

III. CHANGES IN THE BRITISH CABINET SYSTEM

The Great War tested the machinery of all governments. In no very long time Russia broke down completely and fell into anarchy. So also, in measure which we hardly yet understand, collapsed in succession Bulgaria, Turkey, Austria-Hungary, and finally Germany. These countries were not merely defeated. In earlier wars nations have been defeated with no striking changes in the fabric of their governments. The strain, however, of this war, on a scale unique in human history, involved the break-up of many states, the fall of dynasties, the total collapse of political institutions. That the states which proved so stable as to win unexampled victory should yet change was to be expected, and in none of the victorious states have the changes been more remarkable than in Great Britain and the British Empire.

Long before the war broke out there had been plans for co-operation among the different states of the Empire both in time of peace and in time of war. In 1887 sat for the first time what came to be known as the Imperial Conference. Here representatives of all the self-governing states discussed matters of common interest, chiefly relating to communications and to trade. The great achievement of the Conference on Imperial Defence in 1909 was that it confronted this acute problem and later led to the creation of the Imperial Defence Committee. This Committee provided a means for counsel and coöperation among the various states of the Empire to meet the emergency of war. But in Canada, at least, it was never taken very seriously. The conviction of the unreflecting and uninformed that civilized states had outgrown war and that no great conflict was likely proved particularly strong in Canada as it did among similar classes in the United States. Between 1909 and 1914 there had been hot debates in Canada as to the creation of a Canadian navy or, failing this, a sharing of the burdens of the British navy. Little was done, and when the dark clouds broke in 1914 Canada was unprepared to meet the crisis.

Great Britain herself was not prepared and equipped for war upon the land. Even for war upon the sea, as now we know, her equipment was, in some respects, inferior to that of Germany. In learning the art of war she passed through profound modification in her government. She began the war under party government, with a Liberal ministry headed by Mr. Asquith. Within less than a year party government proved impossible. On May