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More Difficulty About Representation

There has been another serious difference between the Canadian and British Governments over the question of Dominion representation at international gatherings at which decisions affecting this country may be taken. There will be more of these in steady succession until the British and Dominion Governments learn from experience that they cannot dodge this matter of formally defining the equality of the British nations, accepting the consequences of this definition and informing the outside nations of the change so that they will understand that the Dominions are no longer colonies but international entities with rights and susceptibilities that must be respected.

It is not in the least surprising that first the United States and then France has questioned the right of Dominion representation at international gatherings; they have never been officially advised of the change of status. When the British nations regularize the position and declare it to the world, these and other foreign nations will understand the situation and will make no further objection to Dominion representation. Perhaps, too, when this is done the officials of the British Foreign office will realize that the recognition of Dominion equality by the British Government is not merely an ornamental and meaningless flourish, but the acceptance of a definite change which it is essential that they understand and respect.

Since the signing of the Versailles treaty there have been three incidents which rather support the theory that the British Foreign office is not much concerned in seeing that the precedent set at Paris is followed. Originally the Dominions were not accorded direct representation at the Washington conference in 1921; the explanation was made that this was due to the refusal of the American Government to invite them, not regarding them as principals. Thanks to Gen. Smuts, this matter was satisfactorily adjusted. Then came the Lausanne Conference when the Dominions were advised that they would be represented by the British representatives, Lord Curzon and Sir Horace Rumbold. When this arrangement was questioned the Dominions were told that France objected to Dominion representation. The facts as to the Lausanne controversy have been so recently stated that it is unnecessary to recount them.

The criticism directed against the Canadian Government by Mr. Meighen and his associates in connection with the Lausanne episode was that it should by no means have accepted the situation but should have insisted upon direct representation. This was a striking manifestation of the solidarity of Canadian opinion as to the necessity of maintaining unimpaired the position in the Empire and the world won by the precedents of 1919. But it was quite lost upon the officials of the Foreign office. In making provision for the inter-allied conference to deal with matters arising out of the Versailles treaty—which obviously affected the Dominions as signatories of that treaty—they agreed to preliminary arrangements the effect of which was to make it impossible to secure Dominion representation. That is to say, the British Foreign office, without consulting the Dominions, agreed with France that the British representation would be limited to three; and after the door had thus been carefully barred the High Commissioners of the Empire were called together in order that there might be explained to them “the difficulties which confront us in securing separate representation of the Dominions and India in the same manner as at Versailles and Washington” (Ramsay MacDonald’s despatch to Mackenzie King, July 11).

The reply of the Canadian Prime Minister to this despatch from the British Prime Minister is worth quoting in full. It was in these terms:

“Your telegram July 11th was received yesterday, and contents carefully considered by cabinet at meeting held during day. We are naturally most anxious to avoid any embarrassment to your Government, and it was with this end in view that when informed by you that Inter-Allied Conference came within scope 1923 Imperial Conference resolution and that in consequence we were being asked to send a representative to a preliminary conference between His Majesty’s Government and the self-governing Dominions and India to arrange for representation at Inter-Allied Conference, we deemed it advisable to anticipate the possibility of any misunderstanding by stating clearly our position with respect to representation in accordance with the terms of that Resolution.

“From the statements of your telegram of July 11th it would seem that the preliminary conference was not, as we had been led to believe, so much for the purpose of arranging for representation of the Dominions and India on a British Empire Delegation as for the purpose of informing the Dominions and India of what, in advance of consultation with their representatives, had been decided upon with respect to representation at the Inter-Allied Conference. This is precisely the procedure adopted with respect to representation at the Lausanne Conference, to which exception has been taken, concerning which, we have been told, we should have spoken more plainly at the time, and which, for many reasons, we had hoped would not be repeated.

“We regret that we are unable to acquiesce in this method of proceeding, or to depart from the position which we have consistently maintained of having Canada’s right to representation at the Inter-Allied Conference determined in accordance with the precedents established at Versailles and Washington, and confirmed by the 1923 Conference Resolution which our Government has formally approved.

“With regard to possible objection by other countries we deem it sufficient to observe that the British Empire has an absolute right to determine its internal organization which in the relevant aspect has already received international recognition.

“In case the rules of procedure at the Inter-Allied Conference do not permit the entire British Empire Delegation to be present at the sessions of the Conference, we are quite prepared to agree that the representation at such sessions shall be determined from time to time by the Delegation, but we regard as essential to our signature to any protocol or other agreement negotiated at an international conference where there is a British Empire Delegation, representation of Canada on such delegation by a delegate holding full powers in the manner set forth in my program. In thus stating our position we feel that we are adopting a course which will commend itself to our Parliament.”

Finally, owing to the pressure of time and the grave circumstances, Canada agreed to representation by the system; that is to say, one of the three places on the delegation would be reserved for Dominion representatives of the Dominions serving in rotation. It is noted that a precisely similar suggestion as to Dominion representation at the Paris conference was rejected decisively by Robert Borden and the other Dominion Premiers. The position of the Dominions is to be safeguarded, however, in various ways by the assurance given by Mr. MacDonald to the Dominion Commissioners: “Whatever is agreed to now, under exceptional circumstances, character, will not be regarded or quoted as a precedent, and a statement by me to that effect will be made by me to the Conference.” It is also announced from London that Canada will insist that a formal statement to this effect be included in the protocol.

This makeshift arrangement, which the Dominions have been forced to agree to by circumstances for which the British Foreign office is primarily responsible, is hardly better than a burlesque. Even the London Times, old-fashioned as its ideas about Imperial relationships are, registers a protest against the performance. “It runs counter,” it says, “to the whole conception of the dominions as equal partners in the British Commonwealth of Nations. It revives the obsolete distinction—the mother country in one category and the dominions en bloc in another. How is it conceivable on any other assumption that the Australian delegate, for example, should be put forward to speak for the Empire on Wednesday and the Canadian or New Zealand delegate on Saturday?”

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