

# THE CANADIAN CLUB OF TORONTO

1916-17

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(June 19th, 1916.)

## The Problem of the Commonwealth

BY MR. LIONEL CURTIS.\*

AT a special luncheon of the Club held on the 19th June, Mr. Curtis said:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen,*—I want as briefly as I can in the time before us to tell you about the organization called "The Round Table," an organization many members of which I see present here to-day. That organization has flourished perhaps more freely in Toronto than in any other part of the British Commonwealth, but the impetus which gave rise to it came from South Africa some years ago.

I must take you back to the year 1906, when the change of government in England brought into power the Administration there which determined to give what it called self-government to the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, a constitution of the ordinary colonial type. I have very little doubt that at the time the members of that Ministry really thought that they were giving self-government to South Africa. I am perfectly assured that in the minds of those men at the time the step they were taking was the only right step. But it was not self-government, for this simple reason, that the questions of primary importance to South Africa were not the questions of interest to the Transvaal or of interest

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\*Mr. Lionel Curtis was actively engaged in the re-organization of South Africa following the war. His work at that time caused him to institute the Round Table Movement for the further study of the problems of the Empire.

to the Free State, but the questions between the four South African democracies.

The first effect of instituting that form of self-government among our democracies was that it brought about a deadlock in South Africa, and we discovered that there was no machinery for settling such questions; therefore if we were going to have self-government at all, we must have it in full, as members of the British Commonwealth. Our institutions must be based on self-government; we must establish here a government suitable to South Africa itself. That was the whole underlying principle of union.

I must take you on to the moment when after three sessions of the conference of Bloemfontein we were completing the work. A hitch occurred which almost destroyed the movement which had taken two years. The question arose of the apportionment of representation between the British and the Dutch sections. The British section was gravely considering delivering an ultimatum which would have, in my opinion, meant that the Union would not have taken place then, and would not have taken place now.

It was at this very juncture that a telegram came out from England to the effect that Sir Edward Grey had warned the British Empire, not merely, I was going to say, the country, but warned the British Empire, of the danger of attack from Germany. It was the first muttering of the storm which broke out two years ago. The South African Union became an accomplished fact that day! The British party felt that in view of the danger to the whole structure, it was too great a responsibility to take to leave South Africa ununited.

Thus at the very moment when we attained the status of a Dominion, which you attained just fifty years ago, we were in this dramatic way brought face to face with responsibilities for national life or death. But that was not all. You must realize what the South African Union meant to the Englishmen who were supporting it, who had come to fight in the war but were staying to live there. It meant that not only the Transvaal and the Free State, but the whole of South Africa, was to be governed by the very generals we had been fighting! We knew it must mean that. We were prepared if it meant government by General Botha; but we knew perfectly well the risks we were taking, that it might not be Botha,—it might be Hertzog or Beyers; in that case we knew perfectly well, that in the event of a world-wide war they would declare South Africa absolutely neutral; that we as Britishers would be told to observe an attitude of neutrality,

when our whole instincts would be impelling us to struggle for Britain. It was a very serious position for us to face.

Both these aspects of the question brought home to us that although we had attained the status of a Dominion, which brought within the scope of the South African Government every purely South African question, the greatest of all questions lay outside the scope of that Government.

As Englishmen living in England, we had gone to elections feeling that the first responsibility laid upon us was that of choosing a Government in whose hands the safety and freedom of the whole Empire would be secure. But now that South Africa had risen to the full status of a Dominion we found that we had no control whatever over the issues of peace and war. That position we felt could not be allowed to stand as it was, and, therefore, we decided to visit Canada, the country mainly responsible for the development of the whole status of the Dominions. Therefore in 1909 three of us came here.

We asked everyone we met what he thought about this question, and always received the answer that the Empire was one and indivisible, and would always remain so; that there were five partners or sister States, all Dominions, absolutely equal. When we asked about issues of peace and war we always received the same answer, that they were to be controlled through the medium of co-operation. We did not see how foreign policy could be carried on by co-operation, and when we came to sift the facts we found that the issues of peace and war were not settled at Ottawa, or at Melbourne, or at Wellington, or at Pretoria, but were settled at Westminster.

Now we did not see how that could continue, and not being politicians but Government servants by training, we sat down to analyze the whole question in a memorandum. The conclusions we came to were so much at variance with the orthodox creed on this subject, that we thought it would be madness for us to publish them. So we printed our memorandum, and went to New Zealand, where we met a number of University and business men, and asked them, "Will you study this question with us?" That invitation was cordially accepted, and through that Round Table groups sprang up.

We then went on to Australia, and groups sprang up there. Both Australian and New Zealand groups urged us to come back to Canada and again put our cause there. So in 1910 I came back to Toronto, saw the friends I had made, and put this case before them. Out of that, Round Table groups

sprang up in Canada, where perhaps they have had a more vigorous existence than in any other part of the Empire.

Just one word as to the composition of these groups. What we wanted was not approval but criticism of our proposal; we wanted juries to sit on it. Therefore we wanted all shades of thought represented. These Round Table groups, including men of all parties, took this printed memorandum; the members read it individually, and then met together and discussed it, and drew up reports upon it. A torrent of criticism was sent in to myself. It was then printed, with the original memorandum to which it related, each criticism opposite the passage to which it referred. These criticisms were sent to the different groups, and what each group had done was put before the other members. The next thing was to prepare a general and comprehensive report on the whole problem; the task of doing that was imposed upon me. I did not realize when I undertook it its formidable nature. Only after a year's work did I realize that it was impossible to deal with the problem in any shorter compass than that in which, for instance, Mr. Bryce dealt with the American Commonwealth.

As instalments of the report were printed they were sent out for criticism to the groups in the Dominions. In 1914 I came to Toronto, and discussed the report with the groups here. It was believed that the document was too formidable for any but students to read, so it was thought well to draw up a popular report for popular consumption. Then the war broke out. "The Problem of the Commonwealth" was prepared, and I think about eight hundred copies went among the various members of the groups in Canada, and again criticism began to pour in. A great many people began to press for its publication; strong reasons for its publication began to appear, and finally I was left no choice in the matter, because unfortunately one magazine in Montreal published a review, and discussion of the unpublished book began to spring up in the public press. There was no secrecy about our work, but there was necessarily privacy, for it is impossible for men to study a grave political problem in the atmosphere of political controversy. Everybody was at liberty to know as much about our work as we did, provided it did not get into the papers. When, however, this book began to be discussed in the public press the papers began to treat the view it contained as those of the Round Table. Therefore I took the only course possible, and decided to rewrite the report in the light of all the criticisms of all the groups, to rewrite it in final form as far as my own views went, and republish it as my

own views. About a month ago it was republished in Great Britain. I came over here, for the simple reason that there was not paper enough in Britain for more than a limited number of copies, so it will be printed in Canada for distribution here and in Australia and New Zealand. In the course of a very few days it will be printed in Toronto and this will be in front of you.

I am afraid I have only a few minutes left in which to present a pretty big case, but I will put it as briefly as I possibly can.

My first position is this: that the British Commonwealth stands for self-government. The ultimate responsibility for all public affairs must rest on the people themselves, that is, on the part of the people who are qualified to bear them.

Now I say all public affairs, in Canada and in South Africa, all Canadian and South African affairs, do rest on the people themselves; they are in the hands of Ministers who can be turned out of office at any moment by the people themselves, and others put in their places. And I venture to say that, when you analyze political responsibility, it ultimately comes down to that. This problem which I suggest to you comes from the fact that the whole of your public affairs are not in the hands of your Ministers at Ottawa. There is no use burking that fact. The events which led to this war were not handled in Ottawa, but in Britain. Nor are the Ministers who handled it responsible to the people of South Africa or of Canada. No Canadian or South African or Australian can affect the life of the Ministry. And peace will be made by these same Ministers. If that peace is not satisfactory, the voters in the United Kingdom will call those Ministers to account; you cannot, nor can we in South Africa; in none of the Dominions can they be called to account.

Now that cannot last, in the lurid light of this war. It is not conceivable that the first and greatest of all public issues, of all public interests, should permanently lie outside the scope of the British subject in Canada. The time is coming sooner or later when peace and war for Canada will be made by the Ministers responsible to the people of Canada. It is impossible for me to conceive anything else. How are you going to bring about this change? A great many people talk as if the Ministers at Ottawa were responsible for the issues of peace and war; they are not. But you can make them so, with a stroke of the pen; or they can make themselves so. But they cannot do so merely by giving notice to the British Government at London. If in the future peace and

war are to be made for Canada at Ottawa instead of at London, that change can be made only by giving notice to Washington, to Paris, to Berlin, to Tokyo, and to the other capitals in the world. When you have done that, you have severed Canada from the British Commonwealth, and destroyed the status of every man, woman and child in Canada as a British citizen. You have effected the most drastic of all revolutions.

There is only one alternative: the Ministers who do at present make peace and war for Canada, including the whole British Commonwealth, should be made just as much responsible to Canada, to the British subject in Canada, as they are now to the British subject in the United Kingdom. In order to effect that, you have to effect certain constitutional changes. I have not time to say what these changes are.

"The Problem of the Commonwealth" is not an attempt to formulate a constitution for the British Empire. It confines itself to the question, what constitutional changes must you make in order to effect that change?

I have only one other thing to say. It is this. Hitherto the future and safety of the Empire has mainly rested on the Old Country; now it is my conviction, that the future and safety of the British Commonwealth rests, and must rest, on the decision taken on this question. Now I have no doubt whatever as to the decision which will be taken on this question in England when the issue is before them: the financial pressure on the country will be so overwhelming it will be impossible for them to do otherwise than to turn to the Dominions and ask them to bear this burden with them. The burden will rest on the Dominions, but it will rest mainly and primarily on the largest of the Dominions, Canada.

I speak my deepest conviction, when I say that I believe it will be settled here rather than in any other part of the British Commonwealth. For that reason, I would appeal to you, in laying this case in front of you, to look at that case, to look at it candidly before you make up your minds on it. You will find, I venture to say, that it is not a case which either political party has laid in front of you; it is not a party matter at all. I would add this: the choice which Canada makes is, and must be, a free one: it cannot possibly, from the nature of the case, be otherwise; but in making that choice, all we who live in other parts of the British Commonwealth realize you are settling your own future and fate, but not your own future and fate only, but ours as well.