British Responses to Indian Nationalism—The Irwin Declaration on Dominion Status, 1929

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On October 31, 1929, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, Lord Irwin (later Viscount Halifax), issued a statement, part of which said that

> the goal of British policy (towards India) was stated in the declaration of August, 1917, to be that of providing for "the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire.... I am authorized on behalf of His Majesty's Government to state clearly that in their judgment it is implicit in the declaration of 1917 that the natural issue of India's constitutional progress, as there contemplated, is the attainment of Dominion Status."[1]

No official pronouncement to the people of India prior to this ever explicitly mentioned the term "Dominion Status." Few created such turmoil on the British political scene, mitigating the statement's beneficial aspects within India, and negating for

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a while the policy aims of Lord Irwin and the Labor government which ruled in the United Kingdom.

By focusing on this episode, by using it as a case study, it is the intention of this paper to investigate the British political process as it related to the problem of reform in India. Specifically, an attempt will be made to answer three questions:

1. To what extent was the Irwin declaration initiated voluntarily by the British government, and to what extent was it a response to the actual pressures of the independence movement within India itself?

2. How did the leadership of political parties within Parliament vary in their attitudes and responses to the Indian problem? What area of fundamental agreement, if any, existed among them on this subject?

3. What factors within British political life influenced these leaderships in their courses of action?

These answers will not be, and cannot be given in statistically accurate terms. For, essentially, they will be concerned with the clash of ideas and values, as set within a framework of pressure and counter-pressure. The British political response to the Indian challenge, so often conceived by students of Indian nationalism in monolithic terms, was a complex and many-sided one. To untangle the many-colored skein is a delicate, often frustrating, yet rewarding task.

FORMULATION OF THE IRWIN DECLARATION

In November, 1927, the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin appointed a seven-man Parliamentary Commission headed by Sir John Simon, of the Liberal Party, to inquire into the workings of the Government of India Act of 1919, and to determine what the next step of the British government in India might be. It was the Act of 1919 that provided for the appointment of such a commission, but this appointment was not due until 1929.

The updating of the Commission's appointment was due to the initiative of the Conservative Secretary of State for India,

Lord Birkenhead. But his motive was political. Birkenhead was no friend of Indian aspirations. He alone in the Lloyd George War Cabinet had opposed the Act of 1919 which granted India limited reform. After his appointment as Secretary of State for India in 1924 he wrote Lord Reading, the Viceroy: "It is frankly inconceivable that India will ever be fit for Dominion self-government."[2] Yet a year later Birkenhead realized that in the next general election in Britain the Conservative party could be defeated by Labor. This could mean leaving the nomination of the commission in "dangerous and radical" hands. Birkenhead had written Reading in December, 1925:

> When I made my speech in the House of Lords suggesting that it might be possible to accelerate the Commission of 1928 . . . I always had it plainly in mind that we could not afford to run the slightest risk that the nomination of the 1928 Commission should be in the hands of our successors. You can readily imagine what kind of a Commission in personnel would have been appointed by Colonel Wedgwood and his friends. I have, therefore throughout, been of the clear opinion that it would be necessary for us, as a matter of elementary prudence, to appoint the Commission not later than the summer of 1927.[3]

The seven-man commission, all drawn from Parliamentary backbenchers, did include two members of the Labor party. Yet the fact that it was purely a Parliamentary team, that no Indian was on it even though the House of Commons contained one, raised a storm within India. All parties in India—the Congress, the Moderates, the Muslim League—united in denouncing its composition. In the House of Commons, Ramsay MacDonald supported the setting up of a pure Parliamentary Commission but suggested that the Indian Parliament at New Delhi also appoint a commission of their own which would report, in harmonious cooperation, to the House of Commons.

Moreover, 1928 was a turbulent year within India. In 1927 the Congress Party at its annual session, under the inspiration of Jawaharlal Nehru, passed a resolution declaring complete independence to be India's goal. The following year the All Parties Conference Report—the Motilal Nehru Report—was published. This document proposed a constitution for India with Dominion

Status as its aim. All Indian parties, except the Muslim League, accepted it. The Congress Party, however, was itself split into factions over the question of accepting Dominion Status. (That term still had to be more clearly defined by the Statute of Westminster in 1931). Its younger, more ardent wing clung to the concept of complete independence. At its annual session in 1928 a compromise was reached. The Congress would settle for Dominion Status rather than complete independence if the British government accepted the All Parties Conference Report within one year. If not, a civil disobedience campaign would be launched. It was during this year that the Simon Commission came out to India. It was met by complete boycott and hostile demonstrations.

Within this framework of pressure the Viceroy and Governor-General, Lord Irwin, had to work. Unlike Birkenhead, the deeply religious Irwin was a friend of Indian national aspirations, "a donnish embodiment of most of the Christian virtues."[4]

Ever since his appointment as Viceroy in 1926 Irwin attempted to keep open the door of communication between the leaders of Indian nationalism and the British government of India. In this uneasy dialogue he valued the special role played by the leaders of the small but influential Indian Liberal Party—the Moderates—who often mediated between the Congress and the Government. But the composition and coming of the Simon Commission had alienated even them. And at year's end India marked time on the verge of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. To keep open the closing doors of political communication, to give the British government in London time to formulate actual proposals for reform following the report of the Simon Commission, to rally the Moderates both outside and within the Congress to his side, Irwin decided to act. His memoirs make explicit his concern:

> The first result was of course the boycott, which greatly damaged relations between Government and the political intelligentsia. Nor was resentment and suspicion confined to the extremists of the Congress Party. Moderate and proven friends of Great Britain . . . felt the exclusion of men of their race from the official review, on which their country's future was to be planned, as bitterly as did the Congress leader Pandit Motilal Nehru. . . . By some means or other contact had to be regained and confidence in British purpose restored.[5]

Irwin decided to suggest to the British Government at Westminster "the two ideas of Round Table Conference and formal declaration of Dominion Status as the goal of British policy for India."[6]

The idea of a Round Table Conference between leaders of all shades of Indian opinion and leading members of all three British political parties, following the report of the Simon Commission, would do many things. For India it would do away with the humiliation of not being represented by her own leaders on the commission, and bring them once more on seemingly equal terms into the dialogue of debate. Moreover, if the recommendations of the Simon Commission were staid and unprogressive, as Birkenhead had hoped they would be, and as Irwin suspected they were, then the whole question could be renewed at the conference table without a violent explosion on the Indian scene.

> But Irwin knew ... that Simon was to refuse the fences without which the Commission could not logically complete the course it had set itself. Diarchy was to be condemned, no doubt, but Provincial Autonomy was to be so safe-guarded as to be virtually meaningless and Federation to be postponed sine die.... The bitterness aroused by the exclusion of Indians from the Commission's personnel would be as nothing compared with the fury when it was known the Commission's recommendations offered no substantial redress.[7]

A declaration on Dominion Status being the final goal of British policy in India, made in conjunction with the announcement on the proposed Round Table Conference, would further quench the spark of incipient non-violent rebellion and create the right atmosphere for genuine future cooperation. For ever since the Montagu declaration of 1917 stating British policy to be "the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire,"[8] debate raged as to the exact meaning of the term "responsible government." How did it differ from "Dominion Status"? What did "progressive realization" really mean? Malcolm Hailey, the Viceroy's advisor, threw fuel on the fire, on one occasion, by talking

in the Legislative Assembly about possible gradations of Dominion Status. Year after year, leaders of Indian nationalism, especially the Moderates, demanded clarification of the term, with a view to securing a pledge on full Dominion Status. Irwin sympathized with the Indian viewpoint. He believed that an assurance on Dominion Status was what political India really wanted, that given such pledge the subcontinent would be prepared to wait for its natural fulfillment. In November, 1929, in a revealing memo to the Government in London on "Dominion Status as understood in Great Britain and India," he wrote:

> Whatever he may feel it necessary to say in public the Indian is not so much concerned with the achieved constitutional state, in the British sense, as he is with what he would consider the *indefeasable assurance* of such achievement. . . . What is to the Englishman an accomplished process, is to the Indian rather *a declaration of right*, from which future and complete enjoyment of Dominion privilege will spring.[9]

And so in the summer of 1929 Irwin went to London, on leave, to discuss his proposals with the British government. However, on May 31, 1929, a general election had been held in which the Conservatives under Baldwin had been replaced by Labor under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald. Labor did not have an absolute majority in the House of Commons. They numbered 288, the Conservatives 260, and the Liberals 59.

In England, Irwin met with Wedgwood Benn, Labor's new Secretary of State for India, Sir John Simon of the Liberal party and Chairman of the Commission, Stanley Baldwin, who led the Conservatives, Lord Reading, who preceded Irwin as Viceroy and now led the Liberal Party in the House of Lords, and Lloyd George, leader of a Liberal faction in the House of Commons. In his memoirs Irwin mentions only the meetings with Wedgwood Benn, Simon, Baldwin, and Winterton. From a biography of Reading (written by his son) we learn that Irwin also met with him and Lloyd George.[10] Whether Irwin met directly with Ramsay MacDonald is not clear.

Wedgwood Benn concurred with Irwin's proposals, "but wished to be satisfied that we were not going behind the backs

of Simon and his Commission, who were then preparing their report."[11] Without an absolute majority in the Commons, Labor was in a delicate position and needed the support, or at least the passive acquiescence, of the Liberals to be able to continue in office. At first Simon saw no objection to the statement on Dominion Status but objected to the Round Table Conference, "principally on the ground that it would be likely to affect adversely the status of the Commission's report when it appeared, by making this only one among other papers that the Conference would presumably have before it, and this before the Government would have made their own attitude to the Commission's report plain."[12] However, Simon did not object to the proposal on Dominion Status since he saw no essential difference between it and the term used in the declaration of 1917—"responsible government." A little later, to Irwin's surprise, Simon changed his attitude on both proposals. Irwin surmised that he was influenced by Lord Reading.[13] Now Simon accepted the announcement of a Round Table Conference if this proposal were made to appear an idea put forward by his own Commission. "But as regards the Dominion Status declaration, Simon remained critical both of its wisdom and of the propriety of making it in advance of the Commission's report and its consideration by Parliament."[14]

From the start Reading was unalterably opposed to the declaration on Dominion Status. Perhaps he shared some of Birkenhead's pessimism on Indian Affairs. As Viceroy, he had worked intimately with the former Conservative Secretary of State for India. The Birkenhead-Reading correspondence on India as found in the biography of Birkenhead (by his son) certainly justifies the author's comment that "Birkenhead, at the India Office, found himself in harmonious partnership with his old friend and often rival Reading, who had been Viceroy since 1921."[15] However, Reading voiced his opposition in purely legalistic terms. Not only would the declaration seriously detract from the value and prestige of the Simon Commission's report, but "he was anxious that a specific declaration should be made in any announcement published by Lord Irwin that all the reservations on Indian Home Rule contained in the Preamble to the 1919 Act still held good, and that no change in the British Gov-

ernment's Indian policy could be expected until after Parliament had considered the Statutory Commission's report."[16] Lloyd George accepted Reading's judgment.

If the Labor government was dependent upon Liberal support for its continued existence, why did Wedgwood Benn and Ramsay MacDonald persist with Irwin's policy in the face of opposition from Simon, Reading, and Lloyd George? Perhaps the answer lay in Irwin's special relationship with the leader of the Conservatives, Stanley Baldwin, and the latter's pronounced views on India.

When selected Viceroy in 1926 Lord Irwin (then Edward Wood) was a member of Baldwin's Cabinet and a close personal friend of the Prime Minister. Baldwin was loath to part with him but "on reflection I felt that India must have the best we could send."[17] While in England, Irwin had already secured Benn's permission to "put Baldwin *au courant* of what was proposed, and found him very ready to accept my judgment. On that sort of question his mind was predisposed towards the view I was advocating, and was quite unruffled by any of the legalist misgivings that weighed with Reading, or Birkenhead."[18] With Baldwin's support Irwin and Benn could afford to ignore the opposition of the Liberals. Yet Baldwin was motivated by more than personal affection. In 1929, even though out of power, the theme of Indian reform preoccupied his mind. A close associate gives an intimate glimpse of this:

> From 1929 onwards his [Baldwin's] mind was not really on the economic crisis nor on Empire preference, nor even his fight with the Press barons; it was already on India, and in certain moods he would talk in private about nothing else.[19]

But many prominent Conservatives disagreed with him on the subject. Eddie Winterton, who had been Conservative Under-Secretary of State for India, informed Irwin that he, Birkenhead, and Austen Chamberlain had grave misgivings and doubts about the proposed declaration.[20] Winterton confirms this in his own memoirs:

> During the summer of 1929 Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India, who was home on leave, asked me to meet him in the absence from town

of the two senior members of the Conservative Party—the late Lord Peel and the late Lord Birkenhead, who were, as ex-Secretaries of State for India, concerned with Indian affairs. He lunched with me at the Belgravia Hotel. I was surprised and alarmed by the views he expressed.[21]

Moreover, in 1929 Baldwin was battling for his political life within the Conservative party. Many who opposed him on India were part of the anti-Baldwin faction: Lord Birkenhead, Winston Churchill, and the press-lords Lord Rothermere, who owned the *Daily Mail*, and Lord Beaverbrook of the *Daily Express*. In addition, spontaneous Tory discontent followed their electoral defeat by Labor. On the sidelines, waiting his chance to make a comeback, stood Britain's wartime coalition leader, David Lloyd George. No love was lost between him and Baldwin. With the Liberals almost a rump party in the Commons, Lloyd George's only opportunity lay in the formation of another coalition, between his group and the Conservatives. And within the latter party he had powerful allies among some of the anti-Baldwin faction—Birkenhead, Churchill, and Beaverbrook. Before the 1929 elections Lloyd George had proposed an alliance with the Conservatives, only to be blocked by Baldwin:

> On 18 February [1929] Lloyd George had made a reconnaissance in a long talk with Churchill. He had suggested that if, as he himself foresaw, the Tories lost the forthcoming contest, they might consider coming to terms with the Liberals, and not at once resigning.
> Baldwin was not interested. He wanted nothing to do with Lloyd George.[22]

Given this situation, India could well be the cause of rallying the entire opposition to drive him from leadership of the party. And Baldwin knew this as well as anyone else. After his initial talks with Irwin in August, when he agreed in principle to the declaration, the Tory leader left for his annual trip to France during the Parliamentary recess. On the twentieth of September, while in France, he received a letter by messenger from Ramsay MacDonald asking him to concur "in the issue of a statement concerning Dominion Status *in the event of the Simon Commission being consulted*, and the consent of all Parties being obtained."[23]

Baldwin agreed on condition that the Simon Commission did so also:

> What would anyone in my position have done. He could have done one of two things: He could have taken the coward's course and have said, "I will give you no answer." I took upon myself personal responsibility with some risk, as I have done before and shall do so again if necessary.... I replied that so far as I was concerned myself I concurred. I could not speak for my colleagues, because they were scattered; I could not speak for the party. When I got home, if the circumstances of the situation were that the other concurrence was obtained, I would do my best to persuade them to take my view. There was only one matter with which I could possibly state my agreement, namely to support the Prime Minister in the event of the Simon Commission expressing its approval of what the Prime Minister proposed to do.[24]

Whether Irwin knew of these conditions to Baldwin's approval is not clear. On the basis of the evidence available it seems he did not. His memoirs only say: "Baldwin then went off for his holiday, and I do not think I had any further occasion to discuss the matter with him."[25]

On his return to England, on October 23, the Conservative leader discovered that the Simon Commission had not approved of the proposed declaration.[26] This created a new and potentially dangerous situation for him. Obviously he knew of the storm brewing, within his own party, on India. It seemed as if his trust and confidence had been betrayed by Ramsay MacDonald; and Irwin had already left for India shortly before his arrival. On October 24 there appeared a warning letter from Lord Birkenhead in *The Daily Telegraph*. It purported "to point out the danger of any intervention by Government in a matter which, by the consent of all Parties has been committed to a commission representative of all those parties."[27] On October 13 the *Sunday Times* had already published a story by its Diplomatic Correspondent which said:

> I understand that soon after Lord Irwin resumes the Viceroyalty a fortnight hence, he will make an important pronouncement of future policy.... The Viceroy's statement will make it clear that the Government adheres to the Declaration of 1917. It will be laid down in set

terms that Dominion Status for India is the goal to be aimed at when conditions are practicable.[28]

Baldwin acted almost immediately. He met with a few of his colleagues and wrote the Acting Prime Minister (since MacDonald was out of the country) that his party could not agree to support the publication of the Irwin declaration.[29] It is not clear whether Baldwin's opponents on India, within his party, knew of this action. Even if they did, it is clear that they continued to mistrust him, if one judges from Winterton's diaries. The incident described below took place on October 25 two days following Baldwin's arrival in England:

> Lunched with Willie Peel (Lord Peel) at the Carlton; F. E. (Lord Birkenhead) was there too; a somewhat serious situation has arisen. Edward Irwin is anxious to make a declaration defining "Dominion Status" as the final goal.... I knew of Edward's desire some time ago but the disturbing thing is that S. B. (Stanley Baldwin) seems to have given contingent assent on behalf of the Party—contingent that is on the agreement of all three parties and the Simon Commission. Even so, some of us think it is dangerous to do so without prior consultation with former colleagues.[30]

While the pot simmered in London, Irwin arrived in New Delhi on October 25, empowered by the Labor government to make his proposed announcement. Time was running out in India. The Congress ultimatum expired in two more months. On October 31, 1929, the momentous declaration on Dominion Status was published. The night before publication Irwin received a personal telegram from Baldwin "asking me if possible to hold the matter up to give time for more consideration."[31] But the Viceroy did not think it a good idea. Moreover since "most of the important people had been warned, to delay the plan was obviously impossible."[32]

RESULT AND REPERCUSSION

For the moment, within India, the clouds cleared. The Liberal Party, the Muslim League, and even the "Moderate" section of the Congress welcomed both the Round Table Conference and

the declaration on Dominion Status. The Liberals joined with the Congress in issuing a manifesto welcoming the Declaration and indicating acceptance of the Round Table Conference if certain conditions or recommendations were fulfilled: immediate release of all political prisoners; the Congress to have a majority of representatives at the proposed Conference, which was to meet "not to discuss when Dominion Status is to be established, but to frame a scheme of Dominion Constitution for India."[33] The doors of communication seemed open once more.

But in England the storm broke. Controversy was fanned by sections of the press; and at the center of the conflagration stood Stanley Baldwin, Ramsay MacDonald and Wedgwood Benn. But the key position was Baldwin's. To maintain his precarious hold he could repudiate Irwin, join forces with Lloyd George's Liberals in the House of Commons, and turn the Labor party out of office. Or he could attempt to stem the rushing tide using all his old political skill, prevent a complete rupture with India, and support, as far as politically possible, the man he appointed Viceroy in 1926. He chose the latter course.

As a first, immediate step Baldwin met with the Conservative Shadow Cabinet, faced his critics within it, and obtained a letter from Ramsay MacDonald in which the latter declared that the statement on "Dominion Status" meant no immediate change in the course of English policy. Sir Samuel Hoare (later Lord Templewood), himself a future Secretary of State for India, gives an intimate glimpse of this confrontation:

> We met in an uncomfortable room in the Conservative Office in Palace Chambers. Criticism of the statement, started by Birkenhead and supported by Austen Chamberlain, at once became very bitter. Baldwin obviously approved of Irwin's action. He had, in fact, already agreed with it in principle at the time of the discussions between Irwin, Simon and MacDonald. He had not, however, then seen the actual words in their final form, and when MacDonald sent them to him, he was on his way to his annual cure at Aix, and could not or would not give them his careful attention. His answer, therefore, to MacDonald was a perfunctory agreement provided that Simon also agreed.... Baldwin also had been placed in a difficulty. His condition had been ignored, *but none the less as he fully approved of the statement,*

he had no intention of repudiating it. All that he could do in the circumstances was to sit back, listen to Birkenhead's scathing criticisms, and obtain a letter from MacDonald in which it was made clear that the Viceroy's words meant no change in British policy.[34]

On November 1, Rothermere's *Daily Mail* fired the first shot of one more virulent anti-Baldwin campaign. Ever since the Conservative defeat in 1929 the press-lord had been in full cry.[35] In its sensational story headlined "Mr. Baldwin's Crowning Blunder; Blind Promise to Socialists; To Support Indian Dominion Status; Withdrawn Under Party Pressure; Rank and File Furious," it said:

> By an extraordinary blunder made during the Parliamentary recess, Mr. Baldwin, the Conservative ex-Premier, has plunged the country into a political crisis of the first magnitude on the vital question of the British administration of India.
> His Conservative colleagues in the last Cabinet are aghast to discover that without their knowledge he had committed them to support the Socialist Government's policy of granting full Home Rule and Dominion Status to the natives of India. Yesterday the Shadow Cabinet of the Conservative Party took the unprecedented step of insisting that their leader should formally repudiate his personal pledge in this matter. They required Mr. Baldwin to write a letter to the Prime Minister withdrawing the approval and promise of support for Indian Home Rule, which, without any consultation with his colleagues, Mr. Baldwin had given to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India, two months ago.
> The predicament in which Mr. Baldwin finds himself is extremely grave. In highly influential Conservative Circles last night the feeling was strongly expressed that his inexplicable vacillation in a matter of such gravity has placed the leadership of the party in urgent question.[36]

In an editorial on the following day the *Mail* called for a vote of censure against the Labor Party.[37] It is tempting to speculate whether Lord Rothermere hoped to kill three birds with one stone—to defeat the Labor Party, form a Conservative-Liberal coalition, and unseat Baldwin from the leadership.

Perhaps this is just what the *Times* hinted at when it published a short item, "The Indian Crisis," by its Parliamentary

Correspondent on November 4:

Those who follow the currents of party politics in England are familiar with the irresistible attraction in some quarters of any movement calculated to unite Conservative and Liberals in a Coalition against Labor on what might be represented as a high Imperial Issue—all the more if it had the incidental advantage of displacing Mr. Baldwin; but this particular issue is beginning to seem a little thin.[38]

All through this crisis the *Times* stood by Irwin and Baldwin. Goeffrey Dawson, its editor and close confidant of the Conservative leader, kept in intimate touch with him:

Nov. 2: I amused myself by writing at intervals—largely to clear my own mind—a survey of the Indian crisis. The afternoon was entirely devoted to talking about it, for Baldwin (Leader of the Opposition) came to see me about three and stayed til 5:30—rather worried about it all and by the intrigue behind it.[39]

On November 1, the day following publication of the declaration, the *Times* in an editorial had already defended Irwin's action. It also attempted to forestall criticism that was sure to arise because of the neglect of the Simon Commission:

Nor is there anything in the statement which anticipates in the slightest degree the Report of the Statutory Commission, or questions the undivided responsibility of the Imperial Government in framing proposals for the consideration of Parliament. The Statutory Commission, representing all parties in Parliament, remains the appointed channel of information about existing Indian conditions, as they appear to a delegation of impartial and sympathetic observers industriously working over a period of two years.[40]

It went on to warn:

There will be pressure upon Labor to give a party twist to their scheme. There will be pressure upon the Conservatives, and perhaps upon Liberals too, to look for opportunities of disagreement. Only the strongest conviction on all sides that the security and well-being of India matter incomparably more than any party success in this country can make the policy sound and practicable.[41]

Dawson and the *Times* hoped for too much! That very after-

noon of November 1, Lloyd George stirred the pot in the Commons by asking Wedgwood Benn whether the Simon Commission had been consulted about the announcement on Dominion Status; and whether the statement indicated any change of policy announced by previous governments. Benn admitted that the Commission had not been consulted. He went on to allay fears by denying that the declaration indicated any immediate change of previous policy:

> Questions of policy involving changes either in substance or in time cannot be considered until the Commission or the Indian Central Committee have submitted their Reports and His Majesty's Government have been able, in consultation with the Government of India, to consider these matters in the light of all the material then available, and after the meeting of the Conference which it is intended to summon.[42]

Lloyd George was followed by a Labor member who asked Benn whether the article in that morning's *Daily Mail* was true with regard to Baldwin being consulted about the Irwin statement before it was made. This gave Baldwin the opportunity to fire his first shot in the war against the press barons. He replied in a House electric with excitement:

> I rise for a moment to ask the indulgence of the House to make an observation with regard to an article which has been brought to my notice as having appeared in today's issue of the "Daily Mail." It is sufficient for me at the moment to say that every implication of fact contained in that article is untrue, and in my opinion gravely injurious to the public interest, not only in this country, but throughout the Empire. I shall have occasion, I hope, at any early date, to examine and make clear the whole position.[43]

Exactly a week from that day, the House decided to hold a full-dress debate on the "Dominion Status" declaration. Few weeks in contemporary parliamentary history have been more charged with tension and excitement. Rumour and counter-rumour erupted. Would the Conservative party join with Lloyd George's Liberals and vote Labor out of office? Would the Irwin statement thus be completely repudiated? Would Baldwin be swept along by the hostile tide within his own party, perhaps

willingly, since he had not been informed by MacDonald about Simon not being consulted? Or would he still put the cause of India first, bring dissident elements within his party to heel, and stand by his ex-colleague and friend, Irwin?

Unfortunately there is little evidence available as to what went on within the ranks of the Conservative party during that week. However, on November 4, Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* published a news story that was vindicated in every detail four days later. Under the headline "No Conservative Revolt Against the Government," it said:

> The Government, which was facing the greatest crisis of its short career at the end of last week, now finds the danger is passing.
> When the Conservatives demanded next Thursday's debate on India the situation seemed a menacing one for the Government. It was revealed that the Liberal leaders to whom the Irwin correspondence had been shown had refused to support the Irwin declaration. The attitude of the Conservatives, and Mr. Baldwin's letter to Mr. Wedgwood Benn withdrawing his approval of the Simon correspondence—which was substantially the same as Lord Irwin's declaration—indicated that the Government would face a hostile majority in the House.
> The extremer politicians even went so far as to say that next Thursday would see the defeat of the Government, with all the disastrous consequences that would be entailed.
> What has brought about the change? *The key position is once more with Mr. Baldwin.* During the week-end he has decided to revert to what might be called his pro-Irwin attitude.
> On Thursday, therefore, the Conservative Party position will be one of approval of Lord Irwin's declaration, modified, of course, by regret that it was made without consultation with the Simon Commission.
> All this will naturally bring comfort to Mr. MacDonald. Even if there are murmurings within the ranks of the Conservatives, the Prime Minister supported by the leader of the Conservative Party, can afford to ignore the Liberals. . . .[44]

THE DEBATES

On November 5 the House of Lords debated the Dominion Status issue. Lord Reading, the Marquess of Crewe, the Marquess of Salisbury, Earl Peel (who replaced Birkenhead as Secretary of

State for India in 1928), and the Earl of Birkenhead, all spoke against the wisdom of the declaration. Reading feared the impact of the declaration upon the people of India. It would create expectations that could not be fulfilled. Moreover the prestige, the influence, and the authority of the Simon Commission had been impaired. Reading's speech attempted to push the Labor spokesmen into declaring that Dominion Status was for the future, not the present; that it would be Parliament acting of its own volition, not pressures from India, that would decide the issue.[45]

Birkenhead, in a rude, caustic, arrogant speech, accused Irwin and the Labor government of attempting to appease Indian extremism. The Term "Dominion Status" changed and evolved through time:

> Does Dominion Status at this moment mean the same thing that it meant a month before the last Imperial Conference? Most plainly not. Does it today mean the same thing that it will mean in five years from now? Who can tell? Here is this word loosely and ignorantly employed, employed as I believe for the first time, employed with a certain significance, and, as I am persuaded, in the hope that in order to deal with a disloyal campaign and with seditious threats men would be persuaded they would receive that which we now know they were not intended to receive and never can receive.[46]

Tamely, weakly, the Labor spokesman defended their policy. Irwin's announcement was not an attempt to frustrate the work of the Simon Commission. No real change from previous governments' policies was intended. In their speeches the emphasis was all on reservations, on the evolutionary process, on the necessity to do nothing more than create the right atmosphere within India.

In conclusion Reading expressed satisfaction and withdrew his motion. At least the House of Lords was not called to vote upon the issue. It made little difference. The damage done here was almost irreparable.

On November 8 came the turn of the Commons. Only here could the future of the Labor government be decided. The very first speech indicated that Ramsay MacDonald would not fall,

that the Irwin declaration would continue to stand as official government policy, even though it did not presage an immediate change. It was Stanley Baldwin who spoke first.

The first part of his speech was an explanation as to how he had come to give his blessings to the Irwin declaration, and why he had been forced to withdraw them on discovering that the Simon Commission had been ignored. Next he attacked the *Daily Mail* and repudiated the accusations made against him, point by point. He had, as his explanation already showed, not committed his party without their prior knowledge to supporting the Socialist government. It was untrue to state that the Conservative Shadow Cabinet insisted that he repudiate his personal pledge. What he did was with their approval, not their coercion.

The *Mail* had challenged him to explain to his followers how he could have appointed a man like Irwin to the Viceroyalty in 1926. This was Baldwin's opportunity. On a technicality he had repudiated his role in the issuance of the declaration; but he would not repudiate his friend and ex-colleague. He had chosen Irwin since India deserved the best, and if the day ever came "when the Party which I lead ceases to attract to itself men of the calibre of Edward Wood (Lord Irwin), then I have finished with my party."[47]

In conclusion Baldwin went on to discuss the general problem of India. The problem was difficult. It would take time to solve. But whatever the phrase "Dominion Status" meant when India had responsible government, one thing would be certain. She would be a full member of the Empire. It was the function, therefore, of the Tory party to toil in faith among the foundations, so that future generations would not be unforgetful.

Though moderate in tone, though it also emphasized evolution and reservation, Baldwin's speech did do three things:

1. It made it clear that there would be no vote of censure against the Labor government over the Dominion Status declaration.

2. It supported Lord Irwin and his aspirations.

3. It did not attack the Labor government directly for having authorized the statement.

Given the agonizing situation he was in, little more could

have been asked of the Conservative party leader.

The speeches that followed Baldwin's—Lloyd George's vitriolic attack upon Labor, Simon's plaintive yet innocuous statement, Wedgwood Benn's long-winded explanation, Ramsay MacDonald's mild defense—all these would not now change the outcome of the debate. The House eventually accepted MacDonald's suggestion that no more discussion was needed. In England the first chapter in the battle for Indian reform, which was to last till 1934, was over.

But in India the debates had grim consequences. Their tone strengthened the hands of those within the Congress who looked upon the Dominion Status announcement as an empty statement. It was one important factor in the revival of Civil Disobedience in 1930 when the Congress ultimatum expired. Few have summed up the effects of the battle in Parliament better than Lord Irwin himself:

> Political India was puzzled and perturbed by this British reaction.... India could hardly be expected to understand how it was that the collective appeal on such an issue of Birkenhead, Churchill, Austen Chamberlin, Lloyd George, Reading and Lloyd would fail to weigh as heavily with the British public as the less brilliant but more solid judgments of Baldwin.... How different, one reflected, might have been the Indian reaction if in place of this outburst the response had taken the form of saying that of course as to purpose there would be no dispute, and that, whatever might be the difficulties in the way, it would be the proud privilege of British and Indians working together to remove them.[48]

Yet, transcending the conflict of the moment, the goal of British policy in India had been enunciated for the future. Ultimately this was to have significance not only for the subcontinent but for all those areas that traversed the slippery and circuitous route from Empire to Commonwealth.

NOTES

1. *Times* (London), November 1, 1929.

2. William Camp, *The Glittering Prizes: A Study of the First Earl of Birkenhead* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1960), p. 186.

3. The Second Earl of Birkenhead, *F. E.—The Life of F. E. Smith—First Earl of Birkenhead* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoodie, 1959), pp. 511–512.

4. Camp, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

5. Earl of Halifax, *Fullness of Days* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 116.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alan Campbell Johnson, *Viscount Halifax—A Biography* (London: Robert Hale, 1941), p. 218.

8. Edwin Montagu, *Parliamentary Debates—House of Commons*, Vol. 97, Col. 1695.

9. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

10. The Marquess of Reading, *Rufus Isaacs—The First Marquess of Reading*, (London: Hutchinson, 1945). The author is the son of the First Marquess.

11. Halifax, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Second Earl of Birkenhead, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

16. Marquess of Reading, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

17. Baldwin in the House of Commons, November 7, 1929, *Parliamentary Debates—House of Commons*, Vol. 231, Cols. 1304–1306.

18. Halifax, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

19. Lord Percy of Newcastle, *Some Memories* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoodie, 1958), p. 131.

20. Halifax, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

21. Rt. Hon. Earl Winterton, P.C., *Orders of the Day* (London: Cassell, 1953), p. 158.

22. Frank Owen, *Tempestuous Journey: Lloyd George, His Life and Times* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), p. 109.

23. Baldwin in the House of Commons, November 7, 1929, *Parliamentary Debates—House of Commons*, Vol. 231, Cols. 1304–1306.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Halifax, *loc. cit.*

26. Baldwin, *loc. cit.*

27. *Daily Telegraph* (London), October 24, 1929.

28. *Sunday Times* (London), October 13, 1929.

29. Baldwin, *loc. cit.*

30. Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–159.

31. Halifax, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Text of the Manifesto as found in B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I. (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1935), pp. 350–351.

34. Viscount Templewood (Sir Samuel Hoare), *Nine Troubled Years* (London: Collins, 1954), p. 46.

35. See Robert Blake, "Baldwin and the Right" in John Raymond, ed.,

The Baldwin Age (London: Eyre & Spottiswoodie, 1960), p. 50.

36. *Daily Mail* (London), November 1, 1929.

37. *Daily Mail* (London), November 2, 1929.

38. *Times* (London), November 4, 1929.

39. John Evelyn Wrench, *Geoffrey Dawson and Our Times* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), p. 278.

40. *Times* (London), November 1, 1929.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Wedgwood Benn in the House of Commons, November 1, 1929, *Parliamentary Debates—House of Commons*, Vol. 231.

43. Baldwin in the House of Commons, November 1, 1929, *ibid.*

44. *Daily Express* (London), November 4, 1929.

45. Lord Reading in the House of Lords, November 5, 1929, *Parliamentary Debates—House of Lords*, Fifth Series, Vol. 75.

46. Lord Birkenhead in the House of Lords, November 5, 1929, *ibid.*

47. Baldwin in the House of Commons, November 7, 1929, *loc. cit.*

48. Halifax, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–123.