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Problems of British Administration in India

BY BASIL ALLEN, C.S.I.

THE PRESIDENT:—Gentlemen, the British Government has recognized that this is a decisive period in the history of the Indian Empire. The gigantic task which it has undertaken of providing the Indian people with the instruments of government constitutes probably the greatest experiment in politics which any nation in the history of the world has ever embarked upon. It is a heavy responsibility for British Statesmen to initiate responsible government in a community so immense and to determine the political future of three hundred and twenty millions of people inexperienced in self-government, with widely different languages and religions and with a culture and mentality varying widely from our own.

It is a privilege to welcome as our guest today one who can speak to us from an experience in the Indian civil service extending over a period of thirty years and whose knowledge of the problems confronting British administration in India is first hand and authoritative. I have much pleasure in introducing Mr. Basil Allen.

MR. ALLEN:—Gentlemen, About a week ago I was rather inclined to wonder why an important association like your own—a number of busy business men—should want to hear anything about India. But during the last few days I have read two articles which have suggested to me that the responsibility is just as great that I should speak to you today.

One of them I skimmed hurriedly through. So far as I saw, it purported to say that Canada had been there in South Africa; Canada had been there in France; Canada

had been there again in India. Gentlemen, when I read that article I knew at once that Canada could be depended upon to play her part if needed, but I was absolutely astonished that anybody should think that anything so serious was likely to occur. The other article purported to reproduce the remarks of Mr. Andrews, and my experience of the Canadian press is that they are extremely accurate reporters. Mr. Andrews said that unless Great Britain made a great and generous gesture, the most serious consequences might result. Well, gentlemen, I think I shall only be voicing your opinion that no great government is going to do what it thinks is not right and best for the masses of the people whom it represents simply because of one or two sayings. Such a suggestion is unworthy of the British Government. Gentlemen, I am naturally pessimistic but, in this particular matter, I am entirely optimistic. The trouble is you have in India at the present time, a political agitation which is due to the anxiety of a small section of the Indian people to press on to a form of government more elaborate than that at present enjoyed and a form which they have never hitherto experienced.

Well, gentlemen, before you can form any judgment of the kind of government suitable for the people you must know something of the kind of people for whom that government is being designed. The population of India is an enormous population. It is a population of about three hundred and twenty millions about 250,000,000 of whom live in British India and the others in Indian states which are in treaty association with His Majesty. That alone makes the problem a very serious and difficult one; and the British Government has deliberately tried to introduce a form of representation and responsible government such as prevails in Great Britain and such as prevails in Canada. Now there are certain reasons which make it particularly difficult to set up a government of that kind in India. The population of India is utterly different from the population of Great Britain or the population of Canada. At best you get an enormous mass of illiterate uninstructed pessimists. The people from immemorial generations have been simply concerned with the cultivation of their land. They are utterly aloof from the progress of civilization. They

live in half a million little villages. Ninety per cent of them are living in villages as compared with fifty per cent in Canada. For years the Government has been pressing on with schemes of education; but education costs money and, although primary education is free, it is not, except in very few areas, compulsory. There are eleven million people at present in school but there is the enormous mass of the population who are illiterate and who really do not care for or understand anything in the shape of politics. Then come the small, more or less educated, middle class and, at the top, you have the very small, highly cultured class, which include poets, philosophers and eminent literary men.

India never has been a union. There is, therefore, you understand, no sense of historical unity in India. Socially again, India is much more a country of different religions than a country of different nations. If you asked the ordinary man in India what he was, he would not say he was Indian. Ninety-nine and a quarter per cent speak only one of these many vernaculars. There are two hundred and twenty different vernaculars in India and you can realize what that fact means. If you were to ask one of the 99% what he was, he would almost certainly say, 'I am Hindu,' or 'Mohammedan,' as the case might be. Between Hindus and Mohammedans there is a continual feud. During the eighteen months from September, 1927, there have been no less than five risings and three hundred people killed and two thousand seven hundred injured. And quite recently, you remember, rioting started in Bombay and one hundred and forty-seven people were killed before order was restored.

The British do not hold India down. We could not carry on for a week without the support of the majority of the population. In Bengal recently we had a political agitation. What was the army with which we kept the people down? There was not a soldier in the whole Province. Our sole striking force was a hundred military policemen. We do not rule India by the sword. India had always been ruled by an autocracy and the autocratic system was carried on when we went there in the eighteenth century. Nobody then would have attempted to introduce democracy in the East. As time passed on we increased the numbers

on the Legislative Councils to enable the opinion of the Indian to be more clearly represented. It was not until by those means, that Indians were able to make their influence felt. I was talking to a legislator at Ottawa and he was surprised when I told him that all draft bills in India were widely circulated; that every government official received a copy and was asked for an opinion. Before rendering an opinion he would not only approach the simple villagers but he would secure the opinions of educated Indians with whom it was his duty to establish contacts. Apart from that, all municipalities and districts, which are largely represented by educated Indians, and members of Council were also asked to submit opinions. Indians had, therefore, every opportunity of making their opinions known to a government which was perhaps the most impartial government that has ever existed in the world. With the Montagu-Chelmsford revision a new era was introduced. I should like to touch on the share the Indians have taken in official administration. The Executive you had there may be divided into the higher and the lower. About a third of the staff is Indian and the Indian personnel is being steadily increased and in the premier Indian Civil Service we aim at least at an Indian share of fifty per cent. I should explain that the Indian Civil Service is just as much open to Indians as to Europeans. If Indians had succeeded in passing examinations in sufficiently large numbers, the whole service would be Indian. I myself, twenty years ago, felt that the fact that the examination was held in London was an undue handicap to Indians and that some arrangement ought to be made to recruit a certain proportion of Indian boys direct in India. Well, the Montagu-Chelmsford revision introduced a system of direct election such as we have in this country. The electorate was of necessity a small one, only one person in two hundred and forty has a vote for the Legislative Assembly which corresponds to our House of Commons and the percentage of voters for the provincial Councils varied from 3 to 4 per cent. In an advanced Province like Bengal 66 per cent. of the Mohammedan and 43 per cent. of the non-Mohammedan electors are unable to read and write. You see what it is the British Government is

confronted with. The Legislative Assemblies are predominantly composed of educated Indians. The Government is in a hopeless minority in the Legislative Councils of India. The Viceroy's Cabinet consists of three Indian and three European members, the Viceroy himself and the Commander-in-Chief. The Indians are not in a majority there but in a substantial minority.

In the Provinces, for every European minister there are three Indians. You can see the share Indians have obtained in the government of their own country is a very substantial one. Unfortunately, however, the Nationalist Indians have not tried to work the new system. For a long time they stayed within the Council in two Provinces but would not allow the Governor to appoint ministers. If they appointed ministers, they passed votes of no confidence. The largest part of the Nationalist party wish to go outside the Empire altogether. In 1924 we had a full-dress debate in the Assembly on the question of Dominion status. There were four difficult questions calling for solution. There was first of all the question of minority. I have told of the intense friction between the Hindus and the Mohammedans, but they are only one of many. You have the Sikhs, a warlike community, some of whom are domiciled in Canada, who have fought our battles again and again. The Sikhs originally had a strong kingdom in the Punjab. In the event of the British retiring, they would probably wish to retain that kingdom. You have other peoples who speak a language entirely unknown in upper India. Again Hindus are actually divided between upper and lower castes. The condition of the lowest castes is terrible. They are hardly recognized as human by the higher castes. Intelligent Indians are only too glad to see the condition of the lower class improved. Orthodoxy is very strong in India. The lower class man is cursed by the higher class. There was the question of minorities and then there was the question of the native states. A third of the Indian area and a quarter of the population is still under the government of Indian Princes in treaty with His Majesty. These Princes have formally said that they will have no part in a government that wishes to go outside the Empire. A great many of these Princes are rich in men

and money. They maintain their own troops which were put at the disposal of the State during the Great War. Remember, too, that the time is long past when Indian Princes increase their borders by other than pacific means.

Then again there is the question of Europeans in India. The Indian does not apply himself very closely to material affairs. He is interested much more in the world to come than in the work of the present day, but the British merchants have done enormous work to develop the wealth of India. It is they who have opened the gold mines and jute mills which are pouring millions into the pockets of business men in Bengal. It is they who have developed the tea gardens and industries.

Then there is the question of defence. In the British army there are sixty thousand men. In the Indian army 167,000 under British officers. The army is not there to hold down the Indian people but to protect the frontier. I do not believe there is any country in the world with such a vulnerable or such a dangerous frontier. In the north-west barren mountains look down upon the Indian plains. In these mountains dwell half a million fighting men, a quarter of whom have modern rifles. Withdraw the Indian army and those tribes would be upon India in a moment. Behind them lies Afghanistan and behind Afghanistan is Soviet Russia. I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that India will remain free from invasion only as long as a strong, well-disciplined army stands on the frontier.

As you know, Sir John Simon has recently been heading a Commission to investigate conditions in India. I have not the faintest idea what he will recommend but I think we can await his proposals with complete confidence. From my own experience, I have not the slightest doubt as to the capacity of the government of India to carry on and keep the ship of state steady and carry on the government not in the interests of one section of the population but in the interests of the whole population, and my message to you today is not a message of despondency but a message of hope and a message of confidence. This is really what I want to say to you today, gentlemen: do not be depressed by what you read. Remember that in this enormous population there are bound to be occasional inci-

dents and occasional cases of violence. There is not really a feeling of hostility against the British. I remember a story that before one of the greatest battles in the Persian war a vote was taken as to who should be Commander-in-Chief. Every general had two votes. It was found that every general voted for himself first and gave one to Themistocles. I believe if we were to do the same thing in India Hindus and Mohammedans would cast for themselves first, but I believe that every race and every community would put the British second. We are the most bearable of anyone. It is really the justification of our existence there. We cannot go away. We do not want to see a second China. You cannot have three hundred million of the world's population tumbling into anarchy without the whole world being disrupted.

Gentlemen, you have given me a patient hearing. I thank you most cordially for having done so. I do not propose to keep you any longer from your most legitimate professions.