THE SIXTH ANNUAL ATTLEE LECTURE

Given by the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Listowel

at India House

16th February, 1988.

WITH ATTLEE FOR INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

I am most grateful to the Attlee Foundation Trustees for asking me to give the fifth annual lecture, in a series that keeps green the memory of my old friend and political master, Clem Attlee. It was an invitation I could hardly refuse, without sheer ingratitude to one of the few great men I have had the good fortune to know, and from whom I have learnt so much and received so much kindness. I felt, at the same time, somewhat daunted by the contributions of my well-informed and distinguished predecessors, not least by the risk of repeating what they had said far better than I could hope to do. But as I had had the privilege, as a Minister at the India Office, to be specially close to Attlee during the period of his involvement with India, I was glad of the opportunity you have given me, to testify to the statesmanship with which he met perhaps the greatest of the many challenges to his political judgement.

We have to remember that the period immediately after the Second World War was a turning point in our history. We had won the war, but our resources had been so depleted that we could no longer maintain our pre-war status as a Great Power. The question now was not whether, but how, and how soon, our diminishing imperial authority, which had become an anachronism in the post-war world, would disappear completely into the past. Would it be possible for the British Empire, with its dependencies in every part of the globe, to avoid being violently sundered by the rising tide of African or Asian anti-imperialism, like the French and Dutch Empires in Africa and the Far East? Could it be transformed without bloodshed or violence, by patient negotiation and final agreement with the new national leaders, into a number of free countries with the option of a closer relationship between them? These were among the tremendous questions which faced the Attlee Government.

The key to what would become a peaceful transition from Empire to Commonwealth was the forging of a new relationship with India, the greatest of our overseas dependencies. This was the task undertaken by Attlee after the 1945 Election. But I shall cover briefly the whole period of his ministerial responsibility for India, starting from the years 1944-47 during which time he was Chairman, as Prime Minister, or as Deputy Prime Minister under Churchill, of the India and Burma Committee of the Cabinet. This phase of his political life has been already described by Mr. K. Harris in his lecture in this series and, of course, in his excellent and definitive biography of Attlee. But I shall be looking at it from a rather different angle as a former ministerial colleague, and as the sole survivor of those Ministers who served on the Cabinet Committee dealing with India in both the Churchill and Attlee Governments.

My first contact with Attlee in the context of India was in the Autumn of 1944 when, as a Junior Minister at the India Office, I joined the India and Burma Committee of the Cabinet under his chairmanship. The agenda of our meetings was a mirror image of the conflict between Wavell, who had succeeded Linlithgow as Viceroy the previous year, and Churchill. He had been sent to India by Churchill as a professional soldier who would keep India quiet until the end of the war, without meddling in politics. It was intended as a strictly law and order job. It must have been a rude shock to the Prime Minister when he soon found out that this professional soldier not only understood politics, but took a strong view about the immediate necessity for constitutional advance without waiting for further progress until after the war.

Wavell had set out his opinions in a long letter to the Prime Minister which I found on my desk when I arrived at the India Office, and I would like to quote a few concluding sentences. I quote. "Above all, there is the question of credibility. We have lost the trust and confidence of Indians by promising so much and doing so little, and we have now to convince them of our sincerity. But the real essential is a change of spirit, a change that will convince the average, educated Indian

that the British Government is sincere in its intentions and is friendly towards India..... In fact, if we want India as a Dominion after the war, we must begin by treating her more like a Dominion now. If certain measures which I would suggest were taken now,..... I believe it would be possible to effect a considerable improvement." End of quote.

These modest measures of reform were the main subject of discussion by the India Committee until the Churchill Wartime Coalition broke up in May 1945. It might have been expected that a Committee of the calibre of Simon, Anderson, Grigg, Butler, Amery, Cripps and Attlee, men of immense political experience and first-hand knowledge of India, would welcome an immediate policy to increase Indian participation in their system of government. But the unfortunate Viceroy found no support except from Amery, the well-intentioned but impotent Secretary of State, and on some occasions from Cripps. With all their expertise, they were in continuing conflict with a Viceroy whose maximum request was a modest step towards self-government. Attlee must have been torn between his personal opinion, and his duty, as the Prime Minister's representative on the Committee, to oppose even the smallest step forward while the war continued.

His own views had not radically changed since he came back from India in 1929 with the Simon Commission, and noted India's lack of the power of self-determination. But he was well aware that Churchill's attitude had not altered since his antagonism to the 1935 India Act, and neatly described it, and the reaction of his Cabinet, in the following words: I quote "The Cabinet has always deferred to the Prime Minister's passionate feelings about India." So nothing serious was done by the Churchill Government to prepare India for the great leap forward that took place so soon after the war.

Attlee was unable to come out in his true colours until after the General Election in July 1945. He made sure that Indian independence was again included in the Labour Party's Election Manifesto, and after the Labour victory and the meeting of the new Parliament in August, lost no time in appointing the Cabinet's India and Burma Committee. This was to consist of Ellen Wilkinson, Stansgate, Cripps, Pethick-Lawrence - the new Secretary of State - and myself, with Attlee in the Chair.

At our first meeting on August 17th, Cripps and Attlee declared that we must quickly work out a policy to realise the long-term undertaking in the Cripps' offer. It will be remembered that the essence of what had been offered in 1942 was a completely independent Indian Union, operating under a constitution of its own choice, which would subsequently decide whether or not it would stay in the British Commonwealth. Thus Attlee made it plain to us from the very start that our job was to replace British by Indian rule within the five-year lifetime of the Labour Government. Little did we think at that moment that our assignment would be completed within two years! This was made possible in Whitehall by a brief but historic ministerial partnership between two men, Cripps and Attlee. Cripps was the only member of our Committee with recent, first-hand experience of India, which he combined with personal acquaintance with all the Indian leaders. He dominated the deliberations of the Committee by his enormous fund of knowledge and his dialectical skill. This impression was not confined to those who shared his politics. Wavell was sometimes an impartial observer at our meetings. He noted with grudging admiration in his Journal that, I quote, "Cripps is, of course, the directing brain."

But the recommendations of the Committee would have been entirely ineffective without the endorsement of the Cabinet. It was in the Cabinet Room that Attlee, quite unlike his usual habit of listening and doodling while others talked, became the dominant personality when India was on the agenda. He, not Cripps, put the case for the Committee, and it was invariably agreed with little argument. The only colleague whose opposition he might have feared was the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who

was at heart an old-fashioned imperialist, keener to expand than contract the Empire. But there seemed to be a non-intervention pact, sometimes but seldom breached, at Cabinet level between the Foreign Secretary and the P.M. Thus it was that the recommendations of the India Committee sailed through the Cabinet, thanks to Attlee's firm lead and power of decision.

Our first year in office was a record of abortive attempts to persuade the leaders of the Hindu and Muslim communities, Nehru and Jinnah, to agree about the constitution of an independent India. When this failed, Attlee decided to send out three emissaries from the Cabinet, the so-called Cabinet Mission, consisting of Pethick-Lawrence, (S. of S.), A.V. Alexander and Cripps, and they spent the summer of 1946 in discussions with the Indian leaders.

The Mission was as unsuccessful as the Viceroy in obtaining a consensus between the communities, and returned empty-handed apart from Cripps' blueprint for the constitution of a united India. It is probable that from this time dates Cripps' disillusion with Wavell and his idea that Mountbatten, with his record of achievement in the Far East, would be the most suitable successor. For Wavell had by now given up his repeated efforts to get agreement between the two leaders and became convinced that an agreed solution was unobtainable. He therefore faced the Cabinet with a choice of policies which would depend entirely on us, without even the acquiescence of the Indian leaders. The two alternatives we were offered were either the enforcement of British rule for 10 years, or a phased withdrawal from British India. The former would entail the reinforcement of the Indian Army by four or five divisions of British troops. This alternative was immediately ruled out by the India Committee as politically impracticable, in the aftermath of the World War. The second alternative was a gradual withdrawal of our armed forces and civil servants, and those British civilians who wanted to leave, by stages from British India, starting from the four Congress Provinces in the south, while holding temporarily the Muslim majority Provinces in the north. The withdrawal operation was to be completed by 31 January 1948, when India would be handed over to the existing authorities in British India and the Indian States.

Apart from Pethick-Lawrence who, like his predecessor as Secretary of State, was always loyal to the Viceroy, the India Committee was unanimous in its opposition to a proposal based on total pessimism about the chances of agreement between the communities. Attlee has described it in his autobiography as, I quote, "a counsel of despair". Wavell could offer nothing more constructive when he returned to London to discuss the situation, and Attlee began to share with Cripps the view that he was no longer the right man for the job. So long as there was any hope of agreement, someone with exceptional diplomatic skill and sensitive understanding of personal relations, might be able to achieve it. With this in mind, Attlee who had been deeply impressed by Mountbatten's policy in S.E. Asia, agreed with Cripps that he should be invited to serve.

But Mountbatten would only go out on his own terms. At a momentous meeting in Downing Street between Attlee, Cripps and Mountbatten, the latter laid down the conditions on which he would accept the appointment. The two most important of these conditions were the fixing of a terminal date for British rule, and the grant of plenipotentiary powers to the Viceroy. Both conditions were difficult for any Prime Minister to accept, especially the second, as it meant taking the power of decision away from the Cabinet. It was pointed out that other Viceroys, including Lord Curzon, who had resigned on the issue, had asked for a "free hand" and it had never been granted. But Mountbatten was adamant and Attlee. though he was probably taking the greatest risk in his political life, had the moral courage to concede Mountbatten's demands.

His wisdom was justified later when Nehru told Mountbatten that his mission would have failed without the power of instant decision. It was, of course, due to Nehru's sagacity as much as Mountbatten's that the negotiations for independence were carried

through without a breakdown.

The announcement of the deadline for our withdrawal, which Attlee made in February in the House of Commons, was received with horrified consternation by the opposition. A Motion of Censure in the House of Lords, which was supported by almost every speaker, was only withdrawn after a speech by Lord Halifax deprecating a hasty decision. It was the only occasion I can remember when the verdict of the House was altered by a single speech.

The directive Mountbatten received from Attlee when he left for India in March 1947, was to secure agreement for a united India comprising British India and the Princely States, and broadly in line with the scheme of the Cabinet Mission which had visited India the previous summer. But if the two major parties, Congress and the League, would still not agree to participate in the government of a united India, he was to advise the Cabinet how and to whom we were to hand over,not later than June 1948. The essence of the remit was that we would leave India by an early fixed date but that we wanted to depart, not in what Churchill would have described as an ignominious "scuttle", but with the dignity and good will of an agreed transfer of power and the prospect of a true and lasting friendship that would only be possible on a footing of equality.

Mountbatten put his plan for a united India to the two party leaders, Nehru and Jinnah, as soon as possible after his arrival in New Delhi. He reported to us, with deep regret, that Jinnah was still determined to establish Pakistan as a separate nation and would accept nothing less. He was therefore in the process of drawing up his own plan for the division of India. Such a plan, we now realised, was our only safeguard against an even greater evil than partition. For if the British left India within a year, without any agreement between Muslims and Hindus to set up separate governments in the predominantly Hindu and Muslim areas, our departure would be followed by chaos and civil war.

The first Partition Plan was brought to London by Lord Ismay, Mountbatten's chief adviser, in May and was approved by the India Committee after three long meetings with Attlee in the chair.

To our intense dismay, we then heard that Mountbatten had changed his mind. He has said that he had a "hunch" he should show the Plan to Nehru who turned it down because, in his view, it would lead to the break-up or "balkanisation" of the whole sub-continent. The question that now arose was how to persuade Ministers to reverse a decision that had just been taken with the full authority of the Cabinet. I felt sure that the best chance for Mountbatten to get what he now wanted was by putting his case to the India Committee in person. The revised Plan that Mountbatten brought back closed the loophole of provincial autonomy, which Nehru feared would fragment India, and was acceptable both to Congress and the League. With such solid backing from Indian opinion, it was not difficult for Mountbatten to convince the Cabinet that we should change our minds. He also brought back the unexpected bonus that both new nations, India and Pakistan, wished to remain as members of the Commonwealth with the status of self-governing Dominions, provided only that the date for independence was advanced to August 1947.

We were particularly pleased and surprised by the change in the attitude of the Congress leaders, who had declared themselves in the constituent assembly a few months earlier in favour of, I quote, "an independent sovereign republic."
I was then sent by Attlee to invite Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a Judge in the Court of Appeal and later a Law Lord, to go out forthwith to India as Chairman of the Boundaries Commission, to draw the boundaries between India and Pakistan. He was exactly the right person, combining immense intellectual ability with total detachment from party politics. This crucial task had to be completed within a few weeks. The Prime Minister reluctantly accepted the ensuing Radcliffe Report, though it was equally disliked by both the communities. They naturally resented the fact that substantial

So we had at last won the prize that had eluded us for so long, as it had eluded Wavell - an agreement between the two main religious communities, Muslim and Hindu, about the future of India after British rule. This agreement between Congress and the League, with the added virtue that both new countries had opted for the Commonwealth, was sufficient to carry the constitutional settlement through the Cabinet. There was now only the problem of the parliamentary time-table as the Bill ending British rule would have to pass through both Houses before the summer recess, to meet the promised date of independence. The Bill itself was drafted with amazing speed by the senior parliamentary draftsman, and submitted to the Cabinet with the title "India (Dominion Status) Bill". Cripps, supported by Attlee, insisted that the word "independence" should go into the title in substitution for "Dominion Status", realising that many ill-informed people still regarded Dominion status as something less than independence.

The India (Independence) Bill was ready by the end of June but it would have no chance of a passage through both Houses within a month without the co-operation of the Opposition. Attlee was therefore asked by the Cabinet to see the leaders of the Opposition parties, at that time Conservative and Liberal. The Liberals had always been with us about India, but the attitude of the Conservative Opposition had been hostile and would entirely depend on Churchill. This gave Attlee a chance to show remarkable diplomatic skill. Instead of tackling the Leader of the Opposition himself, he asked Mountbatten to see him first. Mountbatten reported that, after a long conversation, Churchill had come round about India, the main reason being that it would remain in the Commonwealth after independence. With characteristic magnanimity, Churchill concluded his speech on the second reading of the Bill in the House of Commons with these words, I quote "The Prime Minister said that credit was due to the Viceroy..... great credit will indeed be due to the Viceroy, and not only the Viceroy but to the Prime Minister who advised the British Government to appoint him."

So the India Independence Bill received the Royal Assent in the House of Lords on July 18th, ensuring that India and Pakistan would become independent countries on August 15th. This, I suppose, is the only British Bill in our parliamentary history that has ever been jointly drafted with another country. Attlee authorised me to send the first draft to Mountbatten for consultation with the Indian leaders. He forwarded to me their comments on the Bill, and the suggested amendments by Congress and the League appeared in the final draft. It can truly be said that India and Britain legislated together for Indian independence.

Of course, the attainment of Dominion Status in August 1947 was no more than a means to obtain self-government at the earliest possible moment. It did not prejudge any decision India might take in the Constituent Assembly following independence, as to whether it would stay permanently in the Commonwealth. When it transpired that India did want to remain in the Commonwealth, but as a republic instead of a monarchy, a serious constitutional issue arose. Hitherto, the Crown link had been the sine qua non of Commonwealth membership. Burma had already left the Commonwealth on this issue. Could the British monarch remain the symbol of Commonwealth unity without being Head of State of every Commonwealth country? It was Cripps who came up with the answer to this question. Yes, he suggested, if the Crown was recognised by them all as "Head of the Commonwealth", a new royal title which has continued to this day. Attlee immediately grasped the possibilities of this brilliant compromise. If only he could persuade the other Commonwealth countries to agree, India could have its republican constitution without forfeiting its place in the Commonwealth. He was determined to do his utmost to obtain their consent.

In March 1949, he therefore dispatched his emissaries to prepare the ground for the forthcoming Prime Ministers' Conference in London, at which the fateful decision for the future coherence of the Commonwealth would be taken. They were chosen from Ministers and officials who had had considerable experience of Indian or Commonwealth

affairs. Sir Norman Brook, then Secretary to the Cabinet, went to Canada; my colleague, Patrick Gordon Walker, to Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Sir Percival Liesching, Permanent Under Secretary at the Commonwealth Relations Office, to South Africa, while I was sent to tackle Australia and New Zealand. The purpose of our mission was to convince the Prime Ministers of all these countries that the advantages of keeping India within the Commonwealth outweighed the disadvantages of losing the traditional link with the Crown.

There were affirmative responses from Canada, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Africa, and I found that Prime Minister Chiffley was keenly aware of the importance for Australia of being on the best possible terms with its powerful Asian neighbour. But in New Zealand I had a very different experience - there I found Prime Minister Fraser dead against what he regarded as a weakening of the position of the Crown. He said the people of New Zealand had such a strong affection for their sovereign that they would not tolerate any such change of status. I had two long sessions with him on successive days, but I could not shake this embodiment of New Zealand's loyalty to the monarchy.

So I returned to London with a confession of failure and I fully expected to be hauled over the coals by Attlee as the one missionary who had come back without a conversion. Greatly to my surprise and relief, he told me not to be too despondent as he was sure that Mr. Fraser would come round when he got to London and found that he and the other Commonwealth Prime Ministers were against him. As usual, Attlee's judgement of his colleagues' reaction was absolutely right. At the Prime Ministers' Conference in London in June 1950, it was decided unanimously to find a place in the Commonwealth for the new Republic of India. This momentous decision made it possible to transform the old Commonwealth of British origin, the British Commonwealth as it was then called, into the new Commonwealth of today, with a majority of Republics among its predominantly African and Asian membership. Attlee was truly the architect of our modern Commonwealth.

It is evident that Indian independence was his objective from the start of the 1945 Government for he arranged matters, both in the legislature and the executive, so that Indian affairs were always under his control. By putting the Secretary for State for India in the Lords - unlike Churchill, who kept Amery in the Commons - first Pethick-Lawrence, then myself, he made sure that he himself would answer questions about India and reply to all important debates in the Commons. This also enabled him to take charge of the India Bill when the time came for its introduction. His total mastery of policy was maintained by continuing as Chairman of the Cabinet Committee dealing with India, and being its mouthpiece in the Cabinet.

I believe that it was as the liberator of India that Attlee hoped to be remembered. Mr. K. Harris records that when Attlee was asked, during an American lecture tour, what he thought he would be remembered for, he answered in a typically laconic and modest reply: I quote, "Don't know. If anything, India possibly."

The verdict of history, if the historian A.J.P. Taylor is right, is that he was, I quote, "the greatest of Labour's leaders and Prime Ministers". Is it too much to claim that the Prime Minister who, ever since his seven years in darkest Stepney as a young man, had devoted his public life to the service of the under-privileged, who contributed more than any other to the fabric of the welfare state, who was the principal architect of the modern Commonwealth, should rank among the greatest British Prime Ministers?