CAN THE COLONIES SECEDE?

AN ENGLISH REVIEWER SAYS THEY MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO.

Imperial Federation as a Live Issue—The Colonial Governments Can Make or Mar that Project—The Colonies Have Been Taught that They Can Secede. But This Teaching Must Be Undone.

(Julius Vogel in the Nineteenth Century for December.)

The league for the promotion of the federation of the empire may at least claim the success of bringing the movement within the sphere of practical politics to the extent of making it a recognized subject for discussion. This is not a light work. It means much more than appears on the surface. Great and radical changes, be they social or political, have mostly a tedious and protracted growth. A few men devise and talk over the reform and put it into a more or less definite shape, but they approach only the threshold of the gigantic labor of converting the idea of a coterie into the accepted purpose of many millions. It is a harder strain on the powers of a locomotive engine to make the wheels of the railway carriages perform their first revolution than to keep up a pace of forty or fifty miles an hour when once the wheels are set going. Even so it is harder to gain for a new idea its first recognition as a subject worthy of popular discussion than to keep it moving afterwards in the minds of the multitude. That this should be the case is capable of rational explanation. The first, let us say, six originators may in a given time make six converts. These twelve in their turn may add another twelve to the rank of believers, and the twenty-four resultant may make the number up to forty-eight, and so on until a large aggregate is reached. A hundred thousand converts may double their number in about the same time that the first six achieved a like result, indeed in less time, for belief is readier when it is felt not to be exceptional.

Useful work has at least been done in making the federation of the empire a stock question for consideration. It was essentially the declared policy of the league to avoid any details the discussion of which might stand in the way of cultivating a broad and eager desire to attain to the good gifts which would follow in the wake of federation.

At a conference held in London on the 29th of July, 1884, the Right Honorable W. E. Forster in the chair, it was resolved:

That in order to secure the permanent unity of the Empire, some form of federation is essential.

That for the purpose of influencing public opinion, both in the United Kingdom and colonies, by showing the incalculable advantages which will accrue to the whole empire from the adoption of such a system of organization, a society be formed of men of all parties to advocate and support the principles of federation.

At the adjourned conference held in November in the same year the following resolutions were passed:

That a society be now formed, to be called "The Imperial Federation League."

That the object of the League be to secure by federation the permanent unity of the empire.

That no scheme of federation should interfere with the existing rights of local parliaments as regards local affairs.

That any scheme of Imperial federation should combine on an equitable basis the resources of the empire for the maintenance of common interests, and adequately provide for an organized defence of common rights.

That the League use every constitutional means to bring about the object for which it is formed, and invite the support of men of all political parties."

It will be observed that at the first meeting it was only declared "some form of federation is essential." At the subsequent meeting, at which the basis of the league was fixed, a small approach was made towards qualifying its conditions. Without, as we have already stated, indicating the plan of the confederation, it was deemed advisable to stipulate that "the existing rights of parliaments as regards local affairs" should not be interfered with, and that the scheme should combine "the resources of the empire for the maintenance of common interests," and "provide for an organized defence of common rights."

The latter quotation is clear in its meaning, the former is liable to many interpretations.

The league has continued its work and has certainly succeeded in making federation a subject of discussion in all parts of the British Empire. It has not as yet, however, secured a strong foothold. The prevailing feeling unquestionably is that federation is very much in the air, and not within the practical realities of this generation. The propagandism has, however, been sufficiently powerful to excite opposition in some of the colonies, in the shape of an assertion in favor of future separate nationalism. It is not clear to what dimensions the support of this counter policy has attained, but it is at any rate a testimony to the strength of the feeling the league has succeeded in establishing. Proposals which are regarded as purely chimerical do not attract organized opposition.

The league has quite recently made a new departure. At the instance of Sir Charles Tupper, the High Commissioner of Canada, it has asked the English Government to convene a conference of colonial representatives to face the subject of federation into consideration. The correspondence between Lords Salisbury and Rosebery has been published. In effect Lord Salisbury, while consenting to receive a deputation, says he does not think it desirable to summon a conference of the self-governing colonies, because were he to do so it would imply, what would not be the case, that the Government was prepared to make a recommendation on the subject. Lord Rosebery retorts by quoting from the Queen's speech in 1886 the paragraph, "I am led to the conviction that there is on all sides a growing desire to draw closer in every practicable way the bonds which unite the various portions of the empire." His lordship further instances a resolution moved some years ago by the Right Honorable W. H. Smith, "that in order to avoid disintegration, and to secure the permanent unity of the empire, some form of federation is indispensable." The league, however, has not been discouraged by the hesitation of the Government to accept its proposal. Lord Rosebery announced at the public meeting lately held at the Mansion House that the league had determined that the best mode of securing its objects was through the aid of conferences such as the one held in 1887. This may now be regarded as the policy of the league, in contradistinction to its determination not to formulate a plan. Its argument is that a plan should grow out of discussions between Her Majesty's Government and distinguished representatives or the outside portions of the empire.

The object of this paper is not to discuss the differences of opinion between the present premier and the noble lord who may one day occupy the same position. Our purpose is rather to describe the condition of the question, and to indicate the salient points which are largely mixed up with its future treatment. The first suggestion of federation as a realizable possibility was, we believe, made by the present writer in a lengthy letter to The Standard eighteen years since. Supposing the question is a practical one, it has not much advanced during the long interval in attaining to the position it at present occupies. But the difficulties in the way of arranging federation have certainly much increased. Whereas then, the conditions of the union would have very much rested on the discretion of the imperial government, those conditions now would much more largely depend upon the views of the colonial governments. In other words, while an indissoluble union has become and is becoming more in the interest of the mother country, it wears the appearance of growing proportionately less in the interests of the colonies.

It is to be observed that the primary and essential conditions of any federation must be that every member is bound by it without power of recall. Otherwise it would carry within it the seeds of its own decay, and would answer no purpose, for the chief object of a federation is to replace, by an indestructible union, a combination supposed to be dissoluble at pleasure. It must be understood there that we continue to use the word federation in the sense of a combination not revocable at the wish of any of its component parts.

Without drawing out the plan of the federation it is evident that a federal constitution is not an impossible achievement. There are peculiar difficulties to be dealt with, still they would not prove insurmountable if the desire existed on the part of Great Britain and her dependencies to form a federal union. But although the obstacles evident to view may be overcome, it is quite possible they exercise a deterrent effect in holding back the Imperial Government from taking up the question. We shall endeavor to show later on that the time has passed when the colonies are likely to show much anxiety for federation. As regards the difficulties from the imperial point of view, the two principal—almost the only ones—are the questions of the tariff, and of the mode in which federation would affect Ireland. No federation would be possible that did not leave to each separate colonial member of the federation the control of his tariff for a long period to come. Putting altogether on one side the question of protection of free trade, the customs duties are required in young countries for revenue purposes. Their circumstances do not admit of more than a slender resort to direct taxation. With comparatively small businesses, liable to many ups and downs, and with the very general occupation of redeeming waste lands to pastoral and agricultural purposes, it is hard to draw the line between income genuinely earned and its reabsorption into capital. Again, anything in the nature of a tax on capital exercises a deterrent effect on the introduction of the means on which the progress of young countries essentially depends. Some amount of direct taxation there is, and in course of time more may follow, but it will be long before the tariffs can be much reduced, whilst a tariff that would suit a colony would be excessive if applied to Great Britain. No doubt the plan could be adopted of allowing each member of the federation to maintain its own tariff, with the universal rule of an additional percentage if the importations came from foreign countries instead of from other parts of the federation, or the tariff could be made to apply to foreign countries and a rebate allowed for federation imports. Such a plan is quite practicable, but it would involve what English statesmen much dread—difficult, tedious and prolonged fiscal discussions.

The other obstacle is, however, of greater importance at present, for it would raise the question of the extent to which Ireland would be entitled to local government or Home Rule. The angry passions of the last few years probably magnify this difficulty, for it should be recollected that whatever share of local government the federated empire agreed to give to Ireland could not be increased by any action of its own, as now seems to be feared by the opponents of Home Rule. The British federation would be so irresistibly strong that no member of it, nor any foreign power could destroy the maintenance of its integrity.

There are many other momentous points to be settled, but they may not be deemed difficulties from the consideration of which the nation would flinch. There would be the questions of the basis of representation; the nature of the contributions to federal expenditure, including the cost of a federal fleet; the maintenance of the local forces apart from those which, sooner or later, would be chargeable to the federation; and the relative responsibilities of the civilized and uncivilized races.

If these points to which we have made so general a reference constituted the difficulty of forming a federation, the expectation that all obstacles would soon be overcome would not be an excessively sanguine one. But the greatest difficulty remains behind, in the task of inducing the colonies to join in any reasonable arrangement. The self-governing colonies have been led or misled (as the result may prove) into believing that they were at liberty to leave the empire and set up on their own separate account whenever it suited them. They are in no way to be blamed for coming to this conclusion, for the framers of the colonial constitutions, in order to justify the imperial abnegation to which they had consented, discovered their only defence to be, the declaration that the constitutions were designed as the precursors to ultimate separate nationality.

With the belief that this freedom is open to them (we will consider directly how far the belief is well founded) is it to be wondered at, or are the colonies to be blamed, if they show reluctance to relinquish their supposed discretionary action? They know they gain strength every day, and that though the United Kingdom also advances, their relative power is constantly on the increase. They know also that Great Britain will not ask them to secede; that, if necessary, she would expend countless millions to protect them from foreign aggression; they have quite sufficient hold on the mother country, why should they give her a greater hold on them? They do not care to enquire into the advantages of federation, for they know they do very well as they are, and do not feel inclined to give up the option they possess. It does not require to be argued—it does not require to be expressed. It is as plain as that one and one make two, that there is little inducement to them to enter into a binding engagement while they believe the other side is already bound to them.

The use of the words "mother country" has become so common that one can scarcely avoid the expression. It has been made the foundation of the hackneyed illustration that the colonies are children, and that when they arrive at years of maturity they are, of course, free to leave the parent home. Like many other metaphors it is sadly wanting in reason. The colonies are British territory, won by great sacrifices and great enterprise in the past. They are unquestionably part of the sovereignty or empire, and no practice permits, or justifies, the submission of nations to disintegration unless under the coercion of dire necessity. Is it to be credited that because the folly and weakness of the then Government of Great Britain led to the secession of New England, modern Great Britain will consent to be humbled before the nations of the earth by submitting to its own mutilation? With the uses of steam and electricity distance interposes no difficulty. Is it likely that the people of Great Britain will now, under these altered circumstances, part with territories their forefathers gained and held under conditions of graver responsibility? Then again it would be urged that the colonies, given over to the self-government of the British subjects who resided there, were always meant to continue to be the homes of other British subjects who desired to become colonists. It would be alleged that although the resident people possess the power of local government, many thousands of their fellow-subjects hold enormous interests in the colonies, amounting to scores of millions of pounds, both in the shape of loans to the local governments and private investments.

It seems impossible to believe that any colony would be allowed to secede. The hopes held out in the past would be characterized as authorized. Brought face to face with the demand for secession of any great colony, the sovereign and the people would find a thousand furious reasons for refusing it. It is the fashion to say that if the colonies set up on their own account they will part with the mother country on friendly terms. We believe it to be doubtful. Parting on friendly terms means parting without a struggle. Suppose a colony inclined to secession, what course is it to adopt? Its government is the sovereign's government and could not decently lead the movement. In what shape is sanction to be obtained of a legal character? The easiest form would be a bill authorizing a plebiscite on the subject. Suppose such a measure to pass both houses of the legislature, the governor would reserve it for the sovereign's assent. Woeful would be the position of the British Government that advised the sovereign's approval. The bill would be disallowed, and then the colony would be confronted with the necessity of submission or the use of illegal means.

The writer of this paper candidly admits that if the question of secession were urged by a colony his sympathies would be with the colony, for he knows how entirely the prospect of separation has been held out to the discretion of the colonists. No statesman that he is aware of has ever denied to the colonists the right to secede if they desired it. They would be within what they have been taught to consider their rights, and they are not to be blamed that now they would refuse a federation which ten or fifteen years ago they would have cheerfully welcomed. It may be we are wrong in considering that nothing now would induce some of the colonies to consent to federation short of a declaration that separation is not open to them. It may be they do not value the option so much as we think. But if we are right in our view, then the whole question of federation depends upon whether the mother country is willing to permit a colony to secede if it desired to do so.

Far from the independence of the American colonies being accepted as a precedent, the people of Great Britain will refuse to see an equal justification, and they will make a fight for the preservation of the empire. They will feel that one secession will mean the gradual retirement of every valuable member of the empire, with the leaving on hand the portions most difficult to govern.

The sole outcome of this difficulty of the position seems to be the calm, passionless deliberation of the question, is it open to the colonies to secede if they wish? It is frightfully cruel as well as impolitic to leave the matter in doubt. An authorized legal decision is required, not the enthusiastic utterances of *postprandical* eloquence. Hitherto the clearest indications of the freedom of the colonies to secede, if they wish to do so, have been made in after-dinner speeches.

It cannot be too strongly borne in mind that the theories which aimed at the conclusion that Great Britain would be happier and more powerful without the colonies and dependencies, have ceased to have a hold on the British mind. The disciples of such a doctrine are no longer in evidence. The tendency of all countries is in the direction of obtaining a further territory. France, Italy, Germany, and Russia have shown a fierce desire for acquisition. Spain has held on to Cuba in the face of innumerable difficulties, Portugal would not listen to a proposition for parting with her East African possessions. Even the United States, though debarred by the Monroe doctrine from actually incorporating into the republic land outside the continent, have found a convenient substitute in parental treaties such as those with Hawaii and Samoa. England has incorporated Fiji and a large part of New Guinea, besides other Pacific islands, and has paved the way to incorporating North Borneo. She has extended also her African possessions. The diminishing policy is at an end; a craving for extension has taken its place. The change has been entirely in accordance with the feeling of the nation, and passionately would that feeling show itself if the actual question arose of a colony seeking secession.

In times past there was a disposition to make the population an almost exclusive factor in estimating the value of a new country. But now that war, famine and pestilence exert comparatively little effect in the way of destroying life, the increase of the human race has become very rapid. Population can be easily provided to a new country; area and productiveness count much more than they did; in other words, the waste lands of the earth are more valuable and more sought after as the world is becoming thickly populated. Not only then is the change of feeling with reference to England faring better without her colonies to be reckoned with but there is to be taken into account the distinctly accentuated additional value set upon lands of large area and productive capabilities, however sparingly populated. When these circumstances and all the traditions of the empire and the estimation of foreign countries are remembered, it is difficult to overestimate the tremendous repulsion that the people of Great Britain would exhibit where a definite proposition put forward for the secession of an important colony.

The consideration naturally arises, What prospect is there that any colony will ask to secede? Why cannot the present relations continue for an unlimited period? The answer is to be found in the nature of the relations at present subsisting. It is evident that, as the colonies become more important, the larger will be the ramifications of their interests with other parts of the world. It is scarcely too much to say that there is now no means to deal safely and constitutionally with those interests. The outside relations of the colonies and of the mother country are shuttlecocks to be tossed backwards and forwards on the battledores of the respective governments.

A great deal that has recently taken place in Australia practically bears out the theoretical view that the position cannot remain as it is. Sir Henry Parkes, the premier of New South Wales, lately delivered a highly suggestive and eloquent speech on the Western Australian Constitution Bill. He laid down the doctrine of "Australia for the Australians" in forcible terms. He uttered no complaint against the present form of government of Great Britain and her dependencies—indeed he praised it. But he said federation was impossible between states of unequal power and that his dream was the separate consolidation of various groups of colonies, with a union by alliance with the mother country. He even expressed the hope that the United States might enter into such an alliance.

Sir Henry Parkes is not only an able statesman but a subtle diplomatist. He was no doubt quite sincere in the admiration he expressed for the form of government and institutions of the empire. But the paramount object he dwelt on was a "purely Australian future for Australia." This he think cannot be realized by federation, but may be attained by alliance. In fact he holds out to the growing Nationalist party the prospect they cherish without appearing to make independence a part of the program. But independence must precede alliance, and the future good-will between the separate States may depend on many contingencies. The common origin of the peoples of Great Britain and the United States has not always operated as a barrier to angry feelings.

Sir Henry Parke's remarks were open to much latitude of interpretation. The leader of the opposition, Mr. Dibbs, was less reticent. He agreed with the premier with regard to keeping "Australia for the Australians" and was "prepared to carry that feeling even to a greater length in a practical sense." He remarked amidst cheers "There is no necessity to sever the ties which at present exist between ourselves and the mother country, but the necessities of our national life will cause us to spring forth from the position of dependency on a great power to the position of an independent State." Again: "Australia is bound to be a nation separate and altogether free from the trammels of any country, even the mother country itself."

Sir Henry Parkes has since emphasized his views by a remarkable letter to the colonial governments, in which he warmly urges the necessity of a thorough federation of the Australian colonies. It is clear the position is not stationary in Australia, and it is much to be feared that the progress is not in the direction of federation of the empire. It is quite true that the federation of the Australian colonies might be made an aid to a larger federation, but it is equally the case that the colonies united would be able to interpose a powerful barrier to a consolidation of the empire, such as the desire is the object of some at least, if not the major portion, of the advocates of intercolonial federation.

The present practice of the Colonial Office is to yield to the wishes of the colonies, after submitting to a certain amount of pressure. The responsibility rests with the Imperial Government, and yet it has to allow any colony to constrain it that chooses to do so. To a considerable extent the power rests in one hand, the responsibility in another. Probably it might be said that if the question merely affected one colony and the mother country no better plan could be found than to settle it by compromise between them. But there is scarcely a question affecting the outside relations of one colony that is not of great importance to other colonies. The magnitude of such relations will continue to increase and the time must soon come when it will be apparent that to deal with these questions in any other way than by the constitutional authority of all parts of the empire will be to gradually approach a system of irresponsible government quite alien to the institutions of the nation. No political forecast can be more certain than that a long time will not elapse before a colony will require from the Colonial Office what the Secretary of State dare not on his own responsibility grant, because the point would involve not only the interests of Great Britain and the particular colony, but other parts of the empire. It is thus we are brought within sight of the contingency of a serious difference of opinion between a colony and the mother country, as the growth of the colonies widens their interest in connection with the rest of the world. If, previous to such conflict arising, no definite settlement has been made of the question of federation on the one hand and the right of a colony to secede on the other, the most serious consequences would follow. After training the colonies into the belief that secession is open to them, its denial would be regarded as a grievous wrong; and yet, as we have already seen, the country when brought face to face with the appaling prospect of disintegration would bitterly repudiate it.

We may adduce a few instances in recent times of the home government having