



(c) crown copyright

THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HIS BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT).

SECRET.  
P. 384 (26).

Copy No. 30

C A B I N E T.

IMPERIAL CONFERENCE.

COMMITTEE ON INTER-IMPERIAL RELATIONS.

Note by the Lord President of the Council.

I attach for the information of my colleagues some draft paragraphs relating to the position and mutual relations of Great Britain and the Dominions, which have been provisionally accepted by the Committee of Prime Ministers and Heads of Delegations, over which I have the honour to preside. This draft has been arrived at as the result of difficult and prolonged discussions.

A.J.B.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.1.

15th November, 1926.

The Committee are of opinion that nothing would be gained by attempting to define the Constitution of the British Empire. Its widely scattered parts have very different characteristics, very different histories, and are at very different stages of evolution; while, considered as a whole, it defies classification and bears no real resemblance to any other political organisation which now exists or has ever yet been tried.

There is, however, one most important element in it which, from a strictly constitutional point of view, has now, as regards all vital matters, reached its full development; - we refer to the group of self-governing communities composed of Great Britain and the Dominions. Their position and mutual relation may be readily defined. They are autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

A foreigner endeavouring to understand the true character of the British Empire by the aid of this formula alone might be tempted to think that it was devised rather to make mutual interference impossible than to make mutual co-operation easy.

Such a criticism, however, completely ignores the historic situation. The rapid evolution of the Overseas Dominions during the last fifty years has involved many complicated adjustments of old political machinery to changing conditions. The tendency towards equality of status was both right and inevitable. Geographical and other conditions made this impossible of attainment by the way of federation.

The only alternative was by the way of autonomy; and along this road it has been steadily sought. Every self-governing member of the Empire is now the master of its destiny. In fact, if not always in form, it is subject to no compulsion whatever.

But no account, however accurate, of the negative relations in which Great Britain and the Dominions stand to each other can do more than express a portion of the truth. The British Empire is not founded solely or mainly upon negations. It depends essentially, if not formally, on positive ideals. Free institutions are its life-blood. Free co-operation is its instrument. Peace, security and progress are among its objects. Aspects of all these great themes have been discussed at the present Conference: excellent results have been thereby obtained. And though every Dominion is now, and must always remain, the sole judge of the nature and extent of its co-operation, no common cause will, in our opinion, be thereby imperilled.

Equality of status, so far as Britain and the Dominions are concerned, is thus the root principle governing our inter-Imperial relations. But the principles of equality and similarity, appropriate to status, cannot be universally extended to function. Here we require something more than immutable dogmas. For example, to deal with questions of diplomacy and questions of defence we require also flexible machinery:— machinery which can, from time to time, be adapted to the changing circumstances of the world. This subject also has occupied the attention of etc. .... (This is intended to supply (if necessary) a bridge to all the other subjects on which the Conference has been engaged.)

A.J.B.

...