

No. 1

THE
ROUND TABLE
IN CANADA

A CANADIAN MOVEMENT FOR
DEMOCRATIC IMPERIALISM

"WHAT THE BRITISH EMPIRE
REALLY STANDS FOR."

*An Address Delivered
by Mr. Philip Kerr*

OFFICES: 84 ST. MARY ST., TORONTO.

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REALLY STANDS FOR.”**

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
MR. PHILIP KERR AT THE
TORONTO CLUB TO THE
MEMBERS OF THE ROUND TABLE
ON TUESDAY, JULY 30TH, 1912.

PUBLISHED BY
THE COUNCIL FOR THE ROUND TABLE IN CANADA
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ADDRESS

BY MR. PHILIP KERR AT THE TORONTO CLUB
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“I would like with your consent to explain to you what I believe the British Empire really stands for. I will confess frankly that when I came to this country three years ago I was not in any true sense an Imperialist: I was a sentimental Imperialist in the sense that I had been born under the British flag, and my emotions could easily be roused by an appeal to the sentiments that centre round that flag, but I had no understanding of what the Empire was or of what it was likely to develop into. I am now a convinced Imperialist, and I want to tell you why.

“I think that I may best deal with the subject under two heads. I believe that the British Empire stands for the highest political ideals yet put into practical effect in the world: that is the first ground for my belief in the British Empire. I believe that with the British Empire you get greater personal liberty, coupled with a more direct and individual responsibility than under any other political system which has yet been brought into existence. It has often been said that there is more freedom for the citizen, a better system of government, a more impartial justice, and so forth, within the British Empire than elsewhere. I think this is true, but these are not what I regard as the highest aspects of the political merits of the British system.

“It is a very difficult thing to explain what I mean: perhaps I may explain it best by saying that the political standards of the British Empire exhibit a

more generous belief in human nature, and a more generous trust of our fellowmen than the standards which exist in any other community. The illustration that comes to my mind lies in the recent history of the Anglo-Boer struggle in South Africa. In order to explain what I mean I must try and sweep aside certain fallacies which are current as to the origin of that war: it was not a capitalists' war, it was not a land-grabbing war: the British Government did not enter upon that struggle with a view of obtaining territory. It was not a racial war in the sense that it was the result of pure racial bitterness between individuals. It was, at bottom, a war between two communities, each of whom cherished irreconcilable national ideals. The majority in the Transvaal and Orange Free State were fired with the desire to create in South Africa a great independent republic, speaking the Dutch language, and standing in the world as the foremost exponent of Dutch civilization. The majority in Cape Colony and Natal were determined to remain within the British Empire, and that British ideals and British methods should prevail in that part of South Africa that was then under the British flag. Unfortunately, there was no room in South Africa for two national states, while a strong minority in Cape Colony were passionately attached to the republican ideal, and a strong minority of Uitlanders in the Transvaal were as passionately attached to the British ideal.

“I will say nothing about the negotiations leading up to the war; I will merely express the opinion that there would have been no war if President Kruger had never lived or if Dr. Jameson had never made his raid. I think it is not less true that, if Lord Milner and Cecil Rhodes had not lived, South Africa would not long have continued to be a part of the

British Empire. The vital fact is that, as the result of the war, you cut out the canker which was the real cause of the trouble in South Africa; you destroyed all chance of success for the ideal of a great independent South Africa under the Dutch flag. The terms of peace were a definite surrender by the Boers of that ideal, and there was nobody who was present at these peace negotiations who did not realize how great a sacrifice it was for men who had fought for three years for that ideal, and lost relative and most of their worldly possessions in the process, to acknowledge the triumph of the British over the Dutch South African ideal.

“What happened after the war? The war ended in June, 1902; before the end of December, 1905, the British Government had announced that it was going to give complete responsible government to the late Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, and shortly afterwards there was brought into effect a constitution under which at the first elections the Boer leaders were once more conducting the government of these countries as freely as you conduct the affairs of Canada to-day. There are many opinions about the motives which caused the Liberal Government to do as they did, but the fact remains that within four years of the termination of the war in which the British spent more than a thousand million dollars and many valuable lives, they deliberately and of their own accord established a constitution under which their late enemies became the rulers of their British fellow-subjects. Now I do not believe there is any other nation in the world which would have done that, and when I say that the British Empire stands for the highest political ideals which are being put into practical effect to-day, I give you that as a practical illustration of what I mean.

“The effect has been commensurate with the high standard of political liberty which prompted the experiment. The Boers have abandoned forever the reactionary methods of the Kruger regime; they have been conquered and convinced by practical experience of our political institutions and ways, and in the great reconciliation embodied in the constitution of United South Africa they agreed to inaugurate a new era on the basis that both British and Boers were equally good South Africans and equally loyal citizens of the British Empire. I venture to state that anyone who has been associated with the leaders of the Boers, with General Botha and his colleagues, as I have been, will agree with me in saying that there is not one responsible Boer to-day who, if he had the chance, by an act of his own freewill to pull down the British flag, would lift his hand to do so. I think this history is a very real demonstration of the truth and vitality of the ideals which animate the British Empire to-day.

“But the British Empire does more than afford an example of freedom and good government to the world. It is able to put its ideals and methods into practical effect over one-quarter of the globe. We hear a great deal about the force of the example of American institutions, and we hear a great deal about the force of example of British ideals and British institutions, but there is all the difference in the world between the effect of example to a people who are remote from any actual experience of it, and the effect of the practical realisation of it in their midst.

“That, I think, is the first function which the British Empire discharges in the world, that it stands for the highest ideals of political liberty that

have yet been applied in practical politics; and that is the first reason why I am an Imperialist.

“The second reason why I am an Imperialist is because I believe the British Empire to be the greatest agency for assisting and promoting the development of the non-self-governing races that exists to-day. I propose to take as an example India; but I would explain that, broadly speaking, what I say about the forces that have brought about British rule in India is applicable to Egypt and to the host of minor dependencies of the British Crown all over the world.

“There are many fallacies current about the history of the British connection with India, and I think it is well that we should be quite clear at the outset how we came to build up an empire there. We went there to trade and for no other reason whatever. After the old overland route to the Far East had been closed by the fall of Constantinople, some enterprising Portuguese discovered a road to India round the Cape of Good Hope by sea. A considerable trade between India and Europe was soon built up, European traders acquiring trading rights in India by charter or firman granted to them by the Mogul Emperor of India. About the end of the eighteenth century a great change came over the scene. In the first place the Mogul Empire entered upon its decline. It was at best but a loose fabric and in the hands of incompetent rulers and under the revolutionary impact of Western ways and Western adventurers, it rapidly fell into ruins, with the result that India became the scene of unutterable confusion and chaos. Thus, there were said to be some two million mercenaries wandering over the length and breadth of India, willing to sell their services to anyone who was prepared

to pay for them, or, if no one was prepared to pay for them, helping themselves. In consequence, the East India Company, previously protected by the Moguls, found itself compelled to fortify its settlements in order to safeguard the lives of its servants and its property from the depredations of the mercenaries and guerrilla chiefs, and in order to protect the depots, at which it did its business with Indian traders, from destruction.

“In the second place, about the middle of the eighteenth century the great war between England and France, which had such important effects upon the history of Canada broke out. That was fought out not only in Canada and Europe, but in India. In the course of it both the British and the French engaged Indian princes as their allies, and in consequence, at the end of the war, when the French were finally defeated, the confusion which had followed the decline of the Mogul Empire had become enormously intensified, and the British East India Company found itself in possession of a very large Indian territory. The government of Bengal had disappeared and in order to maintain any semblance of order the representatives of the Company had to take over the government of the province itself. From that day the gradual expansion of British rule in India was inevitable. Previously law and order in the interests of their own trade had been the Company’s motive for interference with Indian politics; now it was the well-being of many millions of Indian subjects. For it was far more vital to the Indians of Bengal that their territory should not be ravaged by Indian bandits, and foreign adventurers, than it was to the East India Company itself. India beyond the limits of British rule was in a chronic state of rapine and war, and experience during a century

proved that the only certain method of establishing the elements of peace and good government was for the British themselves to assume responsibility for the government of India.

“That is the true reason why we went to India. What have the British done there since? India is a continent about as large as Europe. There are in India some 315 millions of people. These people are even more deeply divided than the peoples of Europe. They are divided first of all by religion, for national sentiment is hardly yet alive in India and a man’s dominating loyalty is still to his religion. Rather more than two-thirds are Hindus; less than one-third are Mohammedans, and there are several minor sects. Religious intolerance is a fruitful source of bitter feeling and even of murderous riots.

“Then India is divided by race. There is really less identity between the inhabitants of the north of India and the inhabitants of the south, than there is between the inhabitants of England and the inhabitants of Russia. The people of the extreme north are hardy and warlike; the people of the south are the somewhat decadent disciples of an ancient religious civilisation. In between you get every gradation. Again, there are in India some fifteen principal languages and many subordinate vernaculars. The language which is nearest to a universal language, at any rate among the educated classes, is English. I found that the notices of lodgings to poor pilgrim bathers in the sacred city of Benares were printed in English, as being the language which serves as the best medium of communication for all classes.

“In addition to being divided by race, religion and language, one-third of India is in the hands of

practically independent princes, who are independent in everything except their external relations, which are supervised by the British government. In internal affairs they are entirely free up to the point when their administration becomes a scandal, when the British step in to put things straight if need be by deposing the reigning monarch and putting some one else in his place.

“That gives you some idea of the size of India and how divided it is; India indeed cannot strictly be spoken of as one country, and in so far as it is one country it is because the British have made it so.

“Now, what have the British done for India? They have given it, in the first place, unity and peace. If it were not for the fact that you have a strong British administration there would not be peace in India to-day, for the racial and religious feelings are still strong enough to produce chronic war. They have given to India an impartial system of justice; they have built railways and roads; they have built irrigation works; they have practically eliminated the worst features of famine; they have introduced a modern system of education which India never had before; and above all, they have established a complete and efficient system of government covering the whole country. As a result, the British to-day are absolutely essential to India, and a friend of mine expressed the position accurately and well when he said that for the British to leave India to-day would be the most cruel thing that they could do; for the whole machinery of government would come to a standstill and chaos and civil strife would certainly supervene.

“That is the position in India to-day. That is what British connection has meant to India hitherto.

Yet our work is only half-done. Our greatest work in India lies ahead. Perhaps the most important function of a government is to develop the self-respect and self-reliance of its subjects; and up to the present very little of that work has been done in India. In the first place, the spirit of the Indian native peoples was terribly crushed by some of their Mohammedan rulers. In the second place it has been crushed, in a sense, even more by the British regime, because in place of the old tyranny the Indians had created for them there has been established a most impartial and most efficient and yet to them unintelligible government. They have been overpowered by the superior knowledge, self-control and efficiency of their British rulers. Finally, India is penalized by an intensely fierce, yet enervating, climate, and by many immensely strong yet enervating and demoralising customs and beliefs, notably that of the harem. In consequence, few Indians have aspired to initiative and responsibility. Their idea has rather been to accept the benefits of British rule and not undertake the responsibility of conducting the government themselves. The next work of the British is to develop in India precisely that spirit which has made Canadians first repudiate the interference of Downing Street, and which is now making them come forward and say that they cannot feel themselves full-grown and standing on two legs as a nation unless they are responsible for their own defence and unless they are allowed to shoulder their proper share of the responsibilities of the Empire. For a long time the British in India have been working on these lines. It is not generally understood that there is in India to-day a complete system of representation from top to bottom; there is an elective council for each municipality elected by the ratepayers; there

is an elective council for each rural area elected by the leading men of the district. These councils are usually, though not always, presided over by the local magistrate who is in most cases a British official. Above these local bodies come the provincial councils, and no legislation can be brought into effect in the province which has not got the consent of the provincial legislature. The provincial councils have upon them a majority of Indian members elected by the local councils aforesaid. And above the provincial legislatures comes the great Imperial Legislative Council, which deals with the affairs of the whole vast Indian Empire. On that Council there are thirty members elected by the elected members of the provincial councils out of a total membership of sixty-eight. Above this again, one of the Viceroy's Cabinet is always an Indian, who thus controls one of the great Departments of State; and above that again two members of the Secretary of State's Council in London are Indians.

“Thus, we have already inaugurated a complete system of representation by which the people of India are associated with the government of India from top to bottom; and while to-day they have no real responsibility, they do exercise a very real influence over the conduct of public business. They are learning by degrees how to govern for themselves. The great question of the future is how rapidly and how far that process can be extended. I confess that after spending three months in India I am not very confident that the process will be rapid; the ignorance among the rural people of India is colossal, and they number more than three-fourths of the whole. They have no ideas beyond the politics of their village community, and these are mainly connected with caste or religion. There is also the greatest difficulty

in getting the rural landlord—the natural leader of the people—to serve on any elected body to-day. His interest in public affairs has never yet been stirred. It is gradually growing, but up to the present the progress has been small. The only class which takes any real interest in politics seems to be the class whom we are inclined in this country to call ‘agitators.’ Many of them are of the highest character and fired by noble ideals, but they belong to that order of academic, unpractical theorists which has never yet been entrusted with real power in any country without grave danger.

“It was inevitable that among this class there should be many extremists, and recently there has, as you know, been a movement among these extremists which had for its object the elimination of the British from India by the process of assassination. Naturally there was a row. But, as a result, I think a wrong impression was left upon the mass of the people outside India, because the general tone of the British press was unfriendly to Indian unrest. It was unfriendly because the word ‘unrest’ was used to mean the anarchistic side of the general political movement. But I think I am right in saying that British public opinion, both in India and in the United Kingdom, while hostile to anarchy, has been entirely friendly to the gradual extension of self-government throughout India.

“Thus I believe that the second great function of those who control the British Empire is to continue in the future the work that has been already begun throughout the whole extent of the dependencies of the British Empire. And the most important side of this is not the establishment of material prosperity, the building of railways, roads, irrigation works, new channels of trade, banks, and all the rest

of it; but the gradual education of the politically backward peoples within the Empire, so that they may come to govern themselves, and may ultimately come to be self-governing dominions within the British Empire.

“For the two main reasons, therefore, which I have given you; for the reason that I believe the British Empire to enshrine the highest political ideals yet capable of being put into practical effect, and for the reason that, consciously or unconsciously, it has undertaken the duty of civilizing one-fifth of mankind and is now but half-way towards complete success, I believe it to be the duty of every man who dwells beneath the Union Jack to preserve and strengthen the Empire to the best of his ability.

“I believe in the British Empire, however, for another reason, and that is because I believe that there is a greater work before it in the future than in the past. A very distinguished German professor once said to me that the most interesting political experiment going on in the world to-day was that which was being tried in the British Empire. I asked him what he meant, and he said that the only attempt which was being made to reconcile the claims of nationality with the claims of mankind was being made in the British Empire. He went on to explain that he did not believe that you could build up a single world state on the lines of a national state, that the principles of national life and national aspiration had been born into the world to last for all time, but that these had existed up to the present in a form which inevitably produced active hostility between other nations, and therefore war. So far as he could see the only peoples who were trying to moderate the sentiment of nationalism so as to make it consistent with a larger union were the five nations of the British Empire. These, he said, were attempting to retain sufficient of the national spirit to enable them to act individually and yet enough common

patriotism to enable them to remain within a single political fabric.

“That is one great work which the British Empire, if it continues, may bring to a successful issue. The second is more difficult, and that is to reconcile east and west, and black and white. If we manage to create in India a self-governing, responsible dominion, and if India, when it is responsible and self-governing, elects to remain within the British Empire, we shall have solved the greatest difficulty which presents itself to the world to-day. The coloured peoples are going to progress and the future progress of the world hinges on whether there is to be a long renewal of the world-old feud between east and west, black and white, or whether we can find a system based on mutual give-and-take which will enable them to live in peace and goodwill together. There are great difficulties ahead, I admit; but if the experiment now being made in India is successful, and the peoples of that country, when they have attained the full stature of self-government, decide not to secede from the British Empire, but to remain within it, then history will write down that it was this generation of the citizens of the Empire who have solved the most difficult problem which has perhaps ever confronted mankind.

“The third work which lies before us is a combination of the other two. The causes that threaten to make war a permanency in the world to-day are those two that I have just mentioned: an extravagant nationalism, and colour prejudice. If, by a reconstruction of the constitutional edifice of the Empire, we can reconcile the conflicting claims of the five white nations of the British Empire, and also contrive an enduring agreement between those of its peoples who are of dark colour and of white colour, we shall have proved to the world that there is some other way than war by which disputes between nations and disputes between black, yellow and white can be

settled. That is to say, we shall have shown the world the road by which it can attain universal peace.

“Gentlemen, I believe that the opportunities which lie before us as citizens of the Empire are perhaps greater than those which have been offered to any people since the days of imperial Rome. Rome, had she been able to introduce into her empire the political principles on which the British Empire rests to-day, might have developed into a system of government which would have embraced the whole world. Rome’s experiment failed. But a new Rome has arisen animated by freer principles and possessed of more flexible institutions, yet with the same great opportunity of leading the world to peace and unity. You and I are citizens of this new Rome, and it rests with us and with our fellows to decide whether provincial selfishness and imperial pride are going to let the opportunity slip by, or whether, with high imagination and high courage, we seize it and imprint our mark upon the history of the world.

“It is of course impossible to foretell all the difficulties which beset the long road to our goal. But there are two dangers which lie immediately ahead and which as practical men we have got to avoid. The first is the danger of weakness; the danger lest some of the other nations of the world, more advanced than we are in other respects yet on a lower political plane, destroy what we have so laboriously built up, by an act of war. The most obvious danger to-day is from Germany.* You have in the Germans a people who are still animated by medieval political notions, by an extravagant nationalism, by the old-fashioned idea that the greatest function of a nation is to rule other peoples in the sense of having dominion over them. Let me point out to you the contrast between the treatment accorded to the Boers and the

*In view of the speaker’s reference to Germany, it is interesting to note that this speech was made in 1912, just two years before the outbreak of war.

treatment of the Poles and of Alsace-Lorraine to illustrate what I mean.

“Now, so long as the world is divided into separate nations there is no guarantee that any one of these nations will not be seized with the determination to gain its ends by the use of force. Thus there is not the slightest use in disguising from ourselves that the ruling classes in Germany to-day, the monarchy, the bureaucracy, the army and navy, and the junkers, believe that sooner or later they must throw their vast army and vast navy into the balance in order to win that paramount position in the world which they have been taught it is their destiny to occupy—an idea which is absolutely foreign to the politically more advanced inhabitants of Great Britain, who look to work out their national destiny by peaceful means. So long as this situation lasts and the world is divided up among separate and rival nations, there is only one road of safety for the Empire and its parts—to maintain such a measure of strength by sea that no other nation stands a chance of success if it attacks us. That, I concede, is in itself a dangerous situation, for the possession of overwhelming force has often seduced nations into using that force for improper purposes. But I believe that the political traditions of the British Empire are true enough and strong enough, especially if the Dominions have their say, to prevent any government from misusing its strength in the future. It is not the possession of strength which is wrong; it is the use one may make of it. Nobody ever gained anything worth having by being deliberately weak. Therefore, I believe that the possession of adequate strength is the first essential to the immediate future of the British Empire.

“The second danger is the danger of internal disruption. That may spring from two causes. It may arise out of the difficulty of reconciling the national claims of the Dominions—including Great Britain

—with the claims of a true Imperial government. That is a question which you gentlemen have lately been considering for yourselves. I am not going to discuss it to-day. I will simply say that I believe the solution has, in principle, been found; that a change should be made in our constitution so that a new Imperial authority comes into being representative of all parts, debarred from interfering in the local affairs of any self-governing part, dealing only with their common affairs, and to whose budget each should contribute its proportionate quota.

“But the danger of internal disruption may also arise from what are now the dependencies. India and the other dependent portions of the Empire, as they grow stronger and more self-reliant, may desire to leave the Empire. That danger, I believe, can be averted if we treat them, differently of course in point of time, but in the same spirit of confidence and trust that we treated the Boers after the war. Now it will be immensely difficult for the inhabitants of the United Kingdom alone to do this. For self-government in India means an inevitable decline—possibly only temporary but none the less inevitable—in the standard and efficiency of government in that country. You cannot introduce responsible government among a backward people without their failing in the first instance to come up to the standards which older and more experienced men have set; and the first effect of the introduction of responsible government in India will be a considerable decline in administrative efficiency and a great rise in political animosity, speculation, graft and misgovernment. It will be very difficult for the Indian civilian and for us in England who are proud of the traditions of British rule in India, to stand aside and witness the partial destruction of the fabric we have reared. Yet if the Indian is capable of development, if our present policy is to be brought to fruition, it must be done,

slowly no doubt and by degrees, but none the less surely. I am not at all sure that the influence of that robust democratic confidence which is so marked in the Dominions will not be required in Downing Street, before we concede that measure of self-government to India, when the time for it has come, that will be necessary if the British Empire is to achieve its greatest work.

“I have given you the reasons why I am an Imperialist. You may not agree with them, but I would, in conclusion, earnestly ask you to consider what the alternative to the Imperialist programme means. I say to you deliberately that I am convinced that the future of the Empire rests with the Dominions. The United Kingdom alone cannot long continue to sustain so great a fabric. Therefore, gentlemen, before you reject Imperialism, think well what your act implies. It implies far more than your severance from us at home. It implies the eventual disappearance of the Imperial system which has nurtured you into being; the creation of five new nations independent one of another and possessed of no better method of settling their disputes than war; the rise of the dependencies—of India, Egypt and the rest—into hostile powers, certainly hostile to you and us and certainly allied with our foes. It implies a new lease of life for armaments and war—a new blaze in the ancient feud between East and West, and above all the deliberate rejection and destruction of the possibility of bringing to fruition perhaps the greatest political vision which has yet dawned upon mankind.”

Anyone who wishes either to join or to form a Round Table Group is invited to communicate with the Secretary, The Round Table, 84 St. Mary St., Toronto, who will furnish all necessary information.