

The Meaning of the Indian Constitutional Proposals

By R. Palme Dutt (London)

The proposals of British imperialism for the new "Constitution" to be imposed in India have at last been published—seven years after the original appointment of the **Simon Commission** to prepare them, fifteen years after the previous Government of India Act which was announced as a step towards the rapid advance to "Dominion Status" in India, and seventeen years after the British government's promise in 1917 to establish "responsible government" in India. The present proposals represent the most reactionary constitution that has yet been devised to rivet imperialist rule in India. These seventeen years of constitutional "progress," from the liberal promises of the Declaration of August, 1917, made under the fear of the influence of the Russian Revolution, to the present iron-heel "Constitution," afford a striking demonstration of the "progress backwards" of British imperialism in India.

What lies between 1917 and 1934? To understand this development it is necessary to understand the development of the real situation in India which underlies these constitutional forms and manoeuvres. For between 1917 and 1934 a transformation has taken place in the whole situation in India. This transformation consists in the emergence of the revolutionary workers' and peasants' movement, and the beginning of the transition to the hegemony of the working class, in place of the national bourgeoisie, in the mass struggle. This is the transformation which underlies the change-over of British policy from the liberal promises of 1917 to the cast-iron reaction of 1934.

In 1917-19 British imperialism, terrified at the prospect of the developing revolutionary wave in India and throughout the world, and realising the weakness of its social basis hitherto on the feudal reaction of the princes and landlords, sought the alliance of the Indian bourgeoisie, represented by the Liberals and the National Congress. This was the meaning of the **Montagu-Chelmsford Report**. It is only necessary to compare the extremely polite and conciliatory attitude of that Report to the National Congress, the painstaking discussion through whole sections of all its programme and proposals, with the present-day curt dismissal of the entire national movement as unworthy of detail consideration or potentially seditious, to see the change that has taken place. At that time of panic the most Conservative politicians were the most lavish in their promises. It was **Curzon** who wrote in with his own hand the phrase "responsible government" into the Declaration of August, 1917. It was **Churchill** and **Birkenhead** who broadcasted the talk of "Dominion Status" for India.

But since then this whole plan of British imperialism for alliance with the Indian bourgeoisie has undergone profound modification—to the bitter indignation and disillusionment of the Indian bourgeoisie, who now speak loudly of British "perfidy" and "betrayal" (a cooler consideration of political realities should open their eyes to the fact that the only "betrayal" which matters is, not the perfectly normal tactical change of the imperialist rulers after the immediate moment of danger is passed, but their

own real betrayal of the mass struggle, when they held it in their leadership and strangled it for fear of losing their privileged position, and that the subsequent scant consideration they are receiving from the British ruling class is only the usual traitor's reward after he has done his service). The plan of the Constitution still remains to draw the Indian bourgeoisie into collaboration with a few minor bribes. But the bribes and concessions have been steadily whittled down to minute proportions; the open coercive aspect and domination of the imperialist dictatorship is now heavily emphasised and underlined in every sphere.

Why has this modification taken place? Between these two stages has developed the whole process of the post-war mass struggle in India, and, in particular, the two great periods of mass struggle of 1919-1922 and of 1928-1932. This process, and in particular the post-1928 period, has opened the eyes of the British ruling class to profound changes rapidly developing in the whole situation, and has convinced them of the following lessons:—

First, that the revolutionary workers' and peasants' movement is the real force of the future in India, and that with this British imperialism can hope for no compromise, but can only rely on armed force.

Second, that the Indian bourgeoisie, represented by the National Congress, is becoming increasingly powerless to control the mass struggle, and is compelled to run to the protection of British imperialism against the masses (this was the significance of the unconditional capitulation of the Congress to the government in the Spring of this year, and the legalising of the Congress upon these terms).

Third, that a new leadership of the mass struggle, to replace the bourgeoisie, is developing in the rising Communist leadership, and that this becomes henceforth the main enemy of British imperialism (this was the significance of the Meerut trial, recognising the emergence of the new leadership; it is the significance to-day of the simultaneous legalising of the National Congress and declaring illegal of the Communist Party).

Fourth, that the Indian bourgeoisie, while compelled to unite with British imperialism against the masses in every moment of danger, remains, on the basis of its particular economic interests, irreconcilably hostile to the privileged position of British imperialism, and thus can only prove both a weak and untrustworthy ally. Hence, British imperialism, while utilising this ally for what it is worth, is compelled at the same time to build heavily on the social basis of the feudal reaction (drawing in of the Princes into the Constitution), and to emphasise strongly the open coercive aspect of its power.

This situation governs the character of the new Constitution. **The new Constitution represents the attempt to establish a cast-iron frame of British dictatorship, buttressed by the feudal reaction and by docile bourgeois elements, against the developing Indian mass-revolution.**

For this reason the most prominent feature of the new Constitution is the bristling array of Safeguards, Special Powers, Special Responsibilities, Emergency Powers, etc. (to such an extreme extent that even the semi-official "Times of India" protests that "Many safeguards are overdone").

In the name of the fight against "terrorism" (the convenient label used to cover the entire revolutionary movement), every weapon of governmental terror is put into the hands of the British Executive, and removed from any pretence of constitutional forms, not once, but many times over. Now it is a question of overriding powers in the event of any "grave menace to peace and tranquillity." Now it is a question of the autocratic independence of the police, of the judiciary, of the State services, and, above all, of the Political Police. Now it is a question of the powers of a Governor "for the purpose of combating terrorism to take under his own control any branch of government." Now it is a question of the power of the Governors, in the event of "breakdown" of the Constitution, "to take over as much or as little of the administration as seems necessary." Now it is a question of the power of the Governors "in emergencies . . . to issue Ordinances having the force of law, valid for six months, but renewable for a further six months."

Such heavy over-insurance might seem superfluous, especially as the extreme limitation of the sham "representative" institutions, the restriction of the electorate to 14 per cent. of the population, the over-weighting of the assemblies with official nominees, landlords, representatives of industry, etc., upper houses, indirect

election for the central assembly, communal division, and all the rest of it, might seem to have insured docility. But such heavy over-insurance suggests a fragile ship. **The frantic network of coercive "Safeguards" reveals in every line the overmastering fear of the Indian Revolution.**

The remaining "Safeguards" cover the privileged financial and economic interests of British imperialism in India.

The resultant sphere for the puppet Indian Ministers is small indeed. Thus at the Centre, after the reservation of Defence and Foreign Affairs, and the practical reservation of the Police and Law, there remain nominally Finance, the Post Office, Railways and Trade. Finance is, however, covered by the independence of the Central Reserve Bank under British control, together with the Governor-General's over-riding powers on behalf of "financial stability and credit"; Trade is not only similarly covered by these provisions, but also by the special provisions against discriminatory tariffs or any discriminatory economic measures against British interests; the Railways are to be under an independent Railways Board on "business" lines. Exhaustive examination would thus suggest that the Indian Ministers will be finally left with the honourable duty of conducting the Post Office.

Naturally this munificence will not satisfy the demands of the Indian bourgeoisie, who are already in full outcry over the new Constitution. It is evident, however, that the British ruling class, after the experience of the Congress leadership and capitulation in the past struggle, has formed its opinion of the practical value of the noisy indignation of the Indian bourgeoisie, when separated from the mass struggle, and has assessed their market value at a sixpenny bribe. It is also possible that even this sixpenny bribe will secure the collaboration of a considerable proportion of the bourgeois elements, who are already tumbling over each other to form their parties and enter the new assemblies. But the mass opposition to the whole new Constitution will remain unaffected; and British imperialism has given up any hopes of conciliating the mass opposition to its rule in India.

The driving force to the new phase of British policy in India has been typically the **Conservative right wing**, representing today the near-fascist wing, although the actual policy is the policy of the entire bourgeois bloc. The conflict between the Conservative Party over policy in India has revealed a steady advance in strength of the right wing, led by Churchill and Lloyd, against Baldwin; this fight has been one of the signs of the advance towards fascism in the British bourgeoisie. At the coming Conservative Conference in the beginning of December the issue will be decided between the majority report of the Committee, representing the government's policy, and the minority report of the Conservative right wing, led by Salisbury in the Committee; the differences from the point of view of the degree of reaction of the Constitution for India are of secondary importance, since most of the extreme right demands have been already accepted by the government in the successively more reactionary drafting of the proposals; but the issue for the future of British politics is of considerable importance, since the anti-democratic fight over India has thus been made the key issue for mobilising the Diehard and pro-fascist wing in British politics.

On the other side, the **Labour Party** representatives on the Committee also put in an alternative report (corresponding to the present position of the Labour Party as "Opposition"; the Labour Party in power exercised the most extreme coercive and terrorist policy against the Indian national struggle). The supposed alternative character of the report disappears on examination to questions of phrasing and details, not to any difference on the basic issues of the maintenance of British imperialist rule in India. The "Times" comment may be noted:—

"On a first reading of the alternative report, it was thought that the Labour group had a very different scheme to offer from that in the Report, but closer study of their proposals has shown that much of what they desire to incorporate in the Constitution is already implicit in the Committee's recommendations."

Governing all three reports is the fear of the Indian Revolution. And with reason. The extreme worsening of the economic situation in India under the conditions of the world crisis, the intensified agrarian crisis, the desperate sufferings of the peasants and of the workers, are driving forward the whole development to breaking point. The Director of Public Health in India, Sir

John Megaw, declared in a paper read before the Royal Asiatic Society in May of this year:—

“Sixty per cent. of the village population are poorly or badly nourished. . . . **The country is in a state of emergency which is rapidly passing towards one of crisis. . . .** The outlook for the future is gloomy to a degree, not only for the masses of the people who must face the intensified struggle for bare subsistence, but also for the upper classes whose incomes depend on the production of surplus crops and other commodities. **If the entire produce of the soil is needed to provide for the urgent needs of the cultivators, nothing will be left for the payment of rent or revenue . . . and the whole social structure of India must inevitably be rudely shaken, if not completely destroyed.**”

That is the situation lying behind the Constitutional Report.

The Report provides for the possible revision of certain details after the expiry of ten years. But before those ten years are up, the masses of India will have torn up the whole Report. With every year the path to **Soviet India** stands out ever more sharply as the only path forward for the overwhelming majority of the three hundred and fifty millions of India.