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LORD MILNER AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM ¹

ALTHOUGH only just past sixty years—he was born in 1854—Lord Milner can look back upon a career of such varied and successful attainments as falls to the lot of but few men. Already at Balliol, where he was a contemporary of Asquith, a brilliant future was predicted for him by Jowett. Some years later, Dean Church called him “the finest flower of human culture that the University of Oxford has produced in our time.” After graduating with high honors Milner spent a few years as prize-fellow at New College, and then entered the field of journalism under the guidance of Stead. Subsequently, as private secretary to Goschen, he mastered the mysteries of public finance; and, during the years from 1889 to 1892, he applied this knowledge in reforming the finances of Egypt. Back again in England, he was for five years in control of the Inland Revenue Department. In 1897, amid a chorus of eulogy, he left London for South Africa, where he spent those eight momentous years that are still fresh in the minds of all. While his course of action there has been, and still is, the subject of bitter controversy, only the most irreconcilable of opponents can question the purity of his motives. In all these varied fields of activity, Milner has displayed that rare knowledge of men and measures which results only from a combination of severe intellectual discipline with personal experience of administration. To all questions he brought an open mind; and, though trained in the Whig school, he has not hesitated to abandon such of this party's principles as seemed to him to be no longer tenable. While a staunch imperialist, in that he is firmly convinced of the beneficence of the work being done by the British Empire, he has a genuinely democratic conception of government. Although no party man, he has attached himself in a loose way to the Conservatives, primarily because they, more than the Liberals, realize the urgency of the imperial problem which is, in his eyes, the most vital of all questions confronting British statesmanship.

Milner's career in Egypt has been ably described by his own pen, and his far-reaching work in South Africa has been the subject of elaborate books by W. B. Worsfold. The collection of his speeches and addresses, published under the title of *The Nation and the Empire*,

¹The Nation and the Empire. By Lord Milner. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913.—xlviii, 515 pp.

covers in the main the years from 1906 to 1912 when, no longer hampered by the burdens of administrative duties, he was able to devote his undivided energies to impressing the urgency of the imperial problem upon widely differing audiences in Britain and in Canada. In spite of the accomplishment of important tasks in Egypt and in South Africa, possibly these latter years have been the most fertile ones of his life, for he stands forth as the intellectual leader of the most progressive school of imperial thought throughout the Empire. Its comprehensive aims, which to many seemed visionary during the inertia of peace, have been suddenly brought within the range of practical politics by the dynamics of war. War may not be the father of all things, as the Greek philosopher claimed, but it unquestionably brings to a sharp focus hitherto vaguely defined tendencies.

Although the development of the British Empire and the spread of English political civilization throughout the length and breadth of the world has been the most momentous political development of the past three centuries, this evolution as an entity has received but inadequate attention from historians and students and is generally misunderstood by the public at large. The process by which this Empire grew and the purpose that at present animates it are clearly perceived by comparatively few. Even contemporary changes of far-reaching import have aroused only scant interest, and not many outside of the Empire itself seem to realize the fundamental transmutation in its spirit wrought in the past two decades. These years have witnessed an enormous increase in imperial sentiment in both Britain and the self-governing Dominions. The desire for closer union was to some extent always present in certain circles, but it was fully counterbalanced by centrifugal tendencies; and, up to the end of the last century, the British Empire was in a state of unstable equilibrium. That was the period of Britain's "splendid isolation," when both the Mother Country and the colonies seemed secure from serious foreign danger and the problem of imperial defence was not urgent. The emergence of Germany as a world power with vaguely defined, but alarmingly extensive, ambitions effected a great change. The challenge to Great Britain implied in the creation of a powerful German navy necessitated the withdrawal of the British fleet from the outlying seas and its concentration at the point of danger—the North Sea. The German naval menace awakened the Dominions from their dream of security and brought them face to face with problems of foreign policy and imperial defence that hitherto had seemed to them to be purely the concern of the Mother Country. They then for the first time realized as a vital fact that their present

security and future development depended upon the strength of Great Britain and that their very existence was contingent upon the maintenance of British supremacy at sea. Furthermore, it was gradually recognized that the existing arrangement was inequitable in that the entire burden of naval defence rested upon the tax-payers in the British Isles. As this was gradually realized, the self-governing Dominions—Australia, New Zealand, and Canada—offered to assume a portion of this liability, but in seeking for the best method in which to do so, other and more fundamental questions arose which demonstrated conclusively that the existing imperial organization was inadequate and defective. These communities were confronted with the vital fact that their autonomy was not complete, in that they had no direct voice in determining the course of foreign policy or in deciding the vital issue of peace or war. Under the compelling force of foreign danger, the demand for union became ever more insistent, but no adequate means have as yet been devised for its regular expression. The periodical Imperial Conferences, at which the colonial statesmen meet their British colleagues, do not meet the exigency. Lord Milner has devoted his chief energies to stimulating this movement for greater imperial cohesion and to directing its course towards the most permanently solid goal. “My public activities,” he writes, “have been dominated by a single desire—that of working for the integrity and consolidation of the British Empire.”

The political terminology that is used to describe the amorphous and heterogeneous political aggregate known as the British Empire is woefully misleading, especially in so far as it is applied to the relations between Britain and the five self-governing Dominions. There is at the present time practically no remaining trace of the Roman idea of *imperium* in this connection; and the term “imperial sentiment” as used not only by Lord Milner, but by almost all others, merely connotes a desire for greater union. In many features this movement resembles that which led to the adoption of the American Constitution, as well as the Italian *Risorgimento* and the unification of Germany, but it also differs in this vital respect, that its aim is to unite in one organic commonwealth widely separated communities whose distinct characteristics must inevitably remain intact. The formation of the United States meant the gradual, though not wholly complete, elimination of those highly developed local patriotisms of the colonial era and the ultimate development of a distinctively national character. Similarly, Piedmont and the other states of Italy have been absorbed by the unified nation. In Germany, likewise, local patriotism has been very much lessened;

and, as a result of Prussian predominance, there is a steady tendency towards conformity to one distinct type. Such an outcome is impossible in the case of the British Empire. It is neither anticipated nor desired. The problem is to form an organic commonwealth out of a "world-wide group of sister nations." In this connection Lord Milner has written some very significant words.

Do not let me be thought to advocate the "anglicisation" of the non-British races of the Empire, or to wish to force them into a British mould. Imperialism is something wider than "Anglo-Saxondom" or even than "Pan-Britannicism." The power of incorporating alien races, without trying to disintegrate them, or to rob them of their individuality, is characteristic of the British imperial system. It is not by what it takes away, but by what it gives, not by depriving them of their own character, language, and traditions, but by ensuring them the retention of all these, and at the same time opening new vistas of culture and advancement, that it seeks to win them to itself.

On various occasions, Milner emphasized that there was "no incompatibility between Canadian national patriotism and the wider patriotism of the Empire." But he looks forward expectantly to the more or less distant day, when every one will unhesitatingly acknowledge that his primary allegiance is due to the Empire. In 1912, he said :

My hope is that a day may come when the words "the Empire is my country" will not be a hard saying to any civilized man, I don't care what the color of his skin, in any part of it ; when those words will express his real feeling ; when, over and above his local and racial patriotism, he will recognize that his highest allegiance is to the Empire as a whole.

In this movement for greater imperial unity there is no element of aggression, for the British Empire is a satiated state and its imperial type of nationalism does not, as is unfortunately so often the case where nationalism is restricted to a narrow field, imply hostility towards other nationalities, but merely a desire to preserve inviolate that political civilization which English-speaking peoples rightly or wrongly, but unquestionably sincerely, cherish as their priceless birthright. In its origins and in its aims, the modern imperial movement is distinctly defensive. What Milner said in 1906, he would undoubtedly repeat today. "Our object is not domination or aggrandisement. It is consolidation and security. We envy and antagonize no other nation. But we wish the kindred peoples under the British flag to remain one united family forever."

Seven years later, in the introduction to his collected speeches, he wrote the following significant sentences :

Imperialism as a political doctrine has often been represented as something tawdry and superficial. In reality it has all the depth and comprehensiveness of a religious faith. Its significance is moral even more than material. It is a mistake to think of it as principally concerned with extension of territory, with "painting the map red." There is quite enough painted red already. It is not a question of a couple of hundred thousand square miles more or less. It is a question of preserving the unity of a great race, of enabling it, by maintaining that unity, to develop freely on its own lines, and to continue to fulfil its distinctive mission in the world.

In a similar, but more personal, vein he addressed a Canadian audience in 1908 :

I am so intensely conscious of all that the Empire stands for in the world, of all that it means in the great march of human progress, I am so anxious to give full and yet unexaggerated expression to my sense of the high privilege of British citizenship. But there is nothing so odious as cant, and this is a subject on which it is particularly easy to seem to be canting. Not that I am afraid of falling into a strain of boastfulness. The last thing which the thought of the Empire inspires in me is a desire to boast—to wave a flag, or to shout "Rule Britannia." When I think of it, I am much more inclined to go into a corner by myself and pray. But, even thus, the road is full of pitfalls. One misplaced word, the wrong turn of a phrase, may make the sincere expression of life-long conviction sound like mere empty verbiage and rodomontade.

As this movement has a grip on the Dominions as firm as on the United Kingdom, obviously its aim is not to perpetuate British supremacy in the Empire. Thanks largely to the clear vision of Chamberlain, the idea of British ascendancy has given way to one of partnership and of coöperation on equal terms by all the self-governing democracies of the Empire. The old idea of Great Britain as the Mother Country surrounded by daughter-states is replaced by the conception of a union of sister-nations coöperating for their common interests and ideals. Milner has spread this newer conception far and wide. The self-governing colonies, as he expressed it,

are, in fact, states of the Empire, and the United Kingdom itself is such a state, though no doubt still vastly the greatest and most important, bearing almost all the common burdens, and alone responsible for the great dependencies. Still, the difference between the United Kingdom and the

other states, in the view of the Imperialism of the future, of the only Imperialism that can stand, ought to be regarded as a difference of stature and not of status—a difference which, however great today, must tend to disappear.

The imperialist's ultimate ideal, he said on another occasion, is a union in which the several states, each entirely independent in its separate affairs, should all coöperate for common purposes on the basis of absolute, unqualified equality of status.

Milner is not blind to the possible consequences of this principle upon the future position of England in the Empire, but he envisages her relative inferiority with unperturbed equanimity. In 1904, he said to a Johannesburg audience :

I am an Imperialist out-and-out—and by an Imperialist I don't mean that which is commonly supposed to be indicated by the word. It is not the domination of Great Britain over the other parts of the Empire that is in my mind when I call myself an Imperialist more than an Englishman, and I am prepared to see the Federal Council of the Empire sitting in Ottawa, in Sydney, in South Africa—sitting anywhere within the Empire—if in the great future we can only all hold together. That may be looking very far ahead, but it is the only right ideal in this matter.

As a natural consequence of this newer attitude, the former legal theory of the sovereignty of the British Parliament throughout the Empire has been abandoned as an untenable and mischievous fiction. The older conception of possession inherited from the eighteenth-century colonial system, the idea that England owns colonies, is neither in accord with the existing political facts nor with the legal theory adopted to explain them. In so far as the Dominions are concerned, the Crown is now represented as the sole legal bond uniting them to Great Britain. But the Crown is little more than a symbol, and the ever-swelling volume of imperial sentiment demands political organs by means of which it can express itself. The existing organization does not correspond with political conditions, and requires radical readjustment, if not complete change, in order to establish the necessary harmony. This was the chief lesson that Milner insistently and earnestly inculcated upon his listeners. He urged and urged again the imperative need of creating the necessary political machinery by means of which the self-governing nations of the imperial commonwealth could deliberate and act in common in regard to those matters that equally concerned them all. To an ever increasing number, as Milner points out, "loyalty to the Empire is . . . the supreme political duty." "But loyalty to the

Empire," he says, "however inspiring as a motive of action, is not easy to practise at the present time. And it never will be, as long as the conception of the Empire as a single state is not embodied in any institutions other than the Crown."

Knowing full well the innately conservative character of the people of his stock, Milner was far from sanguine as to the immediate realization of this aim. Evidently, as he viewed the situation, the essential thing was to have this ideal accepted as the ultimate goal in view, because then, in the fulness of time, the necessary institutions would automatically appear. Hence he has not explained explicitly what new imperial machinery is necessary, but as to the fundamental nature of the new organization required he has left no doubt. To his mind, Imperial Conferences and Defence Committees are but temporary makeshifts bridging the critical period. The scheme of a "Britannic Alliance," or that of a formal confederation, he rejects because they are not permanent arrangements. Only organic union in one body politic, with an exclusively imperial legislature and a ministry solely responsible to it, will solve the problem, as he sees it. "It is necessary, at least in my mind," he said in 1912, "that the Empire should be a real State, and not merely a number of separate, more or less closely associated, communities under a common sovereign."

On another occasion, he wrote :

We require an Imperial Constitution, providing for the separation of those branches of public business which, like Foreign Affairs, Defence and Ocean Communications, are essentially Imperial, from those which are mainly local, and for the management of the former by a new authority, representative of all parts of the Empire, but undistracted by the work and controversies which are peculiar to any single part.

This modern imperial movement is primarily concerned with the self-governing colonies, but it also has an important bearing upon the dependencies and protectorates included within the Empire. Milner is the last to ignore the serious nature of the obligation incurred through having assumed responsibility for the welfare of the hundreds of millions of politically uneducated under the British flag. It is partly because of his keen realization of this bond of duty that he is so intent upon the creation of purely imperial organs of government. He feels that the responsibility for the 370 millions in the dependent Empire is too heavy a burden for the 45 millions in the United Kingdom, and that it should be shared by the rapidly growing democracies in the Dominions. In an address on "The Two Empires," delivered in 1908 at the Royal Colonial Institute, he said :

In the long, long run . . . I cannot picture the people of these islands alone remaining solely responsible for the dependent Empire, carrying the whole of the "white man's burden," as far as it falls—and it does very largely fall—on the British race. . . . In our management of the dependent Empire we, the people of the United Kingdom, are only the trustees for the whole family of British states. . . . We too should look ahead, and anticipating the day when we must either have the help of the younger nations in maintaining our common heritage, or be prepared to see it dwindle, seize every opportunity which offers itself of bringing them into closer contact with all that is involved in its preservation. . . . The more we can associate them with ourselves in knowledge of and responsibility for the dependent Empire, the more we may expect to see their attitude towards its colored races develop in intelligence and liberality.

When Lord Milner delivered these addresses, he had but faint hopes that he himself, or even those of the generation after him, would witness the execution of his deeply cherished plan. The existing war has, however, greatly stimulated the movement in favor of greater imperial cohesion. The Dominions have engaged in it on a scale and in a manner hitherto unparalleled in the Empire's long history. This is bound to have important consequences.

When a question touches upon such vast and varied interests in so many scattered communities, and in addition is also closely bound up with the fortunes of an internecine war, it would be futile to attempt to predict exactly what, if any, arrangements will be made for "calling the Dominions to the Councils of the Empire." It is even conceivable, though not likely, that there may be a reaction in imperial sentiment if British arms are completely successful. In all probability, however, no matter what the precise outcome of the war may be, something concrete will be done. Whether existing imperial organs will merely be amplified, or a constitutional convention will frame an organic law for the Empire, depends upon at present incalculable factors. If merely a more or less large step forward be taken, or the goal be reached at one leap, in either case a goodly share of the credit will belong to Lord Milner, whose courageous words and sound thinking have effectively concentrated the attention of many on this, the most vital of British problems.

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