

# THE IMPERIAL CONFERENCE

*Co-operation Rather than Centralization Likely to be Key-Note*

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FROM its beginnings the British Empire has made precedents, not followed them. There is nothing in history—in other peoples' history, that is—to parallel the gathering of the premiers and ministers of the Five Nations to take counsel with the rulers of the Motherland and with one another. Among political miracles none quite equals this unique Empire, alliance, or what you will, grown by haphazard and bound by the strongest and most intangible of ties.

The growing is not over yet. The very name of the present Conference registers the changing composition of the Empire. The Colonial Conferences of the past are gone, along with the colonial subordination of the past; the era of Imperial Conferences between equal partners is begun. The rapidity with which this evolution has proceeded since the first Conference in the jubilee year, 1887, and especially since the Conference of 1902, is startling. It is little wonder that many both in Britain and in Canada have not yet adjusted themselves to the new situation, and still think in terms of an obsolete colonialism.

The present Imperial Conference will register a further advance. The question is, along what line? In this, as in previous Conferences, the chief interest lies in the conflict of the two ideals of Empire which divide men's minds. In all the self-governing states of the Empire, with negligible exceptions, there is agreement in desiring to keep together. Difference comes when the nature of the link is considered. On the one side are those who feel strongly the need of concentrated power, and of a central organization to wield this power, and on the other those who look to building up national centres of strength, bound by intimate alliance, guided by co-operation rather than by central, even if representative, authority. It seems clear that it is the latter tendency which will dominate the Conference proceedings.

THERE are two reasons for this belief. First is the personnel of the Conference. Its foremost figure beyond question is Sir Wilfrid Laurier. No other member has his personal distinction. He and he alone has been a member of every Conference since 1897. Canada's unchallenged position as the premier Dominion gives his utterances decisive weight. And there is no question in which scale the weight will be thrown. At the last Conference Australia was represented by Mr. Alfred Deakin, whose brilliant and captivating eloquence roused the enthusiasm of the ultra-Imperialists and made him their unofficial leader throughout the Empire. To-day his place is taken by Andrew Fisher, the Kilmarnock-born miner who leads the Labour party, a strong Australian first man. From South Africa there came, in 1907, three premiers, only one nationalist in sympathies; to-day United South Africa sends one premier, the Botha who, as premier of the Transvaal, quietly but firmly backed Sir Wilfrid. The dashing Dr. Jameson, now Sir Starr Jameson, with his empire-cementing references to "damned French dancing-masters," will not be present to act as Mr. Deakin's first lieutenant. Sir Edmund Morris, of Newfoundland, who replaces the choleric Sir Robert Bond, has not

yet taken a pronounced stand, though the rule that the smaller the colony the more intense its imperialism may here hold good. Only Sir Joseph Ward, who now is attending his second Conference, remains of the old guard, and it is hardly likely that Mr. Deakin's understudy will rise to the height of the role. In Great Britain itself the same party is in power as in 1907, firm in its traditional policy of unity through freedom, and confirmed in that faith by the splendid results of the self-government granted South Africa in face of the pessimistic opposition of the professional empire-savers.



S.S. "Virginian" leaving Quebec with the Canadian Ministers bound for the Imperial Conference. Mr. Brodeur, Madame Brodeur and Sir Frederick Borden may be seen on the deck

Photo by Joseph

Premier Asquith, who is to preside, when possible, met the last Conference as Chancellor of the Exchequer; Colonial Secretary Harcourt is the fourth in four Conferences.

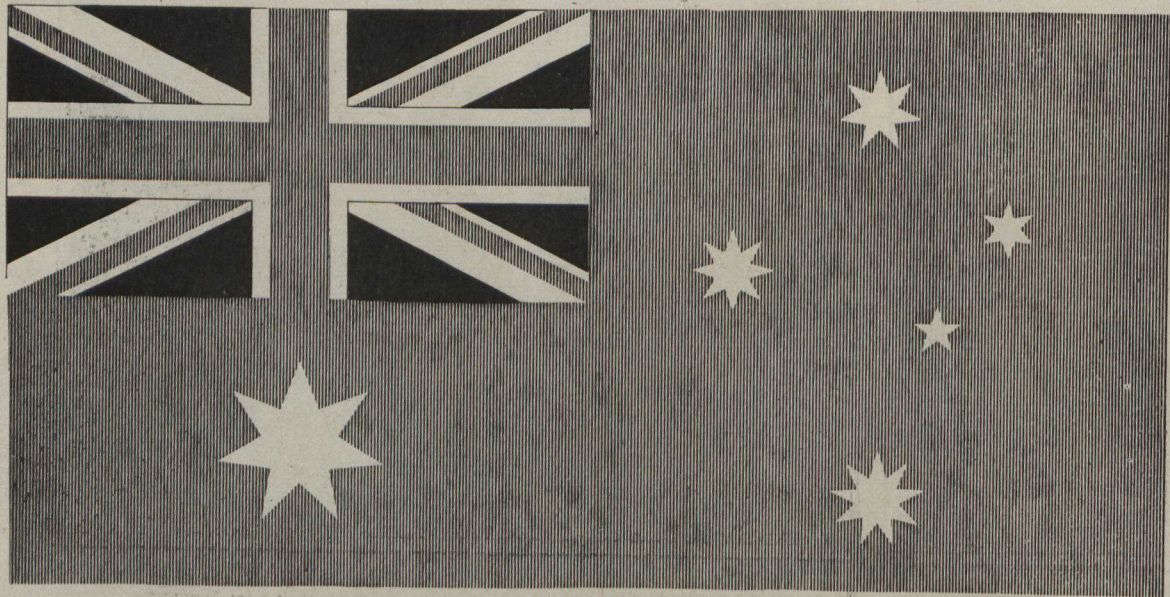
The second reason for believing that co-operation rather than centralization will be the key-note is the fact that since the last Conference the different Dominions have come to forkings of the ways and have definitely chosen to follow the co-operative path. This may most readily be seen in reviewing the chief subjects which are to come up for discussion, in accordance with the resolutions proposed in advance by the different participants, of whom New Zealand and Australia have been most active.

The question of the political machinery of the Empire takes first place. It has assumed new gravity with the growth of the Dominions and the

increase of their dealings with foreign states. It is clear that the old situation, where the foreign policy of the Empire was the concern of the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom alone (with practically no check even by the British House of Commons), cannot stand. There are two alternatives. One is to build up in Britain an organization representing the self-governing Dominions. This organization, it used to be urged, should take the form of an Imperial Parliament, with powers to bind the Empire in matters of joint concern, but this proposal now finds few supporters, in face of the growth of colonial nationalism. It is suggested now-a-days that a more modest beginning be made, some council, merely advisory at the outset, but inevitably taking on fresh powers, till, in Mr. Chamberlain's words, it attained "executive functions and perhaps also legislative powers," including "large powers of taxation." At the last Conference, Mr. Deakin and Dr. Jameson, following Mr. Lyttleton's lead, proposed to convert the Colonial Conference into an Imperial Council, and to establish a permanent secretarial staff, appointed by the Council and under its orders. The opposition of Sir Wilfrid, General Botha, and Lord Elgin, blocked the proposal. The Conference remains a Conference, though its name is changed to Imperial, and while a secretariat was established, it was merely an appendage of the Colonial office, attached to the new department of that office established to deal with Dominions as distinct from Crown Colony affairs; no nucleus of an organization representing the Dominions was set up. In Mr. Deakin's words, "All that is done is that a sub-department has been renamed."

THIS year New Zealand brings forward a resolution entitled, "Imperial Representation of Oversea Dominions," urging the formation of an "Imperial Council of State, with representatives from all the constituent parts of the Empire, whether self-governing or not, in theory and in fact advisory to the Imperial Government on all questions affecting the interests of his Majesty's Dominions overseas. The language is perhaps purposely vague, and Sir Joseph Ward carefully avoided any explanation while in New Zealand, but apparently the establishment of a permanent body sitting in London is designed. It will have the support of many in England, where 300 M. P.'s have signed a memorial in favour of such a scheme; as is natural, there is a large strain of little Englandism in the imperialism of Englishmen, and projects looking to centralizing power in Britain find ready support. But there is little chance of success in the Conference. The weakness of the New Zealand scheme is that it proposes to develop new machinery in Britain alone. But, as the London Times pertinently says, "Co-operation requires a progressive agreement on matters of common interest between all the cabinets, which cannot be attained by the establishment of a central council at any one point, whether London or Ottawa or Cape Town. It requires the creation of special machinery for co-operation at each of those centres, and if possible within the charmed circles of the Cabinets themselves." This is the nationalist alternative, and it is already well advanced. Canada, following Australia's lead, has now an Under-Secretary of External Affairs; doubtless in time the department will have full ministerial rank. We are sending consuls abroad. We are dealing directly with foreign governments through their semi-diplomatic Consuls-General in Ottawa and Montreal, and are to press this year for the formal recognition of this informal practice. We are negotiating treaties with foreign states, now France, now Italy, now the United States, with the more or less formal co-operation of British ambassadors. Even South Africa has already similarly negotiated with Portugal regarding Delagoa Bay. There is obvious danger in this decentralizing of foreign policy. Co-operation and common understanding must be secured to prevent action at cross purposes. It is noteworthy that the British Government has decided to lay before the Conference, in secret session, full details of the foreign situation as it views it. The ice once broken, doubtless arrangements may be made for more constant exchange of views, whether through the High Commissioners or direct to the various cabinets.

In defence, the die has been cast for co-operation rather than centralization. Since the last Conference, Canada, and even Australia, have definitely chosen the local navy solution, and even New Zealand's gift of a Dreadnought cruiser to the British navy had a string tied to it; the "New Zealand" is to be stationed, not in the North Sea, to face the German peril, but in the China Seas, to face the yellow peril; even with little New Zealand the Empire begins at home. Co-operation has its serious problems. The status of Dominion varies,



Merchant Flag of the Commonwealth of Australia