

[Mr. Thomas,] Empire and what that Empire means. Therefore, I make that comment for the very obvious reason that those who suggest that we can maintain our position on a cash basis not only do not understand what they are talking about, but certainly do not understand the attitude both of our Dominions and all parties in this House.

The very difficulties that naturally occur in these constitutional matters lead me to ask whether our experience would not warrant and justify some change in the procedure and method of our Imperial Conferences. In a few months' time representatives of all the Dominions will be in London. They will be fittingly welcomed as representatives of our Dominion Governments. There will be conferences held and there will be resolutions carried. I am going to submit, if a conference of the importance and character of the Imperial Conference is called, where hopes, aspirations, and people's minds far overseas are concentrated on its decisions, that nothing is calculated to do so much harm as to disappoint them with the result. Take the representatives who come from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. They leave with very clear and definite views, and they hammer out their differences and ultimately arrive at a decision. I am not at the moment arguing the merits of the decision. If afterwards when they return home there is a change in their own Government or a change in the Government here at home, and the new Government take a different view on those subjects, then, however honestly and legitimately they may feel about it, nothing is more calculated to cause disappointment and a feeling of the failure of those conferences.

Hon. and right hon. Gentlemen will remember the last Imperial Conference. Anyone who reads the Dominion Press, and anyone conversant with Dominion opinion, will be aware of their keen and bitter disappointment, even going to the extent of saying not only that the Conference was a failure, but that in many respects they had been let down. I am not blaming anyone; I am merely stating the obvious facts. Immediately after the Conference was held a change of Government took place, and the new Govern-

ment took an entirely different view of those matters than the late Government, with the result, as I say, that the Dominions felt that they had been let down. I am submitting that this is not a party question. I am not putting it up in the sense that one Government is right and the other wrong, or *vice versa*. I am merely stating what is an absolute fact. Therefore, if that be the position and if that in itself creates difficulties, I submit that we ought seriously to take note and see whether it is possible to avoid it. In the brief period we were in office we considered this question. It became very acute with us for another reason. We found ourselves having to make decisions on foreign policy which vitally affected the Dominions. We felt that it would be unfair to commit them. We felt that they would be entitled to object if we committed them in advance. At the same time, the question was so urgent that action was required to be taken. We took the view that it would be better to invite them to make some suggestion of an informal kind, so that a conference could be held not of the Governments alone but also of representatives of the oppositions.

I know the argument that can be used against that suggestion. I know perfectly well that it can be held that the Government of the day are responsible. But I do submit that the real answer to that criticism is that the main, indeed the sole, object of holding the Imperial Conference is as far as possible to get common agreement within the Empire and to enable all our Dominions to say, "We have been consulted; we are parties to it," so that there will be continuity of policy. That is the real object underlying the Conference, and I do submit that it is not asking too much. I think the difficulties could be got over. I have thought of it and I have thought out many schemes, and many suggestions have been made, but I still hold the view that the Imperial Conference would be more representative, would approach things in a less party spirit, and would be more likely to arrive at decisions on which there would be common agreement among all parties if those decisions were recorded with the approval and approbation both of the Government and the Opposition. There would be much more likelihood of them

being given effect to, and you would have continuity of policy as the result. I do not know what thought has been given to the question by the present Government—it is bound to have occupied their minds—but I would make this suggestion. It is probably too late to make any change for this year's Conference. That I frankly admit. On the other hand, if any negotiations have taken place it has been done by correspondence. Now that the Conference will be held and you will be meeting face to face you could argue these things personally. You would have the advantage of an exchange of views with the representatives themselves—the suggestion that I make may not be the best—and you would at least have a pooling of suggestions and ideas. Out of that discussion something might arise that would improve the situation on the next occasion. I would suggest to the right hon. Gentleman, if no arrangements have already been made in connection with the Agenda for such a discussion, that the matter might be explored on the lines that I have indicated, and probably something would emerge from it.

I pass from that subject, to ask the right hon. Gentleman what is the situation at the moment with regard to South Africa and the Indian question. There is no subject which is so acute or on which there is such difference of opinion and such strong feeling existing on both sides as the treatment of the Indians in South Africa. In delivering about 90 speeches, in the brief course of a few weeks, and being supposed to have dealt with this problem, I am not quite sure how I got out of it; but I am bound to say that when I came back from South Africa I was convinced that this problem was not only serious from the standpoint of South Africa, but from the standpoint of the Empire as a whole. The great difficulty was in meeting the people who were in daily contact with the problem and who had strong views about it. Many of them, as far as the labour people were concerned it was the case, that their places were being taken by Indians. On the other hand, there were South Africans who said, "This is our problem. We are a self-governing Dominion. We must deal with this question in our own way, as we like, and no one can interfere." That, in a sentence, was the kind of view that one had to meet.

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The answer I gave, in consultation with my right hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Mr. Ramsay MacDonald), who was then Prime Minister, was this: "It is true that, in the main, the problems facing our Dominions are purely Dominion questions, but there are certain questions that are essentially Imperial questions, and the effect of which must be felt in all parts of the Empire. That is peculiarly true with regard to the Indian problem in South Africa." On the authority of the then Government, I said: "As far as the British Government are concerned, we do not propose to suggest to you how you should deal with the matter, because you yourselves, with all the local knowledge, must be the best judges; but we do remind you that you cannot deal with this question as affecting South Africa alone. Therefore, we suggest that a Conference should be called, where South Africa, India and the Imperial Parliament would all be represented, so that the whole problem could then be thrashed out, not only in its national, but in its Imperial sense as well." I took the responsibility of making that suggestion, publicly, to the South African Government, and it was, I think I can say, received with sympathetic approval—to put it no higher—at the time. I should like to know, seeing that the problem is as acute now or even worse than it was then, whether the Government share our view, whether they are prepared to endorse the suggestion that we made, and whether any steps have been taken to give effect to it. I feel sure that the question is of such importance that it warrants the attention which we suggest.

I have made these brief general observations because, in spite of the claim that is often made that the Empire, the British Commonwealth of Nations, is the monopoly of one particular party, we, at least, want to make it perfectly clear what is our position. There are people—and I deprecate it—who would prefer to deal with Russia, if you like, than they would with parts of our own Empire. I do not mean that I want to discourage Russia, and I do not mean that I have any enmity against any other parts of the world, but I do mean that if within the British Commonwealth of Nations we can do more business, we can develop our trade and encourage our people, it is our

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