

CANADA AND THE IMPERIAL WAR CABINET

I. BRITISH PROTECTION OF CANADA

THE defence of the British Empire is a perplexing problem. Attempts to solve it provoked the great revolution from which came the republic of the United States. This revolution was even more momentous than the French Revolution. Not only did it determine the form of the political institutions of the greater part of the two continents of America, but it was itself also in large measure the cause of the French Revolution. Royalist France was aflame with eagerness for republican principles, as applied in America, to the hurt of a hated rival in Europe. These principles, however, would not remain on the other side of the ocean from France. They crossed to Europe and in the end helped to make France herself a republic. Thus a problem of the internal government of the British Empire expanded into a world problem, the struggle between democracy and aristocracy, between local liberty and centralized control. Ever since, in 1607, English colonists settled in Virginia it has haunted the politics of the British Empire. After a stormy history of three hundred years it has taken on a new character because of the great war which broke out in 1914.

The British Empire, as now we all see, has become a world-wide Commonwealth of Nations. When once the British over the seas attained to importance as states they could not be controlled and directed by the people of Great Britain and the consequent problem of continued union became one of the most searching which statesmanship could face. At the time of the American Revolution most British statesmen would have denied the equality of colonial leaders with themselves. A great landowner, with a vast palace as his home, living in state hardly short of regal, naming to Parliament some of its members, would have smiled at the thought of equality with a plain John Adams or even with the Virginian landowner, George Washington. Compared with an English magnate, these colonists would have had a social and with it a

The War Cabinet was in practically continuous session. The members remained in London. They denied themselves pleasant, leisurely week-ends in the country. Sometimes meetings were held twice daily; always they were held once, except on Sunday. Lord Curzon said on June 19, 1918, that in four hundred and seventy-four days there had been five hundred and fifty-five meetings; that two rules were steadily kept in view, one to summon to the Cabinet the ministers, the generals, admirals and other experts who could give desired information and advice, the other to postpone nothing until to-morrow which could be decided to-day. The old Cabinet, pressed for time, divided by various views, unable to bring collected and prolonged attention to a problem, was likely to find refuge in delay. The War Cabinet, knowing the mischief of delay, was true to the policy of prompt decision. So fully had they carried it out, Lord Curzon added, that sometimes on Saturday there was no need to meet. All the business of the week had been despatched. He added, with perhaps a touch of humour, that the Irish question could not be settled in this summary way. But what could be settled was settled promptly by the War Cabinet. If departments differed the Cabinet at once decided the issue.

IV. THE SUMMONING OF THE IMPERIAL WAR CABINET

Britain's part in the war was not, however, the affair only of Great Britain. On this vast problem the whole British Empire was united. The Empire justly prides itself on the diversity of its interests and the variety of its governments. There are few questions in relation to which a common policy for the whole is even desirable. In war, however, unity of direction is the condition of success. Four great nations, Britain, the United States, France and Italy found, in the end, that to defeat Germany they must be united under a single lead. The armed forces of the British Empire were, from the first, under one supreme command and a War Cabinet which directed the efforts of Great Britain alone would not meet the realities of the war. On assuming office, Mr. Lloyd George had this in mind. He became Prime Minister on December 7, 1916. A week later, on December 14, he issued a call to the whole British Empire, including India, to send representatives to London for a conference on the war.

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He did more, however, than summon this Imperial War Conference. War brings prompt and sometimes high-handed decisions. The War Cabinet had just been formed in England. Mr. Lloyd George did not ask the other Prime Ministers whether they would sit in a War Cabinet. He simply cabled to the Governments concerned: "Your Prime Minister will be a member of the War Cabinet." The war had reached perhaps its most critical point. The year 1917 brought a terrible crisis and its early days were full of thronging hopes, anxieties and fears. The United States had not yet entered the war. Russia was on the verge of collapse. The allies were preparing for the mighty effort which resulted in the stupendous sacrifices and the apparently meagre gains of that year. In such circumstances for Canada to have disregarded the call to united counsel and action would have been criminal. Sir Robert Borden and the Prime Ministers of other Dominions, with the exception of Mr. Hughes, detained in Australia by an election, hastened to London and there on March 20, 1917, was brought into actual being the Imperial War Cabinet.

On March 21, the day after the first meeting, *The Times* had a glowing article: "Imperial Rome, or Modern Germany for the matter of that, would have stage-managed such an event very differently. There would have been triumphant processions and elaborate banquets to mark it . . . The new world is to redress the balance of the old. . . . The great European problems which fall to be settled by the verdict of war . . . are henceforth problems for Canada and New Zealand and the other Dominions as well as Great Britain. . . . The War Cabinet which is now meeting is an executive cabinet for the Empire [*sic*]. It is invested with full responsibility for the prosecution of the war, including questions of Foreign Policy, of the provisioning of troops and munitions and of war finance. It will settle Imperial policy as to the time of peace." Mr. Lloyd George declared that the meeting of this "Imperial War Cabinet" marked "the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the Empire." On one thing every one concerned laid special emphasis. The old colonial relation between Great Britain and the other free states of the Empire was definitely ended. The Prime Minister of the parent state, of course, took precedence of all others. He was, however, only *primus inter pares*. Next to him ranked the Prime Minister of Canada, the most populous self-governing state in the Empire after Great Britain. When the Prime Minister of Great Britain was absent the Prime Minister of Canada was to preside. Mr.