

Evolution of the Commonwealth

Stage I: 1887 to 1939

The first Colonial Conference was held in London in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee; the second was held in Ottawa in 1894; and the third in London in 1897 to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Thereafter Colonial and Imperial Conferences were held at intervals up to 1937 when they were superseded by Prime Ministers' Meetings.

The contribution made by the various self-governing Dominions, as they were then called, to the common effort in the First World War, caused them, under the leadership of Sir Robert Borden of Canada and Mr. W.M. Hughes of Australia, to seek and to secure representation at the Versailles Peace Conference and separate seats in the infant League of Nations. During the period 1919 to 1931 Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland^{*} and the Irish Free State became fully independent, in fact as well as in name (though appeals to the Privy Council were not abolished in Canada until December 23, 1949 and are still allowed in Australia and New Zealand). Landmarks in this period were:

(a) The signature in 1923 of a bi-lateral treaty between Canada and the United States by a Canadian Minister. The Imperial Conference of the same year unanimously approved the principle, among others, that bi-lateral treaties imposing obligations on one part of the Empire only should be signed by a representative of that part.

(b) The declaration of the Imperial Conference of 1926, which stated that Great Britain and the Dominions were "equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations".

(c) The Statute of Westminster, 1931, which enacted into law the substance of the conclusions of the Imperial Conference of 1926, and of later recommendations. In brief, this Statute established the legislative equality of the Dominion parliaments with the parliament of the United Kingdom.

During this period, the Indian sub-continent had also moved toward limited self-government through the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, through the concept of the Dyarchy, (provincial executives with responsibilities divided according to category between elected and nominated members) and finally through the establishment of provincial self-government in British India (though not in the Princely States) in 1935.

* In 1949, after a brief period of reversion to colonial status as a result of financial stringency engendered by the depression of the 1930's, Newfoundland, following a plebiscite in which the majority of its people favoured union with Canada, became the tenth province of Canada.