CHAPTER NINE

THE TRANSFER OF POWER
Early in 1947, the British Government was most unfavourably impressed with the political trends affecting the Indian parties and they thought that if they were not very careful, they might well find themselves handing India over not simply to a civil war but to political movements of a definitely totalitarian character. The British Government's position was grave in all conscience. 'Urgent action was needed to break the deadlock, and the principal members of the Cabinet had reached the conclusion that a new personal approach was perhaps the only hope.' They were dissatisfied with Lord Wavell when he came back with nothing more constructive than a mere military evacuation plan. Hence the Government thought of a definite date for their withdrawal and the appointment of a new Governor-General to do the job. (1)

In spite of the fact that the Muslim League had started demanding the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the British Government could neither dissolve it nor reverse its policy. However, the Congress held that the work of the Constituent Assembly


Wavell did not like partition and he felt that the only way out was the gradual withdrawal of the British administration from India. He drew up a plan called 'Operation Ebb-Tide'; a scheme to withdraw British troops and British administration stage by stage from India. Winston Churchill was furious when he heard it. For the plan and other details, see Leonard Mosley, The Last Days of the British Raj (London, 1961) 50-2.

The suggestions of Wavell and the plan could also be found in Wavell's last letter to King George VI, 24 February 1947. Quoted in John W. Wheeler-Bennett, King George VI: His Life and Reign (London, 1958) 707-9.
should continue, though, it admitted that the Constitution agreed upon could not be enforced on a reluctant Province.

In fact, the Muslim League had not only refused to join the Constituent Assembly but had also committed itself to a policy of direct action. The Congress pointed out to the Governor-General, that the League had rejected the Cabinet Mission plan and that therefore the members of the League should resign from the Interim Government. The League members countered that the Congress and other parties also had not accepted the plan and that therefore they had no right to talk about who should continue and who should resign from the Interim Government.

Confronted by such a grave situation, the British Government could neither ask the League nor allow the Congress to resign which would have led to disastrous consequences. The Interim Government was a house divided against itself and the general situation in the country was alarming. The British Government was thus forced to take a bold decision and fix a date for their withdrawal. While deciding upon this course of action, the Labour Government had hoped that 'a time limit would serve as a challenge to bring home to the Indian parties the imperative need for coming to a mutual understanding'. (2)

STATEMENT ON THE TRANSFER OF POWER

In a major and vital policy statement made in the House of Commons on 20 February 1947, Prime Minister Clement Attlee declared

(2) For full details see V.P. Menon, The Transfer of Power in India (Bombay, 1957) 333-8.
that His Majesty's Government desired to hand over power in India to authorities establishing a constitution approved by all parties in India in accordance with the Cabinet Mission's plan. There was uncertainty and the British Government made it clear 'that it is their definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transfer of power into responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June 1948'. The British Government expressed their anxiety to transfer their responsibilities to a government which was capable of maintaining peace and administer India with justice and efficiency. The Prime Minister categorically stated that even if a constitution was not worked out by that time, 'His Majesty's Government will have to consider to whom the powers of the Central Government in British India should be handed over, on the due date, whether as a whole to some form of Central Government for British India or in some areas to the existing Provincial Governments, or in such other ways as may seem most reasonable and in the best interests of the Indian people'. He announced that they would not transfer their paramountcy over the Indian States to any Government of India and it would lapse from the date of their withdrawal. The opening of that new and final phase was to begin with a new Viceroy and Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten, who was entrusted with the task of transferring the responsibility to Indian hands. (3)


It is interesting to note that such a definite policy for the withdrawal had been suggested by a British official as early as 1945. See Penderel Moon, The Future of India (London, 1945) 58-63.
Conservative Reaction in Britain

The Conservative and Right-wing Press was bitterly critical of the date of withdrawal. The Daily Telegraph commented that it was 'reckless folly' to abandon India in the absence of prior agreement. 'Never has a decision fraught with such terrible possibilities been taken with such apparent disregard of consequences. To say that it is essential that all parties should sink their differences and to believe, apparently, that this will be brought about by throwing the whole constitutional future into the melting-pot is to abandon reason and to ignore all past history.' The paper pointed out that it reversed every precedent in the building up of the Dominions where the acknowledgement of status had followed upon agreement as to the hands into which power was to be given. The Daily Express declared that India was in danger of disintegration and that the British policy of abdication was responsible for it. 'It would be a tragic consequence of a generous and well-meaning policy.' The Daily Mail thought that the news was a profound shock to Parliament and would be received with a gasp of incredulity throughout the world. The Times, however, considered that the statement derived directly from certain guiding principles already endorsed by the generality of opinion in Britain and attempted to carry the principles to logical conclusions. (4)

The Right-wing Conservatives considered that the declaration was a great betrayal. The Government's policy 'if it is carried out will rank in history among the great crimes against humanity; to call it as the Government do, the final stage in the attainment

(4) All dated 21 February 1947.
of self-government, is more than cynicism or humbug; it is
blasphemy against the ideals of the national honour of Britain. 1

The statement on the transfer of power represented an abandon-
ment of the position taken up by the Cabinet Mission document which
had laid it down that the British Government would hand over power
to the Indians only when the Constituent Assembly had produced an
agreed constitution. It showed Government wanted to put a limit to
discussion and dissension. The statement 'marked a departure from
the tradition of British imperial policy hitherto at all times
supremely mistrustful of the explicit and the predetermined'. The
Indian political scene had been too long over-shadowed by many
contingencies and the statement introduced at least one element of
certainty. 2 It had few parallels in history and was on all
accounts a decisive step in Britain's self-imposed task of leading
India to complete self-government. At the same time the declaration
was also an ultimatum 'though of a kind never before issued by a
Power so often accused of being Imperialistic. It is an ultimatum
to the Indian leaders to end their quarrels and deadlocks over the
projected constitution, and get together to form a responsible
Government which can take over power from the British raj in peace
and order.' 3 In fact, the decision to partition was implied in
the declaration. It was a logical continuation of the British

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(5) J.E. Powell, 'What Britain Has Given to India',
The Weekly News Letter, 3 (12 April 1947) 4. Issued by the
Conservative Party.

(6) Nicholas Mansergh, Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs,
Problems of War-time Co-operation and Post-war Change 1939-1952

Government's declaration of 6 December. 'Whether or not so intended, it paved the way for partition. It remained for Mountbatten to execute the withdrawal of British power from India.' (8)

PARLIAMENT'S DEBATE ON THE INDIAN POLICY STATEMENT

The British Government sought the approval of Parliament for its latest policy statement on transfer of power to India. It was first debated in the House of Lords and later in the House of Commons. The debate was notable in that it sharply revealed the attitude of the British people, especially of the various political parties and of the groups within the parties, to India's demand for independence.

Conservative Opposition in the Lords

Soon after the announcement of the Government's new policy towards India, Viscount Cranborne, the leader of the Conservative Opposition in the House of Lords, declared that the statement was the reversal of all the previous statements of the British Government in that connection and amounted to the abandonment of India under conditions which could give no hope of a peaceful and prosperous future for its people. (9)

When the debate took place in the House of Lords, Viscount Templewood, former Conservative Secretary of State for India, moved

* For a brief biographical sketch see Appendix I.


The inference that the statement paved the way for partition and even represented an indirect concession to the League demand for Pakistan was shared by British officials prominently connected with the last stage of the British rule. By February 1947, it was felt in London that partition was the only way out of the impasse. Ibid.

(9) Bensusan, H.L., 145 (20 February 1947) col. 839.
a motion regretting the decision of His Majesty's Government to transfer power to India by June 1948. He told the House that there was a unique unity of front upon Indian questions and many of them had realized that the overcharged post-war world atmosphere forced them to expedite the transfer of power. The Opposition parties, he said, had fully supported the Government in the conduct of Indian affairs and had made it clear that they were prepared to transfer power expeditiously. He, however, pointed out that the unity of front was based on three conditions: orderly transfer of power, agreement among the parties, and their obligations to minorities and States. He charged that by a stroke of the pen, without consulting the Opposition, and without fulfilling those conditions, the Government had decided to effect the transfer of power by June 1948: 'This is a case not of gradual appeasement but of unconditional surrender, and at the expense of many/those to whom we have given specific pledges for generations past.' He announced his Party's decision to disassociate itself from the Government's declaration which seemed to them to be in direct opposition to everything they had said in the past and thought that they were making a gambler's throw and 'the throw might come off but it might do irreparable damage to the good Government of India.' He wanted the House to evaluate the statement from two points of view: (1) whether it would give the Government the fullest credit for their good intentions and whether the specification of the date would produce a workable constitution. He thought that the proposals were practically unworkable and politically unwise and would encourage sectional opinion leading to fragmentation of India instead of its unity. He considered that it was the duty of the British Government to complete
their task of achieving the transfer of power peacefully and with unconstrained agreement and that they should refuse to accept a final separation before their obligations and responsibilities were adequately discharged and said that the decision would imperil the peace and prosperity of India. (10)

Many Conservative members who took part in the debate thought that a statement of a graver nature had never been made and believed that the Government were breaking the oath and pledge that had been given by previous Governments and by themselves to protect the minorities. They felt that it was a gamble and said that the two communities could not be united together and that democracy was not possible in India. They held that their objective was the attainment by India of full self-government with a reasonably stable administration and that the Government's India policy aimed at the termination of British connection without a reasonably sound and stable alternative in its place. In fact, they suggested an all-parties delegation to appeal to India to unite failing which they should continue to rule for some years without abandoning India in confusion. Even the Liberal member, Viscount Simon, thought that the Government plan was a new departure and considered that the fixing of a date would not hasten an agreement. (11)

Thus many Conservative speakers, though they did not oppose the transfer of power as such, doubted very much the wisdom of fixing a definite date and thought that the short period left to

(11) Ibid., cols. 951-82.
them to settle the question of transfer of power might lead to chaos and confusion. They therefore opposed the Government's policy statement on the transfer of power to India. They addressed themselves to Templewood's stern declaration that the time limit was a breach of faith imperilling the peace and prosperity of India. In fact the Opposition motion challenging the Government was so widely supported, that it seemed at one stage to render impossible the forging of a united national approach to Indian independence such as had obtained till then. At the end of the first day's debate 'there seemed very little prospect of avoiding a decision and a defeat'. (12) In fact, the Conservative Peers had decided to force a division at the end of the two-day debate and they reached the decision 'in consideration of the gravity of the situation and also of possible Empire repercussions if a clear indication were not given that a strong element of opposition was opposed to the Government's policy'. (13)

At that time, the Earl of Halifax, a leading Conservative and former Viceroy and Governor-General of India, making his last great decisive intervention in Indian affairs, gave a spirited and very reasonable defence of the Government's India policy. He declared that all parties were agreed on the question of leading India to self-government and of maintaining order and security in India. He said that with each political advance the dilemma had constantly been posing itself with increasing sharpness, and held

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(12) Campbell-Johnson, n.s. 1, 25.
(13) Daily Telegraph, 26 February 1947, 1.
that they had all laid the utmost stress upon agreement. 'It is quite obvious why all that was said, and it is quite obvious how true it was, but that does not alter the fact that it may, in this year of grace 1947, in totally different circumstances, not be possible in fact to insist upon it or to stand pat until you get it.'

Continuing, Halifax declared that the Cripps' offer had emphasized agreement among the parties, and due protection of minorities as essential prerequisites to India's right to self-government. Though Churchill placed great weight and insistence upon the conditions attached, the Indians saw that there was the great Conservative Party under Churchill which was prepared to say that the independence of India was no longer a matter of great principle to be resisted at all costs. Halifax held that the offer had an immense effect in India and they could not get back to their original position even if they were not able to achieve their conditions of agreement. He declared that there were all along three choices, agreement, continuation of British rule till agreement and some such action as the Government's India policy. He pointed out that there was no possibility of agreement and that, though logical, the second choice was not practical. The position was rapidly becoming intolerable as the British Government was in a position where responsibility was greater than power. So he felt that the third choice represented by the Government's India policy removed uncertainty and provided a lever for Indian agreement.

Halifax pointed out that the statement and the announcement of date were likely to make for unity. About the betrayal of less powerful interests, he said that realities had to be faced and that the execution of any agreement would depend upon the goodwill of
those to whom power was delegated. He did not accept that the fixing up of the date was wrong, for the truth was that for India there was no solution that was not fraught with the gravest objection, the gravest danger. 'And the conclusion that I reach...','...he said against it is that I am not prepared to condemn what His Majesty's Government are doing unless I can honestly and confidently recommend a better solution.' He appealed to the leader of the Opposition and others to desist from dividing the House on that occasion. 'Admit and recognize sharp differences that exist as to the method by which the final evolution of our professed policy is to be achieved. There are sharp differences as to method, but no differences at all, so far as I am aware, as to professed purpose. If that is so, it means that the policy of His Majesty's Government would certainly, and will certainly, go forward and there is no desire, and no power, to arrest it.* If that is so, is it not the wise course to concentrate our thoughts and our hopes on the future relations between India and the British Commonwealth?' He appealed to the House not to oppose the Government's India policy. (14)

The impact of Halifax's speech was such that many Conservative Peers who had earlier decided to vote against the Government changed their minds and fell in with his appeal to Templewood 'to spare the House the necessity of going to a division'*. The Opposition leader in the Lords, Cranborne, agreed that all parties were pledged to the progressive attainment of self-government by India leading to

Dominion status and, if the Indians so desired, to independence. He held that they stood by those pledges but insisted upon the necessity of a prior agreement. He said that though he was tempted to advise his friends to divide the House to make their views clear, on the ground that a vote against Government's India policy might be misunderstood in India and might be taken to mean a difference of ultimate objective about which there was no difference between the parties, he advised them not to press for a division. The motion was withdrawn. (15)

Commons Debate on the Statement on Transfer of Power

Commending the new policy statement to the House of Commons and seeking its approval, Stafford Cripps declared that the policy towards India was decided under the war-time Government. He pointed out that deterioration of Indo-British relations was arrested by the Cabinet Mission and the Prime Minister's statement of 15 March, both of which had convinced Indian nationalists of their sincerity to withdraw from India. Cripps held that the fixing of the date of June 1948 constituted an honest and fair acceptance of the situation and the only true basis of future relationship was absolute freedom of choice on both sides. He felt that the latest statement of His Majesty's Government marked the final clearing away of those influences which had militated against a full and free friendship and that it was a valuable step to continued close and friendly relations with the India of the future. He announced that they had reached the final and the most critical stage and had to take risks as to the effect of their action upon Britain and the rest of the

(15) Ibid., cols. 1047-62.
world. (16)

The main speaker for the Conservative Opposition, Sir John Anderson, moved an amendment expressing their inability to accept the Government's latest declaration which, 'by fixing an arbitrary date, prejudices the possibility of working out suitable constitutional plan either for a united or a divided India . . . which ignores obligations expressed to minorities . . .'. However, the motion reaffirmed their determination 'to provide for the orderly attainment by India of self-government as soon as possible'. The Conservative members said that they desired progressive self-government for India and immediate Dominion Status with the right to secede from the Commonwealth. They believed that the mass of literate and thinking people of India expected self-government 'and the longer we wait and temporize the more likely we are to have trouble in India, and the worse it will be for India and the British Commonwealth of Nations'. However, they expressed their concern at that 'hysterical abdication' of their responsibilities.

Godfrey Nicholson, a Conservative member, charged that the Prime Minister did not consult other parties. 'The Tory Party is just as pro-Indian as any other party in the House . . . In fact I feel that it is our keener interest and keener sense of responsibility which makes us oppose this policy because we believe that it is wrong.' He said that they wished all success to the policy and would be delighted if they were found to be wrong and the Government right. (17)

(17) Ibid., cols. 512-603.
On the second day of the debate, Winston Churchill, leader of the Conservative Opposition, said that the British political parties had pursued a united policy towards India and for the first time they felt it their duty to express their dissent and their difference by a formal vote. He held that both parties were bound by the Cripps offer of 1942 and the Cripps proposals constituted a definite, decisive and urgent project for action. He held that he was bound to the offer of Dominion Status; the Prime Minister was equally bound to the conditions about agreement between the principal communities about the proper discharge of their pledges about the protection of the minorities and the like. Churchill felt that by their fourteen-month time-limit, the Government had put an end to all prospect of Indian unity. Though he had never believed that unity could have been preserved after the departure of the British Raj, he felt that even the last chance was removed by the Government's action. He said that it was inviting them to take advantage of the time that was left to peg out their claims and to take up strong guard to defend their rights which they valued more than life itself. India was subjected to partition and fragmentation and the time-limit prevented the full, fair and reasonable discussion of the great complicated issues involved. The period would be used for civil war and not for unity and that the political parties and political classes did not represent the Indian masses. It was with deep grief that Churchill watched 'the clattering down of the British Empire with all its glories'. He expressed his forebodings thus: 'In handing over the Government of India to those so-called political classes we are handing over to men of straw, of whom, in a few years, no trace will remain.' He suggested to
the Government to call in the aid of the United Nations instead of withdrawing their power. (18)

R.A. Butler, a leading Conservative said that the fixing of the date was a shock to him, because they had no knowledge to whom power would be transferred. Declaring that they did not wish to hold up progress by playing variations on the harp of discord, Butler said that what his Party wanted was unified agreement. If, however, agreement was not reached, the Party, he said, would be ready to support a divided form of government. It was apparent to him from the Government's statement of 6 December that unitary government would be difficult and he quoted the concluding paragraph of that statement. He did not say that the British ought to stay in India for an indefinite number of years, but he did say that they might stay and finish the job as the proper culmination of those centuries of devotion and service. (19)

Another Conservative member, Stanley Reed, considering the Government's decision as a great and tremendous one, could not find a clear, definite and workable alternative policy and thought that

(18) Ibid., (6 March 1947) cols. 663-78.

(19) Ibid., cols. 748-63.

The last paragraph of the British Government's statement of 6 December 1946, to which Butler made a significant reference, is as follows: 'There has never been any prospect of success for the Constituent Assembly except upon the basis of an agreed procedure. Should the constitution come to be framed by a Constituent Assembly in which a large section of the Indian population had not been represented [i.e., the Muslim League], His Majesty's Government could not, of course, contemplate - as the Congress have stated they would not contemplate - forcing such a constitution upon any unwilling parts of the country. Full text of the statement is to be found in The Indian Annual Register (July-December 1946) 301-2.'
speedier action was the only solution. He told his colleagues that they should get away from the parrot cry, 'Agreement first and progress afterwards', which caused so much exasperation in India as it was thought to be humbug, a pretext to continue in power. (20) The Conservative amendment was negatived by 337 as against 186. The Government's motion for approval of its policy was carried without a division.

Thus, though the Prime Minister's appeal for a united message of goodwill from the House had failed to prevent a division, 'one could not help coming away from this historic debate with the sense that the gulf between Government and Opposition was far narrower than some of Mr. Churchill's more sombre polemics might suggest'. (21) The statement seemed to them an abdication of duty. Harold Macmillan, the Conservative member, said a few months later that it was not 'the mere fixation of the date to which we objected, but the abandonment of duty without any clear scheme by which the obligations we were unable to fulfil could be firmly placed upon other shoulders'. It destroyed all hope of preserving the unity of India. (22)

(20) Ibid., cols. 710-18.

Some years later, Sir Stanley wrote that they knew the Government would receive the full support of its members. Many of them [the Conservatives] wanted to express clearly their attitude to the problem. So they declared: 'A great, indeed vital, decision had to be taken, and to some of us at least, this transcended the obligations of party. We had warned the Opposition leaders through the chief whip that we could not endorse censure of the Government without offering an alternative policy to meet the rapidly deteriorating situation in India and must hold ourselves free to express an independent judgment.' Sir Stanley Reed, The India I knew, 1897-1947 (London, 1952) 236.

(21) Campbell-Johnson, n. 1, 29.

(22) Hansard, H.C., 439 (15 July 1947) col. 2466.
The principal spokesmen of the Conservative Party took their stand on the Cripps offer, whereas the new policy of the Government was a departure from it in some respects; it did not insist on an agreement, it did not mention a treaty, and the policy made it impossible for the British to discharge their obligations to the minorities. In spite of the fact that the Opposition had made it clear that responsibility for the Government's India policy rested with the Labour Government alone, the Conservatives were in agreement with its broad principles and with some of its methods, but were critical of the policy only in matters of detail. But, for the first time now, they had felt it their duty to express dissent and difference by a formal vote. They seemed to have conveniently forgotten their own earlier proposals of the same course of action. For both Churchill and Lord Linlithgow had suggested the same type of policy as that envisaged in the Government's statement, during the Parliament's debate on India in December 1946. (23)

However, it should be noted, that many Conservatives with recent experience of India supported the Government's India policy in contrast to their own Party's official policy. Their arguments were well represented when Halifax declared, that he was not prepared to oppose the Government's India policy because he could not recommend a better solution. For the majority of Conservative members had recognized the imperative need to grant self-government to India; "after all, this was only an extension of a Tory policy consistently pursued over the previous twenty years." They had also

to some extent unwillingly recognized that Britain's role in the world had been diminished by the late war.' (24) The Conservative criticism was concerned about the shortness of the time allowed for framing a constitution and they attacked the statement as far too radical. In fact they were at pains to show that they did so because they feared that it might have harmful consequences for India.

The Labour Government felt that the existing conditions could not be continued indefinitely and that the fixing of a date for the transfer of power to India might act as a spur to the parties and place responsibility upon Indian shoulders firmly for the settlement of communal and constitutional problems. (25) But it was a grave failure of policy on the part of the Labour Government not to have consulted the official Opposition and taken them into confidence. There is reason to believe that if the Opposition had known the confidential reports on the situation in India and suggestions from the British authorities in India, the Conservative Party would have wholeheartedly supported the Government's India policy. As The Economist pointed out, in Parliament there was already a sense of futility about dissensions on India and sooner the quitting was completed, they thought, the better. Since the debate on the Government's public declaration of policy, Indian affairs faded out from the British political scene and the initiative remained with the new Governor-General. (26)


(25) Sir Frederick James, 'The Indian Political Scene', *International Affairs*, (April 1947) 220-7.

The Congress Working Committee at its meeting held on 6-8 March 1947 in Delhi welcomed the British Government's declaration of their definite intention to transfer power finally by June 1948 and urged recognition of the Interim Government as a Dominion, with the Governor-General functioning as the constitutional head of the Government. (27) The arrival in India of a new Viceroy and Governor-General, ... Mountbatten, with definite orders to transfer power gave a sharper edge to His Majesty's Government's purpose, and Indians of all communities hailed the statement unanimously.

THE LAST PHASE

Mountbatten arrived in India in March 1947 and took over as the new Viceroy and Governor-General of India on 'a mission of fulfilment', with 'a very wide mandate'. He had a specific task to discharge, for the British Government had fully accepted 'the principle of terminating the British Raj by a specific date regardless of agreement or earlier than the time limit if the parties were able beforehand to agree on a constitution and form a Government'. (28) At the swearing-in ceremony, Mountbatten declared that His Majesty's Government were resolved to transfer power by June 1948, which meant that a solution must be reached within the next few months. (29)


Nehru thought that 20 February 1947 declaration was a brave and definite statement. But Gandhi, sensed that it might lead to Pakistan for those Provinces which wanted it. See Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase (Ahmedabad, 1956) 565-6.

(28) Campbell-Johnson, n. 1, 19.

The new Governor-General tried all methods to preserve the unity of India, but soon he was made to realize that the Muslim League would not agree to any plan which did not provide for Pakistan. Though the Congress opposed any plan which envisaged partition of the country, gradually both sides succumbed to Mountbatten's shock tactics 'applied with friendliness, sincerity and the patience of Job'. (30) Soon after his arrival in India and taking charge as Governor-General, from the outset, Mountbatten was convinced 'that the need for the political solution is much more pressing than was apparent' when they were in London and 'that the June 1948 time-limit, far from being not long enough, is already too remote a deadline'. Within a week of his stay in India, he had realized that the date was too late rather than too early. (31)

MOUNTBATTEN PLAN AND THE PARTITION

Mountbatten had been asked to find a solution for a united India on the basis of the Cabinet Mission plan. In the course of his talks with Indian party leaders, specially with those of the Muslim League, Mountbatten was convinced 'that an alternative plan for the transfer of power had to be found and implemented without loss of time in order to ease the growing political tension', and that that

(31) Campbell-Johnson, n. 1, 55. See also Mountbatten, n. 29, 64.

Lord Ismay had accompanied Mountbatten with the idea 'that he would be Mountbatten's counsellor of caution, the hand upon his shoulder, the foot upon the brake when the juggernaut seemed to be moving too fast. But a month in India had changed all that. Far from counselling hesitation and reflection his was the voice which urged Mountbatten to make haste.' Mosley, n. 1, 109.
should be done on the basis of Government's statement of 20 February 1947. (32)

In the light of his talks with party leaders and in consultation with his advisers, specially V.P. Menon, Mountbatten evolved a plan for the early demission of power on Dominion Status basis in the first instance. This is popularly known as Mountbatten plan. (33)

Simultaneously on 3 June 1947, the Prime Minister in the House of Commons and the Governor-General in New Delhi announced the Mountbatten plan for the constitutional transfer of power from British to Indian hands after partitioning the subcontinent into two sovereign Dominions. The Governor-General in a broadcast message declared: 'If the transfer of power is to be effected in a peaceful and orderly manner, every single one of us must bend all his efforts to the task. This is no time for bickering, much less for the continuation in any shape or form of the disorders and lawlessness of the past few months.' He further made it clear 'that independence through Dominion Status is complete, and the different administrations are at liberty to opt out of the Commonwealth whenever they please'. (34) On 4 June, Lord Listowel, the Secretary of State for India announcing the new policy in the House of Lords, declared that the Princely states would be free to choose their own

(32) V.P. Menon, n. 2, 353. See also Mosley, n. 1, 97.

(33) For full details of the evolution of the Mountbatten plan, see V.P. Menon, n. 2, 350-74.

(34) Mountbatten, n. 29, 10-12, 23. See also Hansard, H.C., 438 (3 June 1947) cols. 35-41. For full details about the emergence of the Mountbatten plan see Mosley, n. 1, 105-27.
future and that British paramountcy would end. (35)

Welcoming the announcement, Jawaharlal Nehru conveyed to the Governor-General the decision of the Congress to accept those proposals. He said that the plan proposed 'a big advance towards complete independence. Such a big change must have the full concurrence of the people before effect can be given to it, for it must always be remembered that the future of India can only be decided by the people of India and not by any outside authority.' For the League, Jinnah said at first that the plan had got to be very carefully examined in its pros and cons before the final decision could be taken. (36) The Council of the Muslim League on 9 June adopted a resolution accepting 'as a compromise' the British Government's plan for the partition of Punjab and Bengal and the conferment of Dominion Status. The All-India Congress Committee at its meeting in New Delhi on 14-15 June passed a resolution accepting the Mountbatten plan of partition of India by 157 votes to 29. (37)

Commenting on the Mountbatten plan, Winston Churchill said in the House of Commons that the two conditions foreseen at the time of the Cripps Mission, namely agreement between the Indian parties and a period of Dominion Status in which India or any part of it might decide whether or not to remain within the association of the Commonwealth, had been fulfilled. He said that if those two conditions were respected at all stages in fact and in form, all


(37) The Indian Annual Register (January-June 1947) 74.
parties in that House would equally pledge their support for the offer and for the declaration. He declared that they would be ready to support an early legislation, on the basis of the offer and that 'it would not be right that such legislation should be deemed contentious or that any long delays should elapse after it is introduced before it is passed into law. Therefore while-reserving our full freedom to discuss points of detail, we shall not oppose any Bills to confer Dominion Status on the various parts of India.' (38)

In the House of Lords, welcoming the proposals on behalf of the Conservative Party, the Marquess of Salisbury hoped that they would be accepted by Indian parties and would lead to the fruitful collaboration of the Indian and the British peoples within the British Commonwealth. (39) Churchill's guarded terms of approval 

(38) Hansard, H.C., 438 (3 June 1947) cols. 41-3.


At the end of May, Mountbatten, while in London, 'had valuable meetings with the Opposition leaders, without whose support the timing of the whole operation, based as it is upon the quick passage of the Independence Bill through Parliament would be frustrated. In the present delicate situation Mountbatten's personal authority and guidance were needed to secure their vital co-operation and to set their legitimate doubts at rest.' Campbell-Johnson, n. 1, 94-5.

According to Maulana Azad, Mountbatten felt that he could get the support of the Conservatives, specially Churchill for his plan as the proposal was based on partition of the country. Azad believed that the Labour Government changed its attitude and surrendered to the demands of the Muslim League to safeguard British interests than Indian interests or its desire to please the Muslim League. As Churchill never favoured Cabinet Mission plan, he found the Mountbatten plan much more to his taste and threw his weight with the Labour Government to make the passage of the Bill easier. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India Wing Freedom: An Autobiographical Narrative (Bombay, 1959) 188-92.
of the important step announced, his conditional promise of support, and the compliment he paid to Attlee suggested a Parliament determined to meet a serious situation with a united front. Churchill's statement deepened the impression that the new plan, unlike the statement of 20 February, commanded the support of the whole British people. (40)

Even the former Conservative Secretary of State for India, Leopold Amery applauded the courage of the Governor-General and that of the Government in tackling a ticklish situation and complimented them on their success in making Indian political leaders adopt a realistic attitude. (41)

The Conservatives under Churchill noted with relief that the new India was not to be divorced immediately from the Commonwealth, while politicians in India thought that the continuance of a formal link with the British Crown was a small price to pay for actual independence which would be theirs within a few weeks. This ready support to the Mountbatten plan by the Conservative Party as a whole, in contrast to their bitter opposition three months earlier clearly testifies to the fact that their earlier opposition was largely the result of their apprehension of the possible tragic consequences that might happen without an agreement. But the Party was not opposed to India's demand for independence as such; they desired India to remain an independent Dominon in the British Commonwealth for a short time at least, before it decided to secede from it, if it so desired.


(41) The Times, 4 June 1947, 5.
On the whole the Conservative Press welcomed the Mountbatten plan. The Times commented that the acceptance of the Mountbatten plan held a new hope for India. 'The tribute paid by the Prime Minister to the Viceroy, and Churchill's congratulations both to the Prime Minister and to Lord Mountbatten, were the principal features of a parliamentary occasion which in earnest unanimity recalled some of the notable debates of the war . . . 'The British plan deserves to rank as a major contribution to the process of Indian evolution towards nationhood.' The Daily Express thought that a new and glorious hope was born. A noble project in statesmanship had been evolved by wisdom and patience. To the Daily Telegraph the formula was admitted 'a second best'. Only the Daily Mail expressed its forebodings about the future. It considered that a chapter full of glory and achievement closed and another one, dark and uncertain opened. The transfer of power was one of the momentous events and also 'a leap in the dark'. (42)

The White Paper on the Mountbatten plan differed from the rest in two decisive respects, i.e., it was not a proposal for ultimate change but a plan for immediate action and, it had been accepted by all the communities. It was pointed out that the new plan simply recognized the already existing state of affairs in India and the promised legislation for Dominion Status did little more than regularize the system in vogue since the Interim Government took office. Past efforts had failed owing to the extreme slowness with which they were carried into effect and that had given an air of unreality to the whole business. The critics pointed out that

(42) All dated 4 June 1947.
the Congress could have made great progress if it had accepted earlier offers and then agitated for more. Though there is an element of truth in the criticism, the attitude of the Congress was undoubtedly influenced by the fact 'that previous British offers were practically always matters of principle and not of action. There was perhaps some justification when Indian parties have refused to mortgage the future.' (43)

**INDIAN INDEPENDENCE**

Introducing the Indian Independence Bill on 10 July 1947 in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Attlee stated that the Bill brought to an end one chapter in Indo-British relations and opened another. He declared that it had been the settled policy of all parties in the country for many years that Indians in course of time should manage their own affairs and that the real question was how and when that should happen. He announced that the Bill sets up two independent Dominions, free and equal, like the United Kingdom or Canada, and hoped that they would continue in the Commonwealth. He thought that it was the culminating point in a long course of events and that the Bill was designed to implement those proposals which met with general acceptance of the House and the country. He was categorical in his declaration that British paramountcy and suzerainty over the Indian States, together with all British political engagements in the Indian subcontinent, would lapse. (44)

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(43) *The Economist*, 162 (21 June 1947) 936,

Speaking for the Conservative Opposition, in the absence of Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan said that the long history of various reforms represented the gradual unfolding of the steady policy of the British to prepare India for eventual self-government and that it had been steadfastly pursued by the British people as a whole. On that purpose, there had never been any division among British political parties. 'The methods, not the objective, have been the matter of dispute.' All the parties of Churchill's Coalition Government were in agreement with the broad proposition to offer self-government to India, but they insisted on two conditions: agreement among all Indian parties and Dominion Status as the penultimate, and if India so chose, the final stage on the road to independence. He stated that by that Bill the political phase came to an end and prayed that the association between the British and Indian peoples on a new basis might be productive of great good to both.

Welcoming the Bill, Stanley Reed, a Conservative member, thought that it was the fulfilment of their 'concept and trust', in Burke's words, of all their work in India and he refused to accept the proposition that the fixing of a definite timetable made that division inevitable. John Anderson and other Conservative members expressed their support to the measure. Arthur Henderson, the Under-Secretary of State for India, said that the debate was notable for the spirit of sincerity and goodwill and it was an act of faith which enabled them in all sincerity of purposes to transfer the destiny of Indian people into their own hands. (45)

When the Bill came up for the third reading, Butler, former Conservative Under-Secretary of State for India, considered that

(45) Ibid., cols. 2462-87.
the work of leading India towards self-government had its roots in the history of many years ago. The main objective of the Bill was that they practised as well as preached the doctrine of self-government and that was achieved by the passing of that Bill. The corpus of law which remained as the basis of the Bill was the Act of 1935. The effects of the war had not been felt so much in any other country as in the political life of India. It had been increasingly difficult to keep pace with the political changes in India. Those who criticized them a few weeks back were themselves assailed with criticism. (46) The Bill was passed without a division.

In the House of Lords, Templewood, former Conservative Secretary of State for India, thought that the British people were not influenced by theory and general principle but preferred to act empirically and to adopt themselves to changing conditions and that they were ready in due course to recognize accomplished facts. He said that he had seen in actual fact that the British Raj of the day had no effective power in the Indian subcontinent. So he said that it was better to recognize that fact and transfer full responsibility to Indian hands. He considered that sooner that Bill became operative, the sooner full responsibility was placed upon Indian shoulders, the better for the British Parliament and better for the whole relations of the Commonwealth. He did not regard those proposals as revolutionary but thought them to be yet another step in a whole series of steps. (47)


Salisbury, another Conservative, said that the general evolution of the policy clearly involved statesmanship of a very high order. 'If we went too fast, we ran the risk of fatally injuring the structure of unity which had been built up with so much care and devotion over so many years. If, on the other hand, we went too slow, we were liable to create an exasperation and suspicion in Indian minds and this was bound to undermine that essential confidence in British intentions, which was the very basis of our rule. That was the dilemma in which British statesmanship was placed throughout the whole of this period.' He underscored the fact that it was with the pace of that advance and not over the objective that the whole controversy over India had been mainly concerned during the last twenty-five or fifty years and declared that their relationship with India had not ended but had taken a different turn. (48)

Thus the Indian Independence Bill passed through its final stages in the British Parliament 'with great celerity and without a division' and received the Royal Assent and became law on 18 July 1947. The Times remarked: 'Never before in the long annals of the Parliament of Westminster has a measure of this profound significance been accorded a passage at once so rapid and so smooth.' (49)

Thus the Conservatives did not oppose the measure and Churchill had acquiesced in it. The days of the British Raj ended and it was the end too of the Indian campaign which Churchill had

(48) Ibid., cols. 359-68.

(49) The Times, 17 July 1947, 5.
unwittingly sustained over the years. The Government introduced the Bill as a matter of urgency and the Opposition 'consolated by the provision for Dominion Status, refrained from the lamentations and prophesies of woe which might have seemed appropriate to the occasion. Nobody, indeed, was able to deny that what was now being done was what British statesmen of all parties had been declaring it to be the goal of British policy for a generation and after so much storm and stress and final act of renunciation no longer aroused the emotions which had long ago been exhausted on both sides of the argument. It was a foregone conclusion, hardly more than a state of historical fact.' (50)

The foundations of British India had been built upon sand, the sand of a people's consent. That consent was now trickling away, and the walls of the imperial edifice were crumbling. The British seemed in danger of being crushed when they fell and so they decided on their withdrawal. The choice that the British Government made in 1947 was the choice of the British people. The Government had no choice of its own and even if the Conservative Party had been in power, it too would have been forced to recognize the fact. The British people ceased to be interested in the British Empire, in its glories, responsibilities, virtues and vices. (51)

Thus the Conservative Party had fully supported the Labour Government's India policy, even though barely four months earlier

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See also Lewis Broad, Winston Churchill: Architect of Victory and of Peace (London, 1941; Revised 1956) 363.

(51) Michael Edwards, n. 24, 165.
it had opposed the Government's policy statement of 20 February on the transfer of power to India by June 1948. That earlier opposition was largely due to their apprehension of the possible consequence of absence of an agreement among Indians. They made it clear that they were not opposed to India's independence as such, but only considered the time-limit to be very short to complete the transfer of power. The opposition was largely due to their ignorance of the Indian situation and failure of the Government to consult the Opposition before they decided that important policy. Thus it is clear, by and large, that the Conservative Party supported India's demand for independence, though they wanted India to remain as a free member of the Commonwealth for a short period at least, before it opted out of it.
Contrary to the popular impression, it was actually the Conservative Government which started the move for Indian reforms by appointing the Statutory Commission in 1927, well in advance of time. Again, it was the Conservative Governor-General, Lord Irwin, who judged the Indian situation in its perspective and, with a view to remedying it, made his famous declaration on Dominion Status and Round Table Conference on 31 December 1929. Though the declaration sparked off Liberal and Conservative opposition to the granting of Dominion Status to India, it set the reforms in motion and later enabled the Conservative Party to make a determined effort to introduce them in spite of opposition from some of its own Right-wing extremists. As is clear from the private correspondence of Irwin with the Secretary of State, the Conservative Governor-General was so concerned to meet the demands of Indians that, in the beginning, he opposed even his own Party's representation at the Round Table Conference and was successful in excluding John Simon from the British delegation in the hope of convincing Indians of the genuineness of British interest in Indian reforms. The sympathy and earnestness which this Conservative Viceroy and Governor-General brought to bear upon the vexed question of reforms stand out in bold relief when contrasted with the apathy and lack of understanding of his immediate successor in office, Lord Willingdon, who was a non-party man appointed by a Labour Government.

At the Round Table Conference, the unanimous declaration of the all party British delegation was that provided a workable
constitution could be framed, responsibility for the Indian Government should pass under Indian control at the Centre as well as in the Provinces, subject to safeguards in the interest of justice, minorities and stable Government. There was opposition, as usual, from Right-wing extremists, who detested the very idea of a conference; the mass of the Conservative Party, however, agreed that the conference having been held, the results could not be discarded. The Right-wing opposition stemmed from the belief that, to quote Churchill, 'England apart from her Empire in India ceases for ever to be a Great Power'.

There is no doubt that early in the thirties, the Conservatives were uneasy about Indian reforms and the parliamentary system that the British Government proposed to introduce. But that uneasiness was due not so much to their callousness as to their ignorance of the Indian situation. This is proved, if proof were needed, by the fact that if they had opposed the reforms, the Government of India Act of 1935 would not have been approved by the Parliament, which had an overwhelming Conservative majority. It is true that a fairly articulate section of the Party, the Right-wing extremists, opposed the reforms at every step and with all the resources that they could muster, but they failed absolutely to carry the rank and file with them and their opposition made practically no difference to the role that the Party had decided to play. It is also true that the Party did not commit itself to the granting of Dominion Status to India owing to the vagueness and confusion created in the minds of men by the conflicting interpretations of what that status would mean in actual practice, but this must not blind us to the patent and incontrovertible fact that the Party on
the whole was convinced that provincial autonomy and partial self-government at the Centre should be conceded to India to meet the challenge of the situation and to satisfy Indian nationalists.

There were many reasons which prompted the majority of the Conservative Party to support the reforms. First of all there was their loyalty to their leader, Stanley Baldwin, and their confidence in his judgment. Even in that high noon of the Empire this far-seeing statesman had the vision to see that it would not be possible for the British to keep India within the Empire for more than twenty years if they paid scant regard to the demands of Indian nationalists and turned them down in summary fashion. Secondly, the Conservatives realized that only a self-governing nation could deal effectively with the social and religious dimensions of the Indian scene. Thirdly, they wanted to protect their trade with India. British business leaders took a long-term view and decided that it would be wise to mollify Indian opinion by gracefully granting the reforms demanded and gradually leading the country to self-government within the Empire, so that when India did become free, British commerce and financial interests might not be jeopardized. They realized that interaction and common interests of Anglo-Indian trade were such that, given goodwill on both sides, it would flourish even after India attained its independence. The real misfortune was the delay in the passage of the Bill on account of extremist opposition in Parliament. Also, the unusual importance and prominence given to safeguards, with a view to countering the propaganda of the extremists, robbed the constitutional proposals of a good deal of their first attraction. Both together retarded the progress that might otherwise have been made.
At this time, none of the political parties, not even the Labour Party, ever thought of conceding full Dominion Status to India. No doubt the Labour Party took exception to the absence of any statement in the Government of India Act of 1935 that Dominion Status was the final goal of British policy for India. It was not, however, prepared for the immediate fulfilment of that goal. It is clear that even if the Labour Party had been in power, it would not have conceded full Dominion Status at that time.

Now a word about the small but by no means utterly ineffectual minority within the Conservative Party that opposed the reforms. For sentimental reasons, and owing to their inability to gauge the strength of the Indian national movement, these eloquent and true-blue imperialists opposed any change in India, though they professed their readiness to concede an ineffective system of provincial autonomy. They fought the reforms tooth and nail at all stages, in the Parliament as well as at the Party meetings and conferences. They also held many meetings and demonstrations throughout the country to oppose the Government's India policy. Their frequent amendments, repeated motions to report progress, claim of 'breach of privilege', and attempts to sow dissension among the Princes in India and among the Conservative associations in Britain delayed the reforms. They could not, however, kill them.

A considerable section of the Party depended solely upon the guidance of their leaders. When the extremists appealed to their emotions and told them that Britain and its trade and prosperity would be destroyed if India was given an equal status, most of them either voted against the reforms or simply abstained. On the other hand, when the leaders and the enlightened section of
the Party explained to them the changes that had taken place in Asia and in India and described the strength of the Indian national movement for reforms, they supported them wholeheartedly and without hesitation.

The price paid for the appeasement of the group of extremists was the direct omission of the phrase 'Dominion Status' from the Bill. This was despite the Herculean efforts of the enlightened Conservative leader, Baldwin, and his prophetic foresight that India could not be retained as a British dependency for more than twenty years.

Once the Reforms Bill was passed and became an Act, even the extremist opposition in the Party to the reforms died away. They all enthusiastically set about implementing the scheme embodied in it. The Conservative Government, headed at first by Baldwin, and later, in 1937, by Neville Chamberlain, carried into effect scrupulously and meticulously the reforms as enunciated in the constitution of 1935 Act with all its undertakings and safeguards. The Governor-General and the India Office did not fail to carry the intentions of Parliament and the pledges given both to the British and Indian peoples. The Conservative extremists made it clear that they would not obstruct or hamper the carrying out of a policy that Parliament had approved. They never raised the question of law and order in the Provinces. By and large, they supported the introduction of reforms without attempting to put any impediment in their way. They did not interfere or prejudice the implementation of the scheme which they had so resolutely opposed earlier.

There is no doubt that the enthusiasm shown in effecting provincial autonomy was not extended to federation. However, the
British authorities in both countries endeavoured to expedite the inauguration of federation under the Act of 1935 and the Viceroy and Governor-General had plans to secure the States' accession through special emissaries and start federation by 1 April 1936. The greatest stumbling-block in the way of federation was undoubtedly the unenthusiastic and unhelpful attitude of the Princes. Then there were the Muslims, who were from the beginning antagonistic towards federation, where they feared they would be a minority. Delay was also caused by 'the enormous mass of exploratory and preliminary work' which was necessary to introduce federation. This work was interrupted by the Second World War and federation was suspended.

The British public and political parties did not bother about India till the commencement of the war in 1939. They presumably thought that once the Reforms Act was passed, there was nothing else for them to do. During the period from 1935 up to the commencement of the Second World War, all the three political parties were united in supporting the constitutional experiment in British India and there was no difference in their attitude so far as the Indian problem was concerned.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, the Governor-General, by a declaration, without caring to consult Indian leaders, made India a belligerent on the side of Britain. Though India as a whole was united against German aggression in the early stages of the war and sympathized with Poland, the Government's peremptory ways and lack of vision, understanding and initiative compelled nationalist India to adopt an attitude of suspense and unfriendly neutrality. The Congress invited the British Government to declare
their war aims and to define how they would be applied to India. The Government's reply was inadequate. If the Government had been generous in its response to Congress request, and had offered at once what it did offer after a good deal of haggling and haggling, a *rapprochement* honourable to both countries would have been possible.

The British Government did consider new offers from time to time, and these were aimed not at arriving at a settlement but at strengthening their own position in the eyes of the public, both at home and abroad. They emphasized that any scheme to be acceptable to them should have the general support of all Indian parties. In spite of the fact that the Secretary of State for India favoured association of non-official Indians in the conduct of administration, the Governor-General was not willing to have anything but an ineffective consultative committee under his own chairmanship, and thought that it was a first-class opportunity to employ the magic words 'Dominion status' without making any new commitments.

During the initial stages of the war period, the Governor-General played a key role in the determination of British policy towards India. The Secretary of State for India had limited power and owing to the pre-occupation of the Cabinet with other matters, the Governor-General was the determining factor on India policy. Though Dominion status had been the professed goal of British policy for some time past, Linlithgow never thought that it could be realized early. As is clear from the private correspondence between Zetland and Linlithgow, the latter advocated the using of minorities, especially the Muslim League and the Princes, as a counterpoise against the Congress, so that they could avoid objectives which would
call for substantive revision. The Governor-General wanted the British Government to give undue importance to the Muslim League and advocated penal sanctions against the leaders of the Congress, rather than a scheme of government which the Muslim League was not ready to accept. He thought it unwise to throw cold water on the Muslim League scheme for partition. He was not keen to start talking about the end of British rule and suspected that day to be 'very remote'. He warned the British Government against neglecting the Muslim League.

While Zetland argued with the War Cabinet that they could not continue to govern India as a colonial possession consistent with their war aims in Europe, Linlithgow retorted that if the state of Europe showed anything, it was the folly of 'hanging over the minorities to their natural enemies'. The Governor-General finally prevailed upon the Home Government to insist upon agreement among the Indian parties as a pre-condition of future constitutional progress. It was, again, due to his influence that the War Cabinet stoutly refused to make a statement on the lines demanded by the Congress. His advice that the Muslim League should be used to counteract the demands of the Congress also found acceptance.

Even when the Congress provincial ministries resigned and thereby withdrew what little co-operation they had given and the prospect of another civil disobedience movement bulked large on the horizon, the Governor-General still advocated the old policy of masterly inactivity and risked trouble with Parliament and misunderstanding abroad. In his judgement, they were to have 'no qualms of conscience' as to their position and as to what they had done. Influenced by the sober views of some of the Governors of
Indian Provinces, Zetland differed with Linlithgow and suggested a constructive policy, but the War Cabinet adhering to the principle of giving importance to the man on the spot, ignored the realistic yet moderate suggestions of the Secretary of State for India and supported the Governor-General.

The Governor-General grudgingly acknowledged that they had to make a new approach to the Indian problem on account of the war, but the suggestion of a constituent assembly did not carry the faintest shadow of conviction to his mind. As is clear from a perusal of the correspondence of Zetland with Linlithgow, whereas the Secretary of State for India and the Prime Minister (Neville Chamberlain) had open minds and were inclined to reach an agreement with Indian nationalists, the Governor-General adopted a repressive attitude and brushed aside all the suggestions for any change and further exacerbated the Hindu-Muslim conflict.

During the war period, there was a Coalition Government and it would be difficult, if not impossible (and may well remain so, even with access to Cabinet records), to disentangle Conservative attitudes from Coalition policies. But the Conservative Prime Minister, Churchill, held a dominant position, and as the Secretary of State for India, Leopold Amery (1940-45) and Linlithgow, the Governor-General (till 1943) were also Conservatives, it can safely be inferred that, by and large, the Conservatives were responsible for the making of the Coalition Government's India policy.

When Churchill formed the war-time Coalition Government, it is no wonder that the Governor-General should have felt happy. The sentimental and professedly imperialist Prime Minister joined the unimaginative Governor-General in framing British policy towards
India and there was no doubt about the nature of the policy that they would pursue. A change could not have been expected. The strange and surprising feature was that all parties, including even the Labour, blindly and unhesitatingly supported their policy. Thus, the initial blunder committed by the British in making India a belligerent in the Second World War without its consent was further cemented by their stubborn refusal to respond to India’s demand.

The surrender of France and the critical turn in the war for the Allies made Indian nationalists re-examine their attitude to the problem of co-operation in the war effort. Realizing the critical juncture of the war situation, the Congress, in spite of Gandhi’s opposition, expressed its readiness to offer a helping hand in the war effort of the Allies. Amery told the War Cabinet in his draft declaration that a policy of inaction (persistently advocated by Linlithgow) was no longer defensible in the prevailing circumstances and urged upon them the necessity of a re-statement of British intentions as to future constitutional development. He wanted that statement to be more precise as to the method of approach and as to the date of fulfilment than the previous vague declarations. He also expressed himself in favour of conceding the right of Indians to frame their own constitution.

The War Cabinet approved the draft with so many changes that it became much more long-winded and imprecise than the draft he (Amery) had submitted. Amery disclaimed his own responsibility to the style of the draft as amended and the offer (which came to be called the ‘August offer’) it contained.
The success of the constant efforts of the Governor-General to get the Muslim League's sectional demand accepted by the Home Government showed the enormous influence that he wielded with the War Cabinet. He persuaded the Home Government to invest the League and other minorities with what was virtually the power of veto on the constitutional advance of India. The August offer was, however, rejected by Indian nationalists.

The Congress readiness to offer a helping hand in the war effort was first ignored by the British Government. When, however, the war entered the most critical stage and spread to the eastern theatre, making India the pivot of all defence and it became virtually impossible to ignore the persistent demand of the British Press and public, both inside and outside the Parliament, as well as American pressure and international forces, the lethargic British Government made an offer in the form of the Cripps' Mission. Even that was not a full-fledged offer and so naturally it failed and was rejected by Indian nationalists. It is clear from the Prime Minister's letter to the Governor-General that it was forced solely by the critical war situation and the Japanese success in the war, and was not the result of any sudden generosity on the part of the British Government towards Indian people. It was a belated offer and the expediency of the moment gave British policy the air of a death-bed repentence. However, it was a precise definition of the goal of the British policy and an attempt to secure co-operation on the basis of assurance of future constitutional advance. Indian nationalists rejected the offer as no vital changes in the existing structure of government had been contemplated. In fact, there never was any more than a slim sporting chance that the British proposals
would be accepted. Prime Minister Churchill had no idea of conceding Indian demands, and it was sheer expediency that forced him to accept the Cripps plan. He, however, managed to twist it in such a way as to foredoom its acceptance by Indian nationalists. He wanted to gain time and show the world that the British Government were right and Indian nationalists wrong. For the time being, he was so successful in his propaganda that the whole British nation (and even Americans) thought that the offer was sincere and blamed Indians for not accepting it. The strange thing was that even the Labour Party also had a major share in the royal propaganda battle.

The Congress, being deeply disappointed with the unhelpful attitude of the British Government demanded that the British should 'Quit India'. The reaction of the British Government, public and the Press was bitter, and they supported the Indian Government in putting down the movement. Churchill reiterated his imperialist policy, which was, curiously enough, supported by the Labour Party as well. The British took no further initiative except renewing the Cripps offer. The most striking feature of the period was the unanimity of the British public and the political parties in supporting the Coalition Government's, nay, Churchill's, India policy. It is puzzling how even the Labour Party stood by Churchill, for if the Labour Party, which was a major partner in the Coalition Government, wanted to do something to meet India's demand, Churchill would have definitely given in during that critical stage of the war period. It is strange to note that in August 1942 it was the Deputy Prime Minister and the Labour Party leader, Clement Attlee, who took the decision to put all the Congress leaders behind the bars. In the very rapidly changing and challenging circumstances, British
policy towards India failed to gauge the strength and character of the challenge. The British response accordingly failed to produce the extra decisive burst of speed required.

At the same time, during the period, the British people, irrespective of parties, had realized that they could no longer hold India after the war. This had been made very clear by Churchill himself to the King, who (also like Churchill) could not contemplate with equanimity the sure prospect of having to divest himself of the brightest jewel in the British Crown. During the war period, there was no difference of opinion among political parties so far as India was concerned, and there was a remarkable identity of approach and support to Government's India policy. By the end of the war, most of them, irrespective of party affiliation, had realized that they had to concede India's demand for independence without further delay and cultivate good relations. Of course, Churchill had his own reservations about it; but others, even a majority in his own Party, did not share his views. Everyone gave thought to the mode of granting independence to India with the least dislocation in the administrative machinery of the country to enable the smooth transfer of power and to cultivate good relations in future.

Britain had pledged itself to give independence to India after the end of the war, as soon as there was an agreement among the main parties in India. British political parties were all alike committed to helping India achieve its independence, though the emphasis on some aspects differed. Even while in Opposition, the Conservative Party supported the Labour Government's India policy in all its aspects. The Conservative members had realized that India had become politically an adult, and a solution was inevitable
and urgent. But it opposed the 20 February 1947 statement on the transfer of power by June 1948, as they thought that the speed might lead to chaos and confusion owing to the disagreement among Indian parties. However, they made it clear that they were not opposed to the transfer of power as such. They were not told by the then Government about the exact situation in India. The Conservative criticism was rather concerned with the Government's India policy in matters of detail but 'had been in agreement with its broad principles and, up to a point, with its methods'. The Opposition supported the motives of India policy but not the manner and the implication of the announcement. As soon as Indian parties came to an understanding and agreed to Dominion status for the time being at least, the Conservatives fully supported the Government's India policy of transfer of power, accepted the Mountbatten plan, and helped the speedy passage of the Indian Independence Bill.

The general public, irrespective of party affiliations, were ignorant of, and apathetic to, the situation and conditions in India. The average man in Britain had no notion of the growing momentum of the Indian national demand and its implications. The Conservative Party was no exception to this. The rank and file of the Party were ignorant of the complicated problems of India. However, every Conservative of standing who had been brought into direct contact with, and had studied, the latest phase of the Indian problems, rejected the Conservative extremists' solution and supported the Government's India policy. The British in general were prejudiced and never could understand that Indians were capable of operating a parliamentary system. Projecting the image of their own parliamentary system at work in their small islands, the British
could not just bring themselves to imagine that that system of
government would successfully operate in a country many times
bigger than their own, with the added handicap of mass illiteracy.

During the period covered in this study, India's progress
towards independence owed much to the Conservative Party's support,
however reluctant. The Conservative Party was responsible at all
stages for the evolution of the Government's India policy and to a
very large extent helped its determination. In fact, the progress
achieved up to 1939 was largely due to the acquiescence, though not
full support, of the Conservative Party. Though the pace was not
satisfactory, it was nonetheless important to note that there was no
stagnation either. But after the commencement of the Second World
War, the formidable new forces unleashed by the war compelled the
British nation to make a thorough reappraisal of the Indian problem.
As a result, the British nation found that it had no alternative but
to accept the legitimacy of India's demand for independence without
further delay and concentrate their attention not merely on the
mode of conceding it immediately but also on relations with an
independent India.

A few leaders like Churchill continued their back-stage
fight against the spirit of the age and insisted upon some
conditions, such as prior agreement between Indian parties. Here,
in fairness to the British authorities, we have to recognize that
the acute differences between Indian parties about the mode of
independent status for the country was also a factor that contributed
to delay and uncertainty for a long time. To some extent, it
provided the British Government with a weapon to defend their
artificially prolonged opposition to the onrush of new forces,
This further heightened the fear of the British that the granting of independence might endanger the unity of the country. Apart from the empty prestige of having a big Asian nation like India as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations under its leadership, the whole British nation, irrespective of parties, not to speak of the vocal Right-wing Conservatives, had its own sentimental reasons for wishing India to remain as a Dominion, at least for a short time, before it seceded from the Commonwealth. Once the agreement was reached among the Indian parties about partition, there could be no opposition from any quarter, and in fact there never was.

Organized as it was, the Conservative Party's attitude depended largely upon the parliamentary party, nay, the leader of the Party. Thus, during 1930-40, the Conservative leaders favoured limited Indian reforms and sympathized with Indian demands and helped the introduction and implementation of some of the reforms. During the war period, the Party was headed by Churchill, who was definitely opposed to India's independence, as he believed that Britain's strength mainly depended upon its Indian Empire. When all parties unanimously opposed India's demand, it is no wonder that Churchill stood firm. During 1945-47, all parties, including the Conservative Party, favoured Indian independence, and so Churchill had to give in and support the Government's India policy, but he insisted upon certain conditions. When those conditions were fulfilled by the Mountbatten plan, he acquiesced in the Indian demand for independence and helped the speedy passage of the Bill and the transfer of power on 15 August 1947.

Thus, in the Conservative Party, the opposition to India's demand for independence was confined to a few Right-wing sentimental
imperialists who were very vocal. The Right-wing Press (which is still dominant in Britain owing to its financial strength) colluded by helping this minority feeling to find wide and, sometimes its only, publicity. There were always individuals and groups in the Party who supported and sympathized with India's demand. The Party in general recognized the existing conditions and supported the demand. The Right-wing extremists gradually changed their attitude according to the spirit of the age and supported India's demand for independence. No doubt the principle of expediency operated very much. Some individuals who wielded power, like the Viceroy and Governor-General, played an important part in the shaping of British policy and some of them were opposed to India's demands, lest their power and authority should be curtailed. But it is not fair to blame the Conservative Party as a whole for the selfish or blatantly imperialist moves of some of its members.