(October 3, 1933)

The British Commonwealth Relations Conference

BY THE HONORABLE VINCENT MASSEY, P.C., LL.D.

PRESIDENT SIFTON:—We have with us today, the Honorable Vincent Massey. He has been introduced by our good friend Mr. Victor Ross, much better than I could possibly do it. There are one or two things, perhaps, that I might add to Mr. Ross' almost complete coverage of the subject. Mr. Massey has had an interesting experience before the Canadian Club. He has always spoken on some matter of foreign affairs, and on every occasion he has had a large audience. He has given a great deal of time and thought and service, at personal expense, to the study of these matters. Canada is a very young country in the handling of its own foreign affairs and Mr. Massey is about the only gentleman who has given an adequate study to the subjects which come up for discussion. He was our first minister at Washington and his holding of that position was notable for the fact that he showed no bias between any two sectional parts of Canada or any two of three or four of the political parties of Canada. At the time he was merely a representative of Canada, doing his work and doing it modestly and efficiently and carefully, winning the approval of all portions of Canadian society. It is very significant, in that being in such a position, as Canada's foreign relationships become more complex and wide-spread he will no doubt be more and more the person who is best posted on the subject. I take great pleasure in introducing Mr. Massey to address us on the subject of "The Commonwealth Conference."

HON. MR. MASSEY:—Mr. President and Gentlemen—I am very happy indeed to be able to meet my friends in the

Canadian Club again today. Your President is known to be a bold sportsman, but today he is risking too much. This distinguished body has had the privilege of receiving recently, in a formidable procession, eminent visitors from distant continents who have presented to you vast subjects of world-wide significance. And now, as a sort of anti-climax, Mr. Sifton calls up out of the country a local product to do nothing more exciting than talk to you about a recent meeting which took place half a mile from where you are sitting. He is putting his own reputation as chairman to an acid test; he is going to make heavy inroads on your own good nature; and as far as I am concerned,—well, I don't know what he is going to do to me. I have been asked to talk about the British Commonwealth Relations Conference. I am afraid that the only things to be said about it are either platitudes on the one hand or indiscretions on the other. I remember the advice which a colleague once gave to meet such a situation. "My boy," he said, "just make your platitudes sound like indiscretions!" However, this is a trade secret and it may not work any way. I suppose there is only one thing to be done about it. You and your President and I have all got into a fix together; and in a spirit of mutual commiseration we shall have to try and see it through.

This British Commonwealth Relations Conference was a gathering of some forty odd British subjects (the "odd" refers to the forty and not to the subjects), and met, as you know, in almost continuous session for ten days at the University of Toronto in the middle of last month. It may have appeared a rather mysterious, perhaps a purposeless gathering. I have no doubt whatever that many people have asked themselves "What's it all about? Who started it and why?" Well, I shan't worry you about the antecedents of this meeting, although they have their importance. This I will say, no conference could have had better preparation. Two years were spent in study and correspondence and organization by the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London and affiliated bodies here and elsewhere. I wish that the official Imperial Conference had had preparation one-half as effici-

ent and complete as this unofficial gathering had received.

I venture to suggest to you that, although the Conference was a very unobtrusive, almost a shrinking gathering so far as publicity was concerned, it was an event of more than ordinary significance and represented an experiment as useful as it was novel. It was as I shall try to show a very British Conference too. Its practical object was to discuss ways and means by which co-operation between the British nations could be promoted and improved. You may say this is the job of the Imperial Conference, why should laymen meddle in such things? Well, the very importance of this gathering lay in its being unofficial. The very distinguished groups who came here from Great Britain, from the sister Dominions and from India, which included both public men and academic authorities, belonged to all schools of thought in the communities from which they came. An official conference of governments like the Imperial Conference must naturally be composed of members of one party—that which for the time holds the responsibilities of office. This was a Conference of all parties. This was, too, a very informal gathering. Its deliberations were characterized by a frankness and candour which are far more difficult to achieve in a meeting whose members are responsible to some legislative body. Lastly, its meetings were for the most part private and we could escape those rosy clouds of after-dinner eloquence which sometimes abscure one's true perspective.

The major theme of our discussions was co-operation in foreign policy within the British Commonwealth. We discussed this in terms of practice and we discussed it in terms of theory. It was important to do both. The British Empire is, of course, good hunting-ground for the theorist. It presents the maximum number of divergent theories — and seems to survive them! The Continental observer, when he attempts with his nice sense of logic to discuss our domestic relationships, generally retires with a good many erroneous conclusions and possibly a headache besides. The Empire is, of course, largely undefinable. I rejoice in that fact because, I think that what is undefinable is generally indestructible as well. It is easy to make

profitless journeys into the realm of theory. But we must never forget the essential contribution which the scholar's detached mind may make to any question. The Commonwealth has suffered much in the past and suffers even now from loose thinking, and old-fashioned thinking, and from false sentimentality. The purely emotional approach to any subject generally provokes an attitude on the part of others which may seem cold and analytical. The reverse process is equally true. However profound real sentiment may be, it will not be impaired by clear thinking. Emotion is never a satisfactory substitute for thought, although it may provide the driving force behind an idea. After all, if the British nations have arrived, as I believe they have, at satisfactory relationships, this has been due to a combination of those who had a deep feeling for the Empire and those who thought clearly about the Empire. There need be no antagonism between them. It is possible to approach the subject with one's head or with one's heart, or both. I believe the majority of us bring to this great theme both head and heart.

Many differences of view are based on geography. One of the significant things in a gathering of people from various parts of the Commonwealth is to see how geography shapes one's thinking. Ours is a far-flung Empire. New Zealand's position, for instance, as a corner of England thrust out into the South Pacific, four days' sailing distance even from Australia, has little in common with our own, occupying as we do half a continent, with a next-door neighbor thirteen times our size. The Canadian view of the Empire and the New Zealand view cannot be identical. A serious problem for Dominions diversely situated is therefore to acquire a generous real comprehension of each other's problems and national way of thinking and to honestly try to discover the highest common factor between them. That in itself, in my opinion, justifies such a gathering as took place and every appropriate form of contact we may establish between the British sister states.

I have spoken of differences of outlook. Not only as between Dominions, but within a given Dominion there

are plenty of divergent views on matters of theory and principle. That is always true of an imperial gathering. We wouldn't be a British Empire if this wasn't so. But I am satisfied that there is more fundamental unity of mind, even on theoretical questions, now than ever before, And this Conference of which I am speaking, for all the varied points of view, revealed an underlying assumption, sincerely felt and with little need of vocal expression, of the untold value of the British Commonwealth, not only to its own members, but to society as a whole. If we can agree that civilization is the better for the existence and continuance of the Empire, and that our own national contribution to the world is best made through our membership in it, then we may leave various schools of thought to lay the emphasis where they desire—on the part or on the whole—and only ask of them mutual toleration. We must remember that the more critical thinkers on Imperial subjects have always been foolishly accused of disaffection, but they have nevertheless made constructive contributions to the welfare of the Empire itself.

As far as theoretical differences are concerned, however, it is sometimes wise to adopt the expedient I once heard described by an English statesman at the Imperial Conference and "arrive at your conclusion by the characteristic British course of scrupulously avoiding a decision."

You remember the old definition of a good travelling companion, to the effect that the best man to travel with is one who disagrees with all your arguments and agrees with all your plans. That, I believe, was true of this Conference.

Here again it was a very British Conference. When we got to the practical suggestions as to what could be done to make the Empire function better, to promote a fuller co-operation between the British nations, then there was an atmosphere of reality and a very full measure of agreement. The Anglo-Saxon is more concerned with facts than with theories. It is our way of thinking that the theory should be formulated after the facts are known. That was true of the great "Balfour Declaration" of 1926 which defined the modern British Empire in words with

which you are familiar. The Dominions, so it runs, "are autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations." The new relationships, of course, existed in effect before the formula was drafted. That, I think, suggests one secret of the Anglo-Saxon's genius for government. His desire is to see the machine work and he leaves it to the historian to define the principles which the statesman unconsciously applied in his day-to-day efforts to make it function.

This suggests one of the important objects of this Conference—to consider how the mechanism of the Commonwealth could be made to work better, to discuss what remains to be done to alter and improve existing machinery for consultation and exchange of information and to supply it where it may be missing. [It is surprising how much still remains to be done.] The old idea of a centralized Empire which has been long since wisely abandoned by all thinking people, was, of course, that of an Imperial structure supported by one central pillar in London. The self-governing states were to be linked with the mother country and with her alone. When that idea died, as it did die, and the conception of a group of associated member-states was gradually evolved, statesmanship was slow to follow out some of the implications of the new idea. The new Commonwealth is a structure resting on six columns, each on its own footing. But, if I may complete an architectural figure, we have never completed the cross-bracing between these pillars. The whole question has been left in rather a vacuum.

Let me mention one thing by way of illustration. An important fact was brought home to us in the course of the discussions — that in the capitals of the Dominions, foreign countries are more adequately represented than are the governments of other Dominions. In the case of Ottawa, for instance, three foreign states maintain relations with us through their ministers — relations which

meet the important conditions of being continuous and personal and direct. We exchange Trade Commissioners with other Dominions, it is true, but these officers, competent as they are, represent specialized functions and do not personally represent their governments as a whole.

(The mention of Trade Commissioner tempts me to make a brief digression. There is a view that if our relation with other nations is exclusively one of trade, then Trade Commissioners are all we need. Such relations are, of course, not confined to commerce; but even if they were, the Trade Commissioner, to do his job, needs someone whose scope is wider than trade to prepare the way for him and to do the things in connection with his task which no Trade Commissioner can do. Trade is best promoted by a representative whose duties are not limited to those of trade—whose functions are more than those of an expert and who can represent his government in the fullest sense, in other words to be government itself, with access to the highest officer in the government to which he is accredited. Specialists in trade like a Trade Commissioner are essential, but they can only do their best when assisted by senior officers with such general powers and status.) [This is true of Empire countries as well as foreign states, although their relations should cover much more than trade.]

The British Dominions still exchange no officers except Trade Commissioners. Dominions have indirect relations, of course, through their respective High Commissioners in London; and in the case of one or two Dominions, through Ministers in foreign capitals. But we have still to supply direct, continuous, personal relations with our sister British states. What do we in Canada know of the Australian mind, or of opinion in South Africa? They are sister British communities. We exchange with a foreign country like Japan Ministers through whom each country knows intimately what is going on in the other. We accept this interchange as being in the interest of intimate and friendly relations. Why should we fail to provide as between two Dominions of the British Commonwealth the corresponding machinery? This would involve no revolutionary step. The contact could be supplied quite simply and at relatively

modest cost by the interchange of quasi-diplomatic officers, call them High Commissioners or what you will. Such an interchange between London and Ottawa and London and Capetown works well. It would be one reasonable and useful step to extend the idea to inter-Dominion representation. It was interesting to see that there was general agreement in the recent Conference that such a development should take place.

It is of value to examine the relations of Dominions with one another. It is perhaps even more important to consider their growing responsibilities as individual sovereign states in the world at large. We thought much of the privileges of the new status. Have we given equal attention to the corresponding obligations? An interesting point often overlooked came up at the Conference in a general discussion of foreign representation. Although three Dominions have now established independent diplomatic missions where they thonght them necessary, there is but little thought of the question of Dominion consular services. We in Canada, as a matter of fact, have as yet no consuls at all. The Canadian traveller or business man requiring the services of a consul anywhere in the world finds his needs looked after very willingly and very efficiently by British officers. This is particularly true of British consuls in the United States in their work on behalf of Canadian citizens. As a matter of fact one of the little problems which had to be adjusted when the Canadian Legation was set up in Washington—if I may quote from personal experience — was the relation between the new Canadian Minister and British consuls. These were responsible to the British ambassador, but they had to do a considerable amount of business for Canada. So it was arranged, that in connection with their Canadian work, they should take instructions from the Canadian Minister. The plan, I may say, worked admirably and harmonious relations prevailed between the consular officers and the Legation throughout the period with which I am familiar. (I may say that the magnitude of their work is represented by the fact that some twelve hundred dispatches were sent from the Legation on an average each year to British con-

culs in the United States on Canadian business.) But to return to the problem. It would not seem a very self-respecting situation for a Dominion to be in, to be permanently dependent on Great Britain for these services. In my own view, as far as our own Dominion is concerned, the problem can best be solved, when economic conditions permit, by the very slow gradual establishment of our own consular service where it is most needed, working, of course, in close co-operation, particularly during the transsitional stage, with the British service itself.

This is perhaps a relatively unimportant instance of the anomalies which can survive in a slowly evolving system like that of the Commonwealth. It suggests a principle which is, however, important. I am one of those who firmly believe in the conception of fully developed nationhood embodied in the new British Empire. (Like others I believed in it before it became fashionable.) The Empire rests on a majestic paradox. The unity of the whole is based on the freedom of the parts — even the freedom to disagree! But our freedom has its implications. One of these is that of a growing responsibility. As we rise to a positive sense of this we will be less troubled by apprehensions and more occupied with practical problems. If we make our freedom real, we need be subject to no commitments which are not of our own making. We shall show our political maturity best by the active use of our new status rather than by any unreal fears that this status is in jeopardy. There is plenty for a Dominion to do in the world today, the Commonwealth itself offers a field for common action and individual initiative, too, with a great objective as the goal. I need not suggest what this goal is. The dispatches in the daily press tell it all too clearly. It is nothing less than the problem of maintaining peace itself.

The situation existing in the world today, grave as it is, gave a reality to the many earnest hours which the Conference spent on the relation which the Commonwealth should have to the new system created after the war on the theory that nations should be collectively responsible for keeping the peace, that arbitrary force should no longer

prevail. The League of Nations was set up to put this new collective system into effect. It is still in an experimental stage. What should be the relation between the old Empire and the new League, between the Commonwealth system and the Collective system? Are Empire and League mutually antagonistic? Can one in any sense be regarded as a substitute for the other? Or are they complementary? A great Englishman in this place only a few days ago gave you his view, which I believe to be the right view, and if the members of this recent Conference reflect accurately the opinion of the communities to which they belong, the general view is not unlike Lord Cecil's—namely, that the Commonwealth system and the international system are complementary. That there is no choice to be made between them. That each needs the other.

Nothing, I believe, is more unfortunate than the suggestion that there is something mutually hostile between the League of Nations and the British Commonwealth. The Commonwealth, as a matter of fact, gains strength from the League. If we abandoned all the efforts to substitute the rule of law for the rule of force and left the world to a precarious balance of military alliances consider the strain which would be imposed on an Empire stretching over five continents. No aggregation of human beings today so needs peace as do the British peoples. We cannot afford to lose our faith in an international system, however imperfect, which stands between us and a jungle world. There is no more fruitful ground for the co-operation of British nations than in the work of the League and the collective system. The problem of defence on the old prewar basis inevitably reveals divergent views in the Imperial family. An Empire plan of defence would threaten the unity of the Commonwealth and would defeat its own object, but in efforts towards the maintenance of peace under the collective system the British states can find a unifying force, and if the Commonwealth needs the League, the League needs the Commonwealth. The forces which have helped to bring about the League of Nations remain alive, powerful and, I believe, growing in its British mem-

ber states, and it is clear that in the strengthening of those forces lies the best hope, not only for the future of the Commonwealth itself, but for the preservation of the League and all it stands for.

Well, you may say, these are all right as far as general platitudes are concerned; but as the collective system has recently failed us, haven't we got to rely on the strength of the British Empire as a second line of defence? This sounds very plausible, but may I suggest for your consideration that it is not fair to say the League of Nations has failed. In several important crises with which it has dealt in its very short history, its efforts have met with very conspicuous success. Wars have been averted. But let us admit quite frankly that in the recent Oriental crisis the League definitely failed to achieve its main purpose, which was the elimination of arbitrary force as a method of ending conflict. A single determined power, operating on a nineteenth century basis, has proved too much for the moral forces of which the League was supposed to have been an expression. That is tragically true. But in dealing with this very fundamental question, the recent conference was in general agreement that such failure was not due to any defects in the machinery of the League and the collective system, but to two main causes. One of these is the non-membership of certain great states, but I believe the graver one is the failure of members of the League to face the full implications of the Covenant which they had signed. They refused to take the necessary risks to their individual interests in implementing their obligations. The British states must bear their share of blame. This is a pretty serious self-indictment. The League of Nations is after all nothing more than a group of sovereign states who agree to do certain things in certain circumstances Circumstances arose and the things were not done. Had Geneva not wasted precious months in tragic vacillation—alternating in weakness and bluff — the outcome of the Manchurian incident *might* have been averted. You may say that the task of applying sanctions to an outlaw power involves grave risk. So it does. Surely it is true to say that the risk involved will be no greater than the risks

which would follow the complete break-down of the League machinery through lack of the support which it must have to function. We are living in an atmosphere today which gives reality, desperate reality, to a consideration of these things. The mood of Europe is more like that of 1914 than it has been at any time for the last eighteen years.

This may seem irrelevant to an account of the British Empire Conference. I don't think it is. I can only say that this represented the most significant and single question which engaged the attention of the recent gathering. And if one thing emerged from the meetings more important than another it was the view which met with general agreement that the British States should cooperate wholeheartedly to strengthen the collective system both for the sake of the Commonwealth and the world in which it exists.

For the last two years it is true, the collective system may seem to many to be a vague aspiration rather than a concrete fact. The only alternative to chaos is to make it a fact. You are no doubt familiar with the eloquent statement made by Lord Lytton in his famous conversation with the Japanese foreign minister, when he pointed out that the nations who lost millions of lives and billions of treasure in the Great War got out of it just one thing —the collective system for the maintenance of peace; and this he called, and rightly called, the "life-line of civilization". The line may now be worn and frayed, dangerously frayed in places. It is our simple duty to help strengthen it.

What about Canada's relation to these things? I think it's true to say that the Canadian members of this Conference left its sessions with a renewed consciousness of how much the outside world means to us. There is no security for any state today. Even we, with all our isolation, are not safe. It is a matter of self-interest for us to take foreign affairs more seriously than we do. We have a task to perform in this field—an opportunity for usefulness larger than we realise. We are small, we are young; but Canada has a prestige in the international sphere out of proportion to her size or her youth. We are happy in

having no enemies. We can be accused of no ulterior purpose. We can approach international questions with an obvious disinterestedness and with the force which that rare quality lends. Our participation should be no perfunctory matter.

A British Dominion has after all a two-fold opportunity. It can speak and act with all the freedom of complete nationhood; on the other hand, as a member of the British Commonwealth, it has behind it the prestige of a great Empire. A Dominion, to quote a homely adage, is in the position of eating its cake and having it too — a unique privilege. It can bring its influence to bear on British policy when it may be appropriate, as has been done in the past. It can speak its mind to Great Britain with all the candour which is appropriate between members of the same family.

It is, of course, true of the sphere of foreign affairs—perhaps more than of domestic matters—that Governments cannot move much faster than the public opinion to which they are responsible. The education of public opinion is a democratic responsibility which a democracy sometimes forgets. How many of us really know what we as a nation have promised to do as signatories of the League of Nations Covenant; or what the sanctions mean which we are committed to apply? It surely requires no argument to prove the importance of an informed public opinion on these matters. What are the means of its accomplishment? There are obvious agencies performing an invaluable service—The League of Nations Society, Canadian Clubs, the Universities—I needn't name them. But something else is needed. Governments, although they reflect public opinion, can help to instruct it. The Foreign Minister of most states represents the means by which the community is officially informed of the impact of foreign affairs. With us, as with all other Dominions save one, the Portfolio of External Affairs is attached to the office of the Prime Minister, which is already burdened with supreme responsibilities. It was felt by the recent Conference—and here is another change in machinery with great possibilities — that if a Dominion Minister of External

Affairs were charged with those duties alone, he could not only give appropriate attention to a work of growing importance, but he could afford to be absent abroad for months as a normal part of his work, informing himself and giving his government continuous and experienced representation at the League Assembly; he would be free to address public audiences on foreign affairs while in Canada and could stimulate the interest of Parliament itself in such questions and our relation to them. These important services can never be adequately performed until the Department of External Affairs has a minister of its own with no conflicting or competing responsibilities. The Conference was in general agreement on this principle.

Well, gentlemen, it is for each Dominion to act as its people and parliament direct. I believe, however, that in the great fundamental questions which confront the world today, the British states possess common views. The Empire may or may not be a legal entity. The arguments over this would be endless and none too profitable. But for all our differences, I believe we do possess a moral and spiritual unity. I believe that we have in common an intangible something which we derive from the life and character of the mother country herself. For lack of a better phrase, shall I call it the British spirit? It is not the spirit of "Rule Britannia!" — that is out of date — but a humbler, nobler thing than that. We may sometimes disagree with British policy; but I think there has been nothing half as constructive in the world for the last fifteen critical years as the attitude of Great Britain on the questions which confront us. What are the qualities of the spirit behind it? Let me state some of them, not in terms of rhetoric, but as I believe the simple truth to be. One of them is tolerance — let's not forget it. What are the others. A largeness of mind and a readiness to welcome diversity—and use its gift, a stubborn respect for unlimited liberty, a sense of responsibility and trusteeship, where such is needed, political wisdom and maturity—none equal to it—and above all, an honest, even a passionate devotion to peace. It is for us in Canada to comprehend these things and to remember that it is ours

to share them too, and help extend their influence in the world today in a generous spirit of cooperation.

PRESIDENT SIFTON:—I just wish to detain you for one moment with the consent of the members, and with the indulgence of the other distinguished guests we have at the head table, I a m going to mention especially one of them. We have with us at the head table a gentleman who has given very generously of his life and faculties in the promotion of this Institute of International Affairs. I am referring to the Right Hon. Mr. Rowell and I have taken the opportunity of asking him to say a few words at the conclusion of this meeting, but he has asked me to say unfortunately that he does not feel up to it. His health is not all that can be expected. He is taking a few months holidays and, if I may be allowed, I want to wish him on behalf of the Club, the best of fortune and return to health."

I need not attempt to put into words your appreciation of Hon. Mr. Massey's visit here today. He has given a very careful, analytical and courageous statement of the meetings recently held and I wish to thank him very much on your behalf and my own.