

The Dominion of Ceylon

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THE Island of Ceylon, which was promoted in February, 1948, to full membership of the Commonwealth, is separated from the mainland of India by thirty-six miles of sea. This nearness to the Indian continent leads many people who have not visited the East to the belief that Ceylon is part of India in the same way as Vancouver Island, for example, is part of Canada. Colour is lent to this erroneous impression by the fact that there are some 800,000 Indians included among the Island's population of approximately seven million, the largest group of Indians outside India itself. Moreover, the majority of the indigenous population are Indian by origin. But throughout its recorded history of 22 centuries Ceylon has had an independent existence politically with a few interruptions. The Sinhalese, who must have come originally from northern India, and who constitute two-thirds of the population, have had their own language and literary tradition during this long period of history. Important Tamil and Muslim minorities are descended from communities who have lived in the Island almost as long as the Sinhalese themselves. The descendants of the Dutch settlers, known as Burghers and numbering about 30,000, play a significant part in the public and professional life of the country. The Europeans, now mainly interested in commerce and the plantation industries, are not much more than 5,000 in number.

Until the British penetrated the central parts of Ceylon early in the nineteenth

century, the Island was in the main governed by Sinhalese or Tamil kings and had a distinctive culture to which the impressive remains of cities, religious monuments, a highly-developed irrigation system and self-governing village communities bear eloquent testimony. "In hardly any part of the continent of India," wrote Dr. William Geigher, the German scholar who translated the Pali chronicles, "is there such an uninterrupted historical tradition as in the Island of Ceylon."

When the maritime settlements of Ceylon became part of the British Empire in 1796, the vitality of the population had been sapped by successive foreign invasions, civil strife and malaria. These settlements had been annexed by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. The large Roman Catholic community and the common Sinhalese surnames of "de Silva" and "Fernando" bear witness to their crusading zeal. The Portuguese were driven out by the Dutch who gave the country the Roman-Dutch Law as its common law. The overrunning of Holland by the French, with whom Great Britain was at war, during the Revolution, led the British to invade Ceylon to deny to the French navy the fine natural harbour of Trincomalee. The last kings of Kandy, who ruled the central parts of the Island, which were ceded to the British in 1815, were princelings brought to the throne from south India by the Kandyan chiefs who preferred an outsider to a rival or the relation of a rival.

Ceylon has enjoyed the status of a

Dominion in the Commonwealth for a little more than two years but it had moved slowly towards such a goal for fifteen decades. National leaders often chafed at the sluggish progress in the direction of democratic self-government and, indeed, early British rule in Ceylon, as elsewhere, was more concerned with maintaining law and order for the peaceful exploitation of the country's economic resources than with the introduction of western forms of popular government. But even in the first years of British rule, administrators imbued with the liberal traditions of England foresaw a politically autonomous future for Ceylon. Sir Alexander Johnstone, one of the earliest Chief Justices of Ceylon, submitted to His Majesty's Government in 1809 a Memorandum in the course of which he proposed "a Constitution of Government similar in principle to the British Constitution, but so modified as to suit the religious and moral feelings of the natives, and the peculiar circumstances of the country, be guaranteed to all the inhabitants of the Island by an Act of Parliament".

It is possible today to review one and a half century of British rule in Ceylon with greater detachment than it was when the nation's leaders were engaged in a struggle for political freedom and the Colonial Office in London in resisting what its advisers regarded as a dangerous agitation for premature or inopportune changes. This is not the place to make a careful assessment of that rule but it can be asserted with confidence that the period of tutelage, even though it may have been unduly prolonged, has left no legacy of mutual distrust and bitterness. No persuasion was required to establish Ceylon as a contented member of the British Commonwealth. Nor is there any reluctance to recognize at its full worth the British contribution to the economic progress and political education of the people. The British administrators worked on the Fabian and British principle of the inevitability of gradualness. The early Legislative Councils were composed of members nominated by the Governor. It was not until 1910 that a constituency was created to elect a single member to repre-

sent "the educated Ceylonese." In 1924 there was a majority of unofficial members, most of them elected to represent territorial constituencies. But this innovation did not work, as the Governor still carried the responsibility for the administration although the legislature could overrule and obstruct him.

Two Commissions, the first in 1928, presided over by the late Lord Donoughmore, and the second in 1944, presided over by Lord Soulbury who is now Governor-General of Ceylon, brought Ceylon to her present position as a self-governing member of the Commonwealth. The Donoughmore Commission introduced adult franchise, abolished communal representation and gave a Constitution modelled on the London County Council with the Chairmen of seven Executive Committees forming a Board of Ministers. The Soulbury Commission gave to Ceylon a Constitution conforming to the general pattern existing in the Dominions. A few months after the inauguration of the Soulbury Constitution, which had stopped just short of Dominion status, Ceylon was admitted to full membership of the Commonwealth as a Dominion by an Act of the British Parliament.

The friendly and helpful manner in which the change was effected by the British statesmen concerned contributed in no small way to the excellent relations which now obtain between the people of the youngest Dominion and the mother country. The initiative was taken by the Labour Prime Minister but other parliamentarians like Mr. Oliver Stanley, Lord Harlech, Mr. Arthur Creech-Jones, Lord Hall and Mr. Patrick Gordon-Walker were of great help. Two recent Governors, now living in retirement, Sir Andrew Caldecott and Sir Henry Moore, also played a constructive role in the negotiations which were carried on by Ceylon's great leader and Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Don Stephen Senanayake.

II

A REALISATION of the benefits of British rule strengthens the links which bind Ceylon to the Commonwealth.

When Ceylon became a British Colony, its population had dwindled to less than a million. The feudal system at the centre and local self-government at the circumference were crumbling. Education was stagnant and there were no industries producing for export other than the cinnamon monopoly so recently exploited by the Dutch. The British built roads into the interior and introduced new and profitable crops. Ceylon's economy today is founded very largely on its three export industries: tea, rubber and coconuts. The tea industry, which makes a substantial contribution to the national income and to Government revenue, is still owned to the extent of about seventy-five per cent by British capital. Investors have little reason to complain when they get a yield of ten per cent at current share values in one of the most stable agricultural industries to be found in any part of the world.

Ceylon's place in the Commonwealth is determined by the democratic pattern of its government, by its participation in a Commonwealth foreign policy, by the integration of its system of commerce and finance with that of the Commonwealth as a whole and by strategic considerations.

It is obvious that Ceylon has neither the resources nor the trained personnel to defend itself against a powerful aggressor. Yet, during the last war, the Island played a significant role as a base of operations for the South East Asia Command and as supplier of vital strategic war materials such as natural rubber and high-grade graphite or plumbago. The Kremlin has blocked Ceylon's membership in the United Nations Organization on the ground that its Government has promised naval and air bases to the British in the event of war. Indeed, Ceylon has promised to act with Britain in its own interest and there was no compulsion about it. One of the five documents signed when Ceylon received Dominion status referred to defence. The Ceylon Prime Minister made the following statement about this document:

"Ceylon may as a Dominion establish such defence forces as it pleases and will obtain such assistance as it may require

from the United Kingdom. In so far as it cannot provide for its own defence, it may rely on the forces of the United Kingdom, which for this purpose will be provided with such bases and facilities as may be agreed upon. Clause I binds Ceylon to render assistance only to the extent that is in its own interest to do so. The forces to be stationed will be agreed by the Ceylon Government and the bases provided will remain under its control, as has been the practice in the other Dominions. The provision of bases is a well recognized international practice where both parties gain from the arrangement: e.g. the United States have bases in British territory."

Ceylon is a convenient spot whence to reach neighbouring countries in South East Asia where a clash of ideologies has produced violent reactions. It is on the ocean highway to Australia and the Far East and the number of international air lines making scheduled stops in the Island is increasing. These advantages no doubt prompted the selection of Colombo as the venue of the recent conference of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers, the first to be held outside the United Kingdom. The conference attracted a great deal of attention in the world's Press, including the Soviet newspapers. "Izvestia" published a cartoon of Mr. Bevin in the temple of the Sacred Tooth at Kandy in which the Foreign Minister was depicted as imploring the Lord Buddha to give the British lion a new set of teeth, and the sacred tooth itself was shown hanging at the end of a string. This cartoon has given deep offence to the millions of Buddhists who form the majority of the population of Ceylon.

The Colombo Conference gave an opportunity to Commonwealth statesmen to judge for themselves the part which the youngest Dominion will be able to play in the common effort to ensure world peace and prosperity. For among those attending were Mr. Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Lester Pearson, the Canadian Minister of External Affairs, Mr. Doidge, the New Zealand Minister of External Affairs, Pandit Nehru, Prime Minister of India, Mr. Ghulam

Mohamed, Pakistan Finance Minister, and Mr. Paul Sauer, a member of the South African Cabinet.

The Conference did not perhaps achieve spectacular results but those chiefly concerned were of the view that it was fully worthwhile both as a means of bringing together the Commonwealth leaders for a free exchange of views and as an opportunity to direct their minds to specific problems. Viscount Addison, Lord Privy Seal in the British Cabinet, was doubtless expressing the verdict of the British Government when he stated in the House of Lords on March 2, that "the Colombo Conference has been one of the most valuable that our history presented for a long time." He added that it was characterised by extraordinary goodwill and was the first of its kind—a united Commonwealth Conference, not deliberating in general terms but dealing with specific problems such as the peace treaty with Japan and the problems of Burma and South East Asia.

There is a close and continuous exchange of views between the British and Ceylon Governments on the foreign affairs, for their mutual advantage. When Ceylon was granted the full international status of a Dominion in 1948, one of the agreements provided that "Ceylon will be able to appoint its own diplomatic representatives or to use those of the United Kingdom if it prefers to do so. It will be able to make its own treaties and agreements subject to the rules relating to consultation and cooperation laid down by the Imperial Conferences, and these rules apply equally to the United Kingdom. What they mean in practice is that the United Kingdom will keep Ceylon fully informed about its actions through the Commonwealth Relations Office and that Ceylon may make any representations it thinks fit either directly or through the High Commissioners. Similarly, Ceylon will keep the United Kingdom fully informed and will, if necessary, receive representations through the same channels" (Ceylon Government Sessional Paper XXII of 1947).

Within the general framework of a Commonwealth foreign policy Ceylon has

shown its readiness to be of help to its neighbours. Following the Conference of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers in Colombo, the Prime Minister of Burma visited Ceylon on a goodwill mission. Since then Ceylon has given a loan to the Burmese Government as an advance against supplies of rice, the staple food of the Island's inhabitants.

IT may seem paradoxical that although the main Opposition in the Ceylon House of Representatives consists of groups which profess some form of Communism, as a political creed Communism has made little headway in the Island. Communism in Ceylon has not been allowed to go underground since the leaders of the movement were released from detention after the conclusion of the war. The peasant population, which is far and away the largest section of the public, has shown no interest in it. The stronger wing of the local Communist movement is Trotskyist, profoundly distrusts the Soviet regime, and derives no strength from powerful allies outside the country. The leading Communists have been elected to Parliament on personal rather than party grounds. Most of them are intellectuals educated at the Universities of London, Oxford or Cambridge and are severe, if often irresponsible, critics of Government policy. Indeed, they have so far shown neither the inclination nor the capacity for a constructive approach to the problems of government. They seem content to oppose and obstruct so long as they cannot get power.

Political agitators in the country during the period of British rule asked for no more than self-government on the British model of parliamentary democracy. The Ceylon House of Representatives—allowing for local differences—is a smaller edition of the British House of Commons. Adult franchise, territorial representation, Cabinet responsibility, the separation of the Judiciary from the Executive, all these features of the British Constitution are reproduced in the Ceylon Constitution. The procedure of the Senate and House of Representatives follows closely the procedure of the two Houses of the

Mother of Parliaments, and Erskine May is the final authority on all disputed points. The British left behind a well-trained Public Service with sound traditions, but an ever-increasing volume of work, with the Government extending social services and going into many new enterprises, is bound to tax its framework severely.

III

THE problem of the statesman in Ceylon as elsewhere today is that of increasing production and bringing down the cost of living. In these tasks the Ceylon Government has worked in concert with the rest of the Commonwealth. Ceylon has also made a notable contribution to the dollar pool of the Sterling Area. In the ten years from 1939 it had made a net contribution of over £125 millions—a sum approximately equal to the total external assets of the country. Ceylon has also carried out its obligations to limit dollar expenditure to the minimum by a rigid system of exchange and import control and high tariffs although before devaluation of the rupee a wide range of goods were cheaper in the dollar area than in soft currency countries.

Even though the great bulk of Ceylon's food imports come from countries outside the Commonwealth—local production comprising only a third of the country's total requirements—the major part of the trade of the Island is with the Commonwealth, as the figures for 1948 in the adjoining table indicate.

Ceylon's trade within the Commonwealth in 1949 was 57 per cent of the total of its overseas trade. The record for the five preceding years reveals a series of changes: 60 per cent in 1944, a slight drop to 58 in 1945, a sharp rise to 77 in 1946, followed by a steady decline to 67 in 1947 and 57 in 1948. The decline in the Commonwealth share during the past two or three years was due to the increasing price of rice, imported chiefly from Burma, Siam, Egypt and Brazil.

The foregoing survey will have shown

CEYLON'S EXTERNAL TRADE, 1948

INSIDE THE COMMONWEALTH	Imports (Rs. million)	(Rs. million)
United Kingdom...	171	301
Canada.....	8	40
Australia.....	125	84
India.....	125	20
Pakistan.....	11	17
South Africa.....	11	43
New Zealand.....	0.2	22
Mauritius.....	30	0.3
OUTSIDE THE COMMONWEALTH		
United States.....	75	165
Burma.....	171*	0.3
Egypt.....	57	59
Iran.....	30	5
Iraq.....	1	17
Italy.....	3	18
Belgium.....	16	6
Japan.....	13	1
Russia.....	nil	4

*Imports from Burma: mainly rice.

the reader that Ceylon's existence as an independent country is dependent on its membership in the Commonwealth. It has neither the resources nor the ambition to match its armed forces against any likely aggressor. It has sought and adopted the parliamentary system of democracy which has been evolved by the genius of the Anglo-Saxon race. Ceylon sees the advantages of a Commonwealth foreign policy in a world menaced by ideological threats to peace and stability. The pattern of the Island's trade, despite the necessity to buy the larger part of its food supplies from outside the Commonwealth, also shows that the youngest Dominion gains by remaining a member of the family of nations which is today the strongest guarantee of the survival of the democratic system.

Ceylon is the first Crown Colony to graduate to nationhood, and its career is watched by many who hope to reach that status by the same process. If it can produce leaders of the calibre of its present Prime Minister, then Ceylon's future as a small and self-respecting member of the Commonwealth is bright.