rumors started at Berlin ought not to win much credence, but we may dangerously underestimate the ingenious Goebbels machine. It spreads such slanders as its audience abroad is known to have some predisposition to believe, and this story that we are fighting another war for territorial or commercial aggrandisement has been chosen as the one likeliest to prove effective propaganda. Dr. Goebbels knows well that within the Empire itself there is periodically a mood of such critical self-distrust. He appreciates the temper of publicists such as Mr. H. G. Wells, who has told us that what is wrong with Germany is "Teutonic Kiplingism", that he hates the international sharpening which calls itself "imperialist", and that he will never debase his conception of the Empire into that of "a conspiracy in restraint of trade".

But the truth surely is that increased influence of the Dominions in determining Empire foreign policy may well retard much rather than stimulate the belligerent aggressiveness of which all generous minds are apprehensive. One can think of striking examples in recent history to encourage this expectation—examples of Dominion sensitiveness to the claims of international justice, by which the framers of policy in London might with much advantage have been moved, and would have been moved if the Dominions had been able to speak on such matters not on sufferance but of right.

For example, the case of Japan. It is an open secret that but for the vehement intervention of Canadian influence (resented in not a few "imperial" quarters at the time as intrusive) the Anglo-Japanese alliance would have been renewed in 1921, and every reader of the Conservative British press knows how bitterly an important group of British publicists have ever since

lamented the policy by which that alliance was dissolved. When Japan perpetrated her outrage ten years later upon China, setting an example of all that is worst in Nazi ruthlessness and bad faith, Britain was not without her leaders in parliament and in the press to resist even the expression of censure in the *Lytton Report*, and we know how under like influences the purpose of President Roosevelt's "quarantine" speech was frustrated at the *Brussels Conference*. At least until the outbreak of war with Japan stopped such recriminations as untimely, the mistake of quarrelling with that "natural leader of the Orient" had been recurrently branded in influential London journalism.

The same press lords exerted themselves with effect both sinister and powerful to defeat the action of the League of Nations against Italy in the Abyssinian affair, and to ensure the overthrow of the Spanish Republic by the scarcely disguised imposture known as "Non-Intervention". One remembers how in Canada the outburst of protest against such countenance to international injustice was constantly deprecated in certain official quarters with the warning not to interfere in Britain's business, or to presume to challenge the wisdom of those great and good men directing the Foreign Office in London. "Appeasement", we were admonished, was the British government's method, adopted no doubt for good reasons beyond the ken of critics thousands of miles away, and a deferential acquiescence was represented to be our duty!

As one looks back upon those years, so painful now and yet so wholesome to recall, does not the active, constant participation by the Dominions in determining British foreign policy seem far likelier to check than to further "imperialist" designs? No doubt Britain might have postponed for a brief space her own inevitable conflict with Japan, with Italy, with Germany, if she had continued to connive at the outrage these Powers were perpetrating elsewhere. She might have bought off, for a time, the pirate threatening herself by condoning, if not applauding, his treatment of other victims. That Britain and France had just this design, that they were planning to divert Hitler's attack in 1939 from themselves to Soviet Russia, was Marshal Stalin's conviction—with consequences truly appalling, but with certain plausible ground in the appeasement policies to which, for at least the preceding year and a half, British as well as French leadership had been committed. That Hitler, advised by Ribbentrop, expected to have Poland delivered up to his rapacity as Czechoslovakia had been delivered up the year before

at Munich, we have the strongest reason to believe. Plea after plea, of the sort to lend color to Ribbentrop's judgment, had appeared in the British press—showing how Japan's action against China, Italy's against Ethiopia, Franco's against the Spanish Republic, Hitler's against the Czechoslovaks was justified by precedents in British action abroad. In their zeal for appeasement, those British publicists confirmed the most atrocious slanders by the Goebbels press upon their own country.

This is the real menace of "imperialism," and the association of the Dominions in intimate authoritative manner with the shaping of British policy promises not to promote but to restrain it. We are needed as a counteracting influence against the sympathy which has kept the aggressors of different nations countenancing one another, and joining to mock the efforts of reformers against piracy no matter where or in what interest it is attempted. Already the same evil press forces are at work to debase the coming post-war settlement as they debased the working of the League of Nations, and it is not too soon for Dominion resistance to make itself felt decisively. The real spirit of the Old Country is sound for justice; the *Atlantic Charter*, which malicious selfishness is now seeking to condemn to the same fate as the same selfishness contrived for the *Covenant of the League*, has behind it such a volume of support from the British people that there is no doubt of its success *if it continues to be clearly understood*. In that great cause, the crystal clarity of Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt can confront a host of crafty agents of confusion. But here the Dominions, given a chance to speak with authority, have both a great task to do and the will to do it.

First, no doubt, we must frustrate the spreaders of confusion among ourselves—for we have some of them. An occasional voice is heard in Canada protesting against "post-war idealistic projects"; declaring, with presumptuous affectation of a patriotism which is far from the writer's deepest purpose, that to plan now for a new world is to imperil the war effort; and expressing the hope that with all speed the good old days of unrestricted money-making—no government being allowed to interfere—will be brought back. What a famous novel called "unpretentious acquisitiveness, undeterred by intellectual or any other interest". The sort of publicists that Harold Begbie described in the British parliament of 1919 as "hard-faced men who looked as if they had done very well out of the war". Our guarantee against them, as Mr. Churchill showed that he at least understood in his last great radio speech, followed by his ultimatum

to dissentients in the House, is a fierce and immediate publicity for their designs. Force them into the open, before they are ready to show their hands. It is because a unified foreign policy for the Empire should promote this clarification that to object to it as "reactionary imperialism" seems the very inverse of the truth.

### III.

An objection has been raised on the ground that, for Canada at least, the peculiarities of geographical position interpose an obstacle. Alarm has been expressed lest Russia or the United States might some time quarrel with Britain, and might include Canada —so perilously exposed to immediate action, as automatically an enemy. It seems to be argued that in order to avoid this risk we must be careful to keep so separate in position as to leave Russia or the United States, if quarrel should arise with Britain, in doubt regarding the attitude which Canada would take. For our safety, it is said, we must not suffer such independence to be compromised, as it would be if we shared in framing the British foreign policy which led to strain abroad.

How much is there in this fear? Is it seriously supposed that if we refrain from rendering clear and explicit what every observer of affairs must know to be the very heart of our Commonwealth relationship, we shall make any difference except a difference of lowered efficiency in what we set out to do? Does our safety depend on keeping our Commonwealth partnership apparently fitful and occasional? If we cannot advance beyond this loose and precarious association within the Commonwealth itself, what chance is there for some of those schemes for wider international association on which high hopes have been placed? Britain looks forward to continuous post-war partnership with her Russian and American allies in maintaining the world's peace. Many times we have been assured that instead of the old, constantly suspicious mood of preserving "balance of power" the Allies in this terrific struggle for freedom must trust one another for cooperation in its joint guardianship. Are we to begin such new era by reaffirming balance of power in such a form as was never before entertained, disclosing to our Russian and American allies that Canada and Great Britain are not even sure enough of each other to establish such scheme of constant mutual consultation on matters of common danger as they have been so quick to recommend for adoption among independent sovereign



States? Finally, if this difficulty be a serious one, what becomes of the other plea from the critics of Lord Halifax, that to all intents and purposes the long established Conference habit ensures united Commonwealth action? If this is true, can we suppose our Russian and American allies to be unaware that we are accomplishing without acknowledgment what it would be too perilous to venture openly? Would those allies find our Commonwealth cooperation unobjectionable only so long as its method was kept less efficient and more wasteful than the introduction of system instead of accident might render it? The objections serve to refute each other.

#### IV.

The question, as I see it, for the British Commonwealth emerging from the Second World War is this: Are we satisfied to preserve the studiously undefined mutual relationship of Dominions and Mother Country on foreign policy which we have hitherto known? Or has experience of two terrific emergencies suggested improvement that may help to prevent a possible third? We have in the past been content to make limitless sacrifice and to carry limitless burden for a British foreign policy which we had no real hand in shaping. Are we content that this should continue? Or do we feel that we might so influence British foreign policy as to reduce need for such future burdens and sacrifices? In the past, twice within a single generation, at least one contributing cause of war—one cause by which the enemies of Great Britain were encouraged to attack her—was the belief that the British Dominions were so unconcerned for her interests, so remote if not actually hostile in purpose, as to be negligible in a forecast of comparative fighting strength. Are we willing to leave that tragic misconception a chance to operate again?

It is recorded of the Emperor Augustus that he declined to use the traditional formula of Roman patriotism: he refused to pray that the gods would increase and magnify the power of Rome, praying instead that the gods would enable Romans to preserve a power quite great enough already. A like misgiving may well haunt the mind of a British leader about many a motto or slogan of further national ambition. In proportion as one realizes the responsibilities of vast power, one may hesitate at A. C. Benson's prayer for the British Commonwealth, "God Who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet". Not for further material expansion, for wider territory, for richer trade, for more

dominance of any kind over those whom it may please a national self-consciousness to call "subject races". At his moment of highest inspiration, the great Victorian poet of Empire bade his countrymen abjure all this: bade them, in the name of their true imperial purpose, to put from them

Such boastings as the Gentiles use  
And lesser breeds without the law.

But there is a British achievement, an achievement of Britain's past, which we may rightly desire to see become ever wider and deeper. Not flawlessly, not without lapse, but on the whole genuinely, she has promoted fairness, justice, mercy in international dealings. In the present struggle, when this high cause has been at stake as never before in the rivalries of mankind, she has led the hosts of freedom, her courage reanimating the feeble, her resolution never failing when for two terrible years, against enormous odds and abandoned by allies, she had to fight alone. "Last night", wrote a great Englishman in a recent autobiography, "I listened to a Pole describing what the Germans had done in Poland; I prayed that my countrymen might have strength to do God's errand on the wicked, and that I might live a little longer to see it done". When it has been done, as it is now plainly being done, the stern enterprize of battle so fitly called "God's errand" in which the Dominions are bearing so notable a part, there will remain a further gigantic challenge to the resources of British leadership. The international scheme will have to be redrawn, in the light of terrible experience, to establish peace, of which justice is the foundation and strength in those true to justice is the guarantee. To fulfil that great destiny, to share to the utmost the burden, the sacrifice, the responsibilities of remaining thus in the vanguard of the cause—such is the true imperialism by which the Empire may pray to be united more and more. In crisis after crisis Britain has intervened—twice on a great scale within a single generation—to rescue the world's justice from fearful peril. The Dominions have been at her side. Lord Halifax pleads for a policy, based on experience, which will ensure quicker, stronger, more efficient guardianship against such perils still ahead. "Wider still and wider", says the poet, "may thy bounds be set". We are far from sure that we want for the Empire more territory: it has rather been British practice of late to withdraw from territories previously ruled, that native powers might be developed in the exercise of native

control. But the poet's other prayer must be echoed by all lovers of freedom who recognize where freedom in its most dire emergency found championship, and like every genuine prayer, it should inspire those who offer it to cooperate for its fulfilment: "*God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.*"

H. L. S.