CHAPTER X

THE MONTAGU-CHELMSFORD REFORMS

1917-1919

THE questions which came up for decision in Palestine and Mesopotamia were the direct outcome of the war. Further east, questions of no less difficulty were coming to the surface, drawn from the depths by the ripples which radiated outwards from the centre of the world's disturbance. And, to the many problems with which the Cabinet were confronted during the summer of 1917, was added that of the future Government of India. The situation in India itself was such that the Viceroy considered it his duty to press for a very early statement of the views and intentions of the Home Government. And in May, Mr. Chamberlain, then Secretary of State for India, invited the attention of his colleagues to the very serious problems with which the Government were faced and requested a decision as to the action to be taken. "It is not too much to say," he wrote, "that upon a right decision at this critical time depends the peace and contentment of India for years and perhaps generations to come."

It was natural that Lord Curzon should be expected, and should desire, to take a prominent part in the discussions on the matter, and he took an early opportunity of placing his views before the Cabinet. He was under no illusions as to the causes which had forced the question to the front. The generally accepted view that political concessions were due as a reward for the part played by India in the war, he brushed aside. Indian soldiers had rendered loyal and valiant service in the various theatres of hostilities; but Indian

soldiers were the last people in the world to hanker after political concessions. The true reward *in pari materia* for such services was the grant of commissions in the army to Indian officers, and to this proposal he had given his vigorous support. "You will have followed the Indian *dénouements*," he wrote in a letter to Mr. Chamberlain in August, 1917, after the latter had left the India Office. "D—, C—, and others put up a very strong opposition to the Indian commissions; but, with my very emphatic support, Montagu was able to carry it, just as you would have wished."[1] And apart from the services rendered by her soldiers it could scarcely be said that India's war effort had been such as to call for any exceptional reward. No other part of the Empire had suffered less or reaped greater advantage from the war then she had done.

Neither, in Lord Curzon's view, could it be contended that one of those milestones had been reached in Indian history at which Constitutional Reform could be said to be the legitimate outcome of acquired experience, or to be overdue. Thirty-one years had elapsed between the first India Councils Act in 1861 and the Act which he had himself piloted through the House of Commons when Under Secretary for India in 1892. Seventeen years had passed before the next advance had been made in the shape of the Minto-Morley Reform scheme of 1909. Eight years only had run their course since then.

If, then, the need for a further step forward was admitted, let it be acknowledged that it arose neither because the war had justified it, nor because experience demanded it; but because, in the course of the war, forces had been let loose, ideas had found vent, aspirations had been formulated which had either been dormant before, or which in a short space of time had received an almost incredible development.

> "We are really making concessions to India because of the free talk about liberty, democracy, nationality and self-government which have become the common shibboleths of the Allies, and because we are expected to translate into practice

[1] Letter dated August 25th. Mr. Chamberlain left the Government in July, as a result of the Report of the Mesopotamian Commission.

in our own domestic household the sentiments which we have so enthusiastically preached."[1]

Lord Curzon admitted the force of this latter consideration, and agreed that, in some form or other, a statement by the Government to the effect that self-government within the British Empire was the goal at which they aimed, was desirable; it being clearly understood that it was under British guidance that this end must be pursued and could alone be achieved, and that there was no intention to weaken the essential safeguards of British justice and British power.

To the general assent which this proposition commanded there was one notable exception. From the use of the word "self-government" in any formula which might be devised to give expression to their intentions, one prominent member of the Cabinet dissented. He did so, not because he objected to setting up in India a system under which that country would more and more be governed by Indians, but because he feared that in the mouths of Englishmen the word "self-government" had acquired a perfectly definite but technical meaning—namely, a Parliamentary system of Government on a democratic basis. And he thought that to graft such a system upon the ancient and unchanging social system of the East would be to produce a hybrid which would almost certainly be worthless and probably dangerous.

Here, then, was raised the crucial question as to what they meant by the phrase "self-government." Did they mean the setting up of Parliamentary institutions on the English model, the fundamental feature of which was an Executive *responsible* to a representative body, which in its turn was *responsible* to an Electorate? Or had they in mind institutions on the pre-war German or the Japanese model, in which the Executive was not removable by the Legislature and was not, therefore, *responsible* to it in the technical meaning of the term; but institutions which could, none the less, legitimately be described as self-governing, in that both Executive and Legislature would be partly—and ultimately wholly—Indian in composition?

It appeared that some meant one thing and some another; while it is not too much to say, perhaps, of others that they had no very

[1] Note written by Lord Curzon for the War Cabinet in June 1917.

clear ideas as to what exactly they did mean. In their representations to the Secretary of State the Government of India had been careful not to commit themselves to any specific form of self-government. The special circumstances of India, they pointed out, differed so widely from those of any other part of the Empire that they could scarcely expect an Indian Constitution to model itself on those of the British Dominions. All that they contemplated was a gradual progress towards a larger measure of control by her own people which would ultimately result in a form of self-government, differing possibly in many ways from that enjoyed by other parts of the Empire, but evolved on lines which had taken into account India's past history and the special circumstances and traditions of her component peoples. Their proposals for assisting her towards this goal were, briefly, to confer greater powers and a more representative character upon existing local self-governing units such as District (rural) Boards and Municipal Councils; to increase the proportion of Indians in the higher administrative posts, and to pave the way for an enlargement of the constitutional powers of the Provincial Legislatures by broadening the electorate and increasing the number of elected members.

It could scarcely be said that these proposals constituted a contribution of much originality towards the solution of a complex problem. Their weak spot was at once detected by the Secretary of State, who pointed out that to increase the number of elected members of a Legislative body, without at the same time giving them any real control in any Department of Government, would merely result in an embarrassing multiplication of irresponsible critics without effecting any real advance in the direction of self-government. He thought that a scheme must be attempted under which some authority and responsibility would be conferred on members of the Legislatures, and he proposed the appointment of a small Commission to consider the best means by which this could be done.

As to a formula for the purpose of making known the policy of the Government, he did not think it possible to be more precise than to avow an intention to foster the gradual development of free institutions with a view to self-government.

Mr. Montagu, who succeeded Mr. Chamberlain at the India

Office in July, submitted to the Cabinet a formula substantially the same as that suggested by his predecessor—"the gradual development of free institutions with a view to ultimate self-government within the Empire." In place of a Commission, as proposed by Mr. Chamberlain for determining the nature of the steps to be taken to give effect to this policy, he suggested that in accordance with an invitation issued by the Viceroy to Mr. Chamberlain and now extended to himself, he should proceed to India at the head of a small deputation to investigate matters on the spot.

Lord Curzon's attitude now becomes extremely difficult to understand. Contrary to all experience, his mind on this, the one question of all others on which he might have been expected to see clearly, seemed to be tossing painfully on a sea of indecision. For once his power of setting forth in precise language exactly what he had in mind seems to have deserted him. He had certainly never given anyone cause to suppose that he regarded a Parliamentary system as in the least suitable to the circumstances of India. In the discussions of the Minto-Morley scheme of 1909 he had pointed out that the seeds of Parliamentary Government were being sown. But he had done so, not in commendation of what was being done, but as a warning against the consequences.

> "The noble Viscount," he declared, in a speech in the House of Lords, "assured us that he had no ambition to set up any sort of Parliamentary system in India, or even to share in the beginning of that operation. I do not doubt that in uttering those words the noble Viscount was entirely sincere; but believe me that though it may not be his ambition it will inevitably be the consequence of his act."[1]

And now, when a fresh step forward was in contemplation, he warned the Cabinet once more of the danger which he apprehended —"I entertain no shadow of doubt," he wrote, "that these bodies (the enlarged Legislative Councils proposed by the Government of India) will gradually convert themselves into the very form, i.e., of small Parliaments which I ventured to forecast in the House of Lords

[1] Speech delivered on February 23rd, 1909.

Debates in 1909, and which Lord Morley repudiated with a vehemence which was equally short sighted and sincere."

Yet, holding these views, he illogically characterised the Note in which exception had been taken by one of his colleagues to the use of the word *self-government*, as "stubborn" and "reactionary"; and more astonishing still, by changes which he introduced into the formula proposed by Mr. Montagu, did more than anyone else to ensure the establishment in India of a Parliamentary system of Government on the English model.

The formula drawn up by Mr. Montagu was as follows:

> "His Majesty's Government and the Government of India have in view the gradual development of free institutions in India with a view to ultimate self-government within the Empire."

This, at least, left open the question of the type of the free institutions to be set up. It did not rule out a constitution modelled on that of Japan, or on that which has since been introduced in the State of Mysore in which an Executive irremovable by the Legislature, and so not responsible to it in the technical sense, is nevertheless brought into close organic union with the representatives of the people by means of the Initiative, on the part of the popular Assembly on the one hand, and the Referendum to it by the Executive on the other.

This formula did not, however, satisfy Lord Curzon; and on the eve of its publication he redrafted it as follows:

> "The Policy of His Majesty's Government, with which the Government of India are in complete accord, is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the Administration, and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realisation of *responsible Government* in India as an integral part of the British Empire."

The italics are mine. "When we came to the Constitutional question," he wrote in a letter to Mr. Chamberlain, describing the

proceedings, " . . . I suggested a new formula which seemed to me rather safer and certainly nearer to my own point of view than the words you had originally favoured."[1] And a little later he wrote in a similar sense to the Viceroy—" It was, I think, mainly due to me that you got from the Home Government the pronouncement which you repeated in your Council—indeed the actual words were mine."[2]

What then was Lord Curzon's point of view? His introduction of the word " responsible " into the formula in association with the word " self-government," can only have had one meaning; it can only have meant that it was a Parliamentary system which the Government aimed at setting up. Did he realise this? It is almost incredible that he did not do so, more particularly since there can be little doubt that the wording was suggested to him by a lecture on the Problems of Indian Government, delivered by Lord Islington at the request of the Oxford Delegacy for the Extension of Teaching, in which the significance of the phrase " responsible self-government " was specially emphasised. The lecture was delivered on August the 8th, and a copy of it, presented to him by the author, reached Lord Curzon a day or two before he redrafted the formula submitted by the Secretary of State. In this copy two passages are underlined in pencil—evidently by Lord Curzon himself. Both deal with the introduction of *responsible* self-government into India.

> " I would say at once that, if the ideals of the British Empire stand for anything, India's future must be in accord with those ideals and her ultimate ambition which she must one day realise, after successfully surmounting the difficulties before her, is the attainment of responsible Government within the Empire."

The other passage was explanatory:

> " . . . it is to be remembered that if, in deference to the Legislative Council, the Government modify their policy, the Council would have to shoulder the responsibility for the

[1] Letter dated August 25th, 1917. [2] Letter dated October 17th, 1917.

results. This is the essence of responsible Government as we understand it. To secure its introduction into Indian Local Governments a suitable system of elections is important, so that the elected members may be properly representative of the various classes of Indian Society. Only if this is done will it be possible, consistently with the interests of the people, to make the elected Councillors responsible for policy, and to make them realise that for whatever they say or do, they will be held accountable to constituents free to displace them if they fail to give satisfaction."

The obvious inference, then, is that as a result of further consideration Lord Curzon had come to the conclusion either that Parliamentary Government was after all the right form of Government to aim at establishing in India, or that it was now inevitable and had better be frankly accepted by the Cabinet. This inference, however, becomes untenable in the light of his subsequent procedure. For when the scheme devised by Lord Chelmsford and Mr. Montagu, in accordance with the formula drawn up by Lord Curzon himself, was seen to amount to the introduction of Parliamentary Government, Lord Curzon expressed astonishment and dismay. He would ask his colleagues in the Cabinet, he said, to bear in mind when considering the proposals, that, whether they were regarded as being moderate or extreme, they would, if accepted, involve a complete and irrevocable change in the political and administrative relations of Great Britain and India.

"For they propose to do two things, neither of which has hitherto been contemplated, and both of which have been quite recently and solemnly disavowed by British Liberal Ministers, viz., (a) to lay the foundations of a Parliamentary system in India which was almost passionately repudiated by Lord Morley in 1909; and (b) to set up almost complete Indian provincial autonomy which Lord Crewe, his successor as Secretary of State, from his seat in the House of Lords not less emphatically and authoritatively disavowed."[1]

[1] Note written for the Cabinet, June 3rd, 1918.

No wonder that on receipt of a copy of this Memorandum, the Secretary of State should have written :

> " I am sure you will not resent it when I say that your Note on my Report comes to me as a great shock and a surprise. From our conversation together, I had ventured to hope that your criticism would be mainly directed to detail, and I notice with extreme regret your very weighty word of doubt about the principles on which the Report is based. . . I would beg of you to understand that neither the Viceroy nor I underrated the fundamental nature of the changes which we propose ; but we did think that the Announcement of August the 20th contemplated the changes and that it was incumbent upon us to carry that Announcement loyally to its fulfilment." [1]

Mr. Chamberlain took a similar view. He agreed with Lord Curzon as to the magnitude of the changes proposed. But he pointed out that the source of these changes was not the Report drawn up by the Secretary of State and the Viceroy, but the Declaration which the Secretary of State had been authorised to make on behalf of the Government on August the 20th, 1917.

No amount of argument served, however, to shake the attitude of hostility which Lord Curzon had now taken up towards the scheme embodied in the Report ; and he viewed with the utmost aversion all approaches made to him with a view to furthering its prospects. He agreed, though reluctantly, to the publication of the Report, but only on condition that it was made clear that the Cabinet were in no way committed to its contents. He agreed, even more reluctantly, to the appointment of two Committees to investigate in India the question of the Franchise, and that of the division of the administrative field between the new Executives of which the Provincial Governments were to consist. On this latter question he hesitated so long before committing himself, that on July the 23rd, 1918, Mr. Montagu wrote to him summarising recent events and begging for a decision :

[1] Letter from Mr. Montagu to Lord Curzon, dated June 6th, 1918.

"The situation, as I understand it, is as follows. You, I and Chamberlain met. After a preliminary discussion, in which I suggested certain amendments to Chamberlain's proposal, I had, unfortunately, to leave. I asked you the next day what the result was, and I was told that Chamberlain would write to me. Chamberlain wrote to me saying that he thought you would assent to the appointment of the two Committees, but that you saw objections to the rest of my proposals and that I had better write to you on the subject. I wrote to you on the subject on Tuesday last. You told me on Thursday that you would reply to my letter. Owing to your preoccupations I have not yet received that letter and I am awaiting it. When it comes I shall know where we stand. At present I do not know what, if anything, has been decided, and whether we sat *ad referendum* to the Cabinet, or whether we were empowered to decide."

On July the 25th Lord Curzon replied at considerable length. He did not dissent from Mr. Montagu's summary of what had taken place; and he confirmed what Mr. Chamberlain had written —"After you had left the room I told Chamberlain that I would agree, most reluctantly, to the two Committees proposed by him and urged by you; but that I did not see why we should either set up the India Office Committee[1] now, or offer the further sop to India of a batch of Civil Service appointments."[2] He went on to make clear his strong objection to committing himself in any way to the scheme contained in the Report:

"Now I come to your Report. We decided to publish it and no more for the present. But ever since, pressure has been, and I am confident will continue to be, applied, (to persuade us?) to agree first to one thing and then to another, until inevitably we shall have forfeited our liberty of action, and shall be committed to proceedings of which some of us may at bottom

[1] A third Committee to be charged with the task of examining and reporting on the changes in the relations between the India Office and the Government of India which would be necessitated by the introduction of the proposed scheme.

[2] A proposal to fill immediately a proportion of the vacancies in the Indian Civil Service for which English candidates were not available, by the nomination of Indians.

disapprove. You have, naturally enough, in your mind, not merely your own hopes and aspirations, but a House of Commons predisposed to advanced proposals, which there are probably not a dozen men in that House who are really qualified to understand. I have in my mind both my own convictions, based at least upon some experience, and the knowledge that if I am still a member of the Government when legislation is introduced, I shall be held largely responsible for it; and that in the House of Lords, where there are a good many people with Indian experience, while it will only be with the utmost difficulty that advanced proposals will be carried at all, if I am unable to endorse them myself the likelihood of their being accepted will be materially reduced. In these circumstances I want to keep myself free until the results of the various investigations come in; and I am made more and more uncomfortable as successive steps are taken, or proposed, which appear to cut away foot by foot the somewhat precarious ground upon which I stand."

Finally, he made unmistakably clear his dislike of the scheme itself.

"Why is it necessary to proceed at breakneck speed in a case that constitutes a revolution, of which not one person in a thousand in this country realises the magnitude, and which will probably lead by stages of increasing speed to the ultimate disruption of the Empire? The suggested reforms will probably in some respects be quite futile; in others the harm they do will very likely have been grossly exaggerated. But they will drive certain, perhaps unsuspected, roots deep into the soil, which will shake the foundations of the entire structure both of Indian society and of British rule. I heard Morley saying all the things that you are saying now. He has subsequently written a book to prove what wonderful things he did. But, before seven years have elapsed, you go out and compose another book to prove that he was all wrong and that his feats were fiascoes. I shrink from applying any moral except that haste and confidence are liable in Indian undertakings to rude

disappointment. My own experience in India was not devoid of such demonstrations. I have seriously considered the alternative of saying not another word in the Cabinet about any of these proposals, and then, when they finally assume a shape for which I shall have no responsibility, of deciding whether to leave the Government and recover my freedom with regard to them. I dare say this would be the more logical course. I have only not so far adopted it because it did not seem to me quite loyal or fair with regard either to ordinary Cabinet obligations, or to my acceptance of the formula which you announced, with my full consent, nearly a year ago."

It is easy to imagine that to a Secretary of State bent on carrying through a far-reaching scheme of Constitutional Reform, for which he never doubted that he possessed a mandate from the Cabinet and from Parliament, this letter must have come as a rude surprise. He replied go it on July the 30th.

"You accuse me of pressing and squeezing you into new positions. Believe me I cannot, although I search my conscience, find myself guilty of that charge. I claim that I have not pressed you to anything since you assented to the publication of the Report save the steps which seemed to me to be necessary to gain you all the information you required. These are not decisions as to proposals; in fact I do not want decisions on proposals at this stage. These are decisions as to steps to be taken previous to the introduction of a Bill. . . Finally, I want to make an appeal to you. Controversy with you distresses me very much. You talk in your letter of my hopes and aspirations. My hope and aspiration is to carry forward a continuous Indian policy; that is the only one I have. I want to continue the policy of Morley, Crewe, Chamberlain, Hardinge, with your support and assistance. It was you who helped in the Pronouncement of the 20th of August; it was you who supported the suggestion that I should go to India. . . It has been a matter of infinite regret to me that since our preliminary talk on the Report, we have never had another discussion on it.

Will you not let me help you whilst you are making up your mind? If you see points for criticism why will you not let me try to answer them? I seek for nothing but to act as a colleague. I would regret nothing so much as that we should find ourselves finally in opposition to one another. If, therefore, I could only get you to believe that all I am asking now is assent to the necessary steps for completing my proposals and then your co-operation in framing the necessary Bill. I do hope and trust that you will dismiss from your mind any suggestion that you are being rushed or squeezed, and that you will not allow your mind to crystallise previous to discussion with me, and that we may go forward to carry out the policy of August the 20th together. It is because I hope that I can convince you that what I want is to proceed without halt, but not at breakneck speed, that I do not pause now to comment upon one sentence in your letter which shocked me very much—'a revolution which will probably lead by stages of increasing speed to the ultimate disruption of the Empire?' Surely you did not mean this? So far as I can see it must apply, if it applies at all, to the Pronouncement of the 20th August; but—Oh, well! I am more than anxious to avoid controversy and I forbear to write further on this subject."

Matters between Lord Curzon and the Secretary of State were in this delicate position, when a motion to refer the Report to a Joint Committee of the two Houses of Parliament, tabled in the House of Lords by Lord Midleton, necessitated some statement by the Leader of that House. Lord Curzon was careful to avoid committing himself either to approval or condemnation of the scheme itself. Many of the speeches delivered in the course of the debate had contained a good deal of criticism of the Report itself and of the recommendations which it made. "With that part of the discussion," said Lord Curzon, "I am not particularly concerned to deal." It was the procedure adopted and proposed to be adopted by the Government, that the motion directly challenged; and on that question he had no hesitation in throwing in his lot with the Secretary of State. A Joint Committee of the two Houses would

be an appropriate body to which to submit a Bill based on the Report; but before that stage was reached the Government must be permitted to arrive at their own conclusions on the particular proposals made in the Report without the intervention of any outside authority.

Encouraged by this modest measure of support, Mr. Montagu became hopeful once more of securing Lord Curzon's acceptance of the main principles on which his scheme was based. Yet, when the Cabinet decided in February 1919 to appoint a Cabinet Committee to prepare the Bill already promised in the King's speech, Lord Curzon refused to serve on it, giving as his reasons pressure of other work and the difficulty of his own position. "My own position," he told the Secretary to the Cabinet when declining the invitation to serve, "is a peculiar and difficult one. I am not in complete agreement with some of Montagu's proposals: and while on the one hand I have not the time to thresh them out in Committee (which would be a great labour) I am unwilling on the other hand to be invested with responsibility for their final form which would certainly be the case if I were to serve on the Committee, whether I had or had not attended its meetings."[1]

Once more the Secretary of State became seriously alarmed.

> "Thank you for your letter of this morning," he wrote, on receipt of a letter from Lord Curzon conveying to him his decision. "I am bound to confess that it makes me very unhappy. . . . The King's speech has now announced legislation and yet, although I cannot believe that you are going to disinterest yourself entirely in the matter, indeed it would be lamentable if you were to, because of your interest in it, I cannot persuade you to co-operate in the preparation of the Bill. Out of deference to your wishes and in order that the Committee might be quite free to discard or modify anything in the Reforms scheme that we have published, I abandoned the idea of asking the Cabinet to assent to principles on which the Committee should work, but even this has been unsuccessful . . . I tell you again in all sincerity that I am starting as a mem-

[1] Letter dated February 14th, 1919.

ber of this Committee with every desire to produce a Bill which you can support whole-heartedly. Your share in the drafting of the announcement makes it imperative that you should have a share in carrying it out."

Lord Curzon was not to be shaken in his decision. "I can press you no further," Mr. Montagu wrote on February the 17th "but I take a very serious view of your statement that you cannot consent either to become a member or to state your objections or suggestions to a Committee of the Cabinet. I do not know how and when we shall ever get an agreed Government Bill at this rate."

He was unduly apprehensive. Though Lord Curzon never overcame his dislike of the measure, it is doubtful if he ever seriously contemplated resignation over it. When the Bill came up for Second Reading in the House of Lords on December the 12th, 1919, he confined himself in the main to a defence of the procedure adopted by the Government, and to a discussion of the alterations introduced into the framework of the Bill by the Joint Committee. On the merits of the scheme he said little, and that little can scarcely have been gratifying to its supporters. "This is a great experiment," he declared. "I would not have quarrelled with anybody who used the words 'daring experiment.' I am not certain that I should cavil even at the word 'rash.'" He did not think that India would be better governed under the new dispensation than it had been in the past. "I do not think that it will be so well governed. I think that the standard will tend to fall." But he realised that with "the modern ideal of Nationalism and self-determination" making in the circumstances of the times so strong an appeal, the peoples of countries such as India attached much more importance to being governed, even though not so well governed, by themselves, than they did to being even superbly governed by another race.

In the subsequent stages of the Bill which received the Royal Assent on December the 23rd, he took no part.