The Meaning of the Indian Constitutional Proposals

By R. Palme Dutt (London)

The proposals of British imperialism for the new “Constitution” to be imposed in India have at last been published—seven years after the original appointment of the Simon Commission to prepare them, fifteen years after the previous Government of India Act which was announced as a step towards the rapid advance to “Dominion Status” in India, and seventeen years after the British government’s promise in 1917 to establish “responsible government” in India. The present proposals represent the most reactionary constitution that has yet been devised to rivet imperialist rule in India. These seventeen years of constitutional “progress,” from the liberal promises of the Declaration of August, 1917, made under the fear of the influence of the Russian Revolution, to the present iron-heel “Constitution,” afford a striking demonstration of the “progress backwards” of British imperialism in India.

What lies between 1917 and 1934? To understand this development it is necessary to understand the development of the real situation in India which underlies these constitutional forms and manoeuvres. For between 1917 and 1934 a transformation has taken place in the whole situation in India. This transformation consists in the emergence of the revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ movement, and the beginning of the transition to the hegemony of the working class, in place of the national bourgeoisie, in the mass struggle. This is the transformation which underlies the change-over of British policy from the liberal promises of 1917 to the cast-iron reaction of 1934.

In 1917-19 British imperialism, terrified at the prospect of the developing revolutionary wave in India and throughout the world, and restrained by the weakness of its social basis hitherto on the feudal reaction of the princes and landlords, sought the alliance of the Indian bourgeoisie, represented by the Liberals and the National Congress. This was the meaning of the Montagu-Chelmsford Report. It is only necessary to compare the extremely polite and conciliatory attitude of that Report to the National Congress, the painstaking discussion through whole sections of all its programme and proposals with the present-day curt dismissal of the entire national movement as unworthy of detail consideration or potentially seditionous, to see the change that has taken place. At that time of panic the most Conservative politicians were the most lavish in their promises. It was Curzon who wrote in with his own hand the phrase “responsible government” into the Declaration of August, 1917. It was Churchill and Birkenhead who broadcasted the talk of “Dominion Status” for India.

But since then this whole plan of British imperialism for alliance with the Indian bourgeoisie has undergone profound modification—to the bitter indignation and disillusionment of the Indian bourgeoisie, who now speak loudly of British “perfidy” and “betrayal” (a cooler consideration of political realities should open their eyes to the fact that the only “betrayal” which matters is, not the perfectly normal tactical change of the imperialist rulers after the immediate moment of danger is passed, but their
own real betrayal of the mass struggle, when they held it in their leadership and strangled it for fear of losing their privileged position, and that the subsequent concession — or, more correctly, the receiving from the British ruling class is only the usual traitor’s reward after he has done his service. The plan of the Constitution still remains to draw the Indian bourgeoisie into collaboration with a few minor bribes. But the bribes and concessions have been steadily whittled down to minute proportions; the open coercive network of coercive “Safeguards” reveals in every line the overmastering fear of the Indian Revolution.

The remaining “Safeguards” cover the privileged financial and economic interests of British imperialism in India. Thus, as the Centre, after the reservation of Defence and Foreign Affairs, and the practical reservation of the Police and Local Government, has remained now to the whole new Constitution, the Railway and Trade Finance is, however, covered by the independence of the Central Reserve Bank under British control, together with the Governor-General’s over-riding powers on behalf of “financial stability and credit”; Trade is not only similarly covered by these provisions, but also by the special provisions against discriminatory tariffs or any discriminatory economic measures against British interests; the Railways are to be under an independent railways Board on “business” lines. Exhaustive examination would thus suggest that the Indian Ministers will be finally left with the honourable duty of conducting the Post Office.

Naturally this munificence will not satisfy the demands of the Indian bourgeoisie, who are already in full outcry over the new Constitution. It is evident, however, that the British ruling class, after the experience of the Congress leadership and capitulation in the past struggle, has formed its opinion of the practical value of the Indian bourgeoisie, and aban-
s of the following lessons:

First, that the revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ movement is the real force of the future in India, and that with this British imperialism can hope for no compromise, but can only rely on armed force.

Second, that the Indian bourgeoisie, represented by the National Congress, is becoming increasingly powerless to control the mass struggle, and is compelled to turn to the provincial Finance and the provincial governments (this was the significance of the unconditional constitution of the Congress to the government in the Spring of this year, and the legalising of the Congress upon these terms).

Third, that a new leadership of the mass struggle, to replace the bourgeoisie, is developing in the rising Communist leadership, and that this becomes henceforth the main enemy of British imperialism (this was the significance of the Meerut trial, recognising the emergence of the new leadership; it is the significance of the simultaneous legalising of the National Congress and declaring illegal of the Communist Party).

Fourth, that the Indian bourgeoisie, while compelled to unite with British imperialism against the masses in every moment of danger, remains, on the basis of its particular economic interests, irreconcilably hostile to the privileged position of Indian imperialism, and that in 1929 it turned with a warm and untrustworthy ally. Hence, British imperialism, while utilising this ally for what it is worth, is compelled at the same time to build heavily on the social basis of the feudal reaction (drawing in of the Princes into the Constitution), and to emphasise strongly the open coercive aspect of its power.

This situation governs the character of the new Constitution. The new Constitution represents the attempt to establish a cast-
iron framework of British dictatorship, buttressed by the feudal reaction and by docile bourgeois elements, against the developing Indian mass-revolution.

For this reason the most prominent feature of the new Constitution is the bristling array of Safeguards, Special Powers, Special Responsibilities, Emergency Powers, etc. (to such an extent that even the semi-official “Times of India” protests that “Many safeguards overlooked”).

In the name of the fight against “terrorism” (the convenient label used to cover the entire revolutionary movement), every weapon of governmental terror is put into the hands of the British Executive, and removed from any pretence of constitutional forms, not once, but many times over. Now it is a question of over-
riding powers in the event of any “grave menace to peace and tranquillity.” Now it is a question of the autocratic independence of the police, of the judiciary, of the State services, and, above all, of the Political Police. Now it is a question of the powers of a Governor “for the purpose of combating terrorism to take under his own control any branch of government.” Now it is a question of the power of the Governors, in the event of “breakdown” of the Constitution, “to take over as much or as little of the adminis-
tration as seems necessary.” Now it is a question of the power of the Governors “in emergencies . . . to issue Ordinances having the force of law, valid for six months, but renewable for a further six months.”

Such heavy over-insurance might seem superfluous, especially as the extreme limitation of the sham “representative” institutions, the restriction of the electorate to 14 per cent. of the population, the over-weighting of the assemblies with official nominees, landlords, representatives of industry, etc., upper houses, indirect election for the central assembly, communal division, and all the rest of it, might seem to have insured docility. But such heavy over-insurance suggests a fragile ship. The frantic network of coercive “Safeguards” reveals in every line the overmastering fear of the Indian Revolution.

The remaining “Safeguards” cover the privileged financial and economic interests of British imperialism in India. The resultant sphere for the puppet Indian Ministers is small indeed. Thus at the Centre, after the reservation of Defence and Foreign Affairs, and the practical reservation of the Police and Local Government, has remained now to the whole new Constitution, the Railway and Trade Finance is, however, covered by the independence of the Central Reserve Bank under British control, together with the Governor-General’s over-riding powers on behalf of “financial stability and credit”; Trade is not only similarly covered by these provisions, but also by the special provisions against discriminatory tariffs or any discriminatory economic measures against British interests; the Railways are to be under an independent railways Board on “business” lines. Exhaustive examination would thus suggest that the Indian Ministers will be finally left with the honourable duty of conducting the Post Office.

Naturally this munificence will not satisfy the demands of the Indian bourgeoisie, who are already in full outcry over the new Constitution. It is evident, however, that the British ruling class, after the experience of the Congress leadership and capitulation in the past struggle, has formed its opinion of the practical value of the Indian bourgeoisie, and aban-
ons of the following lessons:

First, that the revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ movement is the real force of the future in India, and that with this British imperialism can hope for no compromise, but can only rely on armed force.

Second, that the Indian bourgeoisie, represented by the National Congress, is becoming increasingly powerless to control the mass struggle, and is compelled to turn to the provincial Finance and the provincial governments (this was the significance of the unconditional constitution of the Congress to the government in the Spring of this year, and the legalising of the Congress upon these terms).

Third, that a new leadership of the mass struggle, to replace the bourgeoisie, is developing in the rising Communist leadership, and that this becomes henceforth the main enemy of British imperialism (this was the significance of the Meerut trial, recognising the emergence of the new leadership; it is the significance of the simultaneous legalising of the National Congress and declaring illegal of the Communist Party).

Fourth, that the Indian bourgeoisie, while compelled to unite with British imperialism against the masses in every moment of danger, remains, on the basis of its particular economic interests, irreconcilably hostile to the privileged position of Indian imperialism, and that in 1929 it turned with a warm and untrustworthy ally. Hence, British imperialism, while utilising this ally for what it is worth, is compelled at the same time to build heavily on the social basis of the feudal reaction (drawing in of the Princes into the Constitution), and to emphasise strongly the open coercive aspect of its power.

This situation governs the character of the new Constitution. The new Constitution represents the attempt to establish a cast-
iron frame of British dictatorship, buttressed by the feudal reaction and by docile bourgeois elements, against the developing Indian mass-revolution.

For this reason the most prominent feature of the new Constitution is the bristling array of Safeguards, Special Powers, Special Responsibilities, Emergency Powers, etc. (to such an extent that even the semi-official “Times of India” protests that “Many safeguards overlooked”).

In the name of the fight against “terrorism” (the convenient label used to cover the entire revolutionary movement), every weapon of governmental terror is put into the hands of the British Executive, and removed from any pretence of constitutional forms, not once, but many times over. Now it is a question of over-
riding powers in the event of any “grave menace to peace and tranquillity.” Now it is a question of the autocratic independence of the police, of the judiciary, of the State services, and, above all, of the Political Police. Now it is a question of the powers of a Governor “for the purpose of combating terrorism to take under his own control any branch of government.” Now it is a question of the power of the Governors, in the event of “breakdown” of the Constitution, “to take over as much or as little of the adminis-
tration as seems necessary.” Now it is a question of the power of the Governors “in emergencies . . . to issue Ordinances having the force of law, valid for six months, but renewable for a further six months.”

Such heavy over-insurance might seem superfluous, especially as the extreme limitation of the sham “representative” institutions, the restriction of the electorate to 14 per cent. of the population, the over-weighting of the assemblies with official nominees, landlords, representatives of industry, etc., upper houses, indirect
Nations of the accusations brought against Hungary is to be prevented in order that France and Italy shall be able to carry on their bargains undisturbed? No! things shall not be so convenient for their leaders as they would like to have it! Hungary shall draw Italy along with it! Hungary addressed a note to the General Secretary of the League, requesting that the accusations brought by Yugo-
slavia should be dealt with by the Council without delay. And, lo!
two days after the Italian government, through its press, had welcomed a discussion at Geneva, it suddenly discovers that the complaint contained grave charges against Hungary, from which it escaped immediate consequences only by the poisonous suggestion to support Hungary. It should be pointed out, by the way, that this is a cheap jest on the part of Italy, as Mussolini has calculated beforehand that the majority of the League of Nations will be in favour of postponing the discussion of the Yugoslav note, or, failing that, will so arrange matters that Italy is kept out of the affair.

The game of diplomatic hide and seek must not cause us to forget for one moment that a very serious game is being played here. The declaration of the representatives of Hungary that the complaint brought by Yugoslavia is directed, not against individual crimes, but against the general line of Magyar foreign policy, against revisionism, is true to a certain extent. We say to a certain extent, for revisionism is the general line, not only of Hungarian foreign policy, but, perhaps, in the first place also of its home policy. And this in a double sense. A policy of ruthless oppression of the foreign and home minorities, a policy of cementing the property of the nation in the hands of a few, a policy of financial monopoly, finance and agrarian capital; enormous sums in the shape of taxes are squeezed out of poor and those least able to pay, and employed exclusively for the purpose of maintaining a band of parasitic officers, brutal judges and bureaucrats. If the peasants are experiencing bad times—the Treaty of Trianon is responsible; if the unemployed receive no relief—dismembered Hungary has to maintain the former officials employed under the Hungarian regime and there is no money for the workers; the heavy expenditure on the army, on armaments—Trianon, of course, is responsible. In no other country does the ruling upper class lead such a life of luxury and opulence, with hunting, grand dinners, etc., as in Hungary. "We are a civilised country," declared Horthy, the other day to the troops, which were paraded before him in full-
dress.

Can the present rulers of Hungary really think of a revision of the Trianon Treaty in the event of the former inhabitants of the country being given the free choice of union with present-day Hungary? Not a single Slovak, not a single Rumanian, not a single Serb, not a single Ukrainian—the majority of the inhabi-

The "Corriera della Sera," of November 23—welcomed the Yugoslav note. The "Corriera della Sera" declared that the question was of real international importance and deserved serious consideration, and proposed that it should be dealt with in January. Why not? Yugoslavia's attitude offered Italian fascism, which cynically refuses to extradite Kvatnick and Pavelich, the best opportunity to proceed against the emigrants, "fusseruli." The "Corriera della Sera" said: "The hospitality which is granted to suspicious elements, the systematic acquittal of murderers or the imposing of ridiculously light sentences on them, have created a favourable atmosphere for political crimes which result in damage to Italian authorities, from the highest to the lowest." Thus a campaign of international incitement is to be launched against Italy. Of course, it is easy to derive, not only foreign political, but also home political advantage from sheltering and encouraging foreign terrorists.

But Hungary also had a word to say. The heroes of the dismembered Magyar empire remembered one of their glorious historical legends, how during the attack on Belgrade the monk Capistran wished to prevent the heathen flag from being hoisted and as he did not succeed in this, dragged the flag bearer down with him into the abyss. Why the discussion by the League of Nations?