

# THE WEEK.

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## THE COLONIAL CONFERENCE IN LONDON.

DURING the twenty years which followed the opening of British ports to the merchandise of the world free of duty, the colonies were held in little favour in England. A millennium of free commerce and universal peace was believed to have arrived; all nations were to be brothers, and it was of little import whether the colonies remained British or declared their independence. The argument was generally on the side of the latter. Newspapers published at intervals statements of Imperial expenditure on the outlying dependencies, the greater part being lavished on the Crown colonies—*islands scattered over every sea and garrisoned by the army and navy as protectors of British commerce—and very little on the larger colonies.* Periodically the *Times* addressed to the colonial peoples broad intimations that the sooner they took their departure the better it would be both for them and the Mother Country. The present writer in those days waited upon an Under-Secretary for the Colonies to give him the prevalent Canadian views of the connection, and the view of leading men of England may be gathered from the remark which this official made to a mutual acquaintance: "We cannot do what he wishes; he wants us to say that we desire to keep the colonies!"

The rejection of Free Trade by the greater nations of the world had some effect in banishing the anti-colonial fever; but the eager desire shown by France and Germany of late years to acquire territory in Asia, Africa, and Polynesia completed the work, and brought about the Conference now in session in London. The English mind loves a simple precedent, and is apt to follow wherever it leads. A very common syllogism in London newspapers used to be—Rome, Athens, and Venice were republics, and they were warlike; the United States is a republic, and it must necessarily be warlike. It may safely be said that this formula caused more than one surrender of British territory to our neighbours. In regard to the colonies the false syllogism was—the thirteen North American provinces separated themselves from the Mother Country; other colonies will, of course, do the same. In one case the British mind failed to appreciate the difference between a republic with a few square miles of territory, seeking to extend its boundaries, and a republic in possession of half a continent; in the other they forgot that the thirteen colonies were driven to revolt by tyranny condemned by the highest intellects of the England of that day—tyranny the repetition of which no single Englishman would now entertain for a moment. John Bull failed to appreciate the colonies at their true value, until France and Germany showed the way, and then it was as clear to them as the sun at noon.

The previous blindness was dense, the new light was dazzling. The British people suddenly realised the fact that they possessed in North and Central America, in South and Central Africa, and throughout all Polynesia, from the Mauritius to the Fijis, territories of vast extent, peopled by men of British race, which might be retained perhaps for ever, at least

for a long period, in friendly alliance with the Mother Land. They also realised that in the far North Atlantic, the North and South Pacific, the colonies possessed the only mines of coal, at once the means of pursuing commerce and of preserving it from attack. The coal of Nova Scotia, of Vancouver, and of New South Wales, places Great Britain in a position to meet the world in arms; it gives her the control of the seas, without which her mercantile prosperity would vanish before the enmity of any strong rival. The colonies contain territory (leaving India out of the account) larger than Russia, and the means of supporting a prospective population many times larger than any European country. More than all, the populations are self-governing. Most of them pay the expenses of their own Administrations, even the salaries of the Governors sent from England. How dense must be the insular ignorance of Englishmen—to which Professor Seeley, of University College of London, lately drew the attention of his countrymen—when they were willing to cast off these vast territories and numerous allies because the connection with them was maintained at the cost of a sixtieth part of the national income!

Now that they have come to their senses, Englishmen have gone to work in a sensible way to correct past errors. In old days colonies and colonists were treated in Great Britain very generally with contempt. The people of the smallest independent state were regarded as of more importance than men of British race, supporters of the English Crown. This has been changed, and though great wealth, which few colonists possess, will always give greater prestige in England than anything else, there is a determination in the minds of the ruling classes to show that they value colonies and colonists more than they ever before conceived possible. In inviting a Conference with colonial delegates, British public men have likewise shown good sense in putting out of view all ideas of arranging or even approaching an arrangement in the direction of Imperial Federation. They may privately elicit opinions from the delegates on the subject, but will not propose action. The question of defence will be the chief if not the only subject of discussion. It is a difficult one, and it is, to say the least, improbable that the Conference will come to a definite conclusion upon it. Discussion may, however, elicit views which will produce practical results further on.

It is impossible to adopt one system of defence to be carried out jointly by Britain Less and Greater, which would suit all the colonies. Their vulnerability varies as widely as their latitude and longitude. Thus, the Australian capitals, large and wealthy cities, are situated very near the ocean, and might easily become the prey of a flying squadron of French, German, or Russian ships, able to escape the vigilance of a British fleet. So vividly is this possibility felt that Australia already possesses an iron-clad, and would probably not object to a moderate expenditure on land fortifications. If they were separated from Britain, they would be compelled to undertake these works, and cannot expect the Mother Country to relieve them from it. As to vessels of war, Britain maintains a considerable force in Polynesia to prevent piracy, to keep order on islands more or less savage, and to give protection to her mercantile fleets, which are to be found in every part of Polynesia. It seems to the present writer questionable whether the Australasians can fairly be called upon to pay Britain for the use of these ships. If Australia were independent, the ships would be there; they do not cost Britain more because Australia forms part of the Empire. If the colonies were called on to pay part of the expense, they would ask for some measure of control over the outlay and the movements of the ships, and hence would probably arise jealousies which it would be better to avoid. Very soon, no doubt, we shall have the Australian view of the matter. In regard to the army the Australians will be as ready to arm their population in defence of their country as Canadians are. There may be conflict about the question of a standing army; but it is to be hoped that Britain will not insist upon expenditure in that direction beyond the needs of the colonies and their financial resources. Her military advisers, being regular soldiers, despise militia; but on this continent a citizen soldiery has proved successful in putting down domestic strife, and with Britain mistress of the seas there is no danger of invasion by forces with which Australian volunteers would be unable to cope. They would surely be able to fight in defence of their homes as well—let us say—as the Boers of the Cape.

Canada has less reason to fear attack from hostile maritime Powers