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The Probable Effect of the Covenant of the League  
of Nations on the British Empire.

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Class "A"

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The year 1919 was one of great ideals and great mistakes. Europe was molten; and the little group of statesmen who gathered at Versailles had to prepare the moulds into which the metal was to run. The castings have not cooled yet, and we cannot tell if the work has been well done; but certain notable achievements already stand out. One of these is the League of Nations. Now the League is an attempt both to realise great ideals, and to avert appalling dangers, and it is therefore liable to the faults both of idealism and of expediency; but, whether as a great attempt or a great achievement, it remains as a great step in the progress of mankind. In this League the British Empire is playing an important part, a part vital to the continuance of the League, and it is therefore bound to be greatly influenced by it. If we wish to estimate the extent and nature of this influence, we must examine first the constitutional relationship between League and Empire.

The position is remarkable. In the general assembly of the League the Empire holds six votes, exercised by Great Britain, India, and the four self-governing dominions. Each Empire-member is nominally free to use its vote as it wishes, and has the same obligations as the other members of the League; it is thus pledged to refer all disputes to the Council, and, if requested to do so, to carry out measures against a Covenant-breaking state. Each of the Empire-members has, moreover, three means of gaining representation on the Council. It may be chosen by the assembly as one of the four lesser states to nominate a member; it may be co-opted for certain discussions; and one of its own ministers may be the Empire's representative.

The Covenant thus makes membership of the League no nominal honour for the Empire; and not only does it offer great opportunities for service, but it happens also to affect the Empire in another way. Because it here touches upon an immediate

and vital problem, upon a successful solution of which the first way of interaction entirely depends, we must deal with the second way first. The problem may be stated thus: If we agree that the present constitutional relationship of the component parts of the Empire is unsatisfactory (and few would deny this), we must seek to mend matters either by establishing a more effective and satisfactory interrelationship, or by dissolving altogether such connecting bonds as now exist. It is recognised, however, that the latter course would entail the loss of certain advantages which membership of a body such as the British Commonwealth confers; and it is suggested that membership of the league will be found to bring with it the same advantages.

If we are to examine the possibilities which lie in this statement, we must first be clear as to the constitutional condition of the empire at the present day; and to do this we must go back some twenty years. Before self-government had been granted to any of the Dominions, the control of the foreign policy of the Empire naturally lay with the government, which controlled the fleet on which the scattered Imperial possessions depended for protection. With the grant of self-government to the Dominions and their growth in population and wealth, however, the protection of the Empire could no longer remain the concern of the United Kingdom alone, more especially as the rivalry of Germany was demanding ever increasing expenditure on the fleet. An Imperial Conference was accordingly summoned in 1904, and the Dominions began to take a share in the upkeep of the navy. It followed naturally that henceforward foreign policy should appear on the agenda of the Imperial Conferences; but at the same time the Dominions did not at the outbreak of war enjoy international status. As soon as the war began, however, the need for a constant, close, and effective means of intercommunication resulted in the formation of the Imperial War Cabinet. This Cabinet did not pretend to make any constitutional change, but was occupied solely with questions of the moment, the problem of the constitutional position of the Dominions



being deferred until the close of the war. That problem has now to be faced; and it has since been complicated, or held to be complicated, by two facts - that the Dominions were made independent members of the Peace Conference, and signed the treaty separately, and that they have become full and independent members of the League of Nations. Further, as we have already pointed out, membership of the league has been advocated as an efficient substitute for membership of the Commonwealth. With the implications of the separate signature of the Peace Treaty we are not here immediately concerned; let us therefore pass on to consider how membership of the league affects the constitutional position of the Dominions.

We may distinguish two ideas which encourage the belief in membership of the league as a substitute for membership of the Empire. There must in the first place be a belief that the league can give advantages similar to those which are enjoyed in the Commonwealth, and that it pursues similar aims; for otherwise no one would be willing to let slip the good things which the Commonwealth offers. Together with this belief must go a second. Were the league thought to offer only the same advantages as the Empire, there would be no incentive to change; but it is maintained that with membership of the league and release from the Empire the Dominions would obtain that full nationhood, the consciousness of which is essential for full and rapid progress. Now is this second belief there is a danger that leaps at once to the eye. Each Dominion is today strong, because it has the whole Empire behind it; but take away that support, and will such protection against aggression as the league affords be sufficient? The conception of the league has yet to be tested fully, but one thing has already been made perfectly clear. It has no strength of its own; it is strong only in so far as its members give it strength. We expect "the league" to do this or that, and forget that the task can only be accomplished if Britain, if France, if the other great powers, are determined that it shall be done, and are ready to lend their forces, if need be, to effect it. The whole question, we see, turns upon armies and navies. Until therefore some proof has been given that the great powers are working

and will continue to work for those aims for which the league has been formed, the necessity for maintaining adequate forces for self-protection remains. Left to themselves, the Dominions at present have not those forces. Canada for instance, has to-day a population not much greater than that of Belgium; and the population of New Zealand is about the same as that of Uruguay. For this reason the separatist tendency is viewed with alarm in many parts of the Empire. It may, however, be urged that the development of the empire is as yet far from complete, and that it is quite possible for the Dominions to become in the next century powers capable of standing alone in the world. This cannot be denied; and so at some time in the future the Dominions may be able to break away from the Empire without actual danger to themselves, and indeed, if the first belief be true, without incurring any loss at all.

This belief is, however, wrong; for there is in fact a fundamental distinction between the scope, the powers, and the possibilities of the league, and those of the Commonwealth. The difference is in the first place essentially that between a piece of machinery and a living organism. The machinery may run smoothly for a while; but it cannot adapt itself to new conditions, and an injury to any part throws the whole out of action. The organism, on the other hand, is bound by no hard and fast laws; it can change without a sudden alteration, and it can survive an injury to a single part, because the interrelationship of its various parts is far more close and vital than that between the parts of a machine. Now the sap which permeates and supports this great plant which we call the Empire is the English tongue, and all that goes with it — English literature, history, political thought, religious thought, and not least, ideals. A Dominion cut loose from the Commonwealth would therefore not only give up, in exchange for participation in a set form of international agreement, membership of a living organism which can adapt itself readily to the changing conditions of the future — and the world may alter more in the next two hundred years than it has ever done in the past — but it will also break away from that community of English thought and ideals which has already done



so much for the world, and can do much more in the future. There is, moreover, a second side to the question. Since the league is a world league, it is more adapted for dealing with world problems than with local difficulties. A difference ~~of~~ between, say, two South American republics can best be settled by a purely South American conference; in such a case a European power might be more impartial than helpful. Differences of opinion, moreover, tend to disappear rapidly in "specialised" conferences. Now the British Empire is scattered around the globe, but it has a community of interests on a higher level than that given by mere geographical proximity; its ideal is brotherhood, and not neighbourhood. Here then exists already one of those specialised conferences on which the world must come to depend; and the league can offer the Dominions nothing to take its place.

The empire has grown, rather than been made, and any alteration which now occurs cannot be imposed from without, but must arise from within; what the Empire thinks, therefore, gives rise to what the empire does or becomes, and to discover what it will do tomorrow, we must inquire what it thinks today. We may distinguish two main groups of opinion. There is on the one hand the group which believes that each Dominion must be free to decide what part it is going to take in the international policy of the Empire. The extremists of this group, such as Sir Clifford Sifton, desire complete independence, but there is a more moderate party, represented by General Smuts, which, while it believes in the Dominions' acquisition of considerable independent powers, believes also in the Empire as the greatest expression of the spirit which should animate the league. Thus General Smuts declares for South Africa that "as a free, equal, independent State in the British Commonwealth of Nations, which is taking the place of the old Empire; as a free, equal, sovereign member of the League of Nations, we wish to realise in peace and amity the destiny which Providence has in store for us." On the other hand there is the view held by a group which believes that salvation for the empire can only come through close co-operation. "New Zealand," declares Sir John Salmond,

"neither possesses nor claims any international status"; and Mr. Stanley Bruce has expressed on behalf of Australia the desire for closer cooperation to formulate the policy for the whole empire. That it is the second party which carries with it the most support from the Empire need scarcely be said; for while the advantages of independence may be debated by a few leaders, the mass of the people feel instinctively that where bonds of race and language unite, severance should not be necessary. There seems, therefore, to be little immediate danger of disruption.

If, however, the Covenant of the League cannot take the place of the more intangible but infinitely more real bonds which unite the Empire, it may yet, as we have already suggested, affect it in a most important way. For the Empire, standing as it does not for dominion and power, but to secure safety and freedom for the peoples who compose it, can find in the League a means of working for a better state of affairs not only in the Empire itself, but in the world as a whole.

The Empire can work through the League in two main ways, the one definite, immediate, and important, and the other indefinite, but even more immediate and important. The first consists of the protection and uplift of backward nations; the second the setting-up of a better system of international relationships. Now it is significant that in dealing with the problem of backward races the League followed closely the examples already set by the Empire. The trusteeship is given to a single state, and it is to be administered not for the profit of the mandatory power, but for the benefit of the backward race; the aim is to be development, not exploitation. Mandates are divided into three classes. The A class concerns former portions of the Turkish empire, races which have reached a sufficient level to require only "administrative advice and assistance from the Mandatory Power until such time as they are able to stand alone." Class B contains former tropical possessions of Germany, which are to be administered in much the same way as a colony, the mandatory power being responsible for the maintenance of order and liberty. Class C



includes territories so small or so sparsely populated that they may best be treated as "integral parts" of the territory of the mandatory power; provision is made, however, to prevent the territory thus for the time being absorbed from being permanently annexed. The Empire holds mandates of all three types, and the work of administration has followed the routine which was established by the Empire before the war; in taking up the mandates the Empire has extended its work, but not embarked on a new form of work. Unfortunately, however, Australia has found herself faced by a difficult problem. Her mandate Papua, which is of the Class C type, combines great natural resources with an exceedingly backward population. Here, therefore, is an apparently excellent field for immigration; but experience has proved that the unchecked introduction of western civilisation, with its vices as well as its advantages, proves the deathknell of a backward aboriginal people. Accordingly Australia has asserted her right to control immigration into Papua; but she has been challenged by Japan, on the ground that the territory is to be administered for the benefit of the world as a whole. This is a serious issue; the protection of the natives seems of necessity to entail the jealousy of <sup>some</sup> ~~other~~ powers of too close a control, or of anything smacking of proprietorship, and the enmity of others who desire above all unhampered openings for immigration.

The whole problem of emigration and immigration, however, is but a part of the whole series of problems which now menace the world; and it is in the facing of these that the Empire can find its second and more important opportunity of service through the League. The world is indeed today sick unto death. Five years ago we were still engaged in a war which all but brought our civilisation to nothing; famine and pestilence swept over huge areas, leaving behind them this tale of deserted ~~empty~~ villages and unburied corpses. The areas which thus suffered were not all those menaced by actual warfare; and had the war lasted a little longer, our own civilisation might also have collapsed, as a worm-eaten sick crumbles into dust under a sudden strain. It was four years ago, however, that the war

ended, and our memories are short. Today the old war brewing system remains unassailed. The fuse has been laid, the match applied; and the actual time of the conflagration is only a matter of the length of the fuse. The catastrophe is, however, not inevitable; war is no necessary part of human affairs, and could we only alter the present system, we might find ourselves on the threshold of many things which today seem impossible. Now all reform must be made up of two elements, ideals and force. Ideals alone can do nothing; and at the same time force can only be trusted under the guidance of ideals. It is in this way that the <sup>Empire</sup> ~~League~~ is so important to the league, and the league to the Empire. Not only can the Empire give the league material support but it can also give it moral support; for it is indeed further advanced than the league, in that, while the league aims at co-operation, the Empire has itself gone far towards achieving the far more binding type of union which we may call the commonwealth ideal. The Empire was the greatest model for the league; let it now be its greatest supporter. Let the world realise that there is today at least one force, and that not the weakest, which believes, not in the short-sighted moves of expediency or in the grasping policy of selfishness, or in all the other narrownesses which are edging us inch by inch into another war, but in the truth that the utmost good for each can only be obtained through the utmost good for all. This is not idealism, but the most sober practical policy. Thus, and thus only, can come safety for our civilisation.