



Indian Round Table Conference

7th September—1st December 1931

Statement made by the Prime Minister to the
Conference at the conclusion of its Second
Session on 1st December 1931

*Presented by the Secretary of
State for India to Parliament
by Command of His Majesty,
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INDIAN ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE, 7th September—1st December 1931.

Statement made by the Prime Minister to the Conference at the close of its Second Session, 1st December 1931.

1. We have now had two sessions of the Round Table Conference, and the time has come to survey the important work which has been done, first of all, in setting out the problems which in the task of Indian constitution-building we have to surmount, and then in trying to find how to surmount them. The reports presented to us now bring our co-operation to the end of another stage, and we must pause and study what has been done and the obstacles which we have encountered, and the best ways and means of bringing our work to a successful end as rapidly as possible. I regard our discussions and our personal contacts here as of the highest value, and make bold to say that they have raised the problem of Indian constitutional reform far above the mere technicalities of constitution-making; for we have won that confidence in, and respect for, each other which has made the task one of helpful political co-operation. That, I am confident, will continue to the end. By co-operation alone can we succeed.

2. At the beginning of the year I made a declaration of the policy of the then Government, and I am authorised by the present one to give you and India a specific assurance that it remains their policy. I shall repeat the salient sentences of that declaration:—

“The view of His Majesty’s Government is that responsibility for the government of India should be placed upon Legislatures, Central and Provincial, with such provisions as may be necessary to guarantee, during a period of transition, the observance of certain obligations and to meet other special circumstances, and also with such guarantees as are required by minorities to protect their political liberties and rights.

“In such statutory safeguards as may be made for meeting the needs of the transitional period, it will be a primary concern of His Majesty’s Government to see that the reserved powers are so framed and exercised as not to prejudice the advance of India through the new constitution to full responsibility for her own government.”

3. With regard to the Central Government, I made it plain that, subject to defined conditions, His Majesty’s late Government were prepared to recognise the principle of the responsibility

of the Executive to the Legislature, if both were constituted on an all-India federal basis. The principle of responsibility was to be subject to the qualification that, in existing circumstances, Defence and External Affairs must be reserved to the Governor-General, and that, in regard to finance such conditions must apply as would ensure the fulfilment of the obligations incurred under the authority of the Secretary of State, and the maintenance unimpaired of the financial stability and credit of India.

4. Finally, it was our view that the Governor-General must be granted the necessary powers to enable him to fulfil his responsibility for securing the observance of the constitutional rights of Minorities, and for ultimately maintaining the tranquillity of the State.

5. These were, in broad outline, the features of the new constitution for India as contemplated by His Majesty's Government at the end of the last Conference.

6. As I say, my colleagues in His Majesty's present Government fully accept that statement of January last as representing their own policy. In particular, they desire to reaffirm their belief in an all-India Federation as offering the only hopeful solution of India's constitutional problem. They intend to pursue this plan unswervingly and to do their utmost to surmount the difficulties which now stand in the way of its realisation. In order to give this declaration the fullest authority, the statement which I am now making to you will be circulated to-day as a White Paper to both Houses of Parliament, and the Government will ask Parliament to approve it this week.

7. The discussions which have been proceeding during the past two months have been of value in showing us more precisely the problems we have to solve, and have advanced us towards the solution of some of them. But they have also made it plain that others still require further examination and co-operative consideration. There is still difference of opinion, for instance, as to the composition and powers of the Federal Legislature, and I regret that owing to the absence of a settlement of the key question of how to safeguard the Minorities under a responsible Central Government, the Conference has been unable to discuss effectively the nature of the Federal Executive and its relationship with the Legislature. Again, it has not yet been possible for the States to settle amongst themselves their place in the Federation and their mutual relationships within it. Our common purpose will not be advanced by ignoring these facts, nor by assuming that the difficulties they present will somehow solve themselves. Further thought, discussion and reconciliation of different interests and

points of view are still required before we can translate broad general aims into the detailed machinery of a workable constitution. I am not saying this to indicate impossibility, nor to foreshadow any pause in our work. I only wish to remind you that we have put our hands to a task which demands alike from His Majesty's Government and from the leaders of Indian opinion care, courage and time, lest when the work is done it may bring confusion and disappointment, and instead of opening the way to political progress may effectively bar it. We must build like good craftsmen, well and truly; our duty to India demands that from all of us.

8. What then is the general position in which we find ourselves as regards a practical programme for the advancement of our common aims? I want no more general declarations which carry us no further in our work. The declarations already made and repeated to-day are enough to give confidence in the purpose of the Government and to provide work for the Committees to which I shall refer. I want to keep to business. The great idea of All-India Federation still holds the field. The principle of a responsible Federal Government, subject to certain reservations and safeguards through a transition period, remains unchanged. And we are all agreed that the Governors' Provinces of the future are to be responsibly governed units, enjoying the greatest possible measure of freedom from outside interference and dictation in carrying out their own policies in their own sphere.

9. I should explain at once in connection with that last point that we contemplate as one feature of the new order that the North-West Frontier Province should be constituted a Governor's Province, of the same status as other Governors' Provinces, but with due regard to the necessary requirements of the Frontier, and that, as in all other Governors' Provinces, the powers entrusted to the Governor to safeguard the safety and tranquillity of the Province shall be real and effective.

10. His Majesty's Government also accept in principle the proposition which was endorsed at the last Conference that Sind should be constituted a separate Province, if satisfactory means of financing it can be found. We therefore intend to ask the Government of India to arrange for a Conference with representatives of Sind for the purpose of trying to overcome the difficulties disclosed by the report of the expert financial investigation which has just been completed.

11. But I have digressed from the question of a programme in the light of the accepted factors—Federation as the aim and self-governing Provinces and the Indian States as its basis. As I have said, our discussions have made it clear to all of us that

Federation cannot be achieved in a month or two. There is a mass of difficult constructive work still to be done, and there are important agreements to be sought by which the structure must be shaped and cemented. It is equally plain that the framing of a scheme of responsible government for the Provinces would be a simpler task which could be more speedily accomplished. The adjustments and modifications of the powers now exercised by the Central Government which would obviously have to be made in order to give real self-government to the Provinces should raise no insuperable difficulties. It has, therefore, been pressed upon the Government that the surest and speediest route to Federation would be to get these measures in train forthwith, and not to delay the assumption of full responsibility by the Provinces a day longer than is necessary. But it is clear that a partial advance does not commend itself to you. You have indicated your desire that no change should be made in the Constitution which is not effected by one all-embracing Statute covering the whole field, and His Majesty's Government have no intention of urging a responsibility which, for whatever reasons, is considered at the moment premature or ill-advised. It may be that opinion and circumstances will change, and it is not necessary here and now to take any irrevocable decision. We intend, and have always intended, to press on with all possible despatch with the federal plan. It would clearly be indefensible, however, to allow the present decision to stand in the way of the earliest possible constitutional advance in the North-West Frontier Province. We intend, therefore, to take the necessary steps as soon as may be to apply to the North-West Frontier Province, until the new constitutions are established, the provisions of the present Act relating to Governors' Provinces.

12. We must all, however, realise that there stands in the way of progress, whether for the Provinces or the Centre, that formidable obstacle, the communal deadlock. I have never concealed from you my conviction that this is above all others a problem for you to settle by agreement amongst yourselves. The first of the privileges and the burdens of a self-governing people is to agree how the democratic principle of representation is to be applied—or, in other words, who are to be represented and how it is to be done. This Conference' has twice essayed this task: twice it has failed. I cannot believe that you will demand that we shall accept these failures as final and conclusive.

13. But time presses. We shall soon find that our endeavours to proceed with our plans are held up (indeed they have been held up already) if you cannot present us with a settlement acceptable to all parties as the foundations upon which to build. In that event His Majesty's Government would be

compelled to apply a provisional scheme, for they are determined that even this disability shall not be permitted to be a bar to progress. This would mean that His Majesty's Government would have to settle for you, not only your problems of representation, but also to decide as wisely and justly as possible what checks and balances the Constitution is to contain to protect minorities from an unrestricted and tyrannical use of the democratic principle expressing itself solely through majority power. I desire to warn you that if the Government have to supply even temporarily this part of your Constitution which you are unable to supply for yourselves, and though it will be our care to provide the most ample safeguards for minorities so that none of them need feel that they have been neglected, it will not be a satisfactory way of dealing with this problem. Let me also warn you that if you cannot come to an agreement on this amongst yourselves, it will add considerably to the difficulties of any Government here which shares our views of an Indian Constitution, and it will detract from the place which that Constitution will occupy amongst those of other nations. I therefore beg of you once more to take further opportunities to meet together and present us with an agreement.

14. We intend to go ahead. We have now brought our business down to specific problems which require close and intimate consideration, first of all by bodies which are really committees and not unwieldy conferences, and we must now set up machinery to do this kind of work. As that is being done and conclusions presented, we must be able to continue consultations with you. I propose, therefore, with your consent, to nominate in due course a small representative Committee—a working Committee—of this Conference which will remain in being in India, with which, through the Viceroy, we can keep in effective touch. I cannot here and now specify precisely how this Committee can best be employed. This is a matter which must be worked out and must to some extent depend on the reports of the Committees we propose to set up. But in the end, we shall have to meet again for a final review of the whole scheme.

15. It is our intention to set up at once the Committees whose appointment the Conference has recommended: (a) to investigate and advise on the revision of the Franchise and constituencies; (b) to put to the test of detailed budgetary facts and figures the recommendations of the Federal Finance Sub-Committee; and (c) to explore more fully the specific financial problems arising in connection with certain individual States. We intend that these Committees shall be at work in India under the chairmanship of distinguished public men from this country as

early in the New Year as possible. The views expressed by you here on the other outstanding Federal problems will be taken into consideration at once, and the necessary steps taken to get better understanding and agreement upon them.

16. His Majesty's Government have also taken note of the suggestion made in para. 26 of the Federal Structure Committee's Third Report, with the object of facilitating an early decision on the distribution among the States of whatever quota may be agreed upon for their representation in the Legislature. It follows from what I have already said that they share the general desire for an early agreement on this question among the States, and His Majesty's Government intend to afford the Princes all possible assistance by way of advice in this matter. If it appears to the Government that there is likely to be undue delay in their reaching agreement amongst themselves, the Government will take such steps as seem helpful to obtain a working settlement.

17. I have already alluded to another matter to which you have given ample evidence that you attach great importance, and to which you will expect me to refer. A decision of the communal problem which provides only for representation of the communities in the Legislatures is not enough to secure what I may call "natural rights." When such provisions have been made, minorities will still remain minorities, and the Constitution must therefore contain provisions which will give all creeds and classes a due sense of security that the principle of majority government is not to be employed to their moral or material disadvantage in the body politic. The Government cannot undertake here and now to specify in detail what those provisions should be. Their form and scope will need the most anxious and careful consideration with a view to ensuring on the one hand that they are reasonably adequate for their purpose, and on the other that they do not encroach, to an extent which amounts to stultification, upon the principles of representative responsible government. In this matter the Committee of Consultation should play an important part, for, here also, just as in regard to the method and proportions of electoral representation, it is vital to the success of the new Constitution that it should be framed on a basis of mutual agreement.

18. Now, once again we must bid each other good-bye. Great strides have been made, greater, I am sure you will find, than the most optimistic think. I was glad to hear in the course of these debates speaker after speaker taking that view. It is the true view. We have met with obstacles, but one of those optimists to whom humanity owes most of its progress said that "obstacles were made to be overcome." In that buoyancy of spirit and the goodwill which comes from it, let us go on

with our task. My fairly wide experience of Conferences like this is that the road to agreements is very broken and littered with obstructions to begin with, and the first stages often fill one with despair. But quite suddenly, and generally unexpectedly, the way smoothes itself out and the end is happily reached. I not only pray that such may be our experience, but I assure you that the Government will strive unceasingly to secure such a successful termination to our mutual labours.