Chapter VIII

The Problem of a Federated Heterogeneous Empire

If the building up of a composite nation in the British Isles was from the beginning a foregone conclusion, a geographical and economic necessity only prevented in its entire completion by the most violent and perverse errors of statesmanship, the same cannot be said of the swifter, but still gradual and almost unconscious process by which the colonial empire of Great Britain has been evolving to a point at which it can become a real unity. It was not so long ago that the eventual separation of the colonies carrying with it the evolution of Australia and Canada at least into young independent nations was considered the inevitable end of the colonial empire, its one logical and hardly regrettable conclusion.

There were sound reasons for this mental attitude. The geographical necessity of union was entirely absent; on the contrary, distance created a positive mental separation. Each colony had a clear-cut separate physical body and seemed predestined, on the lines on which human evolution was then running, to become a separate nation. The economic interests of the mother country and the colonies were disparate, aloof from each other, often opposite as was shown by the adoption by the latter of Protection as against the British policy of Free Trade. Their sole political interest in the Empire was the safety given by the British fleet and army against foreign invasion; they did not share and took no direct interest in the government of the Empire or the shaping of its destinies. Psychologically, the sole tie was a frail memory of origin and a tepid sentiment which might easily evaporate and which was combated by a definite separatist sentiment and the natural inclination of strongly
marked human groupings to make for themselves an independent life and racial type. The race origin varied, in Australia British, in South Africa predominantly Dutch, in Canada half French, half English; but in all three countries habits of life, political tendencies, a new type of character and temperament and culture, if it can be so called, were being developed which were as the poles asunder from the old British culture, temperament, habits of life and social and political tendencies. On the other hand, the mother country derived no tangible political, military or economic advantage from these offshoots, only the prestige which the possession of an empire in itself could give her. On both sides, therefore, all the circumstances pointed to an eventual peaceful separation which would leave England only the pride of having been the mother of so many new nations.

Owing to the drawing together of the world by physical Science, the resulting tendency towards larger aggregates, changed political world conditions and the profound political, economic and social changes towards which Great Britain has been moving, all the conditions now are altered and it is easy to see that the fusion of the colonial empire into a great federated commonwealth or something that can plausibly go by that name is practically inevitable. There are difficulties in the way, — economic difficulties, to begin with; for, as we have seen, geographical separation does tend towards a divergence, often an opposition of economic interests, and an imperial Zollverein, natural enough between the States of the German Empire or a Central European Confederation such as was planned by one side in the great war, would be an artificial creation as between widely separated countries and would need constant vigilance and tender handling; yet, at the same time, political unity tends to demand economic union as its natural concomitant and seems to itself hardly complete without it. Political and other difficulties also there are which may yet become manifest and destroy the imperial formation if the practical process of unification is rashly and unwisely handled; but none of these need be insuperable or even a real stumbling-block. The race difficulty which
was at one time serious and menacing in South Africa and is not yet eliminated, need not be more formidable than in Canada; for in both countries there is the English element which, whether a majority or minority, can by friendly union or fusion attach the foreign element to the Empire. Nor is there any such powerful outside attraction or clash of formed cultures or incompatible temperaments as made so difficult the real union of the Austrian Empire.

All that is needed is that England should continue to handle the problem with a right instinct and not commit anything like her fatal American blunder or the mistake she committed but fortunately receded from in South Africa. She has to keep it always in mind that her possible destiny is not that of a dominant country compelling all the parts of her dominions to uniformity with her or to perpetual subordination, but that of the centre of a great confederation of States and nations coalescing by her attraction into a new supra-national unity. Here the first condition is that she must scrupulously respect the free internal life and will, the social, cultural, economic tendencies of the colonies while giving them an equal part with herself in the management of the great common questions of the Empire. She herself can be nothing more in the future of such a new type of aggregate than a political and cultural centre, the clamp or nodus of the union. Given this orientation of the governing mind in England, nothing short of some unforeseen cataclysm can prevent the formation of an empire-unit in which Home Rule with a loose British suzerainty will be replaced by Federation with Home Rule as its basis.

But the problem becomes much more difficult when the question of the other two great constituent parts of the Empire arises, Egypt and India,—so difficult that the first temptation of the political mind, supported by a hundred prejudices and existing interests, was naturally to leave the problem alone and

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1 All this, provided the Empire continues to be victorious and prosperous; provided, too, Britain’s foreign policy does not make the obligations of federated unity too irksome to the smaller members.
create a federated colonial empire with these two great countries as subject dependencies. It is obvious that such a solution could not last and, if obstinately persisted in, would lead to the most undesirable results, if not to eventual disaster. The renascence of India is as inevitable as the rising of tomorrow’s sun, and the renascence of a great nation of three hundred millions with so peculiar a temperament, such unique traditions and ideas of life, so powerful an intelligence and so great a mass of potential energies cannot but be one of the most formidable phenomena of the modern world. It is evident that the new federated empire-unit cannot afford to put itself in permanent antagonism to this renascent nation of three hundred millions and that the short-sighted statesmanship of those servants of today and its interests who would stave off the inevitable issue as long as possible cannot be allowed to prevail. This has indeed been recognised in principle; the difficulty will be in the handling of the problems that will arise when the practical solution of the Indian question can no longer be put off to an uncertain future.

The nature of the difficulties in the way of a practical union between such different aggregates is sufficiently obvious. There is first that geographical separateness which has always made India a country and a people apart, even when it was unable to realise its political unity and was receiving by invasion and mutual communication of cultures the full shock of the civilisations around it. There is the mere mass of its population of three hundred millions whose fusion in any sort with the rest of the nations of the Empire would be a far other matter than the fusion of the comparatively insignificant populations of Australia, Canada and South Africa. There is the salient line of demarcation by race, colour and temperament between the European and the Asiatic. There is the age-long past, the absolute divergence of origins, indelible associations, inherent tendencies

2 The question of Egypt has already been settled since the above was written, and in a sense adverse to union. India, already even then on the road to a free status, has already achieved it, although its two separating parts have figured for a time as dominions and one of them may possibly adhere for some time to that status while the other has adopted, although an independent Republic, a new formula of adhesion to the Commonwealth.
which forbid any possibility of the line of demarcation being effaced or minimised by India’s acceptance of an entirely or predominantly English or European culture. All these difficulties need not necessarily mean the insolubility of the problem; on the contrary, we know that no difficulty can be presented to the human mind which the human mind, if it will, cannot solve. We will assume that in this case there will be both the will and the necessary wisdom; that British statesmanship will commit no irreparable error; that from the minor errors which it cannot fail to commit in the handling of such a problem, it will retreat in time, as has been its temperament and habit in the past; and that, accordingly, a little sooner or a little later some kind of psychological unity may possibly be created between these two widely disparate aggregates of the human race.

The question remains under what conditions this is possible and of what nature the unity will be. It is clear that the governing race must apply with a far greater scrupulosity and firm resolution the principle it has already applied elsewhere with such success and the departure from which has always after a certain stage been so detrimental to its own wider interests. It must allow, respect and even favour actively the free and separate evolution of India subject to the unity of the Empire. So long as India does not entirely govern herself, her interests must take a first place in the mind of those who do govern her, and when she has self-government, it must be of a kind which will not hamper her in her care of her own interests. She must not, for example, be forced into an imperial Zollverein which under present conditions would be disastrous to her economic future until or unless these conditions are changed by a resolute policy of stimulating and encouraging her industrial development, even though that will necessarily be prejudicial to many existing commercial interests within the Empire. No effort must be made to impose English culture or conditions upon her growing life or make them a sine qua non for her recognition among the free peoples of the Empire and no effort of her own to defend and develop her own culture and characteristic development must be interfered with or opposed. Her dignity, sentiments, national
aspirations must be increasingly recognised in practice as well as in principle. Given these conditions, the security of her political and economic interests and a care for her own untroubled growth might keep her in the Empire and time might be given for the rest, for the more subtle and difficult part of the process of unification to fulfil itself more or less rapidly.

The unity created could never take the form of an Indo-British empire; that is a figment of the imagination, a chimera which it would never do to hunt to the detriment of the real possibilities. The possibilities might be, first, a firm political unity secured by common interests; secondly, a sound commercial interchange and mutual industrial helpfulness on healthy lines; thirdly, a new cultural relation of the two most important sections of humanity, Europe and Asia, in which they could exchange all that is great and valuable in either as equal members of one human household; and finally, it might be hoped, in place of the common past associations of political and economic development and military glory which have chiefly helped in building up the nation-unit, the greater glory of association and close partnership in the building of a new, rich and various culture for the life of a nobler humanity. For such, surely, should be the type of the supra-national unit which is the possible next step in the progressive aggregation of humanity.

It is evident that this next step would have no reason or value except as a stage which would make possible by practical demonstration and the creation of new habits of sentiment, mental attitude and common life the unity of the whole human race in a single family. The mere creation of a big empire-unit would be a vulgar and even reactionary phenomenon if it had not this greater issue beyond it. The mere construction of a multicoloured Indo-British unity arrayed in armour of battle and divided by commercial, political and military egoism from other huge unities, Russian, French, German, American, would be a retrogression, not an advance. If at all, therefore, this kind of development is destined,—for we have only taken the instance of the British Empire as the best example of a possible new type,—then it must be as such a half-way house and with this ideal
before us that it can be accepted by the lovers of humanity who are not bound by the limitations of the old local patriotism of nation against nation. Always provided that the political and administrative means are those which are to lead us to the unity of the human race,—for on that doubtful hypothesis we are at present proceeding. The probability of such an eventual development is as yet scanty, for the temper both of Muslim and Hindu India is still overwhelmingly in the direction of independence and nothing has been done on the English side to build up the other possibility. But the possibility had still to be considered, as it is not utterly out of question that under changed conditions there might be an acceptance of virtual independence in place of a separate and isolated autonomy. If so, it would be a sign that one of Nature’s steps towards the final result was leading towards this passage. This much could be said for it that if such a combination of two so disparate peoples and cultures proved to be possible, the greater question of a world-union would begin to bear a less remote appearance.³

³ Things have taken, as was practically inevitable all through, a different turn; but this part of the chapter has been left as it was because the consideration of this possibility was necessary to the theme. The failure of that possible experiment to come anywhere near realisation is an illustration of the fact that this intermediate stage in the progress towards a total world-union presents difficulties which make it almost impossible. Its place has been taken by such agglomerations as the Commonwealth, the Soviet Union and such possibilities as the proposed United States of Europe and other continental combinations such as are coming into being as between the two Americas and may some day be possible in Asia.