MR. MONTAGUE ON INDIAN ADMINISTRATION.

SPEECH IN MESOPOTAMIA DEBATE.

In the House of Commons on July 27 the first consideration which I would like to address to the House is that we are discussing the second occasion which has arisen during the War in which politicians, soldiers, doctors, and civil servants come in for severe censure in this country, which started at the beginning of the War wholly unprepared for, and wholly unexpectant of a conflict of this kind, has, despite the atmosphere of self criticism in which we live, somehow or other through all these mistakes and muddles, developed into the terror of all our enemies, and the most conspicuous enemy and the most successful enemy that Germany possesses. It does seem to me that that is a remarkable fact. When we consider the Reports of Commissions of this kind, after all, we are now discussing one phase in the most successful campaign of the War, the one campaign in which the objective has been achieved To-day the British flag is flying at Bagdad. Where else has there been any comparable success? And these are only the early stages which played a preliminary part in that great success which has been won by General Maude. I agree with the hon. Gentleman who spoke last and my hon. and gallant Friend (Colonel Sir M. Sykes) who spoke from the Back Bench opposite. There are many grave disadvantages in the appointment of these Commissions. As my hon. and gallant Friend said they are bound by their terms of reference to act exactly as the Allies have acted throughout this War, and to consider separately little bits of the picture rather than bring it into true perspective with all the other events which are happening in other parts of the world. After all, if our conspicuous success had been continuous, if General Nixon had reached Bagdad without a reverse, would there ever have been a Mesopotamia Commission? And yet there is no comment upon the fact that just after the battle of Ctesiphon—I think I am right in the date—Gallipoli was evacuated and the whole picture was changed by the liberation of the Turkish forces in the Peninsula. That is my first criticism on the Commission, that you cannot get a true perspective by examining as an isolated thing one theatre of the world War; and the second point that I make against these Commissions has been rendered obvious by all the discussion which took place in the early part of the afternoon. As a result of the publication of the Report, necessarily without evidence, serious charges are made against individuals who have never had an opportunity of learning the evidence against them.

The result is that if you wish to take action against these individuals you are confronted with difficulties with which my right hon. and learned Friend dealt earlier this afternoon, and I submit that if you are going to have any further proceedings it would have been far better to postpone the question until your sittings are completed, because now, whatever Court sits, it must not only have the prejudice of this discussion, but the prejudice of the public discussion upon the Report. I join with my right hon. and learned Friend beside me in his suggestion that of the two alternatives offered that of the right hon. Gentleman the Attorney-General is much the more satisfactory. My third complaint against this Commission is that in the terms of reference they are asked to attach responsibility to departments of the Government, but what the Commission did was to attach responsibility not to departments of the Government but to individuals. The house and the country are sapping in that way the service of co-operative effort and departmental responsibility in this country. Men are asking for instructions in writing, men are safeguarding themselves by letters and by minutes, men dare not give advice because they are afraid of a Commission sitting upon their action. Under the old system the Parliamentary Chief of the Department was responsible for what occurred, and under his rule he cloaked with his authority all those who worked for him. Has that gone by the board? This man and that man may come to be censured, although working seriously and courageously to the best of his endeavours. I believe that by that means you are doing irreparable injury to our system of Government; and you want to weigh that well against any good you can achieve on the other side.

After all, do not let us pass a verdict upon the share of these men in this story because of the fact that we know now that in this part of the campaign, at all events, they were defeated. Do not let us punish men for failure. After all, what was it that the serious defects in the equipment and the plans of the advance on Bagdad really became obvious? I do not say that there were not serious shortages, horrible shortages of necessary supplies before they could be successful, but what I do say is that if there had been no defeat at Ctesiphon and if General Nixon had succeeded in getting to Bagdad most of the evils which overtook the Army in retreat would not have occurred. Therefore, the greatest charge that you can bring against General Nixon is that he failed to obtain success and took serious risks. I do not believe that you will ever beat the Germans unless you take risks, and I think at any rate that the Press atmosphere, if not the House of Commons atmosphere, on this Report is a direct invitation to everybody to take no risks at all. Supposing—which God forbid!—we should have a similar Commission on affairs in Palestine; in the one case it would be that the advance was too quick, and in the other that the advance was possibly too slow. After all, has anybody read paragraph 9, page 18 of the Report, where it describes General Nixon going in the direction of Nasariyeh. The paragraph says:

"The heat was terrific; still General Nixon deemed it expedient to carry on the enterprise. Major-General Gorringe, who was in charge of this column, succeeded in capturing Nasariyeh on the 25th July, with 950 prisoners, seventeen guns and much booty. These operations were initiated by the General on the spot, supported by the Commander-in-Chief and the Viceroy of India, and acquiesced in by the Secretary of State. They appeared to us to be sound from both a military and political view. Our casualties amounted to 533 of all ranks.

In that cold and colourless language is described one of the most courageous and brilliantly executed exploits in all war, accomplished by General Sir John Nixon, who has served his country well, who has served it with distinction and who has played a vital part in the greater successes of his better equipped successors, and certainly he ought not to be censured and punished, and driven out of the Army on the isolated circumstances after the battle of Ctesiphon, but we should acknowledge the incomparable services which that same soldier has rendered to his country.

From Sir John Nixon I will turn to Lord Hardinge. There can be no doubt in the mind of anybody who is acquainted with recent occurrences in India that Lord Hardinge when he left India left it by the universal opinion of all Indians, certainly by the overwhelming majority of Indians, people and Princes, as the most popular Viceroy of modern times. There have been strong predecessors of his, but when he came to India irritation was rife, public opinion had been slighted and ignored, he showed himself from the beginning to the end of his Viceroyalty to be a Viceroy upon whose sympathy and assistance Indians could rely, not only in India but in the whole world, and, as my hon. Friend has said, through personal bereavement and attempted assassination, he stuck to his post to the end of his prolonged term, never faltered, never losing courage, and he left having achieved much for India, and now he is censured by this document, for what, for the fact that he relied too much upon those who had been chosen to give him military advice. Among many things we have never decided in this country are the relations between politicians and soldiers. On the same day you may read two newspapers: sometimes, I think, you will read in one newspaper trenchant criticisms against the Government for overruling or disregarding or attempting to hamper the action of their military advisers, and on the other hand you will find peremptory demands that they should hamper, overrule or criticise their military advisers. The two accusations are not in harmony with one another, and the true relation of the responsibility of politicians and soldiers has never been satisfactorily decided in this country, or as far as I know, by any Government. But the mistake that Lord Hardinge made, if it be a mistake, is the same mistake as my right hon. Friend made when he relied upon Lord French and Sir Douglas Haig, and the same mistake which I presume the present Prime Minister is making when he relies now on the advice of Sir Douglas Haig. May I give an analogy of what I mean? When the Prime Minister or other say that the defence of London against air raids depends upon the number of aeroplanes wanted at the front, who says how many aeroplanes are wanted in France?—the Commander-in-Chief.

Supposing a committee of inquiry sitting afterwards discovered that in a particular month—I do not make the allegation for one moment—that there was certain aeroplanes which might have been used for the defence of London lying idle in a particular part of the front, would the responsibility be that of Sir Douglas Haig or the Prime Minister? What is the alternative to a politician relying on his military advisers? If he cannot trust them, let him choose others. All I say is that Lord Hardinge's reliance upon Sir Beauchamp Duff is not different from that of my right hon. Friend opposite. Lord Hardinge in this regard cannot be treated as an isolated figure. I think the real charge against the Indian Government is a charge in which I want to include Lord Hardinge and my right hon. Friend opposite and his predecessor in office, Lord Crewe. It is so easy to be wise after the event. The real charge against the Indian Administration seems to me to be this: At the beginning of the War I believe there was too great doubt of the loyalty and co-operation of the Indian people. The "Times" newspaper, day after day for sessions and months past, had articles pointing out that sedition was supposed to be rife. It loomed certainly much too large in the discussions of this House. It misled the Germans into thinking India was disloyal, and the deliberate policy of the Government in regard to India during the War seems to me to have been, let us make the least contribution as we dare as far from India as is possible. Keep the War away from India; we will take Indian soldiers and put them into France, and lend Indian civilians to the Home Government. India geographically as a country should be content with defending its own frontiers, and in maintaining order—a very great responsibility—inside the continent of India. Apart from that, it was to do nothing near itself in the War. The people of India were even not asked to contribute to the War, although they asked Parliament that they should be allowed to contribute. I am told that volunteers were asked for in Bengal for certain purposes, and afterwards were told they were not wanted. I am talking now of the beginning of the War. The policy was that we did not know whether India should co-operate in this War or not; we did not trust them; we dare not trust them—I am not criticising them from that point of view—let us keep the War far from India. Then events proved that the Indian people were anxious to co-operate, and the share of the Indian people in this War, from beginning to the end has always been greater than the share of the Indian Government in this War, and always more willing than the share of the Indian Government. When this atmosphere had been created, when Indian troops had been sent to France and Indian civilians sent here, and when India, as Lord Hardinge said, had been "bled white," suddenly there comes a change of policy, and we have this expedition to Bagdad, a complete reversal of policy, unaccompanied, so far as I can see, with any big enough effort to put the Government and organisation of India, which was then on a peace footing, on a war footing, for an aggressive war comparable to the change in policy. Therefore, the machinery was overturned; there was no equipment for war, and when expeditions were sent abroad they ought to have been equipped in a way comparable to the equipment of the expeditionary forces in this country and in our Dominions. As a matter of fact, here comes what I regard a true reduction from this source. The machinery of Government in this country, with its unwritten constitution, and the machinery of Government in our Dominions has proved itself sufficiently elastic, sufficiently capable of modification, to turn a peace-pursuing instrument into a war-making instrument; it is the Government of India alone which does not seem capable of transformation, and I regard that as based upon the fact that the machinery is statute written machinery. The Government of India is too wooden, too iron, too inelastic, too ante-deluvian, to be any use for the modern purposes we have in view. I do not believe that anybody could ever support the Government of India from the point of view of modern requirements. But it won't do. Nothing serious had happened since the Indian mutiny, the public was not interested in Indian affairs, and it required a crisis to direct attention to the fact that the Indian Government is an indefensible system of Government. I remember when I first came to the House, when my hon. friend opposite—he will perhaps forgive me for reminding him of the fact,—and I were members, of one of those Committees which Members of Parliament form themselves into and he spent the whole of his time in trying to direct his colleagues' attention to the necessity of thinking about India. He urged people to go to the Debates about it. I was one of those whom he let to go to the early Debates, when Lord Morley took charge of its affairs. Was he successful? Does anybody remember the Indian Budget Debates before the War? Upon that day the House was always empty India did not matter, and the Debates were left to people on the one side whom their enemies sometimes called "bureaucrats," and on the other side to people whom their enemies sometimes called "seditionists" until it almost came to be disreputable to take part in India n Debates. It required a crisis of this kind to realise how important Indian affairs were. After all, is the House of Commons to be blamed for that? What was the Indian Budget Debate? It was a purely academic discussion which had no effect whatever upon events in India, conducted after the events that were being discussed, had taken place. How can you now defend the fact that the Secretaries of State for India alone of all the occupants of the Front Bench, with the possible exception of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, are not responsible to this House for their salaries, and do not come here with their estimates in order that the House of Commons may express its opinion?

Mr. Dillon: I have said so over and over again in this House.

Mr. Montagu: I know, and I am not blaming anybody for it. What I am saying now is in the light of these revelations of this inelasticity of Indian Government. However much you could gloss over those indefensible proceedings in the past, the time has now come to alter them. Does the hon. Member resent my advocacy of a change?

Mr. Dillon: For twenty years a small group of us have been demanding that the salary of the Secretary of State for India should be put on the estimates and the two Front Benches always solidly combined against us.

Sir J. D. Rees: Was there not justification for that in the tone of the Debates?

Mr. Dillon:—That may be your opinion.

Mr. S. MacNeill:—You (Sir J D Rees) contributed very largely.

Mr. Montagu:—The tone of these Debates was unreal, unsubstantial and ineffective. If estimates for India, like estimates for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Colonial Secretary were to be discussed on the floor of the House of Commons, the Debates on India would be as good as the Debates on foreign affairs. After all, what is the difference? Has it ever been suggested to the people of Australia that they should pay the salary of the Secretary of State for the Colony. Why should the whole cost of that building itself, in Charles Street, including the building itself, be an item of the Indian tax-payers burden rather than that of this House of Commons and the people of the country? If I may give one example of the inconvenience of the existing system, I would refer to the Indian Cotton Duties debate which occurred in this House this year. The Cotton Duties had been imposed and there was no possible way of undoing that. That is the attitude in which we always debate Indian affairs. You have got no opportunity of settling the policy. It has been sometimes questioned whether a democracy can rule an Empire. I say that in this instance the democracy has never had the opportunity of trying. But even if the House of Commons were to give orders to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of State is not his own master. In matters vitally affecting India, he can be overruled by a majority of the Council. I may be told that the cases are very rare in which the Council has differed from the Secretary of State for India. I know one case anyhow, where it was a very near thing, and where the action of the Council might without remedy have involved the Government of India in a policy out of a harmony with the declared policy of the Home Government. And these gentlemen are appointed for seven years, and can only be controlled from the Houses of Parliament by Resolution carried in both Houses calling on them for their resignations. The whole system of the India Office is designed to prevent control by the House of Commons for fear that there might be too advanced a Secretary of State. I do not say that it is possible to govern India through the intervention of the Secretary of State with no expert advice, but what I do say is that in this epoch now after the Mesopotamia Report, he must get his expert advice in some other way than by this Council of men, great men though no doubt they always are, who come home after lengthy service in India to spend the first year of their retirement as members of the Council of India. No wonder that the practice of telegrams backward and forward and of private telegrams, commented upon by the Mesopotamia Report, has come into existence.

Does any Member of this House know much about procedure in the India Office, how the Council sits in Committees, how there is interposed between the Civil servant and the political chiefs the Committees of the India Council, and how the draft on some simple question comes up through the Civil servant to the Under-Secretary of State, and may be referred back to the Committee which sends it back to him, and it then goes to the Secretary of State, who then sends it to India Council, which may refer it back to the Committee, and two or three times in its history may go backwards and forwards. I say that that is a system so cumbrous, so designed to prevent efficiency and change that in the light of these revelations it cannot continue to exist. I speak very bitterly, and I speak with some feelings of this subject, for in the year 1912 a very small modification in this machinery was attempted by Lord Crewe, and a Bill was introduced into the House of Commons. On the motion of Lord Curzon, it was thrown out on Second Reading in another place. Its authorship was attributed to me, and I was supposed to have forced it on my Noble Chief, because I found that the machinery of the India Office was not good for my own purposes. My only desire then, as it is now, was to try and find something which had some semblance of speedy action. Government offices are often accused of circumlocution and red-tape. I have been to the India Office and to other offices. I tell this House that the statutory organisation of the India Office produces an apotheosis of circumlocution and red-tape, beyond the dreams of and ordinary citizen. Now I will come to one particular detail of the India Office administration before I pass from this subject. I think the Mesopotamia Report stigmatises the conduct of the Stores Department as in the one respect unbusinesslike. The Stores Department of the India Office is a Department whose sole function—a most important function certainly—is the purchase of millions of pounds worth of equipment for the Indian Army clothing and such like. It is presided over by a Civil servant; in the year 1912 or 1913 a vacancy occurred in that office, and it was suggested then that the proper man to superintend mere purchasing operations of that kind was a business man, an institution of the policy always associated with the Prime Minister. Great difficulties appeared in the way of the appointment of a business man, and a Civil servant was appointed. But it was agreed then that the next occupant of the office should be a business man. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told me yesterday that a Civil servant had again been appointed.

The Secretary of State for India (Mr. Chamberlain): I never heard of any such agreement.

Mr. Montagu: My right hon. Friend is not responsible for any agreement come to by his predecessor. I say it was then agreed as a policy that a businessman should be appointed to succeed the Civil servant. I am only giving this history to point out that now, after the Report of the Mesopotamia Commission, I would suggest to him that the time has come to abolish the Stores Department of the India Office, when the work that it is doing of clothing the Indian Army is comparable entirely to the work which is now being done by the Ministry of Munitions and the War Office for equipping our own Armies and the Armies of our Allies and that the sooner all these multifarious supply Departments are abolished and the whole business concentrated under one roof and under one office the more efficient will the supplies be.

I come now to the question of the Government of India from India. I think that the control of this House over the Secretary of State ought to be more real, and I would say further that the independence of the Viceroy from the Secretary of State ought to be much greater. You cannot govern a great country by the despatch of telegrams. The Viceroy ought to have far greater powers devolved to him than is at present the case. When I say that, I do submit that you cannot leave the Viceroy as it is. Are there four much more busy men in this country than His Majesty the King, the Prime Minister, who sits opposite, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and the Speaker of the House of Commons? Yet this analogous positions of those four posts are held by one man in India, and he is expected to be responsible and closely to investigate the conduct of a great expedition like this! You cannot find an individual who can undertake the work. Your executive system in India has broken down because it is not constituted for the complicated duties of modern Government but you cannot reorganise the Executive Government of India, remodel the Viceroyalty, and give the Executive Government more freedom from this House of Commons and the Secretary of State unless you make it more responsible to the people of India. Really the whole system has got to be explored in the light of the Mesopotamian Commission. It has proved to be of too much rigidity. My hon. and gallant Friend opposite in his Minority Report, I think—certainly in the questions he has asked in this House—seems to advocate a complete Home Rule for India. I do not believe there is any demand for that in India on a large scale. I do not believe it will be possible, or certainly be a cure for these evils.

Commander Wedgewood:—I want that to be the goal towards which we are driving.

Mr. Montagu: As a goal, I see a different picture; I see the great self-governing Dominions and Provinces of India organised and co-ordinated with the great Principalities, the existing Principalities—and perhaps new ones—not one great Home Rule country, but a series of self-governing Provinces and Principalities, federated by one central Government. But whatever be the object of your rule in India, the universal demand of those Indians whom I have met and corresponded with is that you should state it. Having stated it, you should give some instalment to show that you are in real earnest; some beginning of the new plan which you intend to pursue that gives you the opportunity of giving greater representative institutions in some form or other to the people of India, of giving them greater control of their Executive, of remodelling the Executive—that affords you the opportunity of giving the Executive more liberty from home, because you cannot leave your harrassed officials responsible to two sets of people. Responsibility here at home was intended to replace or to be a substitute for responsibility in India. As you increase responsibility in India you can lessen that responsibility at home.

But I am positive of this, your great claim to continue the illogical system of Government by which we have governed India in the past or is that it was efficient. "It has been proved to be not efficient." It has been proved to be not sufficiently elastic to express the will of the Indian people; to make them into a warring nation as they wanted to be. The history of this War shows that you can rely upon the loyalty of the Indian people to the British Empire—if you ever before doubted it! If you want to use that loyalty you must take advantage of that love of country which is a religion in India, and you must give them that higher opportunity of controlling their own destinies, not merely by councils which cannot act, but by control, by growing control of the Executive itself. Then in your next war—if we ever have war in your next crisis, through times of peace, you will have a contended India, an India equipped to help. Believe me, Mr. Speaker, it is not a question of expediency, it is not a question of desirability. Unless you are prepared to remodel, in the light of modern experience, this century-old and cumbrous machine, then, I believe, I verily believe, that you will lose your right to control the destinies of the Indian Empire.