

Imperial Unity Issue Looms Large in Britain: Dominions for Showdown

by Walter G. Fuller (*Special Correspondent of The Eagle*)

London, January 10 — Bit by bit, the new Conservative government in Britain is checking, limiting, killing, and in some cases actually reversing many of the policies initiated by its Labour predecessor. In some cases these changes in policy are of little significance; sometimes, however, they relate to matters of considerable importance where the reversal of policy is due to a fundamental difference between Tory and Labour points of view.

Specimen Piece of Red Tape

Take, for example, as a typical instance of the more trivial kind of change, the recently announced decision of the War Department under its new Conservative head, Worthington Evans, to rescind the order issued by the Labour Government's War Minister, Stephen Walsh, which compelled an army bandmaster, before accepting an engagement for his band to play at public entertainments, to submit the offer to officials of the Musicians Union in the locality, who then informed him what fee he must charge for the services of his band.

This order was made by Mr Walsh because the Musicians Union had long complained that army bands, being subsidized by the State, were able to cut under civilians bands in competing for public engagements.

The new War Office order cuts the Musicians Union out altogether, and leaves any army band free to take any engagement that comes along, so long as it is not accepted on terms which are lower than those which would in the same circumstances be offered to a civilian band.

Singapore Base Reversal Significant

That, however, is a small matter compared with the Tory's Government's reversal of its predecessor's decision not to proceed with the building of a great fortified base for the British Navy at Singapore. Premier Baldwin's determination to go ahead with Singapore is a very significant thing and marks a real divergence

from the view held by MacDonald and his colleagues.

Imperial Unity a Vital Issue

Another decision of outstanding importance in which the views of the Labour regime have been thrown overboard is in the matter of imperial unity.

Without doubt, this is a vital matter to England and to the future of the British Empire. The question at issue is briefly this: Is the foreign policy of Britain, as conceived and executed by the British Foreign Office, to be regarded in the future as involving, in all its ramifications and consequences, the great self-governing dominions like Canada, South Africa, and Australia? Or, on the other hand, are the governments of these dominions to exercise the rights of real self-government by "contracting out" of those obligations incurred by the British Government in Downing Street, with which one or other of the dominions may disapprove?

Of course the problem becomes a very urgent one when the question of peace and war is involved. Suppose, for instance, that the British Foreign Office, acting under orders from the British Government, makes a treaty with a European power — France, let us say — and as a consequence is drawn into war. Does that mean that the whole empire is drawn into war also?

This is a question which is being very much discussed in political circles in England now.

Dominions Distinctly Nervous

Signs are not wanting the dominions are distinctly nervous on the subject. They do not like the present vague state of affairs, and Ramsay MacDonald was only expressing a very general feeling when, last summer, he urged holding an imperial conference to be attended by two representatives of each of the dominion governments. The replies were all very favorable, and thus the matter stood when

MacDonald's brief reign came to a sudden end.

With the coming of Premier Baldwin and his truculent little Colonial Secretary, L.S. Amery, the whole scheme of such a conference to discuss imperial relations was nipped in the bud, and everything is now back at the beginning.

But students of British constitutional history are saying the matter cannot be left as it is.

Some machinery for imperial consultation and unity of action is absolutely necessary if the British Empire is going to hang together. The present Conservative Government would doubtless prefer to leave things as they are, but circumstances may be too strong for them, and we are likely to see some kind of imperial conference meeting in London before long.

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