

Address given by Clement Attlee to the House of Commons (15 March 1946)

Caption: On 15 March 1946, the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, gives an address to the House of Commons in which he emphasises the need for India to gain independence, while outlining the problems involved.

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The Prime Minister (Mr. Attlee): I would like to thank the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Saffron Walden (Mr. R. A. Butler) for his very helpful, wise, and constructive speech. He has, as we all know, given great service on Indian affairs for many years, and he comes of a family that has given many most distinguished public servants to India. I think that the tone in which he addressed the House is just what is needed today at this critical stage in the relationship between these two countries at a time, as has been said, of very high tension. I find from my Friends in this House who have been out to India and returned, from letters received from Indians, and from Englishmen in India of all points of view, complete agreement on the fact that India is today in a state of great tension and that this is indeed a critical moment. I am quite sure that everyone in this House realises the difficulties of the task which my right hon. Friends have undertaken in conjunction with the Viceroy, and that no one will desire to say anything whatever that will make their task more difficult. The right hon. Gentleman said that the Mission should go out in a positive mood. I entirely agree and that, indeed, is the mood in which my right hon. Friends are undertaking this Mission. It is a time emphatically for very definite and clear action.

I do not intend to make a long speech today, and I do not think it would be wise to do so. In particular, I think it would be most unhelpful to review the past. It is so easy to go back over the past and, in accordance with one's predilections, apportion the blame for past failure in the long drawn out discussions there have been on this extraordinarily difficult problem – the problem of the development of India into a completely self-governing nation. Over such a long period of the past it is so easy to say that at this stage or at that stage opportunities were missed by the faults of one side or the other. I think also, as my right hon. Friend said, it would be a great mistake to stake out the claims of rival communities; we may be quite sure that will be done anyway.

I have had a fairly close connection with this problem now for nearly 20 years, and I would say there have been faults on all sides, but at this time we should be looking to the future rather than harking back to the past. This alone I would say to hon. Members, that it is no good applying the formulae of the past to the present position. The temperature of 1946 is not the temperature of 1920 or of 1930 or even of 1942. The slogans of an earlier day are discarded. Indeed, sometimes words that seemed at that time to Indians to express the height of their aspirations are now set on one side, and other words, other ideas, are substituted. Nothing increases more the pace of the movement of public opinion than a great war. Everyone who had anything to do with this question in the early days between the wars knows what an effect the war of 1914-1918 had on Indian aspirations and Indian ideals. A tide which runs slowly in peace becomes in wartime vastly accelerated, and especially directly after a war, because that tide is to some extent banked up during the war.

I am quite certain that at the present time the tide of nationalism is running very fast in India and, indeed, all over Asia. One always has to remember that India is affected by what happens elsewhere in Asia. I remember so well, when I was on the Simon Commission, how it was borne in upon us what an effect the challenge that had been thrown out by Japan at that time had had on the Asiatic people. The tide of nationalism that at one time seemed to be canalised among a comparatively small proportion of the people of India – mainly a few of the educated classes – has tended to spread wider and wider. I remember so well, indeed, I think we put it in the Simon Commission Report, that although there were great differences in the expression of nationalist sentiment between what are called the extremists and the moderates, and although in many circumstances there might be such a stress on communal claims as might seem almost to exclude the conception of nationalism, yet we found that Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Mahrattah, the politician or civil servant – among all of them that conception of nationalism had been growing stronger and stronger. Today I think that national idea has spread right through and not least, perhaps, among some of those soldiers who have given such wonderful service in the war. I should like today, therefore, not to stress too much the differences between Indians. Let us all realise that whatever the difficulties, whatever the divisions may be, there is this underlying demand among all the Indian peoples.

The right hon. Gentleman did not suggest that the Government should publish any exact terms of reference of the Mission. We have set out the general purpose, and it is our intention that they should be given as free

a hand as possible There will be matters, undoubtedly, on which it will be necessary to refer back for a Cabinet decision, but in the rather fluid position at the present time when we desire to get the utmost co-operation and good will between all the leaders of Indian opinion, it would be unwise to try to tie down those who are going out too rigidly. Indeed, the obvious reason for sending out Cabinet Ministers is that we send out persons of responsibility who are able to take decisions. Of course, there must be an area in which there may have to be a reference back.

The right hon. Gentleman stressed the great part India played during the war. It is worthwhile recording that twice in 25 years India has played a great part in the defeat of tyranny. Is it any wonder that today she claims – as a nation of 400,000,000 people that has twice sent her sons to die for freedom – that she should herself have freedom to decide her own destiny? My colleagues are going to India with the intention of using their utmost endeavours to help her to attain that freedom as speedily and fully as possible. What form of Government is to replace the present regime is for India to decide; but our desire is to help her to set up forthwith the machinery for making that decision. There we are met sometimes with the initial difficulty of getting that machinery set up. We are resolved that machinery shall be set up and we seek the utmost co-operation of all Indian leaders to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman quoted the statement that had been made with regard to India's future. India herself must choose what will be her future Constitution; what will be her position in the world. I hope that the Indian people may elect to remain within the British Commonwealth. I am certain that she will find great advantages in doing so. In these days that demand for complete, isolated nationhood apart from the rest of the world, is really outdated. Unity may come through the United Nations, or through the Commonwealth, but no great nation can stand alone without sharing in what is happening in the world. But if she does so elect, it must be by her own free will. The British Commonwealth and Empire is not bound together by chains of external compulsion. It is a free association of free peoples. If, on the other hand, she elects for independence, in our view she has a right to do so. It will be for us to help to make the transition as smooth and easy as possible.

We should be conscious that the British have done a great work in India. We have united India and given her that sense of nationality which she so very largely lacked over the previous centuries. She has learned from us principles of democracy and justice. When Indians attack our rule, they base their attack, not on Indian principles, but on the basis of standards derived from Britain. I was very struck the other day in the United States, at a dinner where I met a number of distinguished Americans, including a very distinguished Indian, where the talk was turning on the way in which principles worked out here have been applied on the continent of America. It was pointed out that America had a great heritage from Britain. My Indian friend said to me, "You know, the Americans sometimes forget there is another great nation that has also inherited these principles and traditions, and that is India. We feel that we have a duty, a right and a privilege because we also bring to the world and work those very principles that you evolved in Britain."

I am well aware, when I speak of India, that I speak of a country containing a congeries of races, religions and languages, and I know well all the difficulties thereby created. But those difficulties can only be overcome by Indians. We are very mindful of the rights of minorities and minorities should be able to live free from fear. On the other hand, we cannot allow a minority to place a veto on the advance of the majority.

We cannot dictate how these difficulties may be overcome. Our first duty is to get the machinery of decision set up. That is the main purpose of my hon. Friends and the Viceroy. We also want to see set up an interim Government. One of the purposes of the Bill which has been discussed today is to give the Viceroy a greater freedom in order that in the period that shall elapse while this Constitution is being worked out, we may have a Government commanding the greatest possible support in India. I would not like to fetter the Viceroy's discretion in any way, with regard to the allocation of portfolios.

There were a number of points my right hon. Friend mentioned with which I should like to deal. There is the problem of the Indian States. In many Indian States great advances have been made in democratic institutions, and a most interesting experiment is now going forward in Travancore, under the guidance of the distinguished statesman, Sir C. P. Ramaswari Aiyar. Of course, the feelings in British India in regard to

nationalism and the unity of India cannot be confined by the boundaries that separate these States from the Provinces. I hope that the statesmen of British India and of princely India will be able to work out a solution of the problem of bringing together, in one great polity, these disparate constituent parts. There again, we must see that the Indian States find their due place; there can be no positive veto on advance, and I do not believe for a moment that the Indian princes would desire to be a bar to the forward march of India. But, as in the case of any other problems, this is a matter that Indians will settle themselves.

I am very well aware, as we all are, of the minority problems in India, and I think that Indian leaders are more and more realising the need for settling them if India is to have a smooth passage in future years. I believe that due provision will be made for that in the Constitution, and my right hon. Friends, in their conversations, will certainly not neglect the point. We must, however, recognise that we cannot make Indians responsible for governing themselves and, at the same time, retain over here responsibility for the treatment of minorities and the power to intervene on their behalf. We are mindful, too, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman, of the position of the Services – the men who have done great service to India – and the position of their families. I think India should be sensible of the responsibility she has towards those who have served her, and I think that a Government which takes over, so to speak, the assets of our Government will also have to take over the liabilities. There again, that is a point to be dealt with later on. It does not concern the immediate purpose of setting up what I have called the instrument of decision. I entirely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said with regard to the Treaty. That Treaty is primarily for India. We are not going to hang out for anything for our own advantage which would be a disadvantage to India.

In conclusion, may I stress again the crucial nature of the task before us? This problem is of vital importance not only to India and the British Commonwealth and Empire, but to the world. There is this immense nation, set in the midst of Asia, an Asia which has been ravaged by war. Here we have the one great country that has been seeking to apply the principles of democracy. I have always hoped myself that politically India might be the light of Asia. It is a most unfortunate circumstance that, just at the time when we have to deal with these great political issues, there should be grave economic difficulties and, in particular, very grave anxiety over India's food supply. The House knows that His Majesty's Government are deeply concerned in this problem, and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Food is at the present time in the United States with an Indian delegation. We shall do our utmost to help her. At the present moment I do not think I should say anything on the social and economic difficulties to which the right hon. Gentleman referred except this: I believe that those economic and social difficulties can only be solved by the Indians themselves, because they are so closely bound up with the whole Indian way of life and outlook. Whatever we can do to assist, we shall do. My right hon. Friends are going out to India resolved to succeed and I am sure everyone will wish them "God speed."