

LONDON LETTER.

The decisions which must be taken in London this autumn will be of the first importance in the history of the British Empire. The Imperial Conference will be followed by the Indian "Round Table" Conference, and in each case the statesmen who participate will have to bear a heavy burden of responsibility. The time for phrases has passed, and neither Conference can afford to separate without taking decisions upon which the whole future of the Commonwealth may well depend.

The agenda for the Imperial Conference is arranged under the three main heads of inter-imperial relations, foreign policy and defence, and economic relations. Of course it is evident that these classifications must overlap, and in each case the fundamental problem must be that of devising means through which the unity of the Commonwealth may find regular and orderly expression. In effect this means that the time has now come for translating into action the principles of the Report of 1926. It is too often forgotten that this celebrated document made no claim to finality. Its authors only professed to "have laid a foundation upon which subsequent Conferences may build," and in another passage they resolved that "the manner in which any new system is to be worked out is a matter for consideration and settlement between His Majesty's Governments in Great Britain and the Dominions."

The need for a "new system" is made all the more urgent in view of the recent Report of the Conference upon Dominion Legislation. The broad principle running through this unanimous Report is that the Dominions should be set free from the present restrictions upon their legislative competence, so that in future the maintenance of unity in essential things will depend upon voluntary common action rather than upon the reservation of legal power to Westminster. So much is agreed, but it is equally clear that common action pre-supposes common counsel, and this again involves the setting up of some permanent and regular organisation in which the precise form of action may be determined. As the Report of 1926 pointed out, it is now evident that neither long-distance communication nor the rare meetings of Imperial Conferences are adequate to deal with the multitudinous problems which now face the Commonwealth. Every year will produce its own problems, ranging from the most fundamental issues of foreign policy and defence

to the most technical questions of maritime law or economic co-operation. Their right solution can only be reached as the result of prolonged study based upon accurate and exhaustive information. Work of this kind is obviously beyond the competence of the Imperial Conference itself, nor does it seem desirable that we should attempt to deal with it by summoning a series of separate conferences to deal with special subjects as and when they arise. All these Conferences cause a serious dislocation of the ordinary work of cabinet ministers and permanent officials, and the circumstances in which they are convened usually make it impossible for them to complete their work in the necessary detail. Even the Report of the recent Conference on Dominion Legislation for the most part contents itself with statements of principle, leaving the all-important details to be filled in at a later stage.

The trend of opinion among many students of the question of Empire organisation is in favour of something more or less analogous to the Council and the Secretariat of the League of Nations. Such analogies must not be pressed too far, since the League Council is largely occupied with the settlement of disputes, whereas our main problem is that of co-operation in common activities. But certain elements in the situation are common both to the League and to the Empire. In the first place, since all federal schemes are now abandoned by consent, it is clear that in the Empire, as in the League, all positive common action must rest upon voluntary and unanimous agreement. The functions of any imperial body can therefore never be more than advisory. Secondly, if its recommendations are to go beyond useless generalities, they must rest upon the most careful study of all available facts, and the furnishing of the necessary information involves a permanent and adequate secretariat, which should be something quite distinct from the British civil service. Thirdly, the experience of the League Council teaches us that in recommendations based upon full knowledge unanimity is likely to be the rule rather than the exception. We may add that such recommendations, although not legally binding, are not likely to be lightly disregarded.

The specific resolutions of the Conference on Dominion Legislation will undoubtedly be one of the main subjects for discussion. They have been adversely criticised by Professor Keith and other writers, chiefly on the ground that the new liberty which they propose is capable of abuse. That this is true may be conceded at once, but it is a criticism which applies equally to any grant of power, and it is now a political fact that the unity of the Empire

can no longer be made to depend upon such a negation as the denial of freedom to the Dominion Parliaments. This principle is merely the correlative of the obvious statement that unity no longer depends upon the coercive and overriding powers of the Parliament at Westminster. The safeguards against the abuse of liberty can no longer be found in legal disabilities, and in the future the unity of the Empire must be found in co-operation rather than in restriction.

The problem of economic co-operation is unfortunately involved, both in Great Britain and in the Dominions, with local questions of party politics. At a time when the principles of economic policy are being so thoroughly re-examined among members of all parties it is to be regretted that Mr. MacDonald's Government feels itself debarred by the terms of its political creed from entering the Conference with an open mind. Nevertheless, we may hope that the discussions will generate an atmosphere in which these vital problems may come to be regarded from a viewpoint that will be that of the whole Commonwealth.

At the time of writing, it seems likely that the change of government in Canada may prevent the proposed appointment of Mr. Massey as High Commissioner in London. No one here will presume to criticise adversely the decision of Mr. Bennett upon a matter which is clearly within his discretion, but on personal grounds there will be much disappointment if the course of politics should deprive us of the benefit of Mr. Massey's abilities and experience. In future it is probable that the functions of the High Commissioners will increasingly be of a diplomatic character, and the choice of a successor to Mr. Larkin will doubtless be one of the earliest and heaviest responsibilities of the new Prime Minister.

Difficult though the problems may be which face the Imperial Conference, we can at least approach them in the confidence that we have a common basis of discussion in our belief in the unity of the Empire and in our common allegiance to the Crown. With the "Round Table" Conference, unfortunately this is not so. Here we must frankly face the fact that some of the differences of opinion are fundamentally irreconcilable, and the first task of the Conference will be to determine the permissible range of its own deliberations. Probably this will result in the withdrawal of certain delegates from the table, but all debate must inevitably be futile unless it can be agreed that certain fundamental propositions are placed outside the field of controversy.

In practice this means that the real business of the Conference

will be the discussion of the Simon Report, although this will not be officially stated. But all discussion is useless except in so far as it is based upon facts, and the Report contains the only indisputable statement of the vital facts which any scheme of government must take into account. These facts may not be equally palatable to all parties, but no serious attempt has been made to challenge their accuracy, and they cannot be ignored without grave peril. The specific recommendations of the Commissioners may be materially modified before they are presented to Parliament, but the range of possible variation is limited by the facts set forth in the first volume of the Report. As things stand, these proposals are the only ones which are in touch with reality.

It is much to be hoped that the actual text of the Report, and particularly the first volume, will be widely studied throughout the Empire and in other countries. The strong case for British rule in India is one which cannot easily be summarized in popular form or understood without careful study, with the result that in many quarters judgment has gone against us by default. Wide circulation has been obtained in the United States for certain popular books on India which are characterized throughout by the grossest ignorance, if not by deliberate mendacity, and these have prompted some individuals to attempt an interference in the discussions which violates all the accepted standards of international comity. Meanwhile we can only be patient and remain confident that throughout our own Commonwealth public opinion will support our statesmen and those of India in the discharge of responsibilities, the gravity of which is unequalled in history.

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