

Mr. Meighen on Empire Relations

Mr. Meighen's temperate and admirably phrased speech on Imperial relations, to the Commonwealth Club on Tuesday night, is especially valuable as showing the large measure of agreement which exists as to the main features of the settlement of this once complex problem which has been reached. The principles, which Mr. Meighen laid down as governing the relations of the various parts of the Empire, would be accepted by all who advocate an enlarged status for Canada, though there might be differences as to the manner in which these principles should be applied. In fact, as has happened before in our history, this question has been settled practically by consent. There has been going on for the past ten or fifteen years a triangular duel in Canada between those who adored the status of colonial subjection, those who desired to see Canada a province of a highly unified state, and those who believed that the time had come for Canada to extend her self-governing powers into the field of external affairs and claim a position of nationhood, both within the British Commonwealth and the world at large. The latter solution has now been practically accepted by everybody, the evidence of which is to be found in Mr. Meighen's speech, if indeed any evidence is necessary. An address by the leader of the Conservative party ten or fifteen years ago, affirming the equality of Canada with Great Britain and agreeing that Canadians themselves must have complete control and assume full responsibility for both external and internal affairs, would have been followed on the part of the faithful by the rending of clothes and the crying of Ichabod, Ichabod. As it is, Mr. Meighen's remarks will be taken as a matter of course.

The degree and the manner in which Canada will co-operate with the other British nations in the new scheme of things are matters about which there will be legitimate differences of opinion and it will be in this field that the divergences of the Liberal and Conservative views will manifest themselves. With respect to the method by which the Dominions will participate in international conferences, Mr. Meighen declared himself in favor of the panel system which was resorted to at the recent international conference in London. But the panel system is open to the objection which was preferred against it by the London Times, that it commits the capital error of putting the Dominions and Great Britain in different categories. In the panel system the members of the all-British delegation do not serve in rotation. The British members are constantly in attendance and it is the Dominion representatives that rotate. As a permanent method it is quite unacceptable. This was so clearly recognized at the recent conference that the British Government publicly agreed with the Canadian Government that it was not to be regarded as a precedent. The Canadian Government accepted the panel solution for this occasion as the only way out of an impasse which had been created by the failure of the British foreign office to make provision for the representation of the Dominions at the conference. It is not likely to be repeated.

There is no reason why there should be any trouble whatever between Great Britain and the Dominions with respect to representation at international conferences. By the terms of the declaration as to treaty-making powers adopted at the last Imperial Conference, whenever international negotiations are afoot between any British nation and a foreign nation, any other British nation can declare itself in on the conference if it believes that its interests are affected. It follows that when a nation thus declares itself in, it goes in as a principal and not subject to the exigencies of a panel system. It may be that the foreign nation may raise objections to the appearance of other British nations in the conference; but that is an entirely different question which must be dealt with in its own way.

The problems of common Imperial defence weigh heavily upon Mr. Meighen. Obviously he thinks Canada is shirking a measure of responsibility. Canada's contribution to Imperial defence must consist of the measures which she takes for her own defence, creating a power which in the event of war will be available for the larger defence of the Empire. If Mr. Meighen thinks that Canada is not making due provision for her defence it is both his privilege and his duty to submit to the Canadian people for their judgment at the next election an alternative programme embodying his views as to what is proper. Vague complaints that we are not living up to our responsibilities will not get us very far.

All this worrying about how the British nations are going to co-operate to defend themselves against aggression, to keep the ocean routes open in case of war, to provide security for the Empire, is, of course, based upon pre-war conceptions of international policy. They rest upon the assumption that each nation or combination of nations must provide by armaments and by defensive alliances for its own defence. But it is increasingly plain that despite many difficulties in the way the world is moving steadily and rapidly to a point where the security of each nation will be the concern of all, as witness, for instance, the developments at Geneva at this present moment. These problems of Imperial defence and common diplomatic action for purposes of defence will in all probability solve themselves within the next ten or fifteen years by simply disappearing.

Mr. Meighen also expressed himself as still hostile to the proposal for holding a constitutional conference to consider the question of Imperial relations, holding that it would be dangerous to create a constitution for the Empire. Undoubtedly it would be dangerous, and, indeed, quite impossible to frame a constitution for the Empire; but so far as we know nobody has ever proposed to frame such a constitution, excepting the advocates of centralization. There could not be a constitution for the Empire unless the Empire were to turn itself into a unified state, which is a solution of the Imperial problem which has passed into the discard. All that a constitutional conference would be called upon to do would be by formal declaration to regularize within the Empire itself and in the face of the world, the relationship which already exists, for the quieting of doubts at home and for the instruction of the outside world as well. We have reached the point where this is essential. It is much longer delayed we shall see declarations by individual British parliaments defining the existing relations for themselves, which for a variety of reasons is not advisable. But it may be safely predicted that the next Imperial Conference, whether it is called a constitutional conference or not, will deal with this question and will make the necessary formal declaration which is required to confirm and regularize the developments which have taken place to date.

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