

(January 4, 1927)

## Australia and the Imperial Conference

BY THE RT. HON. STANLEY M. BRUCE.\*

PRESIDENT GEORGE H. SEDGEWICK: I think you will agree with me that this is a great day. We have a distinguished visitor from a country which, when you read about it at this time of the year, makes you think you are hearing a Christmas fairy story, for it is summer at Christmas there and the trees are shedding their bark instead of their leaves. And there is something else that appears to us a veritable fairy story—their railways pay. One thing, however, seems to carry through wherever the British go and settle: British justice and British parliamentary institutions and British responsible government seem to flourish in any soil no matter how strange the sky. It was quite natural that in those institutions a young man, who when he was at school was captain of the football, captain of the cricket, captain of the boat and captain of the school should develop qualities of leadership that were bound to take him to the highest place in his country. Those qualities were not only developed in the school, but in the Great War where our guest distinguished himself. And he still bears the marks of that conflict. It is with very great pleasure and very great pride that I introduce to you today Rt. Hon. Stanley M. Bruce, Premier of Australia.

PREMIER BRUCE: Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, there can be no possible doubt but that Canada must have a wonderful and amazing future before it because yesterday I was in Ottawa and went to a luncheon given by the Canadian

\*The Premier of Australia returned from the Imperial Conference in London, by way of Canada and addressed the Canadian Clubs in several of the chief cities of the Dominion.

Club and when I got to the door I was rather staggered because there were six hundred people there. I come here today and there are even more. If that indicates, as I believe it does, that your citizens take a serious interest in all the great questions that affect the Dominion, then you have achieved the greatest thing that any nation could achieve if you are going to realize your great destiny. If what I have seen in Ottawa and more particularly here represents an attitude of mind and point of view of your more responsible citizens then, indeed, you are a very fortunate people.

You have introduced me, thank Heaven, in a marvelously brief biographical sketch, rather than what everybody seems to think necessary with regard to myself when I go to a strange and new place. And sir, when you fluttered into Australia and Australian affairs you were also brief and only touched upon our railways. I would the time permitted today for me to tell you all about Australia and what we hope for, but I am afraid time will not permit and I can only summarise it all by saying that as a people we are very like the people of Canada. We have a profound belief in ourselves, a profound belief in our country and certainly it has a wonderful future. And we hope that these two great countries, the Dominion of Canada and the Commonwealth of Australia, in the future are going to go forward hand in hand in the great march of progress; and our only feeling is one of some slight sympathy for you, for inevitably our destiny must be greater, because we have a greater country.

But, sir, at this luncheon I don't propose to deal with the question of Australia and all our ideals and aspirations. I think it would be more desirable to say a few words to you with regard to the recent Imperial Conference, what it means and what was accomplished. I know perfectly well that there are a number of people who have a true, loyal spirit to our imperial connection, who believe in the British Empire as the greatest cause for civilization and peace in the world and look to this conference and have a feeling of apprehension that something has been done that is going to undermine that great unity of the empire and which must in the future inevitably lead to its disintegration. I would

say to them that there is not the slightest foundation for that apprehension and I would further say that what was done at that conference was done with my cordial co-operation and my assistance and because I had a profound belief that what we were doing was wise and would tend to closer unity in the empire. I must have believed that profoundly or I would not have assented to it, especially when I remind you that we have in Australia a population that is ninety-eight and a half per cent. of British stock.

We have one feeling that transcends all others and that is loyalty to the Throne, belief in the British Empire and a determination to maintain as closely as it is possible the ties that join us to the Motherland. If the determinations of this conference had done anything to undermine that unity it would never have had my assent and I would have fought it to the last ditch.

Let me for a second try and show you what was done. To realise exactly what happened you have to go back a little and look at the past history of the empire and see how we have gradually progressed and see the point to which we have come. As you go back to the days before the war we had, as great communities, gradually and progressively passed on from the stage of Crown Colonies with a governor sent from England who really controlled the destinies of our respective peoples, into a position of having certain self-governing rights, and we passed from that stage until we came to a position where we had absolutely self-governing rights and to all intents and purposes had absolute and complete autonomy; and that position was reached before the war. We came to the war and we had Great Britain as the centre of this great imperial connection, but there was no power linking the Empire together that could have forced any one of the self-governing dominions to lift a hand to assist in that war. In every self-governing dominion you had parliamentary institutions of government. You could not take part in the war, you could not assist in the war or spend money—not one farthing could be spent on equipment or the sending of troops save with the assent of parliament. And before the war we had come to a position where Great Britain could

have engaged in a life and death struggle and nothing could be done to make any self-governing British community help, assist or render one iota of aid. We have got to get that into our heads. We had got, by the recognition of self-governing rights before the war, recognition of our power to control our own destinies. Was it a mistake we had come by those things? Can anyone who remembers the amazing, wonderful and glorious response that came from every quarter of the empire suggest for one second that it was a mistake to have put the dominions into a position where there was nothing binding them to render aid to Britain should she be in peril?

We came to the war and one factor emerged from it with regard to the relations of the self-governing parts of the Empire and that one factor was that while the various dominions had had full self-governing rights they had never been consulted with regard to the foreign policy of the empire and yet wars arise out of foreign policies. Out of the treaty Britain had signed guaranteeing the independence and integrity of Belgium she found herself involved in a world war and yet scarcely anyone in the dominions knew of the existence of that treaty. There was nobody representing the dominions who had been consulted as to the wisdom or lack of wisdom of entering into the treaty and because of that fact, because in every dominion we found ourselves involved in a life and death struggle in which we gave our maximum in lives and treasure—in which because of the aid we rendered, with a million men coming from the dominions, we were probably the determining factor of the Allies' side—the dominions said, "Never again, after this war is over are we going to be placed in a position of being involved in such a struggle arising out of foreign policy dictated and laid down by the British Government, by British advisers of His Majesty, in which the dominions have no voice." I think most of you will agree that this is certainly wise. I don't think there is anybody who has greater imperial sentiment and belief in the empire than I, but being the representative of six million people in the Southern Seas and having regard to some of the ministries that come into power in Great Britain, I'm hanged if

I am prepared to place the destinies of my people in the hands of the British people without a voice or say in what they are going to do.

That is one further fact that evolved out of the war; that the dominions should have a voice with regard to foreign policy and that they should be consulted in the framing of it. To the credit of the British people they immediately granted it and from the day that the war was over every dominion has had a voice and been entitled to express its opinion with regard to foreign policy, not of Great Britain, but of the whole empire.

In 1923 we had an Imperial Conference and having got to the point of the establishment of this idea of a common policy where there was to be consultation and common action, the further point was raised: What is going to be the position if in Britain His Majesty's advisers or say one of the dominions starts negotiations with a foreign country? And the answer was that what had to be done was consultation. No government in the empire is to enter into negotiations with any other power, where it can possibly involve the rights of another part of the Empire or where a great question which might affect the whole of the Empire might be involved, without consultation between the different governments. And that is the position that was evolved in 1923.

Let me summarise where we are. Before the war every dominion with regard to every internal affair was absolutely free and independent. Its own parliament was the only authority. You also had a position that nobody in the British government, no central authority could make any self-governing dominion take part in any war, unless its people freely and willingly, through their own parliament, determined to do so. After the war was evolved the idea that the dominions should be consulted with regard to foreign policy. Finally at the Imperial Conference in 1923 it was laid down that you are to have consultation with the British Government in any action it contemplates and that you are to have consultation with any dominion government which is negotiating any question with a foreign country. All these things were finally determined and finished when

we got to the 1923 conference. But you know there are distinguished statesmen who don't always see quite as clearly as one could desire them to and different gentlemen got up and with an appearance of profound knowledge and extraordinary authority laid down what was the position with regard to Inter-Imperial relations and the great self-governing parts of the Empire, and of course they were always saying something different. I have read what all of them said and I never give away gentlemen whose names would make you cheer, but never have I seen such unadulterated nonsense. They perfectly obviously had got the thing all wrong.

All that was done at the present conference was to lay down with authority with the representatives of every self-governing dominion what was the position we had arrived at in this natural evolution that has been going on inside the British Empire. That document, the report of the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee of the Conference, never laid down one single principle that was not in existence before pen was ever put to the paper to frame the document. It is not in any sense a constitution of the British Empire. It does not bring in that which would be disastrous to the Empire, a written constitution. It only lays down the position we have reached in the natural evolution that has gone on, guided and governed by that amazing genius the British peoples have for the solution of political and constitutional problems.

That is the position with regard to Inter-Imperial relations. I believe the bringing out of all these facts and publishing them with the authority of the self-governing parts of the empire has done incalculable good. It has cleared away a lot of mists and has achieved this: If you have a sort of feeling that you must not do something, human nature says, "I am going to do it, whatever the cost." And I quite appreciate that I am talking to an audience that really understands that. Tell them they can do it and their enthusiasm begins to disappear.

One word and one only on a question I think has caused a good deal of anxiety to some people. That is the right of the various dominions, if they so desire, to send

their representatives to foreign countries. I don't feel the slightest anxiety about that at all and let me tell you why. If you had told the dominions "You must not do it," they would have been looking for some place to send a representative to, and when the hour came for them to be called to book for what they had done they would have talked loudly about their proud and independent position. But there is no hope for them now. In all our countries which are under the system of constitutional government, with control in the Lower House which proceeds to send a direct representative to another country and which involves them in considerable expenditure—when the estimates show what has been spent in sending representatives all over the world, they are going to receive a nasty set back.

There is one case where there is a dominion that has got very close and intimate relations, because of geographical circumstances, with another country. That outstanding example of course is here in Canada, with your frontier of four thousand miles with the United States. If in Canada it is felt desirable to send a direct representative there to deal with those innumerable questions which have to be handled, Canada can do it and I cannot see the slightest thing that is going to break up the British Empire in that course of action.

But speaking of the question broadly there is another angle where it would be extraordinarily ill-advised for a dominion to take advantage of that power. Sometimes in our swollen pride we talk about ourselves as great peoples and very important units in the world, but nevertheless the other nations of the world have not grasped our importance as we see it. But all the nations of the world realise that the British representative at a foreign court, representing the whole empire is the most important person they have in their midst. I would certainly say, as far as Australia is concerned, that when we have some difficult and complicated question arising with another foreign country we will make perfectly certain that the British representative is going to present the case exactly as we want it presented and that we are going to use the prestige of the British ambassador and the whole weight that the British Empire carries behind it.

That is all I want to say on that question and I do venture to suggest to you that we are not going to come to disaster from anything that has been done, but that we are going to go forward with a greater element of unity in the British Empire, because you are going to get co-operation from all parts of the self-governing dominions.

And then we have done another thing, for human nature is an extraordinary thing, and what some of the dominions of the Empire have suffered from—though in my own country we have not suffered at all, though some have unquestionably suffered—what is called an inferiority complex—we were very busy trying to make everybody think we were inferior. For my own part it never crossed my mind that anybody should think Australia inferior.

I leave that side of the question there. There is just this further point I wish to touch upon: that we in the dominions have been a little inclined to talk of our importance and talk of our rights. One of the things we have talked about a great deal is our right to declare to the world that we are autonomous, self-governing peoples; that in every respect we are as good as Great Britain. Well, let us admit that, but don't let us imagine for one second that we can hold that proud position unless we are prepared to assume the responsibility it carries.

And, sir, I think there is one very serious question that all the dominions have got to direct their minds towards. You have this proud position now; and we in Australia feel that we are not only entitled to claim all these things and come forward and almost offensively demand that our point of view shall be respected unless we are prepared to do all in our power to take up the responsibility that rests on our shoulders. Is there any responsibility in any community greater than the responsibility for its own defence? Surely the first function of a government, of any people who are going to declare their independence and position in the world is to ensure that they can provide for their own defence and ensure the safety of their own nationals. It is hopelessly impossible for Australia to suggest that we can ensure our own defence and can provide the safety and rights of our nationals with a small population of six mil-

lions and comparatively small financial resources. But while we cannot provide for it entirely we have to be moving progressively to the point where we can provide for our own defence and in the meantime and until that hour arrives we are content to go on and accept from the Mother country what she has always afforded us—the protection of the British fleet. And we have to make the maximum effort in our own borders having regard to our numbers and financial resources.

I will tell you in a second what we are doing; how we are trying to carry out what we believe to be the greatest obligation that rests upon our shoulders, but I have sometimes heard it suggested that Australia is in a peculiar position of danger and therefore we ought to be doing a tremendous amount to provide for our own defence while other countries need not take the slightest trouble. I don't accept that for one second. Every country has got to provide a measure of defence for itself and unless it is prepared to frankly admit its own inferiority and say "We don't provide for our defence because we can rely on someone else saving us," you are not standing as a proud, independent nation in the eyes of the world. Secondly it passes my comprehension that any dominion of the empire has reached such a point in population or in resources that if it made the maximum effort that it could make towards providing for its own defence it would be doing anything really very much more than might be expected from the smallest independent nation in the world. And that is a point of view I think we should all remember.

Another thing I would put to you is this: All the great dominions are beginning to expand their trade. The produce of every dominion is sailing the seas at every hour of the day. Should a crisis arise in the world is there any greater disaster that could come to any country than that the whole of its overseas trade should be cut off? But unless a country is prepared to do something to ensure that in the hour of danger it would be in a position to contribute in fair measure towards the protection of its own trade routes and overseas commerce it has to accept a position that is inferior to other countries and cannot claim to be put on a pedestal as a great, independent people.

As I understand it all of you who belong to this club are desirous of considering and thinking on the problems that affect your own country and questions that concern inter-Imperial relations and empire defence. I am not asking you to accept my views but to give consideration to certain facts that will at least give you an opportunity to think of these problems. Let me put to you the position with regard to the defence of the various parts of the empire. It is in some respects a common burden because the trade routes of the world are of equal interest to every one of us, or rather of interest in a progressively descending scale. The top of the scale of course is Great Britain. Second on the scale is the senior dominion, Canada, because she has the greatest overseas trade in the empire. Then we come down to Australia. Let me give you the figures of the expenditure, because I think these figures ought to be known and understood. I know if I belonged to any part of the Empire as a private citizen my pride in my own part of the empire would make it imperative for me to know exactly what the position was. The present basis of defence expenditure of the British Empire is this: With regard to the navy Great Britain is spending twenty-five shillings and seven pence per head of population, a total of sixty million pounds or three hundred million dollars. Canada spends eight pence per head on the navy or £291,000. Australia spends £5,143,000 or seventeen shillings and two pence per head. New Zealand is spending six shillings and nine pence and South Africa two pence. The army position is: Great Britain spends eighteen shillings and ten pence per head. Canada four shillings and three pence; Australia five shillings and two pence; New Zealand five shillings and nine pence and South Africa one shilling and nine pence. On the air force Great Britain spends six and eight pence, Canada eleven pence; Australia two and eight pence; New Zealand five pence and South Africa three pence. In addition to these there are other services that don't appear in Great Britain and Canada, but in Australia they are two and two pence a head, in New Zealand some fraction of a penny and in South Africa four pence. Taking the position for the whole of the Empire for 1925-26, which is the last year

available, Great Britain is spending fifty-one shillings and a penny per capita; Canada five shillings and ten pence; Australia twenty-seven and two pence; New Zealand twelve and eleven pence and South Africa two and six pence.

I am giving these figures to you because it seems to me we have to think this problem out. We have gone forward to the point where we are now in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of our own people nations with full self-government and full autonomy. If that is the position, it seems to me that we have got to think and think very hard whether we are prepared to go on claiming from Great Britain equality in every respect and at the same time say that she with her hard-pressed people shall provide fifty-one shillings and a penny per head for the defence of the empire as a whole, while we will spend only a few shillings although we are going through prosperous times. It seems to me the time has come when in all the dominions we have to recognize the great obligation we owe to the Mother country for the protection she has afforded us.

We have got to show the world that we have passed out of the stage of swaddling clothes and are lusty lads growing up with a sense of responsibility and with a determination to play our own part and pay our own way and in doing it return something to the Motherland which has done so much for us in the past.

Those who take, as a few would take, all that has been given us and then say, "It suits me no longer. I am going to depart and go out and seek my own selfish advantage,"—a people who could do that have not that great moral basis for true nationhood, and nobody can look into the future and believe they will achieve greatness.

I say this is a great empire we should all be proud to belong to; the one great solid rock that stands today in a world that has almost gone into chaos; that stands for all the great principles we believe in, all those things for which we fought the war; and I believe that everyone in this generation has a great obligation, that we should remember the lessons of the war and remember those million lives in that empire laid down for those great ideals. We should remember the sacrifice and suffering of our people and should

ensure that we will go forward with greater unity than we have known in the past, that unity springing from no tangible ties that man can see, but from a common allegiance to the throne, our common citizenship of the British Empire and based upon those great ideals of world peace and freedom and liberty and justice, which are the principles which everyone of us, as British nations, believe in and which we know are the only sure foundation for the future of the world.