CHAPTER VIII

COMPULSION, SHIPPING CONTROL AND THE AIR BOARD

1915-1917

THE problem of Gallipoli was not the only one that gravely exercised the minds of those who had joined Mr. Asquith's Government in the summer of 1915. There was the question of man power which suddenly loomed up large and menacing against a background of conflicting opinion and divided counsels. During the early days of the war the difficulty had not been to secure men in adequate numbers for the army; but to train and equip those who flocked to the colours. To this end machinery had been improvised with extraordinary success. The six divisions of the British expeditionary force, which had proceeded to France in August 1914, proved to be the spear-head of an army unprecedented in the long annals of British military history, and, indeed, undreamed of in their wildest flights of imagination by previous British Ministers for War. Already thirty-five divisions were in the field, while behind them were an equal number filling the camps which had sprung up like mushrooms in a night all over the country.

But by the summer of 1915, a stage had been reached at which it was realised that the very success which had attended the improvisation of this vast army was going to be responsible for a further problem—that of keeping this new and unforeseen Colossus in existence. The wastage of war had to be made good; and already the extravagant wastage in the field was outrunning the renewals from home. The war was becoming a war of attrition; and to some at least it was becoming clear that, unless the most economical use was made of the man power of the nation, there was imminent danger

of defeat from pure exhaustion. Great Britain had never, of course, been organised for such a war, though a few leading men—and prominent among them, as we have seen, Lord Curzon—had pictured dimly to themselves the possibility of tremendous and wholly unexampled drafts being made on the manhood of the nation, and had done their best to prepare their countrymen for it.

Lord Roberts who had organised and led the campaign in favour of National Service was dead; but Lord Curzon and others who had given him whole-hearted support in Parliament and upon the platform now renewed their efforts within the walls of the Council Room. On July the 11th, Lord Curzon referred to the difficulties in which he found himself in a letter to Lord Lamington—"The majority of the Cabinet is strongly anti-compulsion, and we should have split up by forcing that issue now. K. is against it because he wants to get the glory of winning the war throughout. But he won't." Whether Lord Curzon was right in his diagnosis of the cause of Lord Kitchener's reluctance to support conscription is of little importance. What was of importance was the fact that Lord Kitchener, who could undoubtedly have carried the Cabinet and the country with him had he given a lead in the matter, remained silent, morose and uncertain.

As the days wore on and nothing was done, Lord Curzon found the uncertainty of the situation increasingly trying. "May I add," he wrote at the end of a letter to the Prime Minister early in August, "that before very long I—if no other—must bring up the question of compulsory service and seek a decision from the Cabinet? The position of myself and some others—holding the views that we do—is not easy, and if we allow the matter to be definitely shelved, might become intolerable." The matter was accordingly faced. "We are discussing in Cabinet the different questions to which you allude," he told Lord Lamington a little later, "and I believe, myself, that those with whom I act, though in the numerical minority, will ultimately prevail. But, of course, we are told that compulsion instead of saving our finances will ultimately ruin them!"

The divisions in the Cabinet were unfortunately reflected in the controversy which sprang up over the question of man power outside. With the formation of the Coalition Government a vigo-

rous campaign in favour of compulsion, led by *The Times*, had met with fierce opposition from leading organs of the Radical party. And with public opinion divided and irresolute the Government had been slow to act. In July legislation authorising the institution of a National Register was passed. Even this modest advance in the direction of a more scientific organisation of the man power of the nation was attacked in some quarters, on the ground that it was a cloak under cover of which the conscriptionists in the Cabinet were preparing to force compulsion upon the country. And this suspicion gave rise to a hostile demonstration at the Trades Union Congress which met in London in September.

Discussion in England, however, was powerless to stay the rapid progress of events in France; and against the arguments of the anti-compulsionists had to be set the inexorable logic of the losses of Loos. And convinced, in face of the rapidly increasing drain upon such reserves as were available, that further delay would be fatal, Lord Curzon invited those with whom he was acting in the matter to a conference at his house to consider their position. This gathering proved to be the turning point in the controversy. With the approval of the Prime Minister, Lord Derby was invited by the War Office in October to assume direction of a far reaching scheme of recruitment, based on the information which the National Register had provided. No attempt was made to disguise the meaning of this fresh appeal to the patriotism of the people. It was frankly admitted to be the last effort on behalf of voluntary service; and in November Mr. Asquith gave a pledge to the married men who came forward in response to it, that they would not be called upon to fulfil their undertaking until the unmarried men who were eligible had first been enrolled. It seemed that this pledge could only mean that, in the event of any considerable number of eligible single men failing to come forward voluntarily to attest under Lord Derby's scheme, compulsion would be applied to ensure their doing so.

Yet opposition in the Cabinet was far from dead; and though by the middle of December it was clear that the Derby scheme had failed—it was estimated that 650,000 single men of military age remained unattested—Lord Curzon was still in doubt as to the issue.

He was faced, indeed, during the closing days of the year with the necessity of taking one of those fateful decisions which throughout his life he had found so difficult. In the event of the anti-compulsionists in the Cabinet carrying the day, should he sever his connection with the Government? There is good reason to suppose that he would have done so. On December the 27th, he received from the Prime Minister an intimation that it was the King's intention to confer upon him a Knighthood of the Garter. To few men would the refusal of such an honour have been harder. Not only did it make an almost irresistible appeal to his passion for the trappings of life, of which something has been said in earlier chapters, but it constituted an exceptional recognition of public service which had lost nothing of its attraction in his eyes because on his return from India, when it had been secretly but fiercely coveted, it had been withheld. Yet now that it was actually within his grasp, he seriously contemplated the prospect of having to forego it. On the very day on which he received the Prime Minister's letter, a Compulsory Service Bill came before the Cabinet for consideration. The discussion on it was inconclusive and the Cabinet rose without coming to a decision. Courtesy demanded a reply to the Prime Minister's letter; the irresolution of the Cabinet left the nature of the reply in doubt. Lord Curzon temporised; he proffered a request, which he hoped would not in the circumstances be regarded as improper, that he might be permitted to defer giving a definite answer for a few days—"when we shall all know more exactly how we stand."

Though the Cabinet had hesitated, the issue was not left long in doubt. Lord Curzon's name appeared in the Honour's List on New Year's day; on the same day it became known that Sir John Simon had left the Government; four days later a Compulsory Military Service Bill was introduced by the Prime Minister in fulfilment of his pledge to the married men, given in the House of Commons on November the 2nd, and on January the 27th the measure became law. Lord Curzon's relief was considerable. "It is a great thing to have dragged this Government over the fence of compulsion," he wrote on January the 3rd. "When I joined it in May I was the only avowed compulsionist in the Cabinet. Now we

have a majority. That is a compensation for staying on which has often been irksome and mortifying to a degree."[1]

Towards the end of January 1916, it became known that Lord Curzon had at last been given definite administrative work of the highest importance. This was the direction of the work of the Shipping Control Committee which came into existence under pressure of the demands which were being made on British shipping, not only by competing interests, military and commercial, in Great Britain itself, but by the growing necessities of her Allies. The difficulty of providing adequately for all these requirements had become steadily greater during the year 1915 as the toll of the available supplies taken by enemy raiders, submarines and mines increased.

The problem, with which the Committee found themselves confronted, was similar to that of the Israelites in Egypt—how to make bricks without straw. Their instructions were to decide on the allocation of British ships to the essential requirements both of the Allies and of the United Kingdom, and to make representations to the Cabinet with regard to the tonnage required for naval and military purposes. These terms of reference seemed to predicate an available margin of tonnage to be allocated, whereas no margin in fact existed. On the contrary, a careful comparison made by the Committee in the form of a balance sheet, between the total demands made and the resources available from which to meet them, showed an actual deficit amounting at a conservative estimate to 3,000,000 tons. And the first problem which the Committee set themselves to solve was that of converting this alarming deficit into a surplus.

They quickly came to the conclusion that there was only one way in which this could be done, and that was by restricting drastically the quantity of goods imported into the country. And as a result of a careful examination of the question from this point of view, they recommended that, for a period of three months from March the 31st, 1916, the import of all commodities other than those comprised in certain clearly defined categories, should be definitely prohibited. The proposal was certainly a bold one and the reception accorded to it, if not encouraging, was not altogether unexpected. The Board of Trade considered the administrative and

[1]Letter to Lord Lamington.

political difficulties in the way of so heroic a remedy insuperable, and declined to adopt it—a decision which was communicated to his Committee by Lord Curzon from a bed of sickness:

> "I am liable to severe back pains," he explained in writing to the Secretary, "and I had one of these seizures last night which will keep me in bed for a few days. I saw Runciman yesterday . . . As I expected, the Board of Trade are quite unable to accept the bold and extensive prohibition of imports which we have proposed. It would involve us in immediate rows of a desperate nature, not merely with trades and interests in this country as well as with the War Office, Munitions Department, etc.; but also with our Allies abroad. The calculations in our draft, which were based upon the hypothetical acceptance of this scheme, fall very largely to the ground."[1]

In these circumstances the Committee fell back for the time being upon a number of other devices for easing the situation, chief among them being the acceleration of merchant shipbuilding; the felling of timber in Great Britain for home requirements in place of importation from abroad; the obtaining of stone and timber in France itself to meet the huge local demand for such things there; and insistence upon the more economical use of tonnage by the naval and military authorities. As a result of their exertions in these directions some improvement was effected. The Admiralty, after discussion with Lord Curzon, agreed to release a number of shipbuilding yards and marine engineering works for commercial requirements; and by May, in spite of increased demands by the War Office in connection with the Salonika expedition, it had been found possible, as a result of the more economical employment of the tonnage allocated, to release from naval and military service over 130 ships of the mercantile marine.

All these devices, however, were little more than palliatives of a desperate evil, and while Great Britain was struggling to meet the necessities of her own case, the Governments of the allied coun-

[1] Letter to Mr. Clement Jones, C.B., to whom I am indebted for much information concerning the working of the Shipping Control Committee.

his Committee continued to work to this end. By the close of the year 1916, competent opinion put the probable deficiencies of carrying power during the ensuing weeks at 500,000 tons of imports a month; and almost the last act of the Shipping Control Committee, in the shape in which it had hitherto existed, was to urge once more upon the Government the vital importance of securing by the prohibition of non-essential imports, the carriage of essential supplies. This action was taken at a moment of rapid political change which was to have its influence upon Lord Curzon's own position in the Government. Mr. Asquith's Administration fell; and Lord Curzon became a member of the War Cabinet—the small Committee of Public Safety by which Mr. Lloyd George, who succeeded to the Premiership, conducted the affairs of the nation from this time on until the end of the war and the conclusion of the Peace Conference. The Shipping Control Committee became merged after Lord Curzon's resignation of the Chairmanship in a new Ministry of Shipping; but the principle for which the Committee had fought so strenuously had by then won the day. On December the 21st, 1916, within a few days of the formation of the new Government, a Cabinet Committee under Lord Curzon's chairmanship was appointed "to consider and report on the question of the restriction of imports." By the middle of February the Committee had submitted to the War Cabinet a programme of restriction involving a reduction of 6,000,000 tons of shipping a year on the actual imports of 1916; within a week the approval of the Cabinet had been obtained; and on March the 31st, 1917, the consent of the Dominions and the Foreign Governments affected having been secured, the long list of the prohibitions agreed upon was published in the *Gazette*.

The Shipping Control Committee had realised from the first how much they owed to Lord Curzon's administrative ability and prestige, and when, in the early summer of 1916, it was rumoured that his talents and driving force were likely to be required elsewhere, they passed a Resolution urging him not to leave them, even if he felt obliged to give a portion of his time to other matters, and offering to relieve him as far as possible of routine work. Lord Curzon was genuinely pleased.

"I desire to express to the Committee my sincere sense of the honour they have done me in passing the Resolution which I have just received. My natural inclination would have been to resign a position to which I do so little justice. But if the Committee think that I can further their cause by taking up their important cases before the War Committee, I will gladly stay on until the Prime Minister or public outcry turns me out. In the meantime I am most grateful to the Committee for their willingness to add to their own labours in order to spare me. My Air Board meets every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon and renders it impossible for me to be absent on those days."[1]

For some time past the administration of the Air Service had been a source of dissatisfaction. There was, in fact, no separate Air Service at all, the army and the navy each employing air corps as auxiliary branches of their own. With a view to prevent overlapping and waste a Co-ordinating Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Derby had been appointed in February 1916, to adjust relations between the War Office and the Admiralty in respect of supplies for the Air Service. Lord Curzon, who had made a study of the question, had condemned the Committee from the start as a perfectly useless half-measure; had pointed out in a Note drawn up for the War Committee and subsequently circulated to the Cabinet, that such a Committee would lack authority, would spend its time trying to arbitrate between the different Departments, would be powerless to evolve a policy or help materially to end the war; and had boldly advocated the creation of an Air Department with an Air Minister at its head. He possessed the vision which enabled him to grasp the immense potentialities of aerial warfare. He regarded the immediate organisation of the air forces of the country for long distance flights against the enemy as one of the most imperative demands of the situation. He brushed aside as irrelevant all discussion of the ethics of reprisals. No Englishman wanted to kill innocent men, women or children. But they did want to bombard, injure, and destroy German military stations, camps, railway centres, arsenals, factories and workshops.

[1] Letter to Mr. Clement Jones, C.B., May 25th, 1916.

He was convinced that, with proper organisation, it should long since have been possible to have had an air fleet over Essen. "That" he declared, "would produce a greater commotion in Germany than the capture of many miles of German trenches." But the potentialities of aerial attack would never materialise without a proper exercise of authority, initiative, unity of action and control; and he saw little hope of these qualities being displayed by a Committee composed in the main of representatives of the War Office and the Admiralty, since there could be no real initiative where there was confused and uncertain responsibility.

His forecast was an accurate one. Its terms of reference were too narrow to enable the Committee to decide any question of policy, and it possessed neither the executive power nor the authority which might have enabled it to bridge the fundamental disagreement which existed between two distinct branches of what should have been one service, each having its own organisation, *esprit de corps* and aspirations. After a few weeks of futile endeavour Lord Derby therefore resigned; and Lord Curzon renewed his representations to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

He again urged the creation of a new Department; but since he was aware of the doubts which the Prime Minister harboured about the proposed Air Ministry, fortified as such doubts were by the steady opposition of both navy and army, he put forward as a possible alternative a less revolutionary measure. Taking the Shipping Control Committee as his model, he suggested the appointment of an Air Board which should be charged with the duty of formulating a policy and of advising the Government in due course for or against the creation of an Air Ministry. He regarded it as essential that, in the event of either the Admiralty or the War Office declining to act on the advice of the Board, the President should be at liberty to refer the matter to the War Committee. The Prime Minister anxious to do something, but fearful of doing too much, accepted the compromise, and in May the new Air Board with Lord Curzon at its head came into being. Apart from its President the Board consisted of two naval and two military representatives, and of two civilians, Lord Sydenham and Major Baird, M.P., who spoke for it in the House of Commons.

The Board set to work with the energy to be expected of any body functioning under Lord Curzon's direction and control. But the old conditions which had rendered Lord Derby's Committee impotent remained unaltered; the two branches of the air force were still under the control of the War Office and the Admiralty; and though the Air Board was invested with greater authority than the Co-ordinating Committee had been, it yet lacked the full power of compelling either Department to carry out its recommendations. The powers delegated to it by the War Committee were not those of a plenipotentiary—in the event of disagreement it could only refer matters back to the War Committee for decision.

When putting forward his suggestion for an Air Board, Lord Curzon had pointed out that in the analogous case of the Shipping Control Committee questions of the first importance were constantly referred to it by the Foreign Office, the Board of Trade and other Departments, not merely for examination but for *decision*; and he had added that unless the constitution of an Air Board was welcome to the War Office and the Admiralty, and unless both those Departments would agree to facilitate a task which must in any case be "most difficult and often odious . . . it would be futile to set it up and no sane man would be found to accept the chair."[1] A very brief experience of the working of the new Board satisfied him that, far from its operations being welcome to the Admiralty, they were viewed by that Department with suspicion and dislike. The fact of the matter was that during the opening days of the war the Admiralty, under the enterprising direction of Mr. Winston Churchill, had strayed into strange fields of activity. Among other miscellaneous and, as some thought, incongruous tasks, it had been charged with, or, at any rate, had assumed responsibility for, the aerial defence of London. There were in reality better reasons for this allocation of duties than were apparent to the casual eye. The strain upon the Admiralty due to war expansion, though sufficiently great, was less severe than it was upon the War Office; and their intelligence system was better adapted for obtaining warning of the approach of air-craft across the seas. It was not altogether surprising, therefore, that when a new body came into

[1] Memorandum submitted to the Cabinet, April 16th, 1916.

being which seemed to be arrogating to itself wide powers in connection with aerial warfare generally, the Admiralty should be at little pains to disguise the fact that they resented its interference in matters which they regarded as lying in a special sense within their own province.

For five months Lord Curzon strove to effect the purpose for which the Air Board had been set up, and at the end of that period he recorded his failure in an elaborate Report to the Prime Minister and the War Committee. "I am in now for my big fight for the expansion of the Air Board," he wrote on October the 25th. "It is really a fight with the Admiralty, and if my proposals, in which my colleagues Lord Sydenham and Major Baird entirely concur, are not accepted by the War Committee (our military colleagues also entirely accept them) we shall resign."[1] The Report was written by himself in consultation with, and with the approval of, his two civilian colleagues. No part was played in its compilation by the representatives of the War Office and the Admiralty who had seats upon the Board, since their official position would have rendered it difficult for them, in Lord Curzon's opinion, to pass judgment upon many of the points which it would be necessary to raise. By far the greater part of the thirty pages of print covered by the Report was devoted, in fact, to an elaboration of the main conclusion to which, as a result of the experience of the past five months, Lord Curzon and his civilian colleagues had been forced. This conclusion was stated and re-stated, buttressed with evidence and supported by illustration; presented to the reader, in short, with the eloquence and skill which never failed Lord Curzon when framing an indictment or arguing a case. In its simplest shape it was formulated as follows—that "no expansion of the work of the Air Board, no complete fulfilment of the charge with which it was entrusted, and no adequate provision for the urgent necessities of the future were possible so long as the Admiralty adopted its present attitude towards the Air Board, and so long as the administration of that branch of the Air Service which was in the hands of the Admiralty was conducted on the present lines."

The Admiralty had passed under the control of a man who was

[1] Letter to Mrs. Duggan.

not one whit behind the President of the Air Board in dialectical skill; and Mr. Balfour, while disclaiming either the time or the inclination for controversy, thought that it would hardly be respectful either to the authors of the Report or to his colleagues on the War Committee, if he were to let it pass wholly without comment. Of the Air Board's performances of which they had little to say themselves, he had still less to write. But to do them justice they were much more interested in abusing the Admiralty than in praising themselves.

> "I do not suppose that in the whole history of the country any Government Department has ever indulged so recklessly in the luxury of inter-departmental criticism. The temptation no doubt has often existed; but hitherto it has been more or less successfully resisted. In the case of the Air Board, however, the ardour of youth and the consciousness of superior abilities have completely broken through the ordinary barriers of self-control. The Army also is mentioned, but only for the purpose of artistic contrast. It is the virtuous apprentice, the lustre of whose shining merits serves but to darken the shadows in the character of his wicked rival."

Lord Curzon's indictment of the Admiralty for their alleged failure to deal more effectively with Zeppelin raids and to appreciate the value of lighter-than-air machines as an adjunct of naval warfare itself, was lightly dismissed—"imaginary history is very easy to write, and quite impossible to refute . ."

This reply by the First Lord of the Admiralty elicited a rejoinder from the President of the Air Board; and for a time the gloom which overhung a domestic controversy, in itself deplorable, was lighted up for those who of necessity looked on while their chiefs monopolised the stage, by the sparks which flew from the clash of steel upon steel as the rapiers met in thrust and parry. It is impossible to say what would have been the outcome of the controversy had Lord Curzon remained President of the Air Board and Mr. Balfour First Lord of the Admiralty. Neither of them was, however, destined to play a leading part in the final stages of the controversy,

for at this juncture the tide of affairs took a turn which swept both of them to other shores. On December the 5th, Mr. Asquith resigned, and Mr. Lloyd George became Prime Minister. Mr. Balfour moved from the Admiralty to the Foreign Office and Lord Curzon became Lord President of the Council, Leader of the House of Lords and a member of the small War Cabinet, which was, henceforth, to devote itself unremittingly to the conduct of the war. It was, however, Lord Curzon's view which in the end prevailed; for in January 1918 the changes for which he had from the first contended were brought about. An Air Ministry was created which in course of time acquired a position analogous to that of the War Office, with an Air Council corresponding to the Army Council, in control of a single service formed by the amalgamation of the Naval and Military wings of the Air Force. Thus was his judgment vindicated and his importunity justified.