

The PRESIDENT—*cont.*

There have been in the past Empires which (like our own) were widespread, populous, rich in material wealth, the prolific breeding-ground of art and science and literature. But this Empire of ours is distinguished from them all by special and dominating characteristics. From the external point of view it is made up of countries which are not geographically conterminous or even contiguous, which present every variety of climate, soil, people, and religion, and, even in those communities which have attained to complete self-government, and which are represented in this room to-day, does not draw its unifying and cohesive force solely from identity of race or of language. Yet you have here a political organization which, by its mere existence, rules out the possibility of war between populations numbering something like a third of the human race. There is, as there must be amongst communities so differently situated and circumstanced, a vast variety of constitutional methods, and of social and political institutions and ideals. But to speak for a moment for that part of the Empire which is represented here to-day, what is it that we have in common, which amidst every diversity of external and material conditions, makes us and keeps us one? There are two things in the self-governing British Empire which are unique in the history of great political aggregations. The first is the reign of Law: wherever the King's writ runs it is the symbol and messenger not of an arbitrary authority, but of rights shared by every citizen, and capable of being asserted and made effective by the tribunals of the land. The second is the combination of local autonomy—absolute, unfettered, complete—with loyalty to a common head, co-operation, spontaneous and unforced, for common interests and purposes, and, I may add, a common trusteeship, whether it be in India or in the Crown Colonies, or in the Protectorates, or within our own borders, of the interests and fortunes of fellow-subjects who have not yet attained, or perhaps in some cases may never attain, to the full stature of self-government.

These general considerations, Gentlemen, familiar as they are to all of you, may not be wholly out of place when we are contemplating in advance the work which is set before this Imperial Conference. In the early Victorian era there were two rough-and-ready solutions for what was regarded, with some impatience, by the British statesmen of that day as the "Colonial problem." The one was centralisation—the government, that is, except in trivial matters, of all the outlying parts of the Empire from an office in Downing Street. The other was disintegration—the acquiescence in, perhaps the encouragement of, a process of successive "hivings off" by which, without the hazards or embitterments of coercion, each community, as it grew to political manhood, would follow the example of the American Colonies, and start an independent and sovereign existence of its own. After 70 years' experience of Imperial evolution, it may be said with confidence that neither of these theories commands the faintest support to-day, either at home or in any part of our self-governing Empire. We were saved from their adoption—some people would say by the favour of Providence—or (to adopt a more flattering hypothesis) by the political instinct of our race. And just in proportion as centralisation was seen to be increasingly absurd, so has disintegration been felt to be increasingly impossible. Whether in this United Kingdom, or in any one of the great communities which you represent, we each of us are, and we each of us intend to remain, master in our own household. This is, here at home and throughout the Dominions, the life-blood of our polity. It is the *articulus stantis aut cadentis Imperii*.

It is none the less true that we are, and intend to remain, units indeed, but units in a greater unity. And it is the primary object and governing purpose of these periodical Conferences that we may take free counsel together in the matters which concern us all. Let me select one or two illustrations from the Agenda which have been suggested for our deliberations here.

There are, first of all, proposals put forward from responsible quarters which aim at some closer form of political union as between the component members of the Empire, and which, with that object, would develop existing, or devise new, machinery, in the shape of an Advisory Council, or in some other form. I need not say that, in advance of the discussions which we are about to have, I pronounce no opinion on this class of proposals. I will only venture the observation that I am sure we shall not lose sight of the value of elasticity