

Britain and Empire

IN a famous statement Mr. Churchill declared during the war that he had no intention of being Prime Minister of Britain in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. He was right. He is not Prime Minister of Britain. This does not mean, however, that the liquidation of the British Empire is already taking place. Neither the paeans nor the laments over its supposed demise are yet justified. But both the British people and the peoples of the Empire are coming to realise with increasing clearness that the old relations must end and that a new relation of free peoples must take its place.

Two Conferences

This month two Conferences will be discussing the new problems of Britain and the post-war world. The first is the Communist Party Congress, which will have to consider all the manifold questions of home and foreign policy arising in the second year of the Labour Government. The second is the Empire Conference of Communist Parties—a new venture which will bring together for the first time accredited delegates from the growing Communist movement in all parts of the British Empire. At this Conference representatives from the Communist Parties in the Empire, from the Dominions, from India and Ceylon and Burma, from Malaya and Hong Kong, from Cyprus and the Middle East, from Africa and outlying regions will be able to meet in common with the representatives from Britain to exchange experiences and discuss common problems. This is a significant new development of the modern world situation. Previously there have been Commonwealth Labour Conferences: but these have been in the main confined to representatives of the privileged sections of the white workers. Here for the first time the representatives of the vanguard of the working masses of the five hundred millions of the Empire, without distinction of colour, race or nation, will be able to proclaim to the world from the heart of the Empire, in London, the aims and the needs of their peoples, their views of the policies that are being pursued, their demands and their struggle. It is appropriate that this wider Conference should follow immediately on the Communist Party Congress. For the problems before both Conferences are closely related. Socialism has long taught the unity of interests of the British people and the peoples of the Empire in the common struggle for liberation. Events today are proving the truth of this in a hundred forms.

From the Old to the New

Alike for Britain and for the peoples of the Empire a new situation has arisen since the war, the defeat of fascism and the advance of the liberation movement over the world. The old basis of British imperialism, of world domination, colonial monopoly and overseas

tribute, which has for so long held one quarter of the human race in its grip and governed the social and political structure in Britain, is breaking down. It will not work any longer. Both economically and politically, and also in a military sense, it is proving bankrupt. All the desperate attempts to shore up the old basis in a new dress can neither reverse the changed relations of world power nor stem the tide of popular advance. The peoples of the Empire press forward to freedom and are not content with shams. The British people, more alert than the representatives of the old ruling class, are also seeking new paths. More and more clearly the inescapable choice opens out before them. Either to cling to the old crumbling basis and go down into the depths with world reaction, squandering man-power and resources to defend the indefensible, unequally yoked to the Wall Street moneylenders, and sinking into an economic slough, financial dependence and eventual war. Or to strike forward along the path of basic social and political reconstruction and establish a new non-imperialist basis in the world in unity with the advancing progressive peoples. This is the essential choice underlying all the problems and controversies which are now agitating public opinion and the labour movement.

Man-power and Empire

There is not a single problem of British reconstruction today, of British home and foreign policy, which is not inseparably linked up with this question of Empire, that is, with this necessity of advance to a non-imperialist basis. Take the question of man-power. There is a crucial shortage of man-power. The Cabinet is issuing a White Paper on this shortage and on the urgent need of half a million additional workers in the key industries. Proposals are put forward that the only solution is to be found in the importation of half a million foreign workers into Britain. The solution is sought to be found in the settlement of Polish fascists in Britain or in the retention of German prisoners of war. *The Times* writes in an editorial on January 17:—

The case for a selective immigration of up to 500,000 foreign workers during the next few years is exceedingly strong, and it is regrettable that neither the Government nor the labour movement appear to have given much thought to it.

Yet where is Britain's man-power? What is the main cause of the shortage? Every one knows the answer. The latest return, for November, shows 1,510,000 in the armed forces, and 474,000 engaged on making equipment and supplies for the armed forces: a total of close on two millions or one-tenth of the available man-power, and a multiplication of the armed forces more than threefold on the pre-war figure of 480,000. Yet, when the question is raised why demobilisation has been slowed down, and why these enormous numbers are necessary, Mr. Attlee in reply points, not merely to the needs of defence or obligations under the United Nations and in ex-enemy

countries, but to imperialist commitments in the Near East or the Far East. If all armed forces were brought home, except for enemy countries, and the level of armed forces brought down, it should be possible to release one million men. How can the crucial question of man-power be discussed without relation to the problem of the Empire?

Balance of Payments Dilemma

Or take the key dilemma of Britain's present economic situation—the deficit on the balance of payments. Britain is at present not paying its way, and is dependent on the American and Canadian loans, which at the present rate will soon be exhausted. The estimated deficit for 1946 was £400 million. But what is the main cause of this gigantic deficit? Before the war there was already a deficit averaging nearly £50 million; this already indicated the decline of the old imperialist basis and the need of radical reconstruction of British economy. Estimates for 1946 indicate that the normal balance of payments, apart from special government expenditure, would show, despite the shrinkage of foreign investment income, a roughly similar deficit of £50 million (excess of imports about £330 million, against estimated overseas income from investments, shipping, etc., of about £280 million). But this is inflated to a deficit of some £400 million, because of £350 million overseas Government expenditure, of which £300 million is overseas military expenditure (Dalton's statement in February, 1946). At present this deficit is paid for by the American and Canadian loans, of which £250 million have been used in six months. At this rate they will be exhausted by the end of 1948. And then? Present policy offers only two alternatives. Either a yet more desperate drive to force up exports, starving home needs, limiting or cutting down the workers' earnings, in an impoverished world market at the very moment when the most ferocious American export drive, consequent on the expected sharpening of the American economic situation by 1948, will be under way. Or renewed recourse to the American moneylender to beg for more credits under harsher terms of enslavement. Is it not time to tackle this problem at the root—the deficit caused by an imperialist foreign policy which is distorting British economy, crippling home reconstruction and leading to bankruptcy? Once again the basic problems of British reconstruction, of the British economic situation, cannot be tackled without reference to the problem of the Empire.

Foreign Policy Controversy

Or consider the present acute controversy on British foreign policy. There is strong criticism, and justified criticism, of the increasingly close line-up of British policy in a political, diplomatic and military bloc with American monopolist reaction against all the progressive forces of the world, against the new democracies in Europe, against the Socialist Soviet Union and against the colonial

peoples. Official innocence of course replies that there is no such bloc, and that it is only a mare's nest of malevolent critics; that the open calculations of every fascist and pro-fascist and reactionary group in the world staking their hopes on such an Anglo-American bloc and a third world war only reveals a similar state of illusion; that Mr. Churchill's Fulton speech was only an academic exercise in favour of Anglo-American friendship and committed no one, and therefore requires no repudiation; that the Anglo-American arms agreement is only a practical arrangement of convenience; that the sending of parallel Anglo-American notes of protest at regular intervals to every advanced democracy in Europe only expresses the spiritual identity of Anglo-Saxon ideals; that the Anglo-American monopoly of the atom bomb is an obvious precaution in the interests of world peace; and that the extension of Anglo-American military, naval and air bases over every corner of the world is a powerful contribution to world security. Official humbug solemnly adds that British policy is to line up with no one, neither with the United States nor with the Soviet Union, but faithfully and single-mindedly to support the United Nations as its anchor, salvation and guiding star.

Anglo-American Bloc

Incidentally, official humbug trips up in its excessive protestations at this point by coolly ignoring the existence of the Anglo-Soviet Alliance, and subsequently gets tied into knots in explaining away the slip. But the practical position is only the more revealingly illustrated by the slip. There exists on paper an Anglo-Soviet Alliance, which is at present completely ignored in practice. There exists on paper, at any rate in public, no Anglo-American alliance; but it is completely carried out in practice. The controversy raised by the critics of present British foreign policy is wilfully misrepresented when it is presented as if it were a conflict between two schools of thought, one advocating an alliance with America, and the other an alliance with the Soviet Union. It is obvious that a serious democratic foreign policy, as the critics have made abundantly clear, must be based on the triple partnership of Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States fulfilling their joint responsibility—in accordance with Teheran, Crimea and the Charter—of co-operative leadership of the United Nations for peace and the prevention of aggression, for disarmament, for the suppression of fascism, and for the independence of nations. The charge against the actions of the Anglo-American representatives since Potsdam is precisely that they have broken away from their obligations and repeatedly and in a concerted manner offended against the principles of the Charter and tripartite co-operation by their "anti-veto" campaign and denunciation of "Big Three dictatorship"; by their exclusive arms pacts and strategic manoeuvres; by their blocking of disarmament proposals and piling up of atom bombs; by their sabotage of the Trusteeship

provisions; by their protection of fascism in Spain and Greece, rebuilding of monopolist reaction in Germany and assistance to reactionary pro-fascist elements in Eastern Europe; and by their overrunning of countries all over the world and establishment of bases. It is this practical policy of an Anglo-American imperialist bloc which makes nonsense of occasional declarations of abstract devotion to the principles of the United Nations; which arouses the resentment of democratic representatives and the applause of reaction all over the world; which weakens and endangers the United Nations and plays into the hands of war intrigues; and which constantly places Britain, despite the progressive anti-Tory majority in Parliament, on the wrong side in the great international issues of our day, so that Britain's foreign policy wins praise from Churchill and the Tory benches and silence from the Labour benches.

Co-operation and Conflict

But what underlies this Anglo-American bloc? Why does Britain line up in this way with American imperialist reaction, despite the sharp conflict of economic interests, and despite the contrast between the anti-Tory Parliament and the Republican Congress and American suspicion of British "socialistic experiments?" It might have been thought that there was an obvious identity of British popular interests with the progressive democratic countries which have working-class socialist-communist majorities and are building planned economies, and with the Socialist Soviet Union, as the best alignment to hold in check the aggressive designs of American reaction, counter the threatening American slump, and maintain democratic co-operation through the United Nations. What is the countervailing factor which makes a supposed community of interests between Labour Britain and the Republican Diehards of Wall Street? The reason is not to be sought wholly in adoration of the nobility of the American character as depicted by the Hollywood film magnates. It is not sufficiently explained by the remarkable similarities of the two languages. It is not even wholly to be sought in the identity of spiritual ideals between the colour bar policies of a Smuts and of a Byrnes, although here we may be coming closer to the trail. The decisive reason lies in more practical considerations. Britain and the United States represent the two main imperialist Powers of the post-war world. This does not mean that their interests are identical. On the contrary, there is sharp conflict between the aggressive and expanding American imperialism and the weakening and declining British imperialism. But they maintain in practice a common front against the advancing tide which threatens to engulf all imperialist interests. The common factor is imperialism. But this co-operation conceals a curious relationship of simultaneous conflict and dependence.

Deadweight of Empire

Britain must line up with America, as the franker defenders of the policy declare in off-the-record talks, because Britain is depen-

dent on America. Britain is declared to be dependent on America economically and strategically. But we have already seen that the main reason for the economic dependence lies in the crushing weight of imperialist commitments. This situation is still clearer in the strategic sphere. The United States has now succeeded to command of the seas. The United States holds both air and naval superiority. This means that the maintenance of the British Empire is strategically dependent on the United States. Here we come to the real crux of the policy. The British imperialists know that their only hope to maintain the empire in post-war conditions lies in complete strategic co-operation with American imperialism. They understand very well the dilemma that the expansionist designs of American imperialism, however much the publicity hue-and-cry may be most noisily directed along anti-Soviet and anti-communist channels, are in cold hard practice directed not least against the British Empire. But they still hope to survive the embrace and maintain their position as, at any rate, junior partners of the more powerful American imperialism. This situation of enforced co-operation concealing conflict, of an unequal marriage of rivals, received illuminating expression in Churchill's statement, in one of his encounters with Roosevelt during the Atlantic Charter meeting, as reported by Elliott Roosevelt:—

Mr. President, I believe you are trying to do away with the British Empire. Every idea you entertain about the structure of the post-war world demonstrates it. But in spite of that, in spite of that we know that you constitute our only hope. And *you* know that *we* know it. *You* know that *we* know that without America the Empire won't stand.

The deadweight of the ever more desperate effort to maintain the Empire still ties Britain to American reaction, despite the defeat of Churchill and Toryism at the polls, and in direct contradiction to the social and political interests of the British people in their aim to advance towards socialism.

Four Wars

At this moment, at the opening of 1947, four wars are in progress in different parts of the world—in China, in Indo-China, in Greece and in Palestine. There is also still latent war in Indonesia, for which, under cover of the truce, Dutch troops are being trained and equipped in Britain. These wars might be thought of concern to the United Nations. In practice, the United Nations is powerless to act, since four of the five leading Powers of the United Nations are engaged in these wars. All the Permanent Powers of the Security Council except the Soviet Union are engaged in one or other of these wars. The United States and Chiang Kai Shek are jointly engaged in the war on Chinese democracy. France under its present leadership, despite the protest of the Communist Party, is engaged in Indo-China in warfare against Viet-Nam. Britain is engaged in Greece and in Palestine. What is to be done about this situation? Does it mean that the United Nations must be written off as a failure, and that, as the

legalists argue, there is a fatal flaw in the Charter, since it is at present unable to prevent colonial wars and military expeditions by imperialist Great Powers? The legalist conclusion is worse than useless, and turns the real issue upside down. The Charter was not established in order to turn minor wars into major wars between the Powers. The Charter was established in order to provide means of democratic co-operation which could eliminate both minor wars and major wars. The effectiveness of the Charter depends above all upon the victory of the democratic progressive forces within each country, and especially in the key countries, the Great Powers. It is here that we hold a special responsibility in Britain; and Britain's role can play a very great part in the success of the United Nations. The fight for world peace is bound up with the fight against the colonial system, that tap-root of modern wars. The success of the United Nations requires the partnership of free and equal nations. Our concern must be that Britain is aligned with the democratic progressive forces of the world which are striving for these aims, which work to strengthen and not to disrupt the United Nations. But for this we must put our own house in order. We must end military intervention in other countries and domination of the peoples of the Empire, as well as end the exclusive arms arrangements with American reaction.

Does the Empire Exist?

Today there is widespread and growing recognition in democratic opinion in this country that it is necessary to end with the old basis of imperialism and to recognise the right to national freedom of the peoples who have been held subject in the Empire. The old type of jingo expression is confined to a narrowing majority and is not viewed with official favour. The general principle of the right of national freedom is widely conceded as a principle, at any rate in the case of those peoples whose degree of political advancement, organisation and active national struggle has compelled the issue to be faced. It is no longer the general principle that is the main point of conflict, but the practice. Today the claim is made by Government spokesmen, and widely echoed in official propaganda, both in the Labour and Tory press, that the break with imperialism has already taken place, and that complete freedom has already been granted to the leading peoples of the empire on the basis of the various constitutional plans which have been drawn up in the recent period or which are being prepared or negotiated. Have we not offered independence to India, to Egypt, to Burma? Has not America granted independence to the Philippines? The charge of imperialism is declared to be obsolete; it no longer exists. A gigantic press and publicity campaign has been organised to reinforce this picture. Nor has this campaign been without success. Despite apparently obvious material, tangible and ocular evidence of continued color ordinances, police arrests, police firing, military occupied garrisons, the belief has almost been created among wide

democratically minded people that the Empire no longer really exists.

“Obsolete Labels”

Mr. Morrison, after declaring in New York in January of last year that “we are great friends of the jolly old Empire and are going to stick to it,” proclaimed in September (*Observer*, September 29, 1946) that Britain

need not be unduly concerned if people seek to attach to us obsolete labels such as “imperialism” and “capitalism.”

The *Daily Herald*, answering criticisms by Henry Wallace of British imperialism, replied (September 14, 1946):—

Now we would like to ask Mr. Wallace a few straight questions. Perhaps he would be good enough to answer.

First, where does he find the evidence of this British imperialist policy? Does he find it in India? If so, how does he explain the fact that, following the visit of the British Cabinet Mission, Jawaharlal Nehru has become Prime Minister of India and that country is free if it wishes to pursue its own independent future? . . . Since the end of the war Britain has abandoned any imperialist claims on India; she has sought a new treaty on an equal basis with a sovereign Egypt; she has approved plans for political advance in a dozen colonial territories.

If this is an “imperialist” policy, then words have no meaning.

To judge from his subsequent utterances, it is to be feared that Henry Wallace has remained unconvinced.

Myths to Save the Empire

Unfortunately, this belief that imperialism belongs to the past and that freedom has already been granted to India and other subject peoples is a dangerous illusion. The elaborate press and publicity campaign organised to put over this belief is a bluff which conceals the real facts of the situation. Only gradually the suspicion that something is wrong begins to break through for the general public, as the grandly publicised independence offers give place to protracted deadlocks and crises, compelling ceaselessly renewed interventions, awards and vetos and continued military occupation. Even then the blame is assiduously laid on the colonial peoples themselves for their impossible behaviour and divisions, defeating the benevolent intentions of their rulers and compelling them reluctantly to delay the gift of freedom. This illusion that independence has already been conceded, and that the only remaining barrier arises from the colonial peoples themselves, becomes today one of the main obstacles to real liberation, because it lulls the democratic movement in Britain and encourages the view that nothing more needs to be done on this side, at the very moment when the actual situation is most serious and requires the most urgent response on our part. Hence it is essential for all serious opponents of imperialism and supporters of national freedom to look behind the labels and judge correctly the real situation.

New Imperialist Technique

It is true that important changes are taking place. But in what direction? It is true that, in face of the worldwide colonial revolt after the war, which is too widespread to admit of any easy suppression by force alone, imperialist policy is trying out new constitutional forms and seeking new forms of political settlement. But these new forms of political settlement by no means take the character of straightforward military withdrawal and transfer of power. Instead, they take the character of complex constitutional settlements, which play on divisions, disrupt the national movements and seek to win over the privileged upper-class elements to co-operation under cover of treaties protecting imperialist strategic interests. The technique of offering a spurious and controlled "independence" is in reality not so new as is sometimes suggested. It was already familiar from the example of Egypt a quarter of a century ago. It was repeated subsequently for Iraq and more recently for Transjordan. America has followed the same method for the Philippines. None of these States is really independent. In all of them the economic and military domination of imperialism is in practice continued under cover of constitutions maintaining the most reactionary, anti-popular and unrepresentative elements in official leading positions. Hence it is not enough to applaud the label of "independence." It is necessary to examine the contents behind the label.

From Egypt to Burma

Egypt has been an "independent" "sovereign" State for twenty-five years; but the conditions for the withdrawal of British troops have not yet been agreed. The negotiations even with the reactionary and unrepresentative Court clique in office have at the moment ended in deadlock precisely because the offer of withdrawal has been made conditional on acceptance of a treaty which would, in fact, continue military overlordship and control of the Sudan. The constitutional plan for India—roundly condemned by every Indian political organisation—is elaborately designed to build up an alliance with the privileged upper-class interests, the Princes, the nawabs at the head of the Moslem League and the big industrialists dominating the Congress machine against the Indian masses, in a complex constitutional structure prolific of deadlocks and ensuring continued British control in practice. The London Conference with Indian leaders in December revealed the subordination of the "Constituent Assembly" to British overriding authority, just as the parliamentary debate revealed from the mouths of Ministers that the plan in no respect departed from the lines already laid down under the Tory Secretary of State, Amery. It was symptomatic that on the same day as the police swooped down on the Indian Communist Party, the announcement was made from New Delhi that an arrangement had been reached for a British company to extract an export from India to Britain monazite and thorium, raw mate-

for the production of atomic energy. The present negotiations with a Burmese delegation have only been opened after the attempt to reimpose the old colonial subjection had failed in face of popular revolt; and even these negotiations have only been opened after the splitting of the Burmese national movement by the separation of the older reactionary politicians and a section of the leadership of the Freedom League from the decisive popular forces, the Communists, trade unions and peasant associations which had built up the liberation movement. Above all, throughout these complex negotiations, military occupation—the essential test of foreign domination—has been maintained and even strengthened. And it is here where the requirements of imperialist policy come most vividly and directly in conflict with the requirements of British reconstruction and popular advance at home.

Raids on Indian Communists

The crisis in all the colonial countries is growing. From Burma it is reported that a popular “parallel Government, collecting taxes from the people and maintaining their own police force and courts of law” controls an area of 5,000 square miles (*Times*, January 15, 1947). Most serious recent evidence of the growing crisis in India is the concerted police raids on the headquarters and press of the Indian Communist Party and the homes of its leaders, as well as, according to reports, on trade union, peasant and student organisations in eight principal centres. The alleged pretext for this offensive, supposed to be based on articles published six months ago giving extracts from official documents revealing military preparations for the suppression of an Indian national revolt in the event of failure of the Cabinet Mission negotiations, cannot be regarded as adequate explanation for the attack at this juncture. These documents have been widely republished in the Indian press. *The Times* correspondent openly stated that the real reasons were to be found in the development of the political situation since the formation of the Interim Government in September, and the growth of mass struggles under the leadership of the Communist Party “culminating in last week’s serious trouble among Cawnpore millworkers. Clearly some action was due if the rot was to be stopped” (*Times*, January 15, 1947). It is significant that Indian Ministers have denied responsibility for the police action. Whatever the role of Indian Ministers, who are in practice no more than an impotent screen for British power, it is clear that we have here a direct assault by the overriding imperialist authorities against the Indian working-class movement, against the vanguard of the Indian fight for freedom, and against that party which most resolutely opposes all communal divisions and stands for the unity of the Indian masses. It is intolerable that such action should be taken in the name of the working-class movement of this country. We remember the Cawnpore trial against Dange and the other leaders of the Indian Communist Party during the first Labour

Government. We remember the Meerut trial against Indian Communism and trade unionism under the second Labour Government. We do not want to see this record repeated today.

Price of Empire

A situation is developing when it has become urgently necessary that the labour movement in this country should reconsider the present policy which is being pursued in relation to the Empire. Is it in the interests of the people of this country to spend their resources and man-power in holding other countries subject? Time was when the prophets of Empire preached that it brought rich dividends, not only to the bondholders and colonial bureaucracy, but also to the workers of the ruling country, enjoying a higher standard of living and social services unknown to the poverty-stricken and disease-ridden colonial peoples. Already in the years before the war Lancashire and the derelict areas could make some comment on this text. Today the boot is on the other foot; or rather, the jackboot is beginning to pinch the foot that wears it. With the armed services over three times pre-war and draining one-tenth of the national income; with the command of the seas lost; and with an impoverished and debt-ridden economy, the ever more desperate effort still to maintain imperialist domination and commitments over the four quarters of the globe is crippling reconstruction, bleeding man-power, dissipating resources, and bringing the danger to Britain of becoming a financial colony and tied and subsidised dependency of the United States. It is time to change the course and follow a different path.

Socialism and Empire

The time has come when the great issue has to be faced. Britain must either break with imperialism or go under. The ending of foreign domination and military interventionist adventures is not only vital in the interests of world democracy and of the colonial peoples struggling for freedom. It is equally the vital interest of the British people if they are to be free to solve their problems at home and advance to socialism. Socialism and empire are irreconcilable contradictions. If we choose empire, we renounce socialism. More than that. Should the present course be pursued to its conclusion, we would not only be renouncing socialism; we would be signing our economic, political and military ruin. It is time to choose the alternative path, when the British people, in liberating the peoples of the Empire, will also liberate themselves. This is no longer wisdom of an ultimate future. It has become the urgent practical politics of the present. The troops must be brought home. We must use our resources for the tasks of reconstruction at home. Let us cut the losses of an outworn, criminal and bankrupt system of Empire, and build instead a new Britain as a free and equal partner of the free peoples of the world.

January 19, 1947.

R. P. T