

# Telegram from the British Foreign Office on the policy pursued in India (London, 19 February 1947)


**Caption:** On 19 February 1947, the day before the announcement by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that independence would be granted to India, the Foreign Office issues a secret telegram outlining the policy pursued by the United Kingdom in India. It particularly explains the process of ‘self-government’ that has long been applied by the British in India. The Foreign Office notes the problems associated with the creation of an interim government but emphasises the government’s firm intention to leave India by June 1948 at the latest.

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FROM FOREIGN OFFICE TO WASHINGTON.

No. 1618.

February 19th, 1947. D. 8.10.p.m. February 19th, 1947.

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MOST IMMEDIATE.

TOP SECRET.

My telegram No. 1617.

Following is background explanation of Statement:-

(1) Objective of United Kingdom policy in India has for many years past been, through a process of gradually developing transfer of authority, ultimately to hand over power to a Federal system of Government commanding at least the assent of all the important elements in the Indian population and in which the Indian States would be co-operating parties. Unity of India which is the greatest single achievement of our rule would thus be preserved.

(2) Policy of the present British Government has been in line with this tradition. Its main principles were stated in Prime Minister's speech in Parliament on 15th March and developed in detail in proposals of the Cabinet Mission. If operated whole-heartedly in a spirit of co-operation these proposals should make it possible for Indians to frame a constitution which would both preserve the unity of India and meet the real

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and legitimate fears of the Muslim community and of other minorities. Intention was that formal and final transfer of authority would not take place until a constitution framed in accordance with the Mission's proposals, or otherwise by agreement between the major communities, could be brought into operation. In this way broad objective referred to in paragraph 1 above would have been realised, and United Kingdom responsibility in India have been terminated by an orderly and peaceful transition. In the meantime it was hoped that an Interim Government representative of all parties would operate harmoniously under existing constitution. Although broad responsibility of United Kingdom Government and Parliament for Indian affairs would continue, this Government would in practice have wide measure of autonomy. Obviously great difficulties were to be expected in this interim period, which it was hoped would be not more than two years, unless there were mutual forbearance between ourselves and Congress Party, and a real spirit of compromise and cooperation between Congress Party and Muslim League.

(3) Unfortunately these conditions have not been realised. Following is our broad assessment of events since the Mission. After the Mission left India, Congress Party interpreted provisions of Mission's proposals regarding procedure in Sections in a way contrary to

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Mission's intention, as clearly explained to them. Essential element of Mission's proposals was that Sections of Constituent Assembly should decide by majority vote Constitutions of Provinces and whether groups of Provinces should be formed subject to right of Provinces to opt out of group by decision of Legislature under new constitution. Congress Party argued that decisions on these questions should require majority of representatives of each Province within the Section. This would almost certainly result in no group constitution being framed by Sections B. and C. Thus Congress Party interpretation removed basis of the compromise which is the whole basis of the proposals. League reacted by withdrawing their acceptance of Mission's proposals, by reverting to advocacy of full Pakistan claim in provocative form, and by threatening direct action. Six months have passed without any substantial progress in drawing up the constitution and Constituent Assembly is meeting without Muslim League representatives. Although recent Congress Party Resolution modified their position there are still certain ambiguities in the acceptance by Congress Party of our Statement of December 6th. Certain Rules of Procedure have been framed by Constituent Assembly which can hardly be reconciled with principle of our Statement that Provincial Constitutions and decision whether there shall be a Group shall be taken by Sections

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of Constituent Assembly by majority vote. This has led Muslim League again to refuse co-operation in Constituent Assembly by their Resolution of January 31st. These events have rendered relations of the two parties in the Cabinet increasingly difficult, and the Congress Party have now demanded that Muslim League Members should resign from the Government. We are being pressed to wind up the Secretary of State's Services and to withdraw British troops from India. Although, in individual cases Congress Party are putting strong pressure on Indian States whom we are bound by our existing relationship to protect from external interference from British India, recent conversations between States representatives and representatives of the Constituent Assembly were amicable and there seems a reasonable prospect that States will enter Constituent Assembly.

(4) Communal situation deteriorated seriously between August and November and over 10,000 persons have been killed and many more injured. Since the London Conference situation has improved but tension is still high. Any open and irrevocable breach between the parties might lead to widespread recrudescence amounting almost to unorganised and spontaneous civil war. In this event Indian Army might disintegrate and take sides.

(5) We have made very effort to bring the Indian Parties together by negotiation and there is not much more  
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that we can do without some move from them. Alternatives therefore are to place the responsibility for finding a solution, or for consequences of failure to do so, finally and solely upon Indian leaders; or to reassert British authority and govern India for a substantial period. Latter course could only be feasible if we resorted to widespread and extreme measures of repression and publicly declared an intention to retain our authority in India for a substantial period of years. We do not consider that this course would be likely to lead to any solution of the Indian problem. In the long run it would lead rather to a spread of revolutionary extremism, probably in a communist form.

(6) We have therefore come to the conclusion set out in the Statement text of which is contained in my immediately preceding telegram announcing our intention to hand over authority in India not later than June 1948. We are hopeful that prospects of a settlement between Congress Party and Muslim League will be increased if it is clearly stated that we shall withdraw at a definite date and definite steps are taken to implement this decision. At present both sides hope to produce a situation in which we shall be forced to assist them in securing their own political objective and this fact impedes a settlement between them.

(7) We, therefore, think that Statement provides

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best prospect of being able to hand over functions of existing Central Government to a single Government having support of both major parties. But if, when date for withdrawal is reached, this is not possible we shall have to hand over to whatever constituted authorities seem most representative of different parts of the country when the time comes. Paragraph 10 of the Statement is designed to avoid, on the one hand, commitment to create Pakistan (which would encourage League to be obstructive), and on the other, any indication that we should, whatever happens, hand over to one authority only (which would encourage Congress Party to be uncompromising).

(8) We realise, of course, that we are running risk that no settlement will be arrived at and that as date for our withdrawal draws near communal situation will deteriorate seriously. But this is just as likely to happen if we make no Statement because both sides will hope that we shall assist them against the other. We believe, therefore, that the right course is for us to be definite as to our intentions.

(9) It may be felt that a definite partition of India before our departure would, if there is no agreement, be preferable, in the last resort, to withdrawal in way we propose. Cogent reasons were given in opening paragraphs of Cabinet Mission's

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Statement of 16th May against any form of Pakistan because the area claimed by the Muslim League would contain far too great a minority of non-Muslim population while a smaller area having a substantial Muslim majority could not be capable economically of survival as an independent State. Partition would be violently resented by a large part of the Indian population including substantial elements in the areas affected. The equitable demarcation of the areas to be separated would be a matter of extreme difficulty but it is not totally excluded by paragraph 10 of the Statement if it is found to be inevitable at a later stage.