(August 18, 1930)

India

By Sir John Simon

Sir John Simon:—Mr. President and gentlemen, I esteem most highly the opportunity which this great audience of busy men gives me to address them for a short time on some aspects of the Indian problem. I made an appeal to this room two days ago at a luncheon when I was speaking to the Canadian people to study this vast, engrossing, fascinating, important question, and if you will forgive me now I shall deal with a few of the salient problems and elementary facts about India, rather than spend time in discussing possible solutions. It is not because I do not realize that your anxiety is as regards the future, but it is because all wise judges in dealing with so complicated an issue must depend upon an appreciation of the circumstances which will control.

Now it is quite impossible to compress within the compass of a speech like this an adequate account of any aspect of this Indian problem and all I am going to try to do is to attempt a short business-like discussion of some of its principal features, hoping that those who hear me may reflect upon them and possibly may be disposed to study them more in detail in the volumes of the Indian Commission report, and as we are all here business people trying to avoid the waste of any time, I shall not use any preliminary language but address myself at once to some aspects of my task.

We have to consider a part of the world which differs in every conceivable respect from the world which you Canadians know at first hand and at your own doors. An accumulation, you might almost say a jumble, of populations, races, religions, languages, civilizations, and an outlook based on ancient Oriental traditions, and a view of life which is to a large extent quite at variance with yours and mine. This Indian outlook is largely the outcome of civilizations more ancient than our own. It is produced from a philosophy which may be more subtle and certainly is difficult for those of other origins always fully to understand. As I have spent my time studying such a question I have become more and more anxious to try to understand and more and more filled with the determination that no word of mine, no act of mine, no recommendation of mine, shall ever fail to do justice to the splendid traditions attached to the Indian people. But sympathy and understanding, in order to be of value in a matter like this, must not be some vague emotion which readily adopts a formula or repeats a slogan. It has to be based as far as possible on knowledge. And a little corner of that India is what I am going to try to disclose in my remarks today.

First let me tell you how the report—here it is—came to be written. The Government of India Act is an Act of 1919, eleven years ago, and on that the present situation of British India is built. That Act was based on the Montagu declaration of policy made during the war by which every party of responsible statesmen in Britain and the Empire is bound. That declaration was a declaration of policy for the increasing association of Indians in every branch of Indian administration and for the gradual development of self-governing institutions in British India with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government, in British India, as an integral part of the Empire. That was the Montagu declaration and the declaration went on to say that progress could only take place by stages, for we move in a world which is very strange to these institutions so familiar to you and me, that the time and the manner of the advance must be determined by the Imperial parliament, and that the future action to be taken must depend on the co-operation and on the extent to which confidence could be placed in the sense of responsibility that was developed. That was the substance of the famous Montagu declaration.

The Government of India Act was passed. Very substantial steps were taken towards greater self-government in

India. India at least has this resemblance to the Dominion of Canada, that it has nine major provinces and in each one of these a legislature, the members of which are for the most part elected by constituencies, has been set up, and in the same way there is a great legislature at the center, with two chambers, in each of which the majority of the members is elected. And in the provinces the ingenious system of dyarchy which was due very largely to the fertile brain of Lionel Curtis, was instituted, so that today in all of the great provinces of India there are Indian ministers who are administering, responsible to the Indian legislature, such departments as education, public health, local government, and so forth. A very great step was taken. And when it was taken the Act of Parliament went on to provide that after a certain interval, which was originally to have been ten years, but was afterwards reduced to six or seven, a commission should be appointed, the names to be voted upon and approved individually by each of the two houses of the Imperial Parliament, which would have the task of reviewing the situation and making recommendations. And it was my good fortune and grave responsibility to be called upon unanimously by both houses of Parliament to act as the chairman of that Indian Statutory Commission.

Now, be quite clear what it is we had to do and have tried to do to the very utmost of our power. We have not got to decide. We had to report. We had not got to legislate. We had to recommend. And one of the matters in which I take, I believe, legitimate pride and satisfaction is this, that the commission of seven members of Parliament, drawn from all the political parties of Britain and from both Houses of Parliament, men whose outlooks in our domestic affairs very widely differ, as the result of nearly three years of assiduous labor and inquiry, is able to present an absolutely unanimous report. We had to say whether and to what extent it was desirable to establish the principle of responsible government or to extend, modify or restrict it, and for that purpose we had to inquire into the working of the system of government and the course which had been followed, circumstances in which action had been taken during the time since the Government of India Act was passed.

I am here not to propound some solution, nor to make criticisms of others, but to help some of my fellow-subjects, who are good enough to listen to me for a short time, quickly, and I hope accurately, to get some of the impressions which in course of time forced themselves upon my own mind and observation. You live so far away that you may well be excused for not having these things always intimately before you. But believe me, my Canadian friends, the time is coming when Canada, entering upon her duty and responsibility in world affairs, will have her own part to play and her duty to do in promoting the progress of mankind by showing a sympathetic understanding of this vast Indian problem.

Now, the first impression, the overwhelming impression, which you would get if you had my experience, is the size and the complexity of the problem itself. Take just two or three figures. The total area that is involved, nearly all of it densely populated, is very nearly two million square miles. That does not seem so alarming to a Canadian as it does perhaps to a stay-at-home Briton. At any rate it is more than twenty times the area of Great Britain. But instead of being an area with limited population the total population that is involved is one-fifth of the inhabitants of the whole globe, 320,000,000 people. That, at least, is an astonishing figure for Canadians, and perhaps it is not without gratification you will observe it is nearly two and a half times the population of the United States.

Take a single province or two. There are many people who speak very confidently about India who have never been to Burmah, one of the nine provinces. Why the province of Burmah alone is larger than the whole of France and it has traditions, social customs, and interesting Burmese characteristics which show you what a very varied business it is to make yourself reasonably acquainted with the problem of India as a whole. Madras is bigger than the whole of Italy. If you were to take all the nine major provinces, the smallest of them all, the province of Assam, is rather bigger than little England. Take the populations including Assam, every single big province in India, eight out of the nine, has a population bigger than the whole of Canada.

Three of them, each of the three, has a bigger population than the whole of Great Britain. But it is not limited to areas and populations. You must conceive of India as an accumulation of peoples who have differences amongst themselves far more profound and difficult to reconcile than anything that we have experience of in our modern world. Languages! Well, leaving out all the vernaculars, some two hundred or more, there are a dozen or a score or more languages in India, some of them belonging to an entirely different family of speech from the others. Many of them hold sway over vast areas, but so distributed that no man could go about India and be sure of making himself understood in the country side in all parts, unless he is a very exceptionally accomplished linguist. It is for that very reason that when a young man becomes a member of the Indian Civil Service the first thing that happens to him is he is allotted to a province and in that province he carries through his working life, because he acquires the two, three, or four tongues necessary for administering the duties of his own area.

But much more important than area and population and language is to get a conception of what ordinary life in India is like. We read the speeches and sometimes receive visitors from India. Often most distinguished, eloquent, subtle men and women. But for the most part they come from that Indian intelligentia which concentrates in the towns of India, the towns where the lawyers are, believe me, in even greater numbers than they are in the City of Toronto. But though that is all very important that is not the aspect of India as a whole. India is a land of villages. There are over half a million villages in India, very many of them having no metalled road of approach, a little accumulation of mud-walled, straw-thatched, dwellings, the temple or the shrine, the village tank, which serves both as a water supply and bath-room for most of them, the fields scattered about outside the villages, not the great prairies that you know here and further west, but subdivided little tenures, because you know both the Hindu law and the other law which prevails there largely results in the breaking up into small partitions of little family plots. And here is an

amusing thing. When the last census in India was taken they chose a moonlight night, with the certainty that they knew before the day came what the weather was going to be, and the ennumerators went around and counted up these three hundred and twenty million people. One question that was put on the census paper was this: "Where were you born?" And in ninety per cent of the cases the answer was, "I was born here in the district where I am now living." And I think in two thirds of the remaining cases they were born in the next county. Now conceive therefore of an immense accumulation of mankind which to a large extent is concentrated in village life, more than seventy per cent of the population directly depending on agriculture, the great landlord, the small tenant, the landless man.

That is the heart and the center of the Indian problem and it is because I feel so deeply the responsibility that rests upon all of us to understand and sympathize with the difficulties of the Indian problem that I mention that fact to you. There are factories in Indian towns but to a very large extent they draw the urban worker from the villages and he goes back to his own home where he and his fathers before him have lived for countless generations. That is the side of India which you do not see. It is a side of India which is so important that we must never allow it to escape from our grasp. You may ask then how far is there anything which you can call a unity which goes by the name of India, because, in effect, in point of size, India is like a sub-continent. It is about the size of Europe if you leave Russia out, and this mixture of languages and religions and races and peoples gives it from many points of view the aspect far more of a continent than a single community. And unquestionably there are very great difficulties in the way of getting a sense of unity in India. Only fourteen men out of every hundred are literate in any language at all. Only two women in every hundred can read or write any tongue whatever. That is a great obstacle in the way of the development of India.

But there are things which are helping a great deal to bring it about. I have no doubt whatever that the event in modern history which has chiefly contributed toward the

unity of India is British administration. You have spread all over the continent the tradition of a system of government which has gradually been established, of which we who are Britons may at least say this with pride, that whatever else has been the subject of criticism or obloquy, nobody has ever dared to suggest that the British administrators at the heads of government have not carried out their government purely and without corruption. Both the Indian administrators and the British administrators who are responsible in the different districts maintain that high standard, and one great gift which Britain has given India is that it has made plain to the mass of the people that there is such a thing as even-handed justice and impartial administration so far as human beings can accomplish it.

And a second thing that is binding India together undoubtedly is the use among the educated minority of the English language. Every congress and conference in India, such as you have just been having here, are to a large extent conducted in English because it is the common mode of communication between educated men coming from different parts of that great subcontinent. Even so I think out of the total of three hundred and twenty millions there are only two and a half millions that are regarded as speaking English.

And thirdly, and extremely important, is the development of this great moving force which is called Indian Nationalist Movement. I do not belittle it in the very least. I sympathize with the aspirations that are behind it with all my heart, but I know if I were in India I should share the aspiration of the educated Indian minority to see my country steadily advancing in its status in the world and taking its own responsibilities upon its own shoulders. No one is more full of a genuine feeling that that is the ultimate goal for which all honest men should strive than the chairman of the Indian Statutory Commission. But let us face the difficulties like sensible people. An effort was made to spread the franchise as widely as possible. The result up to the present is that only three per cent of the population are electors. If you exclude the women and children, of the adult male population about ten per cent are voting, and though the commission over

which I presided did their utmost to recommend extensions, when we considered the practical obligations of carrying out elections, the enormously wide spread prevalence of illiteracy and misunderstanding, we found it quite impossible to recommend more than a comparatively moderate advance at this time.

But now comes another aspect of it which really itself is so foreign to our own experience that it is difficult to convey in a few sentences the gravity of the matter. You have in India communities of differing races and religions whose mutual antagonisms far exceed anything of which we have any sort of experience. No man who comes to Canada or knows anything about the history of the province of Quebec can feel but hopeful that by wise and just and honest sympathetic development you may bring about a reconciliation and good will between people of different origins and languages. But the French-speaking and the English-speaking Canadians come from a common stock. They acknowledge the fundamentals of a common religion. They are the product of a common civilization. If just administration and fair arrangements can be made there is no reason whatever why they should not live as they do live in amity together. Now the problem the Indian statesman has to face is altogether different. There are two hundred and sixteen millions of Hindus; there are seventy millions of Mohammedans, in addition to Sikhs, Indian Christians, and all sorts of other people.

Consider the contrast. You have not got this Mohammedan minority concentrated in one place like the Orangemen in Ulster, so far as Ireland is concerned. The Mohammedans are spread over every part of India. In no single province are they unimportant. In two provinces they form an actual majority of the population, though not of the voters, and everywhere you find this gathering together of the two races side by side. And the result is exceedingly difficult for the administrators and makes it very difficult indeed to provide a system of representative self-government for India. The Mohammedan, a monotheist, an iconoclast, a man supremely proud of the martial traditions of his race, representing the ancient conquerors of Inde; the Hindu, far

more numerous, deeply devoted to his own system of society and religion, far cleverer and more subtle, holding a very large proportion of the high posts, having contributed as much to the intellectual subtlety of the world as any race of people that ever lived. The rivalry and dissension between these two forces has proved to be one of the chief stumbling blocks in the way of smoother and more rapid progress. The devout Hindu reveres the cow and regards it as an object of very special protection. He would not willingly take part in any circumstance that deprived that sacred animal of life. On the other hand in the same village or town there are Mohammedans who at certain seasons of the year desire to make ceremonial sacrifice of a cow in accordance with the rites of their religion. The Hindu marriage festival as I have seen it more than once in that marvellous country, conducted amidst rejoicing of the friends of the parties, with Hindu music at the head of the procession, may be passing by a Mohammedan mosque at the moment of solemn silence and very naturally both parties very deeply resent being interfered with; and it is a literal fact and I care not who denies it (it cannot be successfully challenged), that in that situation it has been found that the intervention and the assistance of some neutral authority, something that is neither Hindu nor Mohammedan, the head of the police, whether he is English or an Indian Christian, is at any rate not regarded as associated by religion or race with either side. There can be no question at all that when this trouble arises both sides cannot but regard the intervention of a neutral as a very admirable way out of their troubles. Therefore, you have to consider what is going to be the future of a country which presents a complicated issue of that sort.

Take another thing. You speak of two hundred million Hindus. But you must understand them to be what they are, subdivided into some two thousand three hundred castes, from the Brahmin at the top, with monopoly of the priestly office and his ancient claim to have the principal possession of knowledge, to the lowest and most degraded and depressed or "untouchable" at the bottom. And this caste system is the very foundation of Hindu social life.

Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the caste of his parents. Nothing that can happen to him through life will ever take him out of it. He inevitably remains within it. A strong tradition of his ancient society requires him to marry within it. The caste may be occupational so that all the members of it are engaged in some particular job in life. It may have some of the functions of a guild which has the very excellent result that every member regards every other member of his caste as a fellow and to a large extent dispenses with the need of a poor law. But on the other hand the very barrier which brings together the members of one caste separates them from every other with the result that when you try to assist, as we are all trying to assist, the development of representative and self-governing institutions in India you have to face the difficulties as they are and not deal with the question light-heartedly by omitting them from your thoughts or speech.

The position which the Brahmin holds in this immense structure is one of the most surprising things in the history of the human race. There are only about seven million Brahmin males and the extent to which in some parts of India this most remarkable people, the inheritors of ancient traditions of learning, exercise sway and hold high positions which they have earned by their intellectual ability is one of the most astonishing features of Indian life. So much so that in the great province of Madras, when the Montagu report was put into operation, it was thought necessary to protect the other Hindu castes from the practical monopoly which the Brahmins might otherwise secure, and they actually enacted that twenty-eight seats in the Madras legislature must be filled by Hindu members who were not Brahmins. And what do you suppose was the number of Brahmins to the Hindu population in Madras, this large, overwhelming, dangerous force. The Brahmins in the province of Madras are about four per cent of the total of the Hindu population of that province.

Now these things are slowly breaking down. There are many advanced and thoughtful minds in India trying to help and they have the respect and good will of all who see its bad qualities, but this ancient social tradition goes back

thousands and thousands of years, depending doubtless on much that is sacred, and much that is very difficult to fit in at short notice in a system of full self-governing responsibility, because at the very bottom of the scale are the depressed classes or the "untouchables". I would like to explain what that means. Something like one-fifth of the total population of India, something like thirty per cent of the Hindu population, are people who are classed as depressed classes, at the very bottom of the Hindu scale, and, in some parts of the country at least, suffer very grave social disabilities. Again and again if you go into a village you will find the depressed classes are living in a little separate hamlet. They are required to draw their water from a separate source. Even their children are not admitted to the ordinary school and while very honorable efforts are being made by some Indian reformers to improve this system you are faced with this fact that this immense mass of miserable, landless, hopeless, people are bound up in a social system which is slightly changing and changing with the help of the most progressive Indian thought, but which cannot possibly be transformed into the sort of community we know without the passage of time and influence of public opinion.

Now that is a little sketch of the kind of situation which has to be dealt with. But there are two things to add. I have merely been speaking of British India. Scattered all over India, occupying one-third of its total territory, are no less than five hundred and sixty Indian States which are not British territory at all. Some of them are ruled over by men of the greatest culture and standing. Some of them are small states. Some of them comprise just a few acres. These states have their arrangements made long ago with the British Crown by which the crown is responsible for its external relations, and is answerable for their defence, and you can see at once what a very great problem the Indian states create in endeavoring to work out a scheme for the further rapid advance of Indian self-government.

And there remains one other thing which I will mention in three or four sentences. It is the problem of

Indian defence and the Indian army. The army in India consists at present of about sixty thousand British troops and about one hundred and fifty thousand Indian troops. The Indian troops, which compose what is strictly called the Indian army, to a large extent are officered by British officers, but the rank and file and some junior officers are Indians and in time it is hoped the King's Commission may be held in the higher ranks. In parts of India, not in all, you will find some of the very fine fighting material that you in the Canadian forces may have come across in the fields of war during the last few years. I pay all possible tribute to the martial character and fine spirit of these people, though they are drawn to a very large extent only from certain parts of India. But the difficulty that is involved in providing for the needs of India on the side of defence and internal security are something which up to the present experience has shown can only be met by a combined force of this kind.

You are reading in your paper today telegrams from Peshawur on the Afgham frontier. I have been there more than once and they live there under at any rate some of the conditions which may be strange to you. The northwest frontier of India is the one serious land frontier of the British Empire which presents an absolute first-class military problem. Here you have between you and your great neighbors three thousand miles without a fort or a gun. War between you two is unthinkable. Australia, New Zealand, or Ireland, the vast island dominions are far away from any military invasion. South Africa has its own special protection owing to its surface. But here on the northwest frontier of India, through all the ages, have poured invaders from the north and west, and there are found there today wild men, brave men, fanatical men, with I know not what influences at work behind them. You can see from our news only of this week quite a serious situation on the northwest frontier. Anything more unlike the plains of India than the Khyber pass has never been seen. It is a far more surprising contrast than the contrast, surprising as it is, between the Rocky Mountains and the plain land that I know well in some parts of this Dominion. And therefore you have

here another tremendous problem for statesmanship, which we have all got to study and try to help to find a way by which step by step we may hope to bring this vast, mixed Indian population which itself has no inheritance of self-governing and representative institutions to help it take its proper part, as it will and must take in time, in the government and administration of its own people.

Now, gentlemen, I have occupied my time, some of you may think, with very elementary things, but, believe me, it is astonishing what a lot of speeches I read and what a lot of observations I hear which show these elementary things are not always borne in mind. When you and I try to consider how the future development of the Indian situation may best be solved, at least be sure of this, solved it will be I am confident of it, and I do not believe that anybody who will study the two volumes of this report will doubt it. All who know India as a whole will be bound to agree the future situation of India cannot be a mere imitation at second hand of a system prevailing under different circumstances elsewhere. It might conceivably take many forms of imitation but what exists elsewhere I am quite sure is not the form it can take. It must take a form which is suited both to the immensity and to the variety of India. It must take a form which is shaped by providing for the needs and circumstances of her many people.

As I read from the studyings of the last twenty or thirty years of the students of our Empire, I believe there is a real lesson to be learned from the analogy of a Dominion such as your own. Each of the great self-governing dominions of the crown has grown to be what it is by going through a process of development which at each stage was adjusted to its own needs, and in every case the ultimate form of government that has emerged is not something that has been conferred upon it or enacted by force of law, but is something which grows out of the character of the peoples concerned. In many cases, as in your own, it has been evolved by degrees as the ultimate meeting together of smaller units into a greater, federated whole, and as you know the unanimous view of the Indian Commission is that it is

along that line that India will find her constitutional development proceed.

As a rule the constitutions of the British Empire do not lay down a whole series of little detailed rules about one hundred and one things. They rely upon the strength and character of the institution to fill in the gap. And these things come about not because an Act of Parliament says so but because in the life of a growing organism the stage is reached when it is found that this is the best way in which to express in a given case the responsibilities of citizenship. I am most profoundly convinced that it is by approaching this vast Indian problem in that sane and sympathetic spirit and not by repeating some arid formula without considering the real nature of the problem that the solution is going to be found. Now the responsibility of Britain in this matter is beyond all denial. History and the facts have made it so. I would venture to repeat to you some words which I used when I was first appointed chairman of this commission three years ago and which have since been repeated in the House of Commons by the Prime Minister of the day. I said this:—

"The British Parliament has a tremendous responsibility to the peoples of India. It is a responsibility which cannot be denied and cannot be evaded. For it is rooted in history and in the facts of the world of today. If, therefore, the future of India is to be one of peaceful progress, as all men of good will both in India and in Britain intensely desire, it can only come about by the action of the British Parliament combined with the co-operation of India itself. Both are provided for in the scheme of investigation and consultation of which the work of the commission is the first stage. The commission did not go to India with any idea of imposing western ideas or constitutional forms from without. We went to listen, to learn, to study varying proposals on the spot and from within. And when the Commission has reported then the scheme provides that full and final consultation which is the essential condition upon which all depends before reaching the decision."

I repeat that here today, but I add this. My Canadian friends, the younger men amongst you most of all, realize

that this is not merely a Canadian question; it is not a question with which Britain especially in an isolated sense is concerned; it is not perhaps in the true view a question in which the Empire is concerned. It is the great international question of the world. If we can help by a proper spirit and understanding and sympathy these people who have their high aspirations which we all respect; if we can help them along the road; if we can bring in our practical experience, our constructive ability, our own knowledge of the way which our own interests are developed to help a people who have not inherited those traditions, then I believe we shall have done a finer thing than was ever done in the history of the contact between the modern world and this ancient and mysterious east. If we do not, I tremble to think what the future history of our globe may be. But if we exhibit the right spirit of comprehension and understanding, not raising obstacles for the sake of blocking progress, but pointing out justice and charting difficulties for the purpose of helping the Indians themselves to steer around them, then it may be you here in Canada, like ourselves in Britain, will have made a contribution to the future peace of the world which generations yet unborn will look back to with gratitude and content.