

Memorandum by Lord Pethick-Lawrence on the Simla Conference (8 August 1945)

Caption: On 8 August 1945, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, circulates a note dated 15 July 1945 from the Viceroy of India, Lord Archibald Wavell, on the Simla Conference. Lord Wavell provides an account of this conference, which he convened on 25 June 1945 to ease tensions between the Indian communities, and assesses the causes of its failure.

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CABINET.

THE SIMLA CONFERENCE.

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INDIA.

I circulate, for information, a note by the Viceroy on the Simla Conference. This is a history of the Conference with the Viceroy's impressions of the Indian political leaders, and his assessment of the causes of failure.

India Office, 8th August, 1945.

F. W. P. L.

ANNEXURE.

THE SIMLA CONFERENCE.

A short account of the reception in India of the proposals of His Majesty's Government, and of the Simla Conference, may interest the Cabinet.

2. The first persons to be informed of the proposals after my return were the Members of my Executive Council. Those of my Indian Colleagues who had remained in India during my absence had been through a trying session of the Legislature and had been subjected, both in the lobbies and in the Congress Press, to constant ridicule about their impending removal. They were excited and irritable and received support from the Defence Member, Firoz Khan Noon, who returned a day or two before myself and, I think, gave a very tendentious and inaccurate account of what had happened in London. I was confronted with a general condemnation of the proposals and with a memorandum signed by seven of the nine Indian Members present (all except Usman and Roy) demanding, among other things, immediate Dominion Status. The main features of the proposals, the memorandum by the seven Members and the proceedings of two stormy Council meetings were disclosed to the Press by some of the Members.

3. This was an unpromising start, but the seven Members had misjudged both public opinion and the strength of their own position. All of them had taken office on the express understanding that they might at any time be asked to make way for Party Members in a reconstituted Council. They failed to excite opposition to the proposals or sympathy with themselves; on the contrary, their public disagreement with me and disregard for the oath of secrecy exposed them to further ridicule as a collection of irresponsible placemen. Their demonstration probably improved the chances of success, but it underlined one of the probable consequences of failure—the extreme difficulty of carrying on with the Members who were in office when the proposals were made. (They have all since given lip-service to the proposals and withdrawn their opposition; but with the majority of them this has simply been the trimming of their sails to the prevailing wind.)

4. The statement in Parliament and my broadcast on the 14th June were well received on the whole. It was soon clear that most educated Indians were in favour of the proposals being accepted. The offer of the portfolio of External Affairs to an Indian Member was well received. I do not think that the proposal

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for a High Commissioner was really understood or had much effect. The main dissentients to the proposals as a whole were, I think, the more extreme members of the Mahasabha, who objected strongly to parity within the proposed Executive Council between Caste Hindus and Muslims; and some of the landed and propertied classes who had been content in the past to lean on "Government" and had made no attempt to establish themselves in politics. Such people always have a grievance if any political advance is proposed. Khizar, who in his heart of hearts desires no change, characterised the offer to me as "so liberal that it made many of us shudder."

I am less sure about official opinion, which is still of great importance in India. I think most of the Indian, and a good many of the British, officials were in favour; but there was some uneasiness and, in the Punjab, where conditions are special, much criticism. It is, of course, easy to demolish any political proposals on the ground that they are addressed to politicians, who have hindered, or at least not helped, the war effort, rather than to the faithful supporters of Government. On the other hand, no official critic suggested any other practicable plan. All would probably admit that a change must come some time, but some think it should be postponed as long as possible.

5. The leaders were more difficult than the general public. Gandhi, stimulated, I think, by Patel, complained that we had for the first time distinguished between "caste" and other Hindus. He hinted at what was to be the main argument of the Congress at the conference—that the Congress is a national and not a communal party. He thought the proposals were far from clear about India's independence. He assured me that he could not possibly attend the conference in any representative capacity, as he is not even a 4-anna member of the Congress. I was able to satisfy these preliminary doubts without giving anything away, and it was finally agreed that Azad should lead for the Congress, while Gandhi would stay in Simla for the conference but would not attend it himself. Jinnah kept an eye on my correspondence with Gandhi, which was published in the Press day by day. He neither accepted nor refused my invitation, and until the conference began I was not sure whether he and the other Muslim League representatives would attend or not.

6. The conference opened on the 25th June with a full attendance. The general discussion disclosed a good deal of suspicion and animosity between Jinnah and Azad. I was able at a fairly early stage in the proceedings to concentrate discussion on the general acceptability of the principles of the proposals, making it clear that eventual success would depend upon subsequent agreement between the parties as to the strength and composition of the new Executive Council. Rather to my surprise, the proposals were accepted in principle unanimously after a very short discussion. The Congress may have had certain mental reservations, *e.g.*, in his opening statement Azad had referred to some guarantee about the future of the areas now under Japanese occupation as a condition to wholehearted support for the war effort. But when the conference came to take its decision on the proposals, no reservations of any kind were made. We then adjourned to enable the parties to consider privately the strength and composition of the new Executive Council. There was a short discussion between Jinnah and Pant, the Congress ex-Premier of the United Provinces, which led to nothing, and it was soon evident that the Congress and the Muslim League were unable to come to an agreement. Jinnah, I understand, refused to meet Azad, a refusal which naturally embittered the latter. When the conference met on the 29th June, it was clear that unless I intervened it would break down. Having ascertained formally that the parties were unable to agree and that there was no hope of agreement, I suggested that we should abandon the attempt to find an arithmetical formula for the composition of the Council, and that they should all submit lists of names to me. I would consider these lists and additional names of my own, and see if I could produce an Executive Council acceptable to everybody. The parties wanted a week in which to consult their respective Working Committees, and I had to allow myself a further week for correspondence with the Secretary of State and consultations with the leaders. I therefore adjourned the conference to the 14th July.

7. During this long adjournment there were, so far as I know, no further contacts between the Congress and the Muslim League. Azad was determined to secure the inclusion in the new Council of Congress or Nationalist Muslims. In this he had the support of his Hindu colleagues; and the Congress as a whole was anxious that its representation in the new Council should be spread as far as

possible over all communities. Azad summoned to Simla the leaders of various Nationalist Muslim organisations who are much disliked by the Muslim League, and it was, I think, generally known that he was attempting to consolidate all the minor parties with the Congress against the League. He certainly initiated discussions with the Sikhs and probably with the Scheduled Castes also.

On the Muslim League side Jinnah was under great pressure from his Premiers. I understand that the ex-Premier of Bengal and the Premiers of Assam and Sind told him that they could hardly return to their Provinces empty-handed, and that the party organisation in the Provinces was not capable of undertaking any serious political conflict. Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan is also believed to have been anxious to take office. On the other hand, Azad's manoeuvres, supported by indiscreet reports and comments in the Hindu Press, probably strengthened Jinnah's own view and that of many of his followers that it would be unsafe for the Muslim League to enter the new Executive Council except on its own terms.

The Sikhs and Scheduled Castes were in no great difficulty. But Khizar Hyat Khan, the Premier of the Punjab, was determined that if the League took office, a non-League Muslim from the Punjab must be included in the Executive Council. This was a further complication for Jinnah. His immediate aim was to ensure the exclusion of Congress or Nationalist Muslims, but he was almost equally concerned to secure the exclusion of any Muslim friendly to the Punjab Unionist Party.

8. In the upshot, all* parties except the Muslim League submitted their lists. On the 7th July Jinnah wrote to me suggesting a confidential discussion of his names; stating that his Working Committee would not co-operate unless all the Muslim Members were nominated by the Muslim League; and adding that once the composition of the new Council was determined, he would have to ask for special safeguards for the Muslims in its day-to-day working. I had a long interview with Jinnah on the 8th July, but failed to move him at all. I then made my selections for the Executive Council without his assistance, including four members of the Muslim League and one non-League Muslim from the Punjab who was unlikely to be particularly offensive to the League. I telegraphed my selections to London, and on receipt of authority from the Cabinet I saw Jinnah again on the 11th July. He then flatly refused to co-operate unless he received a categorical assurance that all the Muslim Members would be drawn from the League and that, once the Council was formed, decisions to which the Muslims objected would be taken only on a vote of a specified majority—say two-thirds. I could not accept either of these conditions. The second in particular, which was now raised formally for the first time, would have made the working of Council almost impossible. The right of communal veto, if granted to the Muslims, must also have been granted to the Hindus; and the Sikh and Scheduled Caste Members would have put forward similar claims. I told Jinnah I could not agree, and it was then clear that the conference had failed.

9. On the 14th July I made a short statement to the conference. I reviewed the proceedings, explained how the failure had occurred, and said that I must take time to consider what should be done. Azad spoke temperately, but laid the blame for the failure on the Muslim League, and suggested that the only possible solution was a firm decision between the parties and communities by His Majesty's Government who could not divest themselves of responsibility. Rajagopalachari followed suit, and said he thought a further attempt to form an interim Executive Council on a territorial or administrative, rather than on a communal, basis, might succeed. Jinnah made a long statement, bringing out the Muslim fear of Congress intrigue and Congress propaganda. He pitched the League claims higher than ever, demanding the acceptance of Pakistan and a right of communal veto within the Executive Council as the price of League co-operation in any provisional arrangement. He insisted that all Muslim Members must be nominated by the League, and at one stage in his argument seemed to demand equality within the Council between the Muslims and all other communities taken together. The other speeches were unimportant. Tara Singh pointed out that the Sikhs would not agree to Pakistan unless they were given a separate Sikh state of their own, and Siva Raj claimed the status of a separate major community for the Scheduled Castes. When all the leaders had had their say the proceedings ended. They were less heated than I expected.

* I do not include the European Group, which, for obvious reasons, decided not to send in a list.

10. During the conference I had talks with Jinnah, Gandhi, Azad (accompanied by Pant), and Nehru. Gandhi, in spite of his great influence and sensitiveness to public opinion, is not capable of securing a communal settlement. I doubt if he or his Working Committee could ever think in terms of genuine co-operation with the Muslims—other than those who are members of the Congress organisation. The Congress list was carefully drawn up to ensure Congress domination in the new Council. The names, or most of them, were published in the Hindu newspapers with laudatory comments on the broadmindedness of the party.

Jinnah is narrow and arrogant, and is actuated mainly by fear and distrust of the Congress. Like Gandhi he is constitutionally incapable of friendly co-operation with the other party.

Azad is an old-fashioned scholar with pleasant manners, but I doubt if he contributes very much to Congress policy. His main object is to get even with Jinnah and the League Muslims who despise him as a paid servant of the Congress.

Nehru is an idealist, and I should say straight and honest. His conversation with me was largely taken up with India's problems and grievances, and his views were reasonable. He has been much moved by the stories he has heard of the suppression of the 1942 disturbances, and it was on this subject alone that he showed heat during his conversation with me. Having devoted most of his life to agitation, he is probably not very practical, but he would be more likely to make friends with the Muslims than the other Hindu leaders I have seen. I had another talk with him after the conference was over, and asked him to use his influence to improve the relations between the two communities.

It is significant that none of the leaders who really count in the main communities has held high office. There are therefore many misconceptions about the working of the Executive Council and of the Government machine generally which it is almost impossible to remove.

11. The immediate cause of the failure of the conference was Jinnah's intransigence about Muslim representation and Muslim safeguards. The deeper cause was the real distrust of the Muslims, other than Nationalist Muslims, for the Congress and the Hindus. Their fear that the Congress, by parading its national character and using Muslim dummies, will permeate the entire administration of any united India is real, and cannot be dismissed as an obsession of Jinnah and his immediate entourage.

12. The failure of any political move narrows the field for future negotiations, and now that Jinnah has rejected a move within the present constitution based on parity between the Caste Hindus and the Muslims, it is not clear what he would be prepared to accept short of Pakistan. My view that any discussion which involves an immediate decision on the Pakistan issue (*e.g.*, an academic discussion of the future constitution) must at present fail has, I think, proved correct. The recent proposals were rejected not on their merits, but as soon as the discussion reached a point at which the Muslims felt obliged to raise a communal principle. Gandhi's final comment to me at the interview when I told him of the failure was that His Majesty's Government would have to decide sooner or later whether to come down on the side of Hindu or Muslim, of Congress or League, since they could never reconcile them. A discouraging comment but true under present leadership.

W.

Viceroy's Camp, Simla, 15th July, 1945.