Chapter VII

DECIDE A DATE AND QUIT

The Cripps Offer of 1942 had held out the promise of self-government after the War. Pethick-Lawrence referred to the imminent end of empire in his New Year Day address of 1946. His statement foreshadowed Attlee’s announcement on 19 February 1946 that a ministerial level Cabinet Mission would go out to India to assist Indians to devise a constitutional machinery for transfer of power. The idea of fixing a time limit of one year for British withdrawal, mooted by Cripps, did not find favour with the other members of the Mission.

The Cabinet Mission also dismissed out of hand the "breakdown plan" devised by the Viceroy's office to meet the contingency of a breakdown of Congress-League negotiations. The plan contemplated province-wise withdrawal from the hostile Congress areas to the future Pakistan provinces. The Cabinet Mission condemned it as "only a deferred scuttle plan" which "does not of itself solve any problems". The Cabinet was

1. 15 May 1946, TP, Vol. 7, p. 263. P.J. Griffiths, representative of British business in India, tried in vain to convince the Cabinet Mission that a time limit would impart reality into their deliberations and chances of a settlement would increase. Ibid., p. 242.

2. Note by the Private Secretary to the Viceroy, 7 April 1946, Ibid., pp. 160-2.

3. 16 May 1946, Ibid., p. 568.
critical of both ideas, of a time limit and phased withdrawal. A specific date for departure would give an impression of weakness which would be damaging to Britain's international position. Withdrawal to Muslim majority provinces was ruled out as it would amount to Pakistan. Attlee reassured the Cabinet Mission that moderation would triumph in Indian politics and the crisis feared may not come soon.

In early September 1946 a 'breakdown plan' was fleshed out, the contingency anticipated this time being breakdown of order, rather than breakdown of agreement. It was once again rejected by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State, Cabinet Mission members and India Office hands, on the grounds of Parliamentary difficulties and the likelihood that it would lead to a scramble for power. The Secretary of State advised the Prime Minister against a Cabinet discussion as a settlement was imperative for defence reasons.

4. See Cabinet Conclusions, 5 June 1946, ibid., pp. 812-19. P.S. Gupta and Moore both point out that the plan was deemed to be against British strategic defence interests and her international position. op cit., pp. 20 and 187 resp.

5. 6 June 1946, ibid., pp. 830-1.

6 Viceroy to Secretary of State, 8 September 1946, ibid., Vol. 8, p.454.

7. Secretary of State to Prime Minister, 20 September 1946, Discussion by Prime Minister, Mission members, India Office officials, 23 Sep. 1946 and Secretary of State to Viceroy, 28 September 1946, ibid, pp. 550, 570,596, and 620 resp.
Wavell had spoken of a specific date, 31 March 1948, beyond which the government would be powerless to wield the responsibility vested in it. The date was not for quitting, it was for planning withdrawal; it was for one's own reference, not for announcement. The main rationale for winding up the Raj was the irreversible running down of the services. It seemed unlikely that the authority of the government would be wielded after the spring of 1948. Rather than wait for that to happen, some unwanted baggage could be jettisoned from the sinking ship. With the Congress provinces offloaded, authority could be effectively wielded in the limited area.

Wavell kept up the pressure on Whitehall despite repeated rebuffs, answering criticism and reiterating the need for a policy on "how and when we are to leave India." The pressure on him did not let up either. The deadlock between the League and Congress over the Constituent Assembly persisted. Jinnah insisted that the Constituent Assembly be postponed sine die till grouping was clarified. Nehru was unwilling to brook further delay in convening the Assembly or in the League's meeting the condition for participation in the Interim Government, viz. acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan. The communal situation

8. The Viceroy to Secretary of State, 23 and 30 October 1946, ibid., pp. 501 and 531.

had deteriorated to virtual civil war by November 1946. The need for a policy at this critical juncture was evident.

Whitehall was clear that however pressing the problems, Wavell did not have the answers. Attlee agreed that reassertion of British authority was impractical but disagreed that the only alternative was phased withdrawal. In an undated note (which deserves a long quotation), Attlee spelt out five incontrovertible arguments against a long stay:

In the event of a breakdown of the administration or a general alignment of the political parties against us are we prepared to go back on our policy and seek to re-establish British rule as against the political parties and maintain it for 18 years? The answer must clearly be no because
(a) In view of our commitments all over the world we have not the military force to hold India against a widespread guerilla movement or to reconquer India.
(b) If we had, pub. opinion in our Party would not stand for it.
(c) It is doubtful if we could keep the Indian troops loyal. It is doubtful if our own troops would be prepared to act.
(d) We should have world opinion against us and be placed in an impossible position at UNO.
(e) We have not now the administrative machine to carry out such a policy either British or Indian.

10. Survey from July to October 1946 enclosed in Secretary of State's Memorandum for the India and Burma Committee, 11 November 1946, Viceroy to Secretary of State, 20 November 1946 and 27 November 1946, ibid., Vol.9, pp.45,118 and 197 resp.

11. c. 13 November 1946, ibid., p.68.
The interim solution proposed by the Cabinet was to invite the leaders to London for a conference. The Government hoped to wish away or at least postpone the day of reckoning. Wavell insisted that the worst be planned for. It was difficult to have a meeting ground. On his visit to London, Wavell submitted a note to the Cabinet suggesting a time bound withdrawal. He impressed upon his Majesty's Government that they must accept that the Mission Plan is dead ... we have only a very limited period and a very limited power to substitute fresh arrangements." He outlined three alternatives, repression, surrender to Congress and a fresh settlement, only to rule them out. The only option remained the breakdown plan, to be implemented in the event of a political impasse. The plan would enable the government to take a firm line with Congress, which was necessary if a settlement was to be achieved.

Cripps initially supported the idea as he felt that power could be transferred by a fixed date only to the government that derived legitimacy from the Constituent Assembly. The task of persuading the Muslim League to participate in the Assembly would be left to this government, should the deadlock persist despite the Federal Court ruling. But he withdrew his support when he

realised that withdrawal was not as open ended as made out to be and that neither New Delhi nor London had any intention of handing over power to Congress alone.

The other Ministers, led by Attlee (whom Wavell had only two weeks earlier praised as likely to make 'a notable Prime Minister'), attacked Wavell's plan as complicated and irresponsible. They pleaded difficulty of handing over power at the Centre and control of the Indian Army in the absence of a settlement, as well as carrying legislation through Parliament. HMG had obviously had second thoughts, and one of them was that India needed a new Viceroy.

Wavell understood HMG's refusal to contemplate handing over India by a specific date as embedded in the imperialist vision of the ministers. A. V. Alexander was "imperialistic in his outlook and hates the whole idea of handing over India" while Bevin, "like everyone else hates the idea of our leaving India, but like everyone else has no alternative to suggest." Bevin voiced his reservations about the adverse impact of the plan on the Middle East in the Cabinet meeting of 31 December 1946. He continued to press the point in his New Year Day 1947 note to Attlee which ran, "I am against fixing a date". Hugh Tinker has argued that Bevin's pressure on Attlee was decisive—"He was only goaded

16. Ibid., p. 397.

182
into a decision to announce a date for withdrawal by a blunt challenge from Ernest Bevin calling for a firm declaration that Britain would not knuckle under. Attlee did not question Bevin's perspective of the post war world in which Britain would continue to play an imperial role in Palestine, Greece and Egypt and head the new Commonwealth, domestic financial constraints and changed international position notwithstanding. He merely pointed out that Bevin had no alternative to suggest. Tinker's contention that Bevin's stand provoked Attlee to fix a date seems one-sided. HMG had decided on announcing their departure by 17 December 1946. More one-sided is Bullock's assertion that the June 1948 date was part of a general cutting of imperial commitments, including in Burma, Palestine and Greece, in the wake of the economic disaster fuelled by the coal crisis in Britain in February 1946. This can at best explain how Bevin's opposition to his colleagues' views on India got swamped by other concerns. Wavell's comment that HMG's concern was "not about India, but about coal, electricity and Palestine" was apt for Bevin.

But not all Ministers were "imperialist". Some wondered whether a quit-India notice should not be more flexible, given all that had to be done. Others saw the point of a specific day, especially to demonstrate sincerity about leaving, but preferred

another date. None doubted the 'facts', i.e., decline of authority, the objection was to the form of presentation—as resigned acceptance of things beyond one's ken rather than as the desired end of one's own untiring efforts to devolve power to Indian hands. The Labour Government's stance was that one must be seen as having the initiative, even if one does not have it. Self interest was to be disguised as magnanimity and transfer of power presented as the outcome of self-determination. As setting a date for withdrawal would amount to accepting responsibility, HMG preferred to relinquish power at an appointed hour to whosoever was in position to receive it. Wavell's style—concede defeat in order to retreat at your own pace—was the inverse of HMG's method—assert success even during withdrawal under pressure from the opponent.

HMG had little patience with what was in their view an imperial Viceroy masquerading as a Birmingham housewife prudently planning for a rainy day. The Labour Government was no less star-struck with empire than their Conservative counterparts. It only had the good sense to see the writing on the wall—that the empire could not last. But if it had to be relinquished, the act must appear as a graceful giving away.

18. Labour's choice of an epitaph on empire was a Shakespearean one—"Nothing became him in his life as much as the leaving of it".
According to R. J. Moore, the differences over the date between Wavell and HMG were rooted in sharply varied approaches to the Indian problem. Wavell feared Congress Raj would become a fait accompli through the continuance of drift and lead to reneging of pledges to the minorities. But HMG was willing to transfer power to Congress as long as it was peaceful and their long term interests were safeguarded. Moore's position, which is in obvious sympathy with the Viceroy's, is contestable. P. S. Gupta rightly points out that the problem was that HMG refused to make a choice of an option, such that in the elusive pursuit of multiple options, finally none were left.

Moore points out that the differences between the Viceroy and HMG came to a head by 17 December, 1946. HMG believed that announcement of departure would alone suffice to stall the downward decline of authority the Viceroy feared. But the latter disagreed and Mountbatten's name was proposed as Viceroy to the King that very day.

HMG assumed cooperation would be forthcoming from Indians, whereas Wavell assumed opposition and even rebellion. In HMG's hands, withdrawal was transformed from a military style, step by step retreat, to a political exercise to be conducted with great 19

delicacy. Appearances were absolutely primary in HMG's consciousness. As early as 25 November 1946, the Secretary of State explained to Wavell that HMG do not wish to give up hope of achieving agreement between Indian parties, and certainly not publicly. They were even more unwilling to admit in Parliament that the British position would become untenable at the end of eighteen months: "To do so would indeed be the most complete condemnation of our own policy and an admission of our own futility".

Wavell's note of 3 December and letter of 10 December were hardly welcomed, but a month later it seemed that HMG found it increasingly difficult to deny the reality of decline in authority and recession of the hope of agreement. They bowed to the inevitable in private but dressed it as a voluntary decision for presentation to the world. The minutes of the Cabinet meeting of 31 December 1946 suggest how this was done:

The general feeling of the Cabinet was that withdrawal from India need not appear to be forced upon us by our weakness nor to be the first step in the dissolution of the Empire. On the contrary, this action must be shown to be the logical conclusion, which we welcomed, of a policy followed by successive Governments for many years.

21. Ibid.
Within two days a memorandum was prepared by the Cabinet Office listing the history of progressive reforms and marking the stages in self-government, with the new statement heralding the final 22 stage.

The rhetoric is evident even in Attlee's draft memoirs wherein he notes that two things were vital, one was to make the Indians feel a sense of responsibility by announcing that the British were leaving within a definite period, the other was to find the man to push this through. His biographer, Kenneth Harris, records that Attlee's reasoning against the breakdown plan ran along the lines that the British could not leave India to chaos as that would condemn them in the eyes of people all over the world.

HMG was anxious to appear to have the initiative and paradoxically this anxiety became greater as their capacity to initiate developments slipped away. HMG substituted hopes for decisions - striving for agreement replaced phased withdrawal, ironically after dismissing the latter option as reflecting defeatism. HMG chose to retreat from reality to a world of dreams

-----------------------------
22. 2 June 1947, ibid., pp. 441-3.
24. Harris, op.cit., p. 372.
which they then strove to make real. The realists could see this and said as much.

HMG dismissed out of hand both the Viceroy and his plan as beleaguered by the pessimistic and ponderous vision typical of a soldier. But they retained the idea of a time limit. Attlee packed the time limit as putty into the mould of a new initiative to be launched by the last Viceroy as the final act of bestowing self-government on the child people of India. In its new wrapping the withdrawal date was transformed from a weapon of manoeuvre to a grand gift.

New Packaging of the Time Limit

A Cabinet India and Burma Committee memorandum of 21 December 1946 referred to the British leaving India not later than 31 March 1948. This was modified in the 4 January draft to mid 1948. The reference to winding up the Raj was dropped and stages in self-government listed instead. The next day Wavell's plan of province-wise withdrawal by stages was replaced by the notion of a gradual but simultaneous withdrawal all over the country till finally a skeletal administration remained. On 6 January the Viceroy's plan was officially consigned to the

25. V.P. Menon warned that the statement was a "leap in the dark" while the Viceroy, who could see beyond the window dressing, dismissed it as a "clap trap of the usual kind". TP, Vol. 9, p. 659.
shelf, as a reserve, but no alternative emergency plan was worked out, though India Office officials pointed out its need. When the Viceroy sent a plan working out the stages of an HMG-style withdrawal from the entire country spread over a year, with separate dates for services, troops etc., it was stowed away. Unfortunately no time table was drawn up by Mountbatten till the 3rd June Plan was introduced. By then it was too late to have an orderly transfer of power. The consequences of the 72 day Quit India notice, sans plan, Mountbatten style, announced on 3 June 1947, are still with us.

Naturally Wavell was dismayed at this tearing away of the fixed date from its original habitat, the plan of phased withdrawal, and its being placed in the hostile terrain of a new initiative, in which it could only create disharmony. He protested strongly that the statement, except for the mid-1948 date, was a "complete indefinite"—"Nothing happens, nine-tenths of it is simply clap-trap of the usual kind". But knowing his voice carried little weight in Whitehall, he added that it was backed by the weighty opinion of the Governors of Punjab, Bengal and U.P. and the Commander-in-Chief. The Bengal Governor felt a fixed date would lead to chaos unless the League was in the Government and the Constituent Assembly. The Punjab Governor

27. Ibid., pp. 725, 728, 746 and 734 resp.
thought that the "statement will be regarded as the prelude to the final communal show-down, with everyone out to seize as much power as they can, if necessary by force". The U.P. Governor gave the statement only a 20% chance of inducing realism and that too if coalition governments came up all over the country. He had earlier, on 31 December, disapproved of the breakdown plan but agreed that control could not be exercised after 31 March 1948. The Commander-in-Chief wanted three years for the reorganisation and nationalisation of the army, any earlier date would mean chaos.

The present proposals were in any case indefinite. A declaration that power would be transferred by 30 June 1948 to a central authority or if that were not possible, to more than one authority, would trigger off a civil war as all communities scrambled to be in power on that fateful day. When nothing seemed to work, even two days before the announcement, Wavell appealed for its postponement to June 1947 or at least to after the new Viceroy was sworn in, but even his desperate attempts to buy time floundered.

**Change of Viceroy**

Mountbatten was approached by Attlee while Wavell was still in London waiting for HMG's answer to his proposals, submitted

once again on 3 December 1946. But Mountbatten was hesitant to leave his newly resumed naval career and asked for terms he thought HMG would not accept — declaration by HMG that he was the last Viceroy and an invitation from Indian leaders to come out as Viceroy. Attlee decided to clinch the Mountbatten deal before the year was out and had him brought back by special plane from a Christmas holiday in Europe. Attlee wrote to Wavell sometime after 8 January 1947, asking him home. The idea was to force his resignation, or so felt Wavell — "cold, ungracious and indefinite, the letter of a small man." The King's approval, asked for on the 17th, came on 29 January and a letter, not mentioning Mountbatten, was sent off to Wavell, informing him that his War-time appointment as Viceroy was drawing to a close.

Attlee referred to the wide divergence of views on policy between HMG and the Viceroy as necessitating a new man for the job. Wavell himself felt he was too small a man for the job and was depressed and strained. But he spoke with dignity of the flaying of the prestige of the great office of Viceroy by his sacking, which was at the very least unceremonious and not very courteously done. Even the date of announcement was only shifted to the afternoon of the 20th.

after his asking that he be saved some embarrassment at his daughter Felicity's wedding that morning. Gossip has it that many of the 800 guests knew that his head was to roll and some even kept back the expensive gifts they now saw no point in giving to an old, retired soldier's daughter.

Wavell tartly corrected Attlee that the difference lay in "my wanting a definite policy and HMG refusing to give one". Even at the end of March 1947, the Viceroy's staff had little idea of the new policy, or so Wavell thought, and he continued to advise the Cabinet at his last meeting with them on 28 March to make detailed arrangements for partition.

But who's afraid of a dismissed Viceroy? Attlee drafted a telegram to Wavell wherein he accused the latter of disowning paternity of the time limit. Attlee argued that as the ministers opposed to it had acquiesced in the face of Wavell's insistence and his better knowledge as the man on the spot, Wavell could hardly reject as illegitimate the very child he had fathered. The telegram was imbued with the same exasperation

31. _TP_, Vol.9, pp.577 and 582.
32. _Wavell's Journal_, pp.403, 417, 432 and 434.
33. 17/18 February 1947, _TP_, Vol.9, p.747. Attlee had informed Wavell on 21 December 1946 that his view had been accepted, by which he meant the need for a statement and a time limit. The Cabinet India and Burma Committee agreed that the 6 December 1946 statement had not got the League into the Constituent Assembly and a further statement was needed. 11 and 20 December 1946 meetings, _ibid._, pp.332 and 391.
and misrepresentation (deliberate perhaps) that flavoured Attlee's reactions to Wavell.

Needless to say it was most unfair of Attlee to insist that Wavell must sink or sail with the boat he set afloat in another stream in another season. Attlee described the 'central point' of Wavell's plan as a fixed date, which again was wrong. The fixed date idea, yoked to a carriage choked with pretenders to the throne, was totally different from Wavell's conception of it as the faithful horse carrying the weary rider home from the outposts of empire.

Attlee constantly distorted Wavell's position, especially when presenting it to others. Firstly, he saw the breakdown plan as a military retreat, which it was not. Secondly, it was seen as an admission of failure whereas it sought to arrest futility and despair by wresting the initiative with a declaration that departure would be at a pace and in a manner decided by the imperial masters— they would not flee in fear of the time bomb ticking away, its fuse lit by the communal flare-up. Thirdly, Attlee questioned Wavell's assumption of a hostile reaction from the Indian people during withdrawal. Wavell had in fact assumed the continuance of

34. 8 January 1947, ibid., p.490.
Congress ministries even in the areas under British control as well as regional cooperation between provinces, whether independent or not. Fourthly, when explaining HMG's policy, Attlee did not inform the Prime Ministers of the Dominions that Wavell envisaged province-wise withdrawal. This gave a vagueness to Wavell's proposals which was not there. Fifthly, Attlee painted a fairly lurid picture of a defeatist Viceroy both in his telegram of 17/18 February 1947 to Wavell and in the Cabinet meeting of 18 February.

On 18 February 1947 Attlee extorted a reluctant acquiescence from his ministers to the statement he proposed to make in Parliament two days later, by pushing the time limit as the only way out. The ministers were told that despite having advocated a time limit till recently, the Viceroy now thought a fixed date would trigger off civil war. In fact it was originally Wavell's idea (and put in words Attlee was to borrow later) that the shock of a date might help in 'inducing a sense of responsibility in Indian politicians' as they naively believed that the British would always be around to keep the peace. Attlee unfairly portrayed the Viceroy's changed stand as inconsistency, for the

36. Ibid., pp. 747 and 750 resp.
37. Ibid., p.750.
38. Ibid., p.335.
fixed date was not brandished by Wavell as a magic wand that would turn hostility into harmony or discord into detente. For Wavell, fixing a time limit marked the end of waiting on agreement and resumption of initiative. It was part of a clear-cut plan, and not a policy in itself, as it became for HMG.

Parentage of the Time Limit?

To whom then does one assign parentage of the time limit? Wavell had put forward 31 March 1948 as the date by which the Raj should be wound up. By 17 December 1946 Attlee had accepted the general idea of a time bound departure—the day Mountbatten's name was suggested as Viceroy to the King. A draft memorandum of the Cabinet India and Burma Committee incorporated the specific date, 31 March 1948, which was later modified to mid 1948.

Mountbatten insisted that a date was crucial, in his letter to the Prime Minister on 3 January 1947 (and not 11 February as Anita Singh would have it). Attlee, who was agreeable to the general idea, preferred mid-1948 to a specific day. 'Mid-1948' was duly incorporated in the draft policy statement of 4 January 1947. Mountbatten pared down mid 1948 to June 1948 (and not

-------------------
41. Ibid., p.454.
42. To Cripps, 26 January 1947, Ibid., p.553.

195
second half of 1948 to June instead of December, as Campbell
Johnson would have it), arguing that Indian leaders would be
given the 1 June date, whereas he would actually have till the
end of the month, if he needed. Cabinet agreement came on 13
February and the 20 February statement assigned 30 June 1948
the last day of the Raj.

The parentage of the fixed date was clearly mixed, Mountbatten's tall claims not withstanding.

'No Alternative but to Leave'

The range of arguments, for and against a date, were
sketched out in the Cabinet itself. The unified voice with
which Attlee, Cripps, Pethick-Lawrence and Labour backbenchers
spoke in Parliament was an orchestrated, not a natural one.
Their unanimity derived from a general malaise, an inability to
suggest an alternative. Dissenting voices had been silenced, or

44. TP, Vol.9, p.688.
45. Mountbatten later claimed that though Attlee took credit for
it, the time limit idea was his. If he had not insisted, the British
might still be out there in India! See Lapierre and Collins, Mountbatten and the Partition of India, pp.15-
16 and 37. For Anita Singh the weightier reason for the
Government's accepting the fixed date was the weak
administration in India. Mountbatten's insistence acted as
the immediate pressure. op.cit., pp. 212-13.

196
had on their own tapered off, in the face of Attlee's argument. Be it Bevin with his dreams of world influence, Cripps with his faith in the goodness of Congress, or Smuts, implacably imperial, they acquiesced in the face of Attlee and Co.'s poser—do you have an alternative?

Dissenting voices in the Cabinet were many, and to different aspects of the draft statement—to the specificity of the time limit, to the timing of its announcement, and to the suggestion of transfer of power to other than a central authority.

Attlee's preference for 'mid 1948', rather than Wavell's 31 March or Mountbatten's June 1948, suggested that he recognised the need for a somewhat flexible timetable but accepted a specific date, perhaps after persuasion that only a day would convince Indians that there was no going back. There were two considerations in opposing too specific a date, the first being that it might mean handing over to chaos, if no responsible government existed. This was the fear of Viscount Addison, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, echoed by others and assuaged by adding the words, "to responsible Indian hands". Addison argued for a two year time limit, instead of a date, which would give the government some space for manoeuvre. His suggestion was not taken up, perhaps because the dramatic impact
of a date was deemed greater.

The second consideration was that handing over power would involve tortuous negotiations and a protracted process of Indianisation, not to speak of the wrangles should division be decided upon. The voices were strongest from within the Government of India, with virtually each official pointing to the impossibility of winding up his department in the given time. The Commander-in-Chief wanted three years, without division, while the Punjab Governor needed four years for his province to be divided peacefully.

The same tactic of demanding an alternative was tried in Parliament, with an even more disarming impact. Many noble Lords would hold forth on the folly of leaving India, damn Labour leaders as small men unable to see beyond their noses, but in the end appeal to the House against a division of vote as there was no option but to leave—the march of history could not be reversed. Halifax took this line and Cranbourne, Catto and others followed suit.


47. See fn. 27.

The Commons was stormier and less tolerant of cant. It resisted walking into the trap of suggesting an alternative. It was asserted that the opposition could not frame an alternative as it lacked familiarity with and information about India. Besides, an 'alternative or nothing' was a totally undemocratic demand. Anderson made the mistake of offering practical suggestions and the Government tried to pin debate around it, dismissing all other comments as destructive.

The Cabinet had been a dress rehearsal for the opening night at Lords. Pethick-Lawrence made the big speech, the opposition rose in protest at this departure from tried policy and a date for the debate was announced. Attlee made the policy announcement in the Commons but it fell to Cripps to make the keynote speech. HMG had decided on a double edged strategy—the carrot of friendship and unity for the dreamers and visionaries and the stick of impending powerlessness for the realists. Neither worked.

The latter was the incontrovertible argument and was made like that—India could not be held any longer. This was the natural outcome of stopping recruitment, a decision taken early in the War with the concurrence of the Conservatives. An apparent choice was offered, that of continuing British rule for a couple of decades more, if men, money and troops could be poured in and

49. House of Commons debate, 6 March 1947, ibid.
force used to compel the consent that was no longer forthcoming voluntarily. It was so obviously a non-option for all knew that the necessary will-power, manpower and money did not exist. It had a curious impact—an alternative which only proved that there was no alternative. It also served as a whipping-boy who was occasionally pushed into the opposition fold by the Government, branded as Conservative and then beaten for having not so honourable designs on India. Conservatives patiently pointed out that they had no desire to stay on in India indefinitely. They had supported self-government but were questioning both the assessment on which the decision to leave in a hurry was based and the manner of conceding independence.

The irony was that an appearance-conscious HMG had to admit in Parliament to loss of initiative and authority, after opposing Wavell's plan on the ground that it would be an admission of failure. This was the only unanswerable argument for winding up the Raj and by a particular day at that.

The intention of shocking the Indians into agreement was dismissed as persisting with vain hopes and the likelihood of just the opposite happening pointed out. The plea, that the Congress demand that the League quit the Government or join the

50. Why handover to Congress was the question asked by Thomas Moore, Churchill and Walter Smiles. Walter Smiles felt the 'present political leaders would vanish like Kerensky while Churchill likened Congressmen to 'men of straw'.
Constituent Assembly had to be deflected, was disregarded. A direct answer to that question would be better, and in any case, the League was asked to quit, not HMG. The notion of withdrawal being the culmination of British policy of self-government for Indians was generally acceptable, but could HMG, or anyone, insist that this was the final stage and there would be an ultimate point?

The problem was that any policy which assumed that initiative was in British hands, was open to modification and even inversion-why leave if we can control events? On the other hand if initiative was declared to be in Indian hands, critics in Parliament and elsewhere could take them to task for letting things come to such a pass - why are we not in control? But after the thunder there would be acquiescence. So HMG was in a sort of trap—the latter was an easier situation but it meant admitting failure, the former was an attacking position but difficult to hold. HMG muddled badly as it took up both stances and used arguments which were contradictory.

In fact HMG used three arguments— the time limit was needed to convince Indians of our sincerity about leaving India; the time limit will shock Indians into agreement; the time limit is the date beyond which we cannot stay on.

The first one was weak with over-use, as Scarborough pointed out. Every policy initiative in the past two years, be it the
sending of the Cabinet Mission or the setting up of the Interim Government, had all been argued for on this ground. The second prop collapsed with the first blow. Logic was not on HMG's side, for disunity seemed a likelier prospect given a time limit. Despite HMG's assertion that it would bring agreement, the statement that power would be transferred to responsible government (s) and not to whoever is at the centre, would invite disunity.

Only their majority carried Labour through the Commons while in the Lords, Halifax was able to put a positive interpretation on withdrawal and pose it as the best way to win over Indians rather than the only way out. He argued that if they are not bound to have us around, they would want to cement ties. HMG's Ministers were not able to do this, perhaps because they did not have enough faith in their own policies.

Cripps took up the argument of decline in authority and put it to good use in his 5 March 1947 speech in the Commons. He buttressed it by posing an alternative and then declaring it was

51. Stafford Cripps' position was most ironic. He had strongly opposed the idea of a time limit in the Cabinet when he realised it went against the emergence of a united India. But it fell to him to take the lead in the Commons debate on which paradoxically, Godfrey Nicolson commented- "If ever there was a speech which was a direct invitation to the Muslim League to stick their toes in and hold out for Pakistan, that was one".

202
not a viable one at all. As a Conservative MP put it, we are being met with a *fait accompli*. Lord Hailey, with his long experience of India, questioned the *fait accompli*, by reducing it to an assessment from the reality it was posed as—what are the Government's sources of information, he questioned. He clarified that the situation was one of 'running down', rather than breakdown of administration, and this could be reversed, given time to train new recruits. Anderson in the Commons suggested seconding officials from the home services and army and police for a while.

Both these arguments questioned first the limiting of options to two—reinforce or wind up, and then to one, quit, because the first was impractical and inadvisable. Hailey's second point was more significant, though taken less note of. He declared that the services aspect was not decisive at all, it was being made out to be so, because the government did not want to face up to the facts. The facts were that the League had refused to come into the Constituent Assembly and Congress threatened revolution. Both those were threats which had to be tackled, not surrendered before. As far as the Congress went, it had initiated revolution in 1942, but we had stayed then and we should do the same now. There was an area of grey between the black and white options which HMG should explore.
Templewood questioned another aspect, i.e. the argument that a fixed date and a breakdown plan will infuse spirit into the services. He feared that the services would react adversely to an announcement that after 15 months 'the steel frame' would be scrap metal. Their already strained loyalty would be under greater stress as Congress heightened pressure and the Secretary of State withdrew support.

The specificity of the time limit was flayed in Parliament and modifications offered. John Anderson, an old India hand, retained the idea of a date, but as one till which agreement on a unitary succession could be awaited. If that did not happen Britain would transfer power at a pace she deemed fit. He also advised that a decision be taken first on division, and then on a date, as the timetable would vary. Viscount Cranbourne felt it was a crazy task to try and do all of it together in so short a time - "Why did they fix so early a date so as to make success almost impossible"? Anderson had a point in delinking the date from withdrawal and linking it with agreement alone, letting the former take its own time. This put an onus on agreement, whereas the statement, by waiting on agreement, encouraged disagreement.

But HMG's mood was one of being done with it, one way or the other. Most cared little for what happened as long as they escaped unscathed. Besides, an untidy job would suit them later
as they would then stay on to trim the edges. For example, if India did not have her defence organised adequately, would she not take a more interested look at the Commonwealth?

The opposition was at two levels— one questioning the likelihood of unity and positing divisiveness in its place and the other pointing to the danger of handing over to chaos. The distinction is really of stages, disunity being less grave than chaos. The first argument was advanced by speaker after speaker, Templewood and Hailey in the Lords and Churchill, Anderson, Raikes, Nicolson and Brigadier Low in the Commons. The hope that the parties would be shocked into agreement was a fond hope, rather, an onus was placed on secession, with divisive forces encouraged to dig their toes in and wait for the appointed hour to see their dreams realised. Templewood and Churchill used the word fragmentation, not just division. The former warned of creating 10 British Indias as separatist elements would become 'more isolationist than ever'. Was there a method to the madness, he wondered.

Can the government have had it in mind that the statement of a definite date would lead to the separation of the various parts of India? On the face of it it looks almost as if they had.

Churchill laid the same charge:

The Government by their 14 months time limit have put an end to all prospect of Indian unity.......A time limit is imposed, a king of guillotine!
Those who warned of chaos were not afraid of Pakistan, but of greater fragmentation. They also doubted the ability of the Congress and League to govern and were anxious about growing Communist influence. Addison had expressed the doubt in the Cabinet whether a responsible government(s) would exist by June 1948— if not, would we then hand over India to chaos? R.A. Butler in the Commons had echoed Addison’s very words while Nicolson added that “in June 1948, chaos will be set up by Act of Parliament”. In the Lords, Newall, Middleton and Cranbourne had raised the spectre of anarchy—

I am afraid that we have only seen the beginning of bloodshed of a sort that would make the operations of Shivaji and his Maharatta hordes look like something of a picnic.

Churchill was devastatingly acerbic, as usual, when he likened HMG’s policy to a Gandhian Quit India notice of the 1942 Do or Die type—‘leave India to God or, in modern parlance, to anarchy’:

There, as far as I can see, is a statement indistinguishable from the policy His Majesty’s Government are determined to pursue.

Immediate Consideration for the Time Limit

The Congress demand that the League join the Constituent Assembly or leave the Interim Government, became an additional, though important factor, in making a policy statement. The
Muslim League persisted with its stand of not participating in the Constituent Assembly. The Congress demanded that in that case the League should withdraw from the Interim Government as the two were integral parts of the Mission Plan. Neither the Viceroy nor HMG could deny the logical validity of the Congress demand. Jalal, however, does and interprets it as the unwillingness of Congress to share power with the League in a weak centre. HMG could only advise the Viceroy to play for time and appeal to the Congress not to insist on their point in the interests of the country. The rider was - how to justify this appeal? Those planning policy tried to shape the 20 February statement into a double edged tool which would meet the Viceroy's demand for a policy and the Congress demand for the ouster of the League by turning their sights towards the prospect of freedom by a predetermined date. If it did neither, it would gain time for HMG.

This idea seems to have developed between 6 and 14 February, for on the latter date the Secretary of State wrote to the Viceroy that he should ask Nehru to await our answer in our proposed statement. The argument given by Attlee (when

52. Nehru and others to Viceroy, 5 February 1947, TP, Vol.9, p.622.


54. Secretary of State to Viceroy, 5 Feb. 1947 & Memo by Secretary of State, 6 February 1947, TP,Vol.9,pp.634 and 622.

55. Ibid., p.712.
ministers suggested delay) for the urgency of the statement was that Congress was pressing for a statement on the League's position. As a separate statement could not be framed in a hurry, the present one must suffice. In Parliament Cripps (and Pethick-Lawrence) presented the statement as a response both to decline in authority and the quit notice served by the Congress on the League.

Reactions

The basic flaw in the 20 February statement was its ambiguity about the successor authority. Despite conceding the possibility of more than one successor state and refusing to define "responsible government" as the one emanating from the Constituent Assembly, HMG denied that they accepted Pakistan and continued to harp on Indian unity. As in the case of the Cabinet Mission Plan, there was a deliberate obscurity to allow for opposed perceptions of the proponents of unity and division in India and Britain. Once again two contradictory conceptions had been yoked together, a time limit to set Congress sights on imminent independence and talk of transferring power to responsible government(s) to keep the bait of Pakistan dangling.

56. Cabinet India and Burma Committee and Cabinet meetings, 17 & 18 Feb. 1947, ibid., p.748. For text of 20 February statement see ibid., pp. 773-5.

57. According to Hailey, Congress were confident that they could handle the Muslims while the League was confident it could get Pakistan. Also see Moore, op.cit., p.222.
before the League.

Anita Singh has termed the statement a "conspicuous failure", as it virtually declared the Assembly dead, besides making the "Unionist ministry politically irrelevant": "The fixing of a terminal date for the Raj in the 20 February statement, far from leading to an agreement between the League and the Congress proved the signal for an attempt to carve out Pakistan by direct action by the League".

In Moore's view, "the 20 February statement exacerbated communal disorder in Northern India". The fall of the Punjab ministry was followed by League assertion in NWFP and immigration of Bengali Muslims into Assam.

In Jalal's view, "London had placed a time bomb under an already tottering administrative structure and had now lit the fuse". The consequences for Jinnah were adverse. The date was a blow to him as he needed time to get Congress to concede his demands. But there was an identity of interests between British and Congress on quick independence. Both were afraid that delay in transferring power would mean losing control, for the former over the country, for latter over the party and country.

59. Moore, op.cit., p.239.
The League's reading of the statement was that provincial governments would inherit power if there was no agreement at the Centre and duly made a bid for power in the Punjab. The Punjab Governor had cautioned that the statement amounted to an "invitation to warring parties to make real war upon one another." This was what Nicolson (and paradoxically Cripps, whom Nicolson was critical of), Templewood and Churchill feared—that the statement would encourage disunity. However, another view (held by India Office officials, (e.g. Croft) and expressed in the Cabinet) was that the League was against the announcement of a future date for withdrawal, for that would help the Congress.

Congress leaders welcomed the statement as proof of British sincerity to quit. Nehru promptly extended the hand of cooperation to Liaqat—

The British are fading out of the picture and the burden of decision must rest on all of us here. It seems desirable that we should face this situation squarely and not speak to each other from a distance.

61. 16 February 1947, TP, Vol. 9, p. 728.

62. Croft to Pethick-Lawrence, 7 January 1947 and Cabinet Conclusions, 31 December 1946, ibid., pp. 478 and 428. See Harris, op. cit., p. 374, for a similar view.

63. 9 March 1947, JNSU, 2nd series, Vol. 2, p. 69. According to Moore, Congress saw the statement as a go-ahead signal for constitution making with units unwilling to be in the Union given the option to secede from it, but once it was formed. op. cit., p. 222.
The distance remained but the crisis in the Interim Government was temporarily defused.

Gandhi felt that the statement could be oriented in a direction favourable to the Congress, despite its holding out the possibility of Pakistan. Those parts wishing to be independent of the British, i.e., the Congress-provinces, were free to do so, just as those who wanted Pakistan may get it. Much depended on the Constituent Assembly and the Interim Government and on the Congress provinces, who, "if wise, will get what they want".