

TORIES AND THE COMMONWEALTH

LORD ALTRINCHAM

Editor of 'The National and English Review'

It is wrong to think that the British Conservative Party has a peculiarly bad record in Imperial, or Commonwealth, affairs. The myth has gained currency for various reasons which I will examine later; but first I must state quite categorically that, while no British Party has any cause to be proud of its record, the Conservative Party has done no worse than its rivals. In some respects it has done better.

The Liberal Party in the 19th century believed in economic mastery, without obligation to the weak. The industrial middle class on which it was based wanted only cheap raw materials and easy markets. Disraeli's imagination, and Joseph Chamberlain's prophetic business sense, enabled the Conservative Party towards the end of the century to acquire an interest in the Empire. There were grave flaws in both Disraeli's and Chamberlain's type of imperialism, but they were at least preferable to the short-sighted cupidity of the Manchester School. Gladstone, it is true, had some inkling of what was later to become the Commonwealth idea, and he saw the moral and practical necessity for coming to terms with Irish nationalism; but even he was capable of sending an expeditionary force to crush a nationalist rising in Egypt. Moreover, Liberal policy towards South Africa, which, like the Labour Party's towards India, is often paraded in shining contrast to that of the Tories, does not appear to have been very virtuous on closer inspection. The Boer War was simply a fight for supremacy between two white tribes: the Tories (supported at the time by many Liberals) won a costly victory for the British tribe, but the Liberals, when they came to power, made a settlement which ensured the ultimate domination of the Boer. Campbell-Bannerman, not Milner, was responsible for the present tragic situation in the Union of South Africa.

The Liberals cannot claim to have championed the rights of the Africans and Asians: they exploited the so-called "Chinese slavery" issue for electoral purposes, but in the long run their dispensation was more injurious to the oppressed majority in South Africa than that of a Tory Government would have been.

After the first World War the Liberal Party was ousted by the Labour Party, which also depended upon sectional support in the United Kingdom. The captains of industry gave way to the

non-commissioned officers—the trade union bosses. What did this mean, in terms of British Imperial policy? As spokesmen for the underdog at home the Socialists also proclaimed their concern for the colonial underdog, but their words were not matched by deeds. The 1945 Labour Government “gave” independence to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, but it is clear from all the evidence that Britain *could* not have held the Indian sub-continent, even had the Government been willing to try. Attlee and his colleagues were making a virtue of necessity, and Attlee himself was going back on the principles which he had helped to lay down as a member of the Simon Commission. I am quite sure that he was right to do so, and that his earlier views were absurdly cautious and conservative. But I am equally sure that his mind was changed by the logic of events, rather than by any belief in independence for its own sake.

This is corroborated by Labour’s record in Africa. They had six years in which to bestow democratic rights and grant self-government to the African colonies. By 1951 only the most modest progress had been made, the position of the European settlers in Kenya was virtually unchanged, Seretse Khama had been exiled after contracting a mixed marriage, and Dr. Nkrumah had been incarcerated. The radicalism of the Labour Party was confined to winning a place in the sun for British trade unionists. It has been well said that a Labour man is a Conservative without money. The Labour rank-and-file is insular and mildly jingoistic, and the Labour leadership looks above all to the underdogs who have votes in a British General Election.

Economically, no British Party has shown anything like generosity towards the overseas territories. Every penny spent by the Labour Government outside Britain was more than covered by American loans and grants, so it would be strictly fair to say that between 1945 and 1951 the United States was financing the Commonwealth. Even now the Americans are doing far more than the UK to help the independent Commonwealth nations; but what the UK is doing is at least being paid for out of its own earnings and savings. The Colonial Welfare and Development scheme, initiated during the War by a Tory Colonial Secretary, Mr. Oliver Stanley, as a means of helping the dependent territories to acquire basic amenities and services, has so far involved less money all told than is spent *each year* in providing subsidies for British agriculture! The Labour Party announced in its Election manifesto that it would spend one

per cent. of the national income on underdeveloped countries: more than this is, in fact, already being spent by the Tory Government, but it is pitifully inadequate. I should like to see the figure raised to five per cent. or more, and there is reason to hope that Mr. Macmillan, fortified by his victory at the polls, will take more drastic steps to narrow the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" in the Commonwealth as a whole. He has recently been talking about the problem—notably in his television discussion with President Eisenhower last September—and I shall be surprised if he does not act accordingly over the next five years.

The Tory Party has two handicaps in regard to the Commonwealth—the legacy of what I will call romantic-strategic imperialism (of which Disraeli and Winston Churchill have been the arch-protagonists), and a tendency to support European minorities against indigenous majorities. The former has been no more than intermittent, and it must never be forgotten that Baldwin pushed through Indian reforms in the 1930's in the teeth of opposition from Churchill and a strong faction of the Tory Party. The vindication of Churchill's views on foreign policy, and the enormous prestige which he gained as Prime Minister during the War, had the unfortunate effect of reviving the influence of his Imperial daydreams, which would otherwise have died a natural death. Much that has happened since—more especially the Suez catastrophe and the futile struggle against Cypriot nationalism—may be attributed to a Churchillian mood in the Tory Party, though it must be said that Churchill himself had the genius and magnanimity to avoid, while he was in office, such errors as lesser men have committed in an attempt to resemble him.

The other Tory handicap stems from Joseph Chamberlain, and is a preoccupation with the economic aspects of imperialism, to the exclusion of political, and at times of moral, considerations. The latest example has been the imposing of Federation in Central Africa, combined with blatant favouritism for European settlers in the Rhodesias and in Kenya. Despite the lesson of the West Indies—that European economic interests can best be preserved by the timely concession of political rights to non-Europeans—the Tories have until now been trying to maintain European political control in East and Central Africa. I believe, however, that the Nyasaland Emergency and the Devlin Report have caused a profound reappraisal in Whitehall, superficial

appearances notwithstanding. The immediate official reaction to the Devlin Report (as to the historic Durham Report in the last century) was hostile; but the Devlin Report has, like the Durham Report, a compelling quality, which no Government can permanently resist.

Already the signs are hopeful. Mr. Iain Macleod has succeeded Mr. Alan Lennox-Boyd at the Colonial Office. Mr. Macleod is liberal-minded, ruthless and intensely ambitious. He must know that a last-ditch fight for the old structure of European privilege in Africa would be his own political undoing: he will therefore strike the best bargain he can with African nationalists, and disappoint the extreme Right of his own Party—as President de Gaulle has disappointed the Algerian *ultras*. Lord Monckton has accepted the chairmanship of the Central African Commission, preparatory to the constitutional review. As Minister of Labour after 1951, Monckton had the job of convincing the trade unions that a Tory Government was their friend, and he succeeded admirably—because he was always prepared to give way and compromise. A sharply intelligent man, he will not allow nostalgia for the past to cloud his judgment of contemporary realities. Macmillan himself is a composite character: he has suffered, in his time, from both the Churchillian and the Chamberlainite attitudes towards the Empire. He actively encouraged the assault on Egypt in 1956—but he was quick to withdraw from the imbroglio when he saw how disastrous it was, and he will probably soon be shaking hands with President Nasser. As Foreign Secretary he refused to discuss self-determination for Cyprus—but he has since agreed to it. No doubt he will soon be greeting Dr. Banda as he lately greeted Archbishop Makarios. He is a pragmatist with a reforming instinct, and he is not weighed down by scruple. As Chairman of the Conservative Party he has appointed Mr. R. A. Butler, who as Under-Secretary for India helped to pilot the Government of India Bill through the House of Commons despite all that Churchill could do, and who is generally felt to epitomize the Tory Left. By giving him control of the Party organization, Macmillan has shown that he intends to resist any Rightward move which might follow the electoral triumph of October 8th.

The 1955 Tory Government made mistakes and even, in my opinion, committed one or two crimes of an imperialist nature. But paradoxically Mr. Lennox-Boyd has been an outstanding Colonial Secretary. He is completely innocent of racial prejudice

and has mixed very freely with people in every part of the Commonwealth. He has also been responsible for major constitutional advances—the independence of Ghana and Malaya, the birth of the Caribbean Federation, the successful negotiation of terms for Nigerian independence, and much else. His only weakness has been in dealing with European settlers: he has neither communicated to them his own enlightened view of race relations, nor has he had the temerity to overrule them. But the value of his work will be recognized long after his mistakes have been forgiven and almost forgotten.

The Tory Party has the advantage of refusing to take the "Little England" view that its opponents have, in their different ways, been inclined to adopt. That refusal has, as I have tried to suggest, a dangerous and undesirable side: it can go with an imperialism which is either predatory or vainglorious. But the good side must not be overlooked. When all the cant and hypocrisy have been discounted, there remains a residue of philanthropy which, together with a traditional shrewdness and adaptability, may lead through crisis to co-operation. But the Party must shed its belief in the entrenchment of European political power; must take the risk (which Disraeli took in this country) of mass enfranchisement in advance of mass education; and must lose its paternalistic tone, which is irritating to those who are up-and-coming, both at home and abroad. Macmillan was much improved by his Commonwealth tour at the beginning of 1958, and he seems to have been further improved by the chastening experience of Central Africa. His authority is unchallenged, his team is united, and the country is so absorbed with its own affairs that it will pay little attention to what is done outside. One may therefore hope that the present Tory Government will gradually calm the understandable fears of liberal observers who were shocked by events during the last Parliament and have noticed only the defects of Tory thinking on the Commonwealth.