Birla Park
New Delhi, April 10, 1942

Dear Sir Stafford,

On the 2nd April I sent you the resolution of the Working Committee of the Congress containing their views on the tentative proposals put forward by you on behalf of the British Government. In this resolution we expressed our dissent from several important and far-reaching proposals for the future. Further consideration of these proposals has only strengthened us in our conviction in regard to them, and we should like to repeat that we cannot accept them as suggested. The Working Committee's resolution gives expression in our conclusions relating to them which we reached after the most earnest consideration.

That resolution, however, emphasized the gravity of the present situation and stated that the ultimate decision that we might take would be governed by the changes made in the present. The over-riding problem before all of us, and more especially before all Indians, is the defence of the country from aggression and invasion. The future, important as it is will depend on what happens in the next few months and years. We were therefore prepared to do without any assurances for this uncertain future, hoping that through our sacrifices in the defence of our country we would lay the solid and enduring foundations for a free and independent India. We concentrated, therefore, on the present.
Your original proposals in regard to the present, as contained in clause (e) of the proposed declaration were vague and incomplete, except in so far as it was made clear that 'His Majesty's Government must inevitably bear the full responsibility for the defence of India.' These proposals, in effect, asked for participation in the tasks of today with a view to ensure the 'future freedom of India.' Freedom was for an uncertain future, not for the present; and no indication was given in clause (e) of what arrangements of governmental and other changes would be made in the present. When this vagueness was pointed out, you said that this was deliberate, so as to give you freedom to determine these changes in consultation with others. In our talks you gave us to understand that you envisaged a National Government which would deal with all matters except Defence.

Defence at any time, and more particularly in wartime, is of essential importance and without it a National Government functions in a very limited field. Apart from this consideration it was obvious that the whole purpose of your proposals and our talks centred round the urgency of the problems created by the threat of the invasion of India. The chief functions of a National Government must necessarily be to organize Defence both intensively and on the widest popular basis and to create a mass psychology of resistance to an invader. Only a National Government on whom this responsibility was laid. Popular resistance
must have a national background and both the soldier and the civilian must feel that they are fighting for their country's freedom under national leadership.

The question became one not of just satisfying our national aspiration but of effective prosecution of the war and fighting to the last any invader who set foot on the soil of India. On general principles a National Government would control defence through a Defence Minister, and the Commander-in-Chief would control the armed forces and would have full latitude in the carrying out of operations connected with the war. An Indian National Government should have normally functioned in this way. We made it clear that the Commander-in-Chief in India would have control of the armed forces and the conduct of operations and other matters connected therewith. With a view to arriving at a settlement, we were prepared to accept certain limitations on the normal powers of the Defence Minister. We had no desire to upset in the middle of the war the present military organization or arrangements. We accepted also that the higher strategy of the war should be controlled by the War Cabinet in London which would have an Indian member. The immediate object before us was to make the defence of India more effective, to strengthen it, to broaden it on the popular will, and to reduce all red tape, delay and inefficiency from it. There was no question of our interfering with the technical and operational sides. One thing of course, was of paramount importance to us; India's safety and defence.
Subject to this primary consideration there was no reason why there should be any difficulty in finding a way out of the present impasse in accordance with the unanimous desire of the Indian people, for in this matter there are no differences amongst us.

The emphasis on Defence led you to reconsider the matter and you wrote to me on the 7th April suggesting a formula for Defence.

In this letter you said: 'As the Working Committee have understood, it is impossible to make any change in the existing constitution during the period of hostilities.' The Working Committee's attitude in the matter has been completely misunderstood and I should like to clear this up, although we are not immediately concerned with it. The Committee do not think that there is any inherent difficulty in the way of constitutional changes during the war. Everything that helps in the war not only can be but must be done, and done with speed. That is the only way to carry on and win a war. No complicated enactments are necessary. A recognition of India's freedom and right to self-determination could easily be made, if it were so wished, together with certain other consequential but important changes.

The rest can be left to future arrangements and adjustments. I might remind you that the British Prime Minister actually proposed a union of France and England on the eve of the fall of France. No greater or more fundamental change could be imagined, and this was suggested at a period of grave
crisis and peril. War accelerates change; it does not fit in with static conceptions.

The formula for Defence that you sent us was considered by us together with its annexure which gave a list of subjects or departments which were to be transferred to the Defence Department. This list was a revealing one as it proved that the Defence Minister would deal with relatively unimportant matters. We were unable to accept this and we informed you accordingly.

Subsequently, a new formula for Defence was suggested to us, but without any list of subjects. This formula seemed to us to be based on a more healthy approach and we suggested certain changes pointing out that our ultimate decision would necessarily depend on the allocation of subjects. A revised formula was then sent back to us together with an indication of the functions of the War Department.

This was so widely and comprehensively framed that it was difficult for us to know what the actual allocation of subjects and departments, as between the Defence Department and the War Department, would be. A request was made on our behalf that illustrative lists of these subjects might be supplied to enable us to consider the matter. No such lists were supplied to us.

In the interview we had with you yesterday we discussed the new formula and expressed our viewpoint in regard to it.
I need not repeat what I said then. The wording of the formula is after all a minor matter and we should not allow that to come in our way, unless some important principle is at stake. But behind that wording lay certain ideas and we were surprised to find that during the past few days we had been proceeding on wrong assumptions.

When we asked you for illustrative lists of subjects for the two departments, you referred us to the old list for the Defence Department which you had previously sent us and which we had been unable to accept. You added that certain residuary subjects might be added to this but, in effect, there was not likely to be any such subjects as the allocation was complete. Thus, you said, that substantially there was no change between the old list and any new one that might be prepared. If this was so, and we were to go back ultimately to the place we started from, then what was the purpose of our searching for a new formula? A new set of words meaning the same thing made no difference. In the course of our talks many other matter were also cleared up, unfortunately to our disadvantage. You had referred both privately and in the course of public statements to a National Government and a 'Cabinet' consisting of 'ministers'. These words have a certain significance and we had imagined that the new Government would function with full powers as a cabinet, with the Viceroy acting as a constitutional head. But the new picture that you placed before us was really not very different from the old, the difference being one
of degree and not of kind. The new Government could neither be called except vaguely and inaccurately; nor could it function as a National Government. It would just be the Viceroy and his Executive Council with the Viceroy having all his old powers. We did not ask for any legal changes but we did ask for definite assurances and conventions which would indicate that the new Government would function as a free government the members of which act as members of a cabinet in a constitutional government. In regard to the conduct of the war and connected activities the Commander-in-Chief would have freedom, and he would act as War Minister.

We were informed that nothing can be said at this stage, even vaguely and generally, about the conventions that should govern the Government and the Viceroy. Ultimately there was always the possibility of the members of the Executive Council resigning or threatening to resign if they disagreed with the Viceroy. That sanction or remedy is of course always open, but it is curious that we should base our approach to a new government on the probability of conflict and resignation at the very outset.

The picture therefore placed before us is not essentially different from the old one. The whole object which we, and I believe you have in view—that is, to create a new psychological approach to the people, to make them feel that their own national government had come, that they were defending their newly-won freedom—would be completely frustrated when they saw this old picture again, with even the old
labels on. The continuation of the India Office which has been a symbol of evil to us, would confirm this picture. It has almost been taken for granted for some time past that the India Office would soon disappear as it was an anachronism. But now we are told that even this undesirable relic of a past age is going to continue.

The picture of the government, which was so like the old in all essential features, is such that we cannot fit into it. Normally we would have had little difficulty in disposing of this matter for it is so far removed from all that we have striven for, but in the circumstances of today we were prepared to give full consideration to every proposal which might lead to an effective organization of the defence of India. The peril that faces India affects us more than it can possibly affect any foreigner and we are anxious and eager to do our utmost to face it and overcome it. But we cannot undertake responsibilities when we are not given the freedom and power to shoulder them effectively and when an old environment continues which hampers the national effort.

While we cannot accept the proposals you have made, we want to inform you that we are yet prepared to assume responsibility provided a truly national government is formed. We are prepared to put aside for the present all questions about the future, though as we have indicated, we hold definite views about it. But in the present, the National Government must be a cabinet government with full power and
must not merely be a continuation of the Viceroy's Executive Council. In regard to defence we have already stated what, in our opinion, the position should be at present. We feel that such an arrangement is the very minimum that is essential for the functioning of a National Government and for making the popular appeal which is urgently needed.

We would point out to you that the suggestions we have put forward are not ours only but may be considered to be the unanimous demand of the Indian people. On these matters there is no difference of opinion among the various groups and parties, and the difference is the as between the Indian people as a whole and the British Government. Such differences as exist in India relate to constitutional changes in the future. We are agreeable to the postponement of this issue so that the largest possible measure of unity might be achieved in the present crisis for the defence of India. It would be a tragedy that even when there is this unanimity of opinion in India, the British Government should prevent a free National Government from functioning and from serving the cause of India as well as the larger causes for which millions are suffering and dying today.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/- Abul Kalam Azad.
The Rt. Hon. Sir Stafford Cripps,
3, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi

On the 11th of April Cripps replied to me in the following terms:

2, Queen Victoria Road
New Delhi, 11th April, 1942.

My Dear Maulana Sahib,

I was extremely sorry to receive from you your letter of April 10th expressing the rejection by the Congress Working Committee of His Majesty's Government's draft declaration.

I will not deal with those points which are covered by the original resolution of your Committee which you sent me, as they were clearly not the reason for your decision.

Nor need I go into the question of the division of duties between the Defence Minister and the Commander-in-Chief as War Member with which you deal at length. This division allotted to the Defence Minister all functions outside those actually connected with the General Headquarters, Navy Headquarters and Air Headquarters which are under the Commander-in-Chief as head of the fighting forces in India.

In addition to these functions in the narrow field of 'Defence' it was suggested that all other portfolios relating to that subject such as:

Home-Department - Internal order, police, refugees etc.
Finance Department - All war finance in India.
Communications Department—Railways, roads, transport etc.
Supply Department—Supplies for all forces and munitions.
Information and Broadcasting Department—propaganda, publicity etc.
Civil Defence Department—A.R.P. and all forms of civilian defence.
Legislative Department—Regulations and orders.
Labour Department—Man Power.

Defence Department—Administration and Indian personnel etc., should be put in the hands of representative Indians as members of the Executive Council.

Nothing further could have been done by way of giving responsibility for Defence services to representative Indian members without jeopardising the immediate defence of Indian under the Commander-in-Chief. This defence is, as you know, a paramount duty and responsibility of His Majesty's Government, while unity of Command is essential in the interest of the Allied help to India.

The real substance of your refusal to take part in a National Government is that the form of Government suggested is not such as would enable you to really the Indian people as you desire.

You make two suggestions. First that the constitution might now be changed. In this respect I would point out that you made this suggestion for the first time last night,
nearly three weeks after you had received the proposals, and I would further remark that every other representative with whom I have discussed this view has accepted the practical impossibility of any such legislative change in the middle of a war and at such a moment as the present.

Second you suggest 'a truly National Government' be formed, which must be a 'cabinet Government with full power'.

Without constitutional changes of a most complicated character and on a very large scale this would not be possible, as you realize.

Were such a system to be introduced by convention under the existing circumstances, the nominated cabinet (nominated presumably by the major political organizations) would be responsible to no one but itself, could not be removed and would in fact constitute an absolute dictatorship of the majority.

This suggestion would be rejected by all minorities in India, since it would subject all of them to a permanent and autocratic majority in the Cabinet. Nor would it be consistent with the pledges already given by His Majesty's Government to protect the rights of those minorities.

In a country such as India where communal divisions are still so deep an irresponsible majority Government of this kind is not possible.

Apart from this, however, until such time as the Indian people frame their new constitution, His Majesty's
Government must continue to carry out its duties to those large sections of the Indian people to whom it has given its pledges.

The proposals of His Majesty's Government went as far as possible short of a complete change in the constitution which is generally acknowledged as impracticable in the circumstances of today.

While therefore both I and His Majesty's Government recognize the keen desire of your Working Committee to carry on the war against the enemy by every means in their power, they regret that your Working Committee has not seen its way to join in the war effort upon the conditions sincerely offered as the only conditions which could have brought together all the different communities and sections of the Indian people.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/- Stafford Cripps

I propose to publish this answer

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,
Birla House
New Delhi

I wrote back to him on the same day:

Birla House
Albuquerque Road
New Delhi April 11, 1942

Dear Sir Stafford,

I have just received your letter of April 10th and I must confess that my colleagues and I were considerably surprised to read it. I am sending you this reply immediately
and can only deal briefly herewith some of the points you have raised.

The points covered by our original resolution are important and represent my Committee's well-considered views on the British proposals as a whole. But we pointed out to you that so far as the proposals relate to the future they might be set aside, as we were anxious to assume responsibility for India's government and defence in this hour of danger. This responsibility could only be undertaken, however, if it was real responsibility and power.

As regards the division of functions between the Defence Minister and the War Minister you did not give illustrative lists, as requested by us, and referred us to the previous list of the Defence Minister's functions, which, as you know, we had been wholly unable to accept. In your letter under reply you mention certain subjects, directly or indirectly related to the war, which will be administered by other departments. So far as the Defence Minister is concerned, it is clear that his functions will be limited by the first list that you sent.

No one has suggested any restrictions on the normal powers of the Commander-in-Chief. Indeed we went beyond this and were prepared to agree to further powers being given to him as War Minister. But it is clear that the British Government's conception and ours in regard to defence
differ greatly. For us it means giving it a national character and calling upon every man and woman in India to participate in it. It means trusting our own people and seeking their full co-operation in this great effort. The British Government's view seems to be based on an utter lack of confidence in the Indian people and in withholding real power from them. You refer to the paramount duty and responsibility of His Majesty's Government in regard to defence. That duty and responsibility cannot be discharged effectively unless the Indian people are made to have and feel their responsibility, and the recent past stands witness to this. The Government of India do not seem to realize that the war can only be fought on a popular basis.

Your statement that we have for the first time after three weeks suggested a change in the constitution is hardly correct. In the course of our talks reference was made to it, but it is true that we did not lay stress on it as we did not want to introduce new issues. But when you stated explicitly in your letter that we had agreed that no constitutional changes could be made during the war, we had to deny this and correct your impression.

It is the last part of your letter that has especially surprised and pained us. It seems that there has been a progressive deterioration in the British Government's attitude as our negotiations proceeded. What we were told in our very first talk with you is now denied or explained away. You told me then that there would be a National
Government which would function as a Cabinet and that the position of the Viceroy should be analogous to that of the King in England vis-a-vis his Cabinet. In regard to the India Office, you told me, that you were surprised that no one had so far mentioned this important matter, and that the practical course was to have this attached or incorporated with the Dominion's Office.

The whole of this picture which you sketched before us has now been completely shattered by what you told us during our last interview.

You have put forward an argument in your letter which at no time during our talks was mentioned by you. You refer to the 'absolute dictatorship of the majority'. It is astonishing that such a statement should be made in this connection and at this stage. This difficulty is inherent in any scheme of a mixed cabinet formed to meet an emergency, but there are many ways in which it can be provided for. Had you raised this question we would have discussed it and found a satisfactory solution. The whole approach to this question has been that a mixed cabinet should be formed and should co-operate together. We accepted this. We are not interested in the Congress as such gaining power, but we are interested in the Indian people as a whole having freedom and power. How the Cabinet should be formed and should function was a question which might have been considered after, the main question was decided; that is, the extent
of power which the British Government would give up to the Indian people. Because of this we never discussed it with you or even referred to it. Nevertheless you have raised this matter for the first time, in what is presumably your last letter to us, and tried most unjustifiably to side track the real issue between us.

You will remember that in my very first talk with you, I pointed out that the communal or like questions did not arise at this stage. As soon as the British Government made up its mind to transfer real power and responsibility, the other questions could be tackled successfully by those concerned. You gave me the impression that you agreed with this approach.

We are convinced that if the British Government did not pursue a policy of encouraging disruption, all of us, to whatever party or group we belong, would be able to come together and find a common line of action. But, unhappily, even in this grave hour of peril, the British Government is unable to give up its wrecking policy. We are driven to the conclusion that it attaches more importance to holding on to its rule in India, as long as it can, and promoting discord and disruption here with that end in view, than to an effective defence of India against the aggression and invasion that overhang us. To us, and to all Indians, the dominant consideration is the defence and safety of India, and it is by that test that we judge.
You mention that you propose to publish your letter to me. I presume that you have no objection now to our publishing our original resolution, your letters to us, and our letters to you.

Yours sincerely,

Sd, Abul Kalam Azad

The Right Hon'ble Sir Stafford Cripps, 3, Queen Victoria Road, New Delhi.