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**The Imperial Federation Movement in  
Great Britain, 1869 - 1893**

**by**

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Leicester University  
1976**

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present a detailed history of the imperial federation movement in Britain between 1869 and 1893. The bulk of the thesis is concerned with the Imperial Federation League 1884-1893, but particular attention has also been paid to the antecedents of the movement in Britain. As with all political movements, a particular point is reached at which it moves from a hazy inarticulate stage to an articulate institutionalized level, and an effort has been made to explain exactly why the crystallization of the imperial federation movement occurred in 1869-1870.

An attempt has also been made to explain the content of the theoretical debate about the nature of federal union which accompanied the general concern for closer imperial union, and more attention has been devoted to the relationship between the question of Irish Home Rule and imperial federation than is usually the case with most studies of this period. In addition to these considerations, an effort has been made to elucidate the views and attitudes of Lord Rosebery and Lord Salisbury in relation both to the theory of imperial federation and to the movement, an area of research which has been almost totally neglected.

Great emphasis has been placed upon research into private papers in this study, not merely to supplement information culled from official publications and contemporary books and periodicals, but in order to obtain a deeper insight into the motives and attitudes of the various protagonists and to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the history of the imperial federation movement in Great Britain.

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List of Abbreviations

A.H.R.	American Historical Review
C.H.B.E.	Cambridge History of the British Empire
C.H.A.	Canadian Historical Association Report
C.H.R.	Canadian Historical Review
H.S. (A.N.Z.)	Historical Studies (Australia and New Zealand)
J.C.P.S.	Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies
P.R.C.I.	Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute
R.C.S.	Royal Commonwealth Society
T.N.A.P.S.S.	Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science.
T.R.H.S.	Transactions of the Royal Historical Society

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A NEW OUTLOOK ON EMPIRE

A consideration of the imperial federation movement in Great Britain in the mid- and late-Victorian years must begin with a consideration of the relationship between the momentous transformation in economic and political conditions in the Western world and the changes which occurred in British imperial attitudes about the years 1869-1871. Without doubt, the decade 1865-1875 represents a period during which new, far-reaching global developments had a direct impact upon Britain's greatness in the world. The cumulative effect of world events during these years upon Britain's dominance in the spheres of trade, industry and agriculture, and with regard to her standing as an unrivalled naval power, was to indicate that she would not go unchallenged in the foreseeable future.

The decade 1865-1875 was studded with novel developments which pointed to a harder future for Britain in the world : the singularity of her position disappeared, although the signs of this alteration were barely visible to the great mass of the population. By 1869-1871, however, there was clear evidence of an awareness of the new historic situation on the part of at least some mid-Victorians, and the gloomy murmurings and prophecies of these men had one important consequence : they compelled an earnest rethinking of accepted views of empire. These years, therefore, represent an age during which a fundamental reappraisal of empire took place chiefly as a result of exogenous circumstances. It is important to stress, however, that the environment in which the rethinking of empire took place, came into existence in a very piecemeal fashion and that the dates recorded here are only indicative : they limit the subject and provide a framework which is amenable to order, but they must not be taken too literally. As Professor Egerton once reminded us:

Where tendencies, not events, are being considered, divisions by time must, in the nature of things, be somewhat rough and arbitrary. No one can say the exact hour when the zeitgeist is found pointing in a particular direction. 1

1. Quoted in A.C. Cooke, *Empire Unity and Colonial Nationalism, 1884-1911*, Annual Report of the Canadian Historical Association, 1939, pp.77-86.



The changing world to which the mid-Victorians were compelled to adjust exhibited a number of potential rather than real threats to Britain's position, but, taken together, they represented a new climate which encouraged thinking men to question their future. Foreign rivalry was not a new and strange phenomenon to the Victorians; it was rather the size and intensity of the challenges emerging in the 'sixties and 'seventies which was unique.

One of the earliest signs of this changing world was the emergence of the United States from the Civil War as a politically cohesive state in 1865. Although incapable of playing a really influential role in world affairs in that year, there was little doubt that this huge state was going to have a bright future in terms of world power. 1869 witnessed the completion of the first railroad to span the American continent after which the United States "ceased to be an Atlantic country in order to become a continental nation,"<sup>1</sup> and as early as 1871 she displayed her new strength when her interests collided with those of Britain in the famous Alabama episode. That it is a basic misunderstanding to assume that the forces challenging Britain were confined to European perimeters was ably emphasized by J.E.Tyler when he wrote that "the new era of world politics was never to be simply characterized by the out-burst of the European nations"<sup>2</sup>, and his analysis is confirmed by Disraeli's remark in 1872 that the United States "throw their lengthening shades over the Atlantic, which mix with European waters. These are vast and novel elements in the distribution of power."<sup>3</sup>

1. G. Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, pp.43-44.
2. J.E.Tyler, *The Struggle for Imperial Unity, 1868-1895*, (Lon. 1938), p.18.
3. Speech on "Conservative Principles" at Manchester, 3 April 1872, T.E.Kebbel, *Selected Speeches of the Earl of Beaconsfield*, (Lon. 1882) Vol. II, p.522.



Disraeli's keen perception of change was not, however, confined to the rise of the United States. In September 1875, he wrote to Lady Bradford that he did not see why Japan should not become "the Sardinia of the Mongolian East" since they were "by far the cleverest of the Mongolian Races."<sup>1</sup> The year 1868 had indeed been one of the most significant in Japanese history with the advent of the Meiji Restoration and the gradual sweeping away of feudalism - a process of Western emulation which culminated in Japanese domination of the Far East by 1905.

In 1871, the face of Europe had also changed. The outcome of the Franco-Prussian War and the rapidity with which Germany came to dominate continental Europe automatically destroyed one of the fundamental principles of British foreign policy in the nineteenth century. It was true that Britain had looked with favour upon the unification of Germany and the promise of her growth introducing a new element of both strength and stability which would check the aggression of Russia and of Britain's traditional enemy, France, but Prussian aggrandizement also seemed to suggest mischief. Summarising the implications of the war for Britain, D. Raymond wrote in 1921 that :

The grave forebodings that were felt in England were also felt in other lands, but England was the spokesman of them all. She.... feared that German unity had been made a stalking horse for the designs of Prussia. The traditions of the Hohenzollerns and of the nobility....were not those, it was believed, that should shape the policy of the foremost Power of Europe. 2

1. W. Money Penny and G. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, (Lon. 1910-20), Vol. II, p. 778.
2. D. Raymond, *British Policy and Opinion During the Franco-Prussian War*, (N.Y. 1921), pp. 400-401.

It was Disraeli again who was alive to the implications of the new European situation:

Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists. There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope, at present involved in that obscurity incident to such affairs....  
.....The balance of power has been destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England. 1

Gladstone's Government was subjected to heavy criticism for Britain's inaction during and after the Franco-Prussian conflict, but their apparent pusillanimity simply reflected "the very age and body of the time."<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Prussian expansion and consolidation was also not lost on Gladstone, who wrote anonymously in the Edinburgh Review that:

Every joint of the compacted fabric of Continental Europe has been unset, and there is not one considerable state whose positions and prospects have not been fundamentally modified. 3

The other challenge to Britain's position in the world at this time came from Russia, whose Chancellor, Prince Gortchakov, announced the unilateral abrogation of the Black Sea Clauses in October 1870. The London Protocol of January 1871 resolved the dispute, but it was badly received by the British public who registered a deep sense of Russian perfidy and an almost alarmist response at her obviously renewed menace. As Sir Robert Ensor wrote in 1936:

What subconsciously galled the Englishmen of that day was the contrast between his country's gigantic lead over her neighbours in trade, production, invention, mechanical powers and material resources of every kind, and her relegation to an unaccustomed back seat in the Council of Europe. 4

1. Moneypenny and Buckle, op.cit., II, pp.473-474.
2. Quoted in D.Raymond, op.cit., pp.284-285.
3. The Edinburgh Review, October 1870, the article was entitled, "Germany France and England", pp.555-593.



The Russian manoeuvre was no accident : it had occurred at the precise moment when Britain could do nothing and it represented another blow against mid-Victorian confidence.

These global events certainly had a disturbing effect upon the British public and the Pall Mall Gazette suggested the direction in which interpretation was to proceed when, in December 1869, it reflected upon contemporary developments :

the tendency of men's minds everywhere has been to the aggregation of small, and better consolidation of large states, and neither in Europe, nor in America, does the course of events seem to promise well for the continued independence of the weaker powers. 1

It was precisely this tendency which both the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian Conflict seemed to confirm, and it did not go unnoticed that Italy too had unified into a large entity by 1871. Indeed, British observers did not even have to look outside the empire to find a successful example of the consolidation of national unity for Canada seemed to have achieved it in 1867. Concern for the size of states in the changing world of this period was to find its way into the parliamentary arena in 1870 when Viscount Sandon declared that "the tendency of the day was in favour of large nationalities and the day of small nations was past."<sup>2</sup> In what appeared to be a new era of big states, it was obvious that the world was going to be a more dangerous place to live, and Dr. Creighton's analysis emphasized this point when he wrote that, "the year 1870 lifted the curtain on a new and vaguely disturbing scene. The world was suddenly crowded - overcrowded - with great hulking and ambitious national states."<sup>3</sup>

1. Pall Mall Gazette, 19 December 1869.

2. Hansard, 3, 26 April 1870, 200, 1893.

3. D. Creighton, The Victorians and the Empire, Canadian Historical Review, Vol. 19., (June 1938), pp. 138-153.

What was also significant about these events was the wider application of the federal principle which they manifested. Both Germany and the United States were striking examples of the practicability of federative action to consolidate national unity, and success there undoubtedly encouraged those who were later to be suggesting a similar remedy for the problem of British imperial unity. In particular, the recently-established Canadian federation had proved itself capable of reconciling French Catholics and English Protestants over a geographical expanse of thousands of miles, despite the close proximity of a powerful and sometimes troublesome neighbour to the south. To the early pioneers of imperial unity - those who began to see the British Empire in a distinctly new light - the idea of applying the federal principle to the empire as a means of effecting some sort of closer, more binding, union of the various parts to the centre, must have received an impetus from these foreign examples.

Economically, there were also disturbing signs of foreign rivalry. In the sphere of foreign trade competition, for example, there were signs of a new trend, even if it was difficult to pinpoint. The climax of mid-Victorian business expansion was reached in the early 'seventies when "the value of the export trade ... was greater than in any previous period and greater, indeed, than it was to be again until almost the end of the century".<sup>1</sup> With business profits high and industrial activity at its peak these must have appeared to be the golden years of mid-Victorian prosperity which gave a veracity to the motto "Workshop of the World". Yet, in 1870, Daniel Grant published his book, "Home Politics or the Growth of Trade" in which he argued that Britain's commercial greatness was limited to about twenty years and that the vision of her being the workshop of the world was "a dream of the past : war has made itself felt, other nations have entered the race, and although we are still the great traders of the world, the singularity of our position has gone."<sup>2</sup>

1. R.J.Hoffman, Great Britain and the Anglo-German Trade Rivalry, 1875-1914, (Philadelphia 1933), p.5.

2. D.Grant, Home Politics or the Growth of Trade, (Lon. 1870), p.184.



In the same year, J.A.Froude, historian and editor of Fraser's Magazine since 1860, registered his pessimism when he questioned whether British confidence was justified, adding that, "There are symptoms which suggest, if not fear, yet at least misgivings".<sup>1</sup> A year later, however, The Times remained undaunted and refused to accept these doubts:

We can.....look on the present with undisturbed satisfaction. Our commerce is extending and multiplying its world-wide ramifications without much regard for the croaking of any political or scientific Cassandras.....Turn where we may, we find in our commerce no traces of decadence. 2

The glaring contrast between the rigid patriotism of The Times and the sullen realism of Grant and Froude was not difficult to explain. R.J. Hoffman's account summarised it well when he claimed that "pessimistic prophecies, which were not entirely lacking, passed with scant hearing, for general satisfaction and a spirit of optimism pervaded the country."<sup>3</sup> To the majority of informed men, therefore, disbelief was understandable: serious competition from Europe and America could make no real impact simply because foreign industrialism was still in comparative infancy.

Certain seeds of weakness in Britain's hitherto uncontested supremacy in industry and agriculture soon became apparent, however. Between 1870 and 1886 two acute financial crises occurred, each followed by an industrial and commercial depression. When the slump in industry became general by 1876, the gloom was compounded as British agriculture also succumbed to growing foreign competition and a succession of wet summers. These hints of a serious decline in Britain's economic position were not sufficient to cause widespread public alarm and concern until the 'eighties when they assumed a degree of permanence, but they were portents which convinced several individuals of the need for reassessment. Scientific and technological innovation were also not irrelevant to the challenge which Britain began to face in her hitherto universal dominance in most spheres of activity. Improvements and inventions in communications,

1. J.A.Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, Vol. II., p.195.

2. *The Times*, 26 September, 1871.

3. R.Hoffman, *op.cit.*, p.5.



industrial processes, and agricultural techniques combined to produce stiffer foreign competition and greater rivalry, although these developments were part of a gradual process of economic change which, again, had its main impact in the 'eighties and 'nineties.

It was in the sphere of tariff policy, however, that the changing economic and commercial world proved to be the most challenging. By 1870, free trade had acquired in Britain a sanctity which few mortals dared to question, although it owed its durability less to the Liberal devotion to abstract dogma than to the fact that it served the widespread interests of the manufacturing class<sup>1</sup> and meant cheap food to the labouring masses, a large proportion of whose income was spent on food. Stripped of its moral overtones, free trade was a very practical economic belief : pursuit of it as a virtue enabled Britain to exploit the benefits gained by her early industrialisation. It was in fact a policy of strength; but it had gained too a mystique, a religious aura, through its identification, by such propagandists as Cobden and Bright, with God's law for the universe.

Manchester was the centre of the free trade movement - hence the growth of the so-called Manchester School - but the new world which emerged gradually about the decade after 1870 exhibited a disturbing disinclination to remain one open economic space. Both Canada and the United States had already given an indication of future trends when they introduced protective duties in 1859 and 1865 respectively, and by the end of the 'seventies other nations - France, Germany and Russia - had begun to introduce tariffs in a manner which repudiated Cobden's belief that free trade would prove to be universally contagious. Likewise, the traditional Manchester School conception of the state as being nothing more than an administrative unit was also subject to erosion. Reference to the revival of agitation for state-aided emigration of the unemployed

1. C.J.Fuchs, *The Trade Policy of Great Britain and her Colonies since 1860*, (Lon. 1905), pp. 3-16. See also D.C.Platt, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815-1914*, (Oxford 1968), pp.95-96.

to the colonies, which aroused considerable public attention during the years 1868-1871, was an example of this trend. State intervention in society was still anathema to traditional Liberal attitudes of individual self-determination, as The Times demonstrated when it commented upon the agitation in January 1870:

It would be dangerous to permit the establishment of such a precedent. If the State has to find work, so may it find food, lodging, education, amusement until we are landed in a purely communistic society. 1

This was laissez-faire individualism pure and simple, and it still dominated men's minds, although there were hints of a new tendency. Both in the domestic and in the international context, contemporary events suggested an entirely different concept of the state as something more than a mere administrative unit.

Increasingly then, the decade after 1870 represented an era of doubt when change could only be for the worse and when old attitudes and assumptions were seriously questioned for the first time. In this new climate of radical change, it was hardly surprising that the Victorians began to exercise their powers of introspection, and it was here that the empire began to loom large in their minds as they wrestled with the problem of how to adjust to a world which did not promise guaranteed markets and international peace and stability. Both Grant and Froude had registered their pessimism in 1870, and it is significant that they had both regarded the empire as the salvation for Britain's future. In claiming that Britain's position in the world was "fast changing" and that mid-Victorians were "on the eve of a new national life", Grant left no doubts as to his remedy:

1. The Times, 28 January, 1870.



In it (our Colonial Empire) we have the  
 elements out of which can be woven a  
 great social and a great political ideal...  
 .....let us but weld our colonies so as  
 to form them into an integral part of our  
 empire. 1

Independently, Froude had also arrived at the same conclusion. Using  
 phraseology which was rapidly becoming anachronistic when applied to  
 the white self-governing empire, Froude simplified the issue:

the problem now is but to re-unite the  
 scattered fragments of the same nation,  
 and bridge over the distance which  
 divides them from us. Distance frightens  
 us; but steam and the telegraph have  
 abolished distance. 2

Like most Victorians, Froude underestimated the importance of colonial  
 nationalism when he advocated the consolidation of the existing empire,  
 and his panacea remained a rather undefined concept based upon spiritual  
 bonds, not constitutional reform. Colonies were no longer British  
 outposts for emigration and colonists were no longer "Englishmen across  
 the seas", even if they had exported British political traditions a  
 generation earlier. Both Grant and Froude were spokesmen of a new idea  
 of empire in 1870, but traditional imperial attitudes coexisted with  
 their novel vision and inevitably coloured their patterns of thought  
 upon the subject. Based upon assumptions which were already archaic,  
 their imperial vision, still a vague aspiration, embodied a basic  
 paradox : it accepted the need for change with regard to the imperial  
 relationship, but it failed to recognize the implications of change  
 which had already taken place in that relationship. Their futuristic  
 concept of empire was thus bedevilled by anachronistic premises from the  
 very beginning.

1. D. Grant, op.cit., pp.178-185.

2. J. Froude, op.cit., II, pp.210.

In his observations of how to readjust to a new, more hostile, world, Froude had also highlighted another factor which was subject to constant discussion and reference by the pioneers of a new imperial outlook. The absence of geographical contiguity came to represent no real impediment to imperial unity since improvements in communications and transport implied the abolition of distance which enabled the empire enthusiasts to claim that contact could be made with towns in the Australian colonies and Canada as quickly as it could be established in the remote parts of England and Scotland. Psychologically, such assertions were convincing, but if they were depicted as happy justifications for the pursuit of a closer union of the empire, they also contained less optimistic inferences. As late as 1868, Charles Dilke was claiming in his "Greater Britain", a record of his imperial travels, that "the fear of conquest of the Australian colonies if we left them to themselves is on the face of it ridiculous"<sup>1</sup>, but global events were already rendering such claims obsolete by 1871. Enabling the English reader at home to comprehend fully the sheer magnitude and variety of the empire for the first time, Dilke's descriptive diary was a popular success, but the confidence which it displayed in the mother country's world status to resist foreign encroachment in the more remote spheres of her influence was accepted with much less confidence after 1871. Even before the guns of the Franco-Prussian War had first thundered in earnest on 4 August 1870, the Westminster Review had identified the potential danger which was inherent in the diminution of distance voiced by the new imperialists as:

1. C. Dilke, Greater Britain, p. 388.



.the transference of what now constitutes  
 the strength and the glory of this  
 country to independent or foreign rivals.  
 Should America, Prussia or any other  
 rising power take a helpless but  
 abandoned colony under its protection,  
 England's loss will be the other  
 nation's gain. 1

Unfortunately the diminution of distance was a double-edged sword; it could be used to show how far the obstacles of geography had been removed for enthusiasts of imperial unity, and it also meant, correspondingly, that the world was a much smaller place to inhabit and, thus, a potentially more dangerous place to be. Undeterred by such logic, however, the new imperialists put this argument to good use when they noted that imperial unity was therefore not just desirable, it was a necessity. Equally significant was the Westminster Review's deliberate emphasis on the empire as "the strength and the glory" of Britain, an emphasis which many mid-Victorian politicians and statesmen had hitherto either ignored or placed in subordination to concern for economy.

As a result then of all these far reaching economic and political changes, which occurred as apparently unrelated events in the world during the decade after 1865, a bout of introspective thought took place concerning Britain's position in the world, and it was out of this reassessment that the term "imperial federation" eventually emerged. As a contradiction in terms, the phrase was later subjected to a barrage of academic criticism, but in the decade of the 'seventies it served to mean all things to those who wanted to strengthen Britain

1. The Westminster Review, July 1870.



via the colonies.

It takes more, however, than the zeitgeist to crystallize an idea into a movement, and if we are to understand the emergence of a politically active association dedicated to "imperial federation", we must descend from the general trends which we have discussed so far to the particular, and we must look at the specific events which spurred men to join together to do something about what they believed in. This jolt was provided by the incompetence of the Liberal government in 1869-1870 in relation to colonial policy, and it is to this event and its preliminaries that we must now turn.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Crisis of Opinion

#### The Changing Imperial Relationship

At a time when free trade was still the absolute, eternal and incontrovertible ethos of mid-Victorian England, and while it still received a sacrosanct, moral virtue in the mouths of Cobden and Bright and other middle-class reformers, it was hardly surprising to find a widespread agreement among politicians of all shades of opinion as to the inevitability of colonial independence. Belief in the "manifest destiny" of the colonies was, after all, only logical once the errors of the mercantilist system had been thoroughly exposed and convincingly refuted by all the revered free trade theorists. Adam Smith epitomized the intellectual attack upon the old colonial system with its archaic commercial and political restrictions, and those who were his disciples in mid-Victorian England had commonsense on their side when they called attention to the economic worthlessness of the colonial connection. It was as a result of such allegations that the term "separatism" gained currency in thought and speech during the three decades before 1870, although probably few men who uttered the word really thought about its precise implications. On the face of it, considerations of pure expediency determined whether or not such men advocated an abrupt severance of relationships or if they merely exhibited a predisposition to oppose further additions to the empire, but individual examples were nevertheless set against a background of happy acquiescence towards colonial maturity.

The mid-Victorian conviction which forecast total independence for the white self-governing empire certainly seemed to be assisted and legitimized by the logic of colonial development which was exemplified by the increasing autonomy given to the Australian colonies and New Zealand. By the decade of the 'sixties, however, these gradual changes in the imperial relationship began to attract the attention of those few parliamentarians who thought about the colonies. Anomalies in



the imperial relationship, caused by the fact that it was a historically changing relationship and not a static connection, began to appear and a new concern began slowly to be expressed as the colonies asserted themselves in the new circumstances of their autonomy. In this atmosphere, however, the burdens imposed upon the mother country by the empire began to assume a new significance. Progressive self-government conformed to the spirit of the age, but when it allowed the colonies to impose protective duties on the mother country whose taxpayers provided the money to defend those colonies, "the quintessence of anomaly seemed to have been reached".<sup>1</sup> Yet such a situation was capable of explanation: if Britain could dismantle the whole system of imperial preferences and navigation monopolies in what most Englishmen considered to be the national interest, then it was equally permissible for the colonies to erect tariff barriers in what they considered to be their national interest.

This paradoxical state of affairs, which horrified the colonial reformers, was simply the result of basic changes in the nature of the imperial relationship and, as such, it was a passing phase without permanent significance. The acquisition of self-government had, in effect, produced a situation whereby the colonial connection was at a crossroads by the decade of the 'sixties which, with its acceptance of the need for widespread retrenchment in public expenditure, explained the growing concern for a readjustment in imperial relations along the lines of self-reliance. More and more voices began to speak out in favour of urging the colonies to accept the burdens as well as the rights of self-government, although very few publicly confessed to hastening the day of deliverance. In this climate, the colonial connection - popularly referred to as the "colonial question" - was suddenly subjected to an unusual parliamentary scrutiny in the early 'sixties as the Liberal party turned its attention to the financing of imperial defence.

By 1860, Gladstone, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer in Palmerston's predominantly Whig ministry, had begun his "battle for thrifty husbandry"<sup>2</sup>, a concerted attack upon extravagance in government

1. R.Schuyler, *The Fall of the Old Colonial System, 1770-1870*. (New York, 1945), p. 235.

2. J.Morley, *The Life of W.E.Gladstone*, Vol. I, p.505.

expenditure from which the colonies were not exempt.<sup>1</sup> In the sphere of colonial affairs, it soon came to be accepted that the most effective reduction in imperial expenditure lay in the transference to the self-governing colonies of at least a fraction of the cost of their own defence. This widely-accepted attitude of self-reliance eventually found expression in the establishment of a select committee of the House of Commons to investigate colonial defence expenditure in March 1861 and its report in the following year created a precedent for the future pattern of defence policy towards the self-governing colonies. On the basis of the report, imperial troops stationed in the Australian colonies, New Zealand, Canada and the West Indies were to be gradually withdrawn in order to reduce not only administrative and military costs of maintainance, but also, according to Manchester School maxims, in order to minimise the risks of British involvement in colonial disputes with other nations. Uppermost in the minds of Manchester men was the position of Canada whose relations with the United States were usually strained throughout the 'sixties.<sup>2</sup> However, concern for economy, although most closely associated with Gladstone and the Manchester School of Economists, was not a party issue in these years. Indeed, the advocacy of curtailing expenditure upon certain non-productive areas of the empire received widespread agreement which cut across traditional party lines.

This policy of imperial frugality had few opponents, but it did not generally include a severance of the colonial tie. In the case of Edward Cardwell, the Whig Colonial Secretary between 1864-1866, who was directly responsible for executing the policy of withdrawing the colonial garrisons, there is firm evidence to show that he was as much motivated by a genuine concern for security and efficiency as with the consideration of retrenchment.<sup>3</sup> Morley testified to this when, in a momentary outburst

1. See R.L.Schuyler, *The Recall of the Legions : A Phase in the Decentralization of the British Empire*, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 26, (Oct. 1920), pp 18-36.
2. See C.P.Stacey, *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871*, (*Royal Empire Society Imperial Studies*, No. 11., London 1936).
3. For a summary of Cardwell's role, see G.J.Sellers, *Edward Cardwell at the Colonial Office, 1864-1866*, Unpub. Oxford Univ. B.Litt, thesis, Oct. 1958.



of exasperation, Gladstone claimed:

I am now in the battle about the army.....  
Never on any single occasion since this government  
was formed has his voice been raised in the  
Cabinet for economy. 1

Nevertheless, concern for economy, coupled with the increasingly anomalous position of the self-governing colonies in relation to the mother country, did cause thinking men to begin to question the credibility of the colonial connection in an age which prophesied independence for the infant nations. With Manchester School ideas apparently in the ascendant, however, the debate upon the value of the colonial connection in the 'sixties assumed a much tougher uncompromising tone among certain informed circles of society.

#### Goldwin Smith and Separatism

If there were a handful of interested parliamentarians who thought seriously about the future of the empire in the early 'sixties, they could be forgiven if they occasionally slipped almost imperceptibly into the language of Goldwin Smith.<sup>2</sup> In a collection of press articles written to the Daily News and reconstituted as a book entitled "The Empire" in 1863, Goldwin Smith soon became the proverbial "villain of the piece" as he built the reputation for which he spent the rest of his life atoning. As an eminent exponent of the Manchester School ethos, Smith's main concern in his book was to emphasize the pecuniary considerations in the colonial connection, which, taken by themselves, showed a balance sheet devoid of material benefits. Pursuance of this remorseless logic impelled him to point out that conditions then were very different from what they had been under the old colonial system. The essential bond of commercial advantage had disappeared and, thus, from the pecuniary standpoint, the white self-governing empire had lost its *raison d'être*: the burdens outweighed the benefits of the connection.

1. Morley, op.cit. I, p.545.

2. As former Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, 1858-1867, Smith was noted for his candour when it came to expressing Manchester School views on free trade and the colonial connection. Leaving England in 1868 Smith took up permanent residence in America until 1871 and Canada until his death in 1910.



Armed with this analysis, and invariably supported by editorial comment of the period,<sup>1</sup> Smith questioned the value of an empire where progressive self-government had enabled the colonies to protect their own trading interests against British competition, while the mother country still defended them. All that Smith really did, therefore, was to identify this changed set of circumstances so that, in the climate of retrenchment in government expenditure, which included the colonies, the colonial connection was depicted as a liability. Smith's complaints in later years that he was not an anti-imperialist<sup>2</sup> thus lost credibility because of the chilling conviction with which he wrote and, of course, because of the influence of his book, but there is no doubt that he earned the reputation of being a separatist.

To some extent, evidence regarding Smith's ostensible anti-imperialism is conflicting. The main indictment against him was that he was uncompromising. His gifts of logic and lucidity were, in retrospect, undermined by his failure to appreciate the importance of sentiment when analysing the slow revolution in imperial thought, although he repudiated this assertion in his critique of empire.<sup>3</sup> It was Disraeli, of course, who stigmatized him as "the wild man of the cloister" and it was Goldwin Smith's own secretary, Arnold Haultain, who confirmed this appellation in April 1905 when he wrote that :

To some perhaps this may not appear a wholly inapt phrase by which to characterize an erudite but sedentary man of letters who spends his life in composing.....brilliant diatribes against colonization in a country renowned in history for its aptitude for the peopling of foreign lands. 4

1. Goldwin Smith's most recent biographer, E.Wallace, Goldwin Smith: Victorian Liberal (Toronto Univ. Press 1957), claimed that his book provoked widespread criticism, but it nevertheless reflected the prevailing attitude of informed British political opinion towards the self-governing colonies in the early 'sixties.
2. G.Smith, Reminiscences, pp. 221-222.
3. Smith recognised and anticipated this criticism when he wrote that "None but a cynic would despise sentiment; none but a fool would build on it.", The Empire, p.97.
4. A.Haultain, Goldwin Smith: His Life and Opinions, (Lon. 1913), p.205.

Since the term "anti-imperialist" had only a retrospective relevance to Goldwin Smith's views on empire, it is necessary to use it as sparingly as possible. In the decade of the 'sixties it would be accurate to argue that prevailing opinion upon empire was unanimous in opposing further territorial expansion so that, to this extent, the vast majority of Victorians who thought about the empire were all anti-imperialists. Recognition of "informal" empire, rather than "formal" empire, seems to have been the guiding principle of the age<sup>1</sup>. However, it is not in this sense that the term was attributed to Goldwin Smith : it was really used as a label of derision which referred more specifically to his inflexible belief in hastening colonial independence.

If labels must be used, Goldwin Smith was more of a "Separatist" than an "Anti-imperialist". Nowhere is his separatism more evident than in his reformulated press articles :

The time was when the universal prevalence of commercial monopoly made it well worth our while to hold Colonies in dependence for the sake of commanding their trade. But that time is gone. Trade is everywhere free, or becoming free; and this expensive and peribous connexion has entirely survived its sole legitimate cause. It is time that we should recognise the change that has come over the world.

We have, in fact, long felt that the Colonies did nothing for us.....If they are doing nothing for us, .....where is the use of continuing the connexion ? 2

Yet in the same collection of letters Smith could also suggest a large new vision of empire which would resemble "a great Anglo-Saxon federation" and which would arise spontaneously out of "affinity and mutual affection".<sup>3</sup> The apparent incongruity of these statements is easily explained. Smith believed that the real bonds of attachment in the colonial connection were kinship, sentiment and tradition, and that when released from the archaic formal bonds of empire, the colonies

1. See J.Gallagher, R.Robinson, and A.Denney, *Africa and the Victorians*, (Lon. 1961)

2. G.Smith, *The Empire*, pp 2-3

3. Ibid., p.6.



would still behave as Englishmen across the seas, but without being financially burdensome. In this way, therefore, a kind of invisible network of "crimson threads" would informally replace the absurdly anachronistic ties which cushioned the colonies from the obligations of self-government. Separation could thus be presented as an inevitable readjustment of imperial relations which substituted one form of arrangement for another without weakening the ties, although such a bland generalization conveniently overlooked the pertinent question as to with whom the initiative would reside. As most Victorians soon came to realise, the self-governing colonies exhibited a remarkable capacity for dragging their feet when it came to jettisoning the imperial connection.

The trouble with using such terms as "Separatism" or "Little Englandism", of course, is that they were very often contemporary labels of derision which, because they were politically-charged, are invariably of little use to the historian.<sup>1</sup> To accept them at face value is simply to ignore the fact that they obscured gradations of meaning and intention. Indeed, the more closely they are examined the less appropriate they tend to appear. Separatism has frankly been oversimplified : it pre-supposes a unanimity of purpose which did not exist and it ascribes a malevolence of intention which only hindsight can claim. Although Goldwin Smith was partly to blame for being misunderstood by his critics, he was nevertheless branded by a term which was abused. Smith's logic did not actually amount to the immediate abandonment of empire; it was simply that his Manchester School views impelled him to denounce the existing colonial connection as both anachronistic and even detrimental to the junior partners. There was nothing surprising in this and Smith remarked that he did not advocate a hasty dismemberment of the empire; he merely observed that the world had changed and that "we ought to take practical note of the change".<sup>2</sup> He clearly did not rule out some other form of continuing association, however less formal it might be.

1. See J.S. Galbraith, "Myths of the 'Little England' Era," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 67, (Oct. 1961) pp 34-48.

2. *Op.cit.*, p.8.



Goldwin Smith's contemporary political assumptions regarding the empire certainly percolated throughout both political parties, but found a special place of rest wherever Manchester School beliefs waxed strongest in the Liberal Party. While it came to be regarded as a household phrase among informed colonial circles, however, Smith's separatism was unfortunately used as synonymous with other interpretations of the term. Most of the recent spadework in the task of revising this interpretation of prevailing imperial attitudes has been performed by C.C.Eldridge whose observations merit emphasis in this survey:

The suggestions for the gradual relaxation of imperial ties advocated by the majority of separatists, the idea of separation by consent preached by exponents of the 'voluntary tie' school of thought, and the policy of the British government followed throughout the 1860's were not so very far apart. 1

With one or two important exceptions, most so-called separatists looked for a gradual relaxation of ties, but it was sought after by mutual agreement over an unspecified period of time. Equally significant, however, is the fact that it did not necessarily preclude some other undefined form of continuing association and it varied according to individual colonies. There were gradations of meaning, therefore, but they were all based upon a common acceptance of the changing imperial relationship, and only a tiny minority of public men went as far as supporting an abrupt separatism.

Dr. Eldridge's analysis has shown quite convincingly that the Liberal government did not pursue an officially-disguised policy of imperial dismemberment during the years 1868-1874, but this conclusion must not be allowed to obscure the fact that a minority of senior Liberal ministers did express feelings that an abrupt separatism would not have been unwelcome. Quite the contrary, there is a rather substantial accumulation of evidence which demonstrates beyond doubt

1. C.C.Eldridge, *England's Mission : The Imperial Idea in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli, 1868-1880*, (Lon. 1973) p.38.

the prevalence of such beliefs at least with regard to Canada, and provided that separation was conducted upon friendly terms. This desire for friendliness proved to be the great restraining factor, however. Separatism was an essentially British or imperial phenomenon : it was linked principally to the mother country's self-interest and it rested firmly upon the notion of retrenchment which served to highlight the anomalies in the imperial relationship.

Most of the more recent studies of the decade 1860-1870 tend to concentrate on disproving the theses of C.A. Bodelsen and R.L. Schuyler that this was a period of purposeful separatism or the climax of anti-imperialism. Clearly, separatism was neither a concerted movement nor a calculated policy, but to leave it at this is frankly to overlook the equally significant fact that certain Cabinet ministers did display unequivocal separatist convictions. It is a common mistake to assume that just because certain extreme views of colonial policy found no evident accommodation in the Liberal government's official colonial policy that they, therefore, had no impact at all and consequently can be dismissed. Indeed, there is even an art in saying nothing at the right moment which can have as much impact upon informed opinion as verbosity. It therefore becomes necessary to argue that both public and private contributions to the colonial debate are relevant to an analysis which is as much concerned with what Liberal ministers said they were doing, as with what they did do. In this light, the use of deliberately ambiguous terminology, private exhortations, public hesitation and even calculated silence all added a neurosis to the proverbial colonial question which the government's unimaginative and rigid attitude served further to magnify.

On the face of it, there was scarcely a public man who gave serious thought to the empire who did not mention the word "independence," but the measure of response to such language depended entirely upon how soon the event was to take place. In general, it was relegated to the more distant future, but at other times it appeared to be very close at hand. Thus, there are many indications that the Canadian Confederation of 1867 was thought of as a preparation for its total independence in the near

future.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, however, one of the chief considerations of the British government was the hostility of the United States. In May 1869 Lord Clarendon, the Liberal Foreign Secretary, confessed to Queen Victoria that:

It is the unfriendly state of our relations with America that to a great extent paralyses our action in Europe. There is not the smallest doubt that if we were engaged in a Continental quarrel, we should immediately find ourselves at war with the United States. 2

Canada was thus a special cause for concern in British colonial policy, but the contributions of senior Liberal ministers, such as Robert Lowe and John Bright, to the colonial debate and the toughness of Lord Granville, the Colonial secretary, did not offer the prospect of either moderation or flexibility in the government's determination to pursue economy.

#### Canada and the Separatists

R.L.Schuyler wrote in 1945 that:

When an English historian has vouchsafed to touch upon the anti-imperial sentiment of the Mid-Victorian era, the reader gets the impression that a regrettable episode is being glossed over. 3

It can be accepted that the Gladstone Government did not aspire to be, "the heralds and inaugurators of a new policy and a new era" with regard to the colonies, as Gladstone belatedly informed the House of Commons in April, 1870,<sup>4</sup> but there has been a tendency to minimise the extent to which separatist views brought about a "crisis of opinion"<sup>5</sup> in the

1. See especially, D.L.M.Farr, *The Colonial Office and Canada*, (Toronto 1955) p. 276. Also F.H.Underhill, *Canada's Relations with the Empire as seen by the Toronto Globe 1857-1867*, *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 10., June, 1929, pp.106-128.
2. Clarendon to the Queen, 1 May 1869, G.E.Buckle, (ed)., *Letters of Queen Victoria*, 2nd series, Vol. 1, (1862-1869), p.594.
3. Schuyler, *op.cit.*, p.245.
4. Hansard, (3), 26 April 1870, 200, 1898-1899.
5. The expression belongs to W.D.McIntyre, *The Imperial Frontier in the Tropics 1865-1875 : A Study of British Colonial Policy in W.Africa, Malaya and the South Pacific in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli*, p.50.



years 1869-1871. On a subject about which senior Liberal ministers said and wrote little of a committal nature, the paucity of evidence must be interpreted with extreme care. The need to register and explain an individual's alleged reasons for a specific opinion, whether uttered publicly or conveyed privately, is a task only partly completed to date. There are convincing scraps of evidence to suggest that certain individuals can be 'convicted' of strong separatist views and they would have transferred their views to the sphere of practical politics had the opportunity presented itself to them. It is worth noting, however, that such evidence referred to particular problems and that, in the case of Canada, even the Tory party could boast of an advocate of separatism.

If inertia and considerations of prestige counselled against a hurried severance of the colonial tie, it remained to render the empire as harmless as possible to the working of the British economy. In one of several intervals of prophecy in the 'sixties, Lord Robert Cecil, later third Marquis of Salisbury, wrote to Sir Charles Adderley in December, 1861 on the problem of the expense of a Maori rebellion in New Zealand :

I think the present war, if it comes to that, will draw a good deal of attention to the question of a colonial empire, whether it be worth having, or at what price. 1

Doubtless, Cecil's comment was an expression of a more widespread feeling that if independence was inevitable then the object of imperial policy should be nothing more positive than a maintenance of the status quo. In this, Gladstone concurred as he indicated in a memorandum of July, 1864 concerning the question of imperial expenditure on the Quebec fortifications.<sup>2</sup> Clearly he opposed such a display of financial generosity upon a country which he regarded as moving inevitably towards independence and because it might possibly increase the colony's dependence upon the mother country. This was, therefore, a case of the government implicitly assisting the development of colonial independence.

1. W. Childe-Pemberton, *The Life of Lord Norton, 1814-1905* (Lon. 1909) p. 178.
2. Quoted in P. Knaplund, *Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Policy*, (Lon 1927) pp. 228-242.

The Liberal Government did not have a monopoly of public men who spoke of retrenchment or colonial independence, but it did possess individuals who exhibited a remarkable ability to convey frankness when timely discretion would have meant less embarrassment in colonial affairs. Probably the two most notorious separatists of senior rank in the Gladstone Government of 1868 were John Bright and Robert Lowe. Bright's love of peace impelled him to regard the imperial tie as a cross to bear and, like Lowe, it was the possession of Canada which seemed to elicit his strongest separatist inclinations. In a debate on the army estimates in the House of Commons in March 1865, Bright uttered one of his most famous diatribes on the Canadian issue:

I suspect from what has been stated by official Gentlemen in the present Government and in previous Governments, that there is no objection to the independence of Canada whenever Canada may wish it. I have been glad to hear those statements, because I think they mark an extraordinary progress in sound opinions in this country.....I believe if Canada now, by a friendly separation from this country, became an independent state,.....it would not be less friendly to England.....In the case of war with America, Canada would then be a neutral country;.....I do not object to that separation in the least; I believe it would be better for us and better for her. 1

The consistency of his Manchester School ethos was evident two years later when he indicated a belief that the impending Canadian Confederation was only a prelude to an immediate separation from Britain:

I think it would be far better for them and for us - cheaper for us and less demoralizing for them - that they should become an independent State. 2

There is evidence that Bright did not want to give up the empire as a whole<sup>3</sup>, but such statements were recorded in the later 1850's and there can be little doubt from his position a decade later that he regarded Canada at least as an awkward embarrassment.

1. J.E.Thorold Rogers, (editor), *Speeches of John Bright*, Vol. 1., (Lon. 1868), pp.153-154.
2. House of Commons, 28 February 1867, J.E.Thorold Rogers, op.cit. p.161.
3. For a detailed account of Bright's position, see J.L.Sturgis, *John Bright and the Empire*, (Lon. Univ. 1969), pp. 101-102 and 183-184.

Robert Lowe had a chequered career as regards colonial experience. His ten years residence in Australia as an active member of the New South Wales Legislature ensured that his role in the House of Commons debates on colonial policy would be as a scathing critic, whichever party held office. Lowe's disagreeable experiences of Australian politics in the 1840's accounted for his detestation of democracy and, hence his role as a trenchant critic of parliamentary reform in England at the time of the passing of the 1867 Reform Bill. In retrospect, however, his early career in Australia, where he soon gained 'prominence and unpopularity'<sup>1</sup>, was, in one respect, of marked contrast to his later reputation as an opponent of empire. In 1844, he took up a strong position on the subject of the separation of the colony of Victoria when he argued for the principle that 'Union is strength' and even that this principle might be extended to the whole of Britain's colonial empire :

I hold and believe that the time is not remote when Great Britain will give up the idea of treating the dependencies of the Crown as children, to be cast adrift by their parent as soon as they arrive at manhood, and substitute for it the far wiser and nobler policy of knitting herself and her Colonies into one mighty Confederacy. 2

Lowe was in fact advocating a form of imperial federation, although it seems certain that he preferred to forget his pioneering days in later life. At a public dinner in the hall of Sydney College in January, 1846 he replied to the toast, 'A speedy and thorough reform of the Colonial policy of Great Britain' that he was not one of those who looked forward to separation from the mother country as inevitable and proceeded to rebuke the bungling incompetence of Downing Street.<sup>3</sup> This was hardly Lowe's stance in the 1860's, however, when his hostility to the possession of Canada revealed a complete volte-face. In the House of

1. J.Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, (Lon. 1903), pp.293-310.
2. A.Patchett Martin, *The Life and Letters of Viscount Sherbrooke*, Vol.I, pp. 234-295. See also J.F.Hogan, *Robert Lowe*, (Lon. 1893), pp.210-233.
3. A.Patchett Martin, *ibid.*, Vol.I., pp.290-291.



Commons in 1865, Lowe's views seemed to have travelled full circle when he argued that Canada ought to be given to understand that she was quite free to establish herself as an independent republic if she so desired.<sup>1</sup> In 1867 he reflected upon the value of the colonial empire in terms of monetary burdens :

What I apprehend as likely to happen now is that England will separate from the colonies because they insist on taxing her. 2

He even referred to Britain as 'the Cinderella who does all the work of the Imperial household' confessing, however, that the fairy tale had been reversed and that the 'young sisters' have enslaved the elder.'<sup>3</sup> Lowe's separatism seemed to have reached its point of desperation when in 1872 he urged an immediate severance of the link with Canada to the newly-appointed Governor-General, the Marquis of Dufferin.

Dufferin wrote :

It is perfectly true that, after I had been appointed to Canada, Bob Lowe came up to me in a club and said, 'Now you ought to make it your business to get rid of the Dominion.'<sup>4</sup>

Evidence seems to suggest, however, that Lowe's concern to be rid of Canada was not confined to a handful of Manchester men plotting the downfall of the empire. Lord Kimberley, who became Colonial Secretary in the summer of 1870, recorded in his 'Journal' in May 1869 that the Cabinet favoured a policy towards Canada which would reduce the possibility

1. 23 March, 1865, Hansard,(3), CLXXVIII, 153.

2. 28 March, 1867, *ibid.*, CLXXXVI, 762.

3. A.Patchett Martin, *op.cit.*, Vol. I., p.341.

4. Sir A.Lyall, *The Life of the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava*, Vol. I., (Lon. 1905), p.286.

of a war with the United States :

We have had a gloomy discussion on the relations between this country and the United States. Nearly all the Ministers were of opinion that it would be impossible to defend Canada successfully against the Americans, and that it is much to be desired that Canada should become independent. It would be for the interest both of England and Canada. We should be relieved from a continual source of weakness and danger,.....There is no reason why an independent Canada should not be on equally good terms with both nations. 1

In other departments of government and administration there were individual expressions of discontent with the Canadian tie. Lord Lyons, the British Ambassador in Paris during the troubled years of Franco-Prussian hostilities, wrote to Lord Clarendon :

I never feel comfortable about Canada and our North American possessions.....it seems to be in the nature of things that the United States' prestige should grow and ours should wane in North America, and I wish we were well and creditably out of the scrape. 2

Clarendon's rejoinder of June 1870 was sympathetic:

I agree in every word you say about our possessions in North America and wish that they would propose to be independent or to annex themselves. We can't throw them off and it is very desirable that we should part as friends. 3

As a Whig, Clarendon's philosophy with regard to the colonies could only be that of a detached observer anticipating independence at some future date, but the Canadian relationship seemed to render it expedient to accelerate the pace of colonial development, in British interests.

1. E.Drus, A Journal of Events during the Gladstone Ministry 1868-1874 : The Earl of Kimberley, Camden Misc., xxi, (Lon. 1958) p.4.
2. Lord Newton, Lord Lyons : A Record of British Diplomacy, Vol. I., (Lon. 1913), pp.291-292.
3. Clarendon to Lyons, 1 June 1870, Clarendon Papers, 1870, C474, ff. 478-479.

Lord Kimberley also admitted that it would be better for both Britain and Canada that the connection should cease, but added that, 'it would be premature and impolitic to do anything with a view to bringing it about now.'<sup>1</sup> A summary of Kimberley's attitude towards the Canadian question in this period, according to his Journal, would show him as an advocate of independence 'at the right moment'. Clearly, however, the time seemed inopportune in 1870.

Even Lord Salisbury, the future Tory leader, seemed disposed to truncate Canada from the empire when he wrote to Lord Sandford in May 1872 :

As it is the mess gets worse every year : and unless some happy accident induces Canada to quarrel with us, we must come to grief. 2

Salisbury's observation was another example of wishful thinking, but it did not betray him as a separatist hiding in Tory ranks. Like the majority of the Liberal Cabinet in 1872, his major concern was to avoid an Anglo-American war. Salisbury's early view of the empire was 'almost totally lacking in appeal to patriotism and chauvinistic feelings and his anxiousness to avoid unnecessary international responsibilities is most noticeable in his writings on colonial affairs.'<sup>3</sup> Quite clearly, his attitude towards the empire in this period could just as easily have resided at home in the ranks of the Liberal Party. His antipathy towards Britain's involvement in native wars in the colonies, 'Little Wars' as he sarcastically called them, was quite obviously a reflection of prevailing concern for retrenchment. It appears that the Tory Party at this time did not regard colonial affairs as sufficiently important to warrant a concerted attack upon the Liberal obsession with economy in this sphere. It was only the Earl of Carnarvon and a small group of Tory enthusiasts and specialists who mounted an assault on Liberal Colonial policy in 1869-1870. Up until July, 1869 the most consistent feature of parliament's regard for colonial affairs was its indifference.

1. E.Drus, op.cit., p.18.

2. Salisbury to Sandford, 3 May 1872, Salisbury Papers, Class D/XV/f.72.

3. M.Pinto-Duschinsky, The Political Thought of Lord Salisbury, 1854-1868, (Lon. 1967), p.132.



### Parliamentary Indifference

To suggest that mid-Victorian parliaments were not greatly interested in colonial matters is really to state the obvious, but it was not a condition of affairs which necessarily meant that colonial interests were damaged by inattention.<sup>1</sup> After all, Colonial Office despatches were still written with a view to their possible presentation to Parliament and the Colonial Secretary and his assistants in parliament still had to be prepared for the occasional probing question. It would be pointless to burden this study with the numerous examples of parliamentary indifference which could be tiresomely cited and tediously ennumerated, especially in the period 1860-1865, which, with the publication of Goldwin Smith's 'Empire' in 1863, seemed to represent a minor epoch in imperial history. The more familiar manifestations of parliamentary apathy were either a visible emptying of the chambers when an imperial subject was next on the timetable, or an already absent House. Parliamentary docility in imperial subjects, either as a result of a lack of technical knowledge or the lateness of the hour, could be useful to the expedition of colonial business, and it was never a surprise for an interested member to find that his initiative had been thwarted by failing to obtain a quorum, or that the House had dwindled to less than forty members while he was speaking. In the House of Lords, the situation was probably made worse by the fact that the House had no jurisdiction over financial considerations so that this convention deprived imperial topics of any significant interest when they appeared on the agenda.

1. Lord George Hamilton claimed retrospectively that it was the Liberals who "knew little and cared less" about colonial politics and imperial aspirations, but it was never as simple as this. As a Conservative M.P. Hamilton's assertion is suspect. Lord G. Hamilton, *Parliamentary Reminiscences and Reflections*, (Lon. 1916-1922), Vol.1, pp.21-22.

In general, of course, colonial matters had no direct bearing on elections and there was no strict party policy on imperial questions in the decade 1860-1870 which would have given one party a distinctive identity in this realm. Party labels being of no real significance in any analysis of parliamentary opinion on the colonies, it was much more useful to isolate groups on a functional basis according to their interests in the colonies.<sup>1</sup> The organization of groups did, in some instances, cut across party lines, even after the Second Reform Act of 1867. However, the year 1869 marked at least the beginning of a new transitory phase in parliamentary debates on colonial issues. The occasion for the sudden interest and excitement in parliamentary attitudes towards the colonies was Lord Granville's uncompromising treatment of New Zealand. It stimulated a long debate in July, 1869 in the House of Commons<sup>2</sup> and, again, in the same month in the Lords,<sup>3</sup> tentative observations were made by Lord Carnarvon on the policy of the withdrawal of troops from the colonies. In this debate Carnarvon admitted that indifference had been the spirit of the age :

We, in England, are sometimes so engrossed with the mass of Public Business.....that we are obliged to pass by colonial questions with comparatively little debate and to appear sometimes as giving them apparently less attention than they deserve.....and they fancy we are indifferent when we are not really so. 4

The parliamentary rumpus of the years 1869-1870, however, did not produce any polarization of party attitudes towards the empire. Carnarvon's spirited, and sometimes melodramatic, attacks on the government's colonial policy were the efforts of an individual incensed by the Liberal Ministry's clumsiness in dealings with the colonies.

1. For the period 1864-1866 this analysis had been made by G.J.Sellers, Edward Cardwell at the Colonial Office, Unpub. Oxford Univ. B.Litt. thesis, 1958, pp.50-52, and for the period after 1867 see P.J.Durrans, The Discussion of Imperial Affairs in the British Parliament, 1868-1880, Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1970.
2. 22 July 1869, Hansard,(3), CXCviii, 456-493.
3. 27 July 1869, *ibid.*, CXCviii, 778-795.
4. 27 July 1869, *ibid.*, CXCviii, 780.

At the heart of this insensibility there seemed to be a desire to dispose of the whole issue as quick and as peremptorily as possible. As Colonial Secretary, therefore, Granville's role in the agitation both inside and outside parliament was absolutely key.

#### Granville's Position

The continuing debate as to Granville's personal attitude towards the empire seems to provide no conclusive evidence one way or the other. One study covering the period of his colonial secretaryship suggests that he was a convinced separatist<sup>1</sup>, while two much more recent analyses indicate that he had no intention of practising an imperial dismemberment, although retaining the right to inaugurate a friendly separation if and when desirable.<sup>2</sup> Evidence in his private correspondence with Gladstone and in confidential despatches does, on occasions, conflict with his public announcements in parliament and this apparent contradiction is another example of the historian's dilemma in attempting to weigh one consideration against another. To a degree, the suspicions of his contemporaries can be subordinated, although not discounted, in importance to other considerations, chiefly because their conjectures were probably due to the government's failure to explain its policy, rather than the result of actual proof.

The fact that any of Granville's colleagues or contemporaries could record in their correspondence a belief in his separatist intentions is of some value, however, in any attempt to arrive at a summary of his position. He was certainly known to go further than Gladstone in his desire to retain the initiative in bringing about a separation between the mother country and a colony, at the right moment. Presumably the timing of the event would be determined by some unforeseen contingency which would render a severance necessary. It is in this light that Granville's clandestine manoeuvres regarding Canada must be viewed.

1. See W.P.Tyler, Sir Frederic Rogers, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, 1860-1871, Ph.D. thesis, Duke Univ., 1963. Tyler's picture of Granville is naturally arrived at by a study of Colonial Office officials with whom he worked.
2. See W.D.McIntyre, op.cit. and C.C.Eldridge, op.cit.



Suspensions were naturally aroused that he had embarked upon a new colonial policy, which was not true, but the retrospective questions as to whether he was a separatist and whether he would have implemented such a policy given the chance, remain at the centre of the controversy.

Granville was certainly not interested in colonial affairs. He did not devote much time to the administration of Colonial Office affairs in 1869 chiefly because he was pre-occupied with piloting Gladstone's Irish measures through the hostile atmosphere of the House of Lords. One critic of his disinterest in colonial matters was probably right when he wrote in the Times in November, 1869 :

Granville was more interested in coaching the Irish Church Bill through the House of Lords, than in learning something about his fifty colonies. 1

It must be admitted that Granville seems to have gained a certain notoriety as an indolent occupant of office, a reputation of which he was evidently aware and with which he seemed to concur :

People think that I am an idle man; I am sorry to say it is quite true. 2

He even admitted to his private secretary that if he left his letters alone they would usually answer themselves. This assessment of Granville seems to have been confirmed by Lord Rendel, a personal friend of Gladstone's, who wrote retrospectively in 1931 that :

it was always said that he was so slack and dilatory as a Foreign Minister in his last term of office in that Department.....I can believe that he let his papers stand over a good deal and that he may have practised a masterly inactivity. 3

1. 10 November 1869, The Times. The critic was Edward Wilson
2. Lord Kilbracken, Reminiscences, (Lon. 1931), p.102.
3. Lord Rendel, Personal Papers of Lord Rendel, (Lon.1931), p.33.

Granville certainly possessed the social graces of an earlier age, 'he had all the tastes, the graces, the opportunities. In social talent he was matchless.'<sup>1</sup> Lord Kimberley, Granville's successor at the Colonial Office in 1870, recorded in his Journal that:

His great fault is that he lives from hand to mouth, and trusts too much to the chapter of accidents. He seems never to give himself the trouble to reason out any matter completely, and he is singularly ignorant of the details of the questions he has to deal with. This laziness makes him an indifferent departmental Minister. 2

It hardly seems surprising, therefore, that colonial matters would find no place of importance in Granville's mind. He doubtless regarded the Colonial Office as a convenient base from which to carry out other government business and, as a result, he left much of his work to his Permanent Under-Secretary, Frederic Rogers, who, not surprisingly, liked Granville very much as a master. In December 1868 he wrote:

He is very pleasant and friendly, and I think will not meddle beyond what is required to keep us clear of political slips. 3

Granville's tenure of office is more obviously associated with the withdrawal of the imperial troops from the colonies, than those of his predecessors, mainly because of the outbreak of another native war in New Zealand and the uncompromising methods he employed with that colony. His early dismay at the apparent unpopularity of the programme of economy as applied to imperial expenditure was sarcastically conveyed to Gladstone, 'If you ever get through this twaddle, you will believe in the neglect of your colonies'.<sup>4</sup> While Lord Carnarvon appeared to be the chief Opposition critic of Lord Granville in parliament, it was Lord John Russell, the great Whig statesman, who continually badgered Granville for a clear statement of his policy throughout the period from August 1869

1. Granville's diplomatic finesse and suave manners had earned him the sobriquet of "Pussy", although he failed to display these niceties to the colonies in 1869.
2. E.Drus, The Kimberley Journal, p.31.
3. G.E.Marindin, (editor), Letters of Frederic Lord Blachford, (Lon.1896), p.275.
4. Granville to Gladstone, 31 December 1868, A.Ramm, (editor), The Political Correspondence of Gladstone, 1868-1876, Camden Society, No. 81, 3rd Series, Vol.I, p.7.

to the end of 1870. In August 1869 Granville began his inner party conflict with Russell when he wrote to him :

Theoretically you assume that I wish to get rid of Canada, Australia and India. Our relations with North America are of a very delicate character, The best solution of them would probably be that in the course of time and in the most friendly spirit the Dominion should find itself strong enough to proclaim her independence. 1

Russell's mind appears to have occasionally arrived at the possibility of some form of imperial federation as the solution to the imperial relationship. He had alluded to it as early as 1849<sup>2</sup> and in his 'Recollections' published in 1875 he returned to the subject, but added a warning that :

The Minister who tries to weaken the attachment of our North American Provinces to Great Britain will be sure to rouse the general indignation of the people of England, and will be punished, if not by impeachment, at all events by eternal infamy. 3

It seemed to Russell, however, that Granville was contemplating precisely this action whereas he warmly advocated the consolidation of the British Empire, but the Colonial Secretary was not impressed:

Johnny Russell wrote a violent criticism to me on my Colonial Policy, in which he compared himself to Oliver Cromwell and Chatham, and me to Lord North and Geo. Grenville. I rejoined much too good-humouredly, my Secretary thinks - and I have had a rejoinder, in which amongst other things he says "that which I wish to see is a Colonial Representative Assembly sitting apart from our Lords and Commons voting us supplies in aid for our Navy and Army, and receiving in return assurances of support from the Queen."

Shall we immortalize your administration by proposing this ? 4

1. Granville to Russell, 28 August 1869, Lord E. Fitzmaurice, Life of the Second Earl Granville, (Lon. 1905), Vol. II., p.22.
2. Russell to Early Grey, 19 August 1849, P.R.O., 30.22.8., Quoted in M.Kerr, The Role of the British Parliament in Colonial Affairs 1850-1860, Oxford Univ. Ph.D. thesis 1952, pp. 252-253.
3. Lord J. Russell, Recollections and Suggestions 1813-1873, (Lon. 1875), Vol.II, p.204.
4. Granville to Gladstone, 2 September 1869, Ramm, ed., op.cit. p.52.



In retrospect, the suggestion was not as premature as it then appeared and the sarcasm with which Granville treated it was a reflection of the prevailing feeling among those parliamentarians familiar with the colonial question who could not seriously contemplate an abdication of sovereignty which such a plan seemed to demand. Gladstone's regard for Russell's suggestion and for his relentless criticism of Granville was one of annoyance and absurdity. He deprecated Russell's persecution of Granville and quite obviously felt that his proposal was preposterous:

I cannot wonder at your not answering the letter of Sept. 3rd : for there is always a hope that nonsense may evaporate of itself if it is let alone and not precipitated by the cold touch of scorn into the solid. 1

Clearly, the attacks made by Russell had little impact upon the minds of Gladstone and Granville, except for irritation, but Russell's approaches were to be emulated on a much wider basis as part of a more widespread attack on the government in parliament.

The most controversial evidence of Granville's propensity to favour the expedition of a friendly separation from Canada appeared in a note to Gladstone in January 1870, but the matter arose in a very roundabout manner which suggested that Granville acted entirely independently of Gladstone. In May 1869 Gladstone had reminded Granville of his own interpretation of the Colonial connection :

It may be just worth while to mention to you that in January 1846 I wrote from the C.O. Instructions to Lord Cathcart as Governor General in Canada in which it was distinctly enough laid down that we did not 'impose' British connection upon the Colony, but regarded its goodwill and desire as an essential condition of the connection. 2

Gladstone's object in conveying this to Granville was, 'for the chance of being useful at a future stage when we resume the discussion.' Granville, however, had every intention of implementing the Premier's 'freedom and voluntarism' with regard to Canada for, in June 1869, he

1. Gladstone to Granville, 1 October 1869, Ramm, op.cit., p.62.
2. Gladstone to Granville, 29 May 1869, Ramm, op.cit., p.24.

sent a confidential despatch to the Governor-General in Canada, Sir John Young, which emulated his chief's instructions of 1846. In the June despatch Granville stated that :

It has been more and more felt on both sides that Canada is part of the British Empire because she desires to be so; and under the influence of this conviction the attachment of the colonists to Great Britain has grown with the growth of their independence. H.M. Government value the existing relation as the symbol and support of that attachment.....They have no desire to maintain it for a single year after it has become injurious or distasteful to them. 1

The need for absolute discretion in this private correspondence was quickly emphasized by Granville who added to the draft, which was primarily the work of Frederic Rogers :

You will also be good enough to bring to my notice any line of policy, or any measures which without implying on the part of H.M. Government any wish to change abruptly our relations, would gradually prepare both countries for a friendly relaxation of them. 2

It seems that Gladstone was unaware of the nature of this communication and that Granville acted completely independently of Gladstone.<sup>3</sup> Evidence in the Gladstone-Granville correspondence indicates that Gladstone was not informed of Granville's manoeuvres until the Colonial Secretary admitted to him in January 1870 :

An extract from that despatch was the basis of a confidential despatch to Sir John Young which I desired him not to show to his ministers for fear of misconstruction but to use as a guide for his own language. There is a phrase at the end of it, which would make it unwise to publish it at present. 4

1. Granville to Young, 14 June 1869, C.O. 42/678, Quoted in C.C.Eldridge, op.cit., pp.67-68.
2. ibid, C.C.Eldridge, op.cit. pp. 67-68. This part of the draft also appears in Ramm. op.cit., p.89. Significantly, Lord Carnarvon wrote on 10 December 1869 that he was convinced of Granville's desire to sever the Canadian tie, Sir A.Hardinge, Life of the Fourth Earl of Carnarvon, (Oxford, 3 Vols., 1925), Vol.II, p.17.
3. See E.Drus, The Kimberley Journal, p.xvii.
4. Granville to Gladstone, 25 January 1870, Ramm, op.cit., p.89.

Thus, there was a time lag of seven months between Granville's initial draft conveying separatist feelings to Sir John Young and Gladstone's awareness of it. Clearly, Granville thought that Britain should merely undertake to defend any portion of the Empire and should not relinquish to right to take the initiative in severing the bond. It was in this significant reservation that Granville's view of traditional Liberal ideas of separation by consent differed from that of his chief. A secret memorandum from Granville to Gladstone in January 1870 demonstrated the difference between their views :

May not circumstances arise, in which it would be politic for this country to say "you are now so rich and so strong that we must take the initiative and ask you to agree to a friendly separation" ? 1

These exchanges were not known to the public in Britain, but, as a result of the indiscretions of Sir John Young in Canada, a situation of ambiguity was widely reported by the Canadian press which gave an unexpected authority to the accusations and suspicions heaped upon Granville's colonial policy in England. In June 1870, however, Lord Clarendon died and Granville received the seals of the Foreign Office in July, while Lord Kimberley replaced Granville as Colonial Secretary.

#### Kimberley's Contribution

These ministerial changes, it seems, did little to curb the unrest generated by Granville's toughness, but Kimberley's application to the task of retrenchment yielded a much more conciliatory approach to colonial policy. The offer of the Colonial Office seems to have been totally unexpected, as Kimberley confessed in his Journal :

I have never served in the Colonial department, and have paid little attention to colonial affairs of late years. 2

Kimberley's tenure of office, which is well recorded in his Journal, also reveals some useful commentary on the question of separatism. Like

1. Granville's enquiry on a secret memo. by Gladstone, 19 January 1870, Gladstone Papers, Add. Mss., 44, 759.
2. E.Drus, op.cit., p.16.



Gladstone, Kimberley regarded colonial independence as inevitable, and he also looked upon the abandonment of empire as impracticable. His principal concern with regard to the white self-governing colonies during his term of office from 1870-1874 was to avoid a premature rupture in relations with them. This accounts for his favourable attitude towards the growing demands of the Australian colonies for complete Freedom in dealing with inter-colonial trade, while Gladstone resisted this development because he thought it would magnify the economic disunity of the empire.<sup>1</sup> Both, however, were motivated by a concern to avoid measures which might have far-reaching consequences and this meant resisting trends which tended towards separatism. Kimberley was as equally apprehensive as Gladstone, admitting that such economic freedom would undermine the connection with England and would have an undoubted separatist effect. Nevertheless, he was reluctantly aware of the impracticability of a refusal of Australian demands and consoled himself in the belief that the colonies would never be able to agree upon a common tariff. Thus, the Australian Colonies Duties Act of 1873 enabled them to introduce preferential trading arrangements with each other - another blow at free trade within the empire.

Unlike Granville, Lord Kimberley has no reputation for controversy, but even Kimberley remarked upon the separatist fervour which swirled about the Cabinet. In connection with the Australian economic demands, he wrote in March 1872 :

Gladstone, Lowe and Cardwell make no secret of their opinion that we should be well rid of the colonies, and Cardwell evidently thinks the Australian demand for power to establish an Australian intercolonial tariff, a good opportunity for bringing matters to a point. 2

1. See the letter from Gladstone to Kimberley, December 1871, for the Prime Minister's opposition to Australian demands which is reprinted in P.Knaplund, Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Policy, pp.247-250.
2. E.Drus, op.cit., p.29.

In view of Gladstone's public disavowal of separatism in the House of Commons in April 1870, Kimberley's revelation appears as either momentary exasperation or a private exercise in wishful thinking, but whatever the explanation might be, it seems that instances of such a renegade nature were hardly likely to take the neurosis out of the current debate on the colonial question. If this was evidence of the type of unstable background to the colonial debate at Cabinet level, then Liberal politicians could hardly complain if the government's colonial policy was frequently misinterpreted and regarded with suspicion. Historians have underestimated the extent to which separatist desires pervaded the minds of senior Liberal politicians, even if the government never seriously adopted a policy of imperial dismemberment. If those members of parliament who interested themselves in colonial matters were agreed that some radical change must soon be imposed upon the informal structure, certain senior Colonial Office Officials also maintained strong beliefs in the essentially transient nature of the Imperial tie.

#### Colonial Office Attitudes

The extent to which senior permanent officials in the Colonial Office seriously influenced British colonial policy is a heavily trodden area of historical research which has been reworked a number of times in recent years.<sup>1</sup> It might be expected, of course, that the very ephemeral nature of ministerial office would be offset, at least theoretically, by the continuity of the civil service. Thus, it was only reasonable to anticipate

1. See especially W.D.McIntyre, *op.cit.*, pp. 46-74 and C.C.Eldridge, *op.cit.*, pp. 59-62, 83, 89-90. The classic studies:- H.L.Hall, *The Colonial Office*, (Lon. 1937); Sir A.Bertram, *The Colonial Service*, (Cambridge 1930); Sir J.Bramston, "The Colonial Office from Within", *Empire Review*, I, (April 1901), pp. 279-287; Sir W.A.B.Hamilton, "Forty-Four Years At the Colonial Office," *Nineteenth Century*, Vol.386, (April 1909), pp.599-613; and A.B.Pugh, *The Colonial Office, 1801-1925*, *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, Vol. III, pp.711-767, are still invaluable, but D.L.M. Farr, *The Colonial Office and Canada 1867-1887*, (Toronto 1955) is of particular value to this study.

that the changing personnel of the Colonial Secretary and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary would give an undue influence to the permanent staff in the Colonial Office. Herman Merivale, the permanent under-secretary in the Colonial Office from 1848 to 1859, had written as early as 1842, when Professor of Political Economy at Oxford University that :

Colonial Secretaries ought to allow their office to be a sinecure, and let the whole be constituted by some steady permanent under secretary. 1

The Colonial Office had never been regarded as an important position to hold and the administration of the empire had been carried out with a kind of solemn resignation to the fact that the colonies existed. If neither parliamentarians nor officials ever questioned the value of the colonial connection in the decade before 1860, the atmosphere of acquiescence in the existence of colonies changed in the decade after 1860. Accompanying the policy of colonial self-reliance and reduced expenditure established in the early 'sixties, the accession of Frederic Rogers to the post of permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office in 1860 represented, in many respects, a change in attitudes in the Colonial Office. 2

The making of colonial policy was really the concern of a small elite:- the permanent staff at the Colonial Office; the tiny group of parliamentarians, including the Colonial Secretary, whose official positions involved them in colonial matters; and the occasional intervention of interested Members of Parliament, usually with first-hand experience of life in the colonies. The conduct of imperial business was carried out along well-understood lines and it was generally accepted that colonial policy should be both non-political and non-controversial in

1. Merivale to MacVey Napier, 27 January 1842, Ms. 34, 620 and 249, Quoted in M.Kerr, *The Role of the British Parliament in Colonial Affairs 1850-1860*, Oxford Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1952, p.260.
2. For the fullest account of Rogers' career, see W.P.Tyler, *Sir Frederic Rogers, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office 1860-1871*, Ph.D. thesis, Duke Univ. N.Carolina, 1962.



nature. Doubtless, the generally unstable party system of the period up to 1868 allowed for an elasticity in colonial affairs which served as a policy, except where a special problem needed to be judged on its merits. Lord Palmerston epitomized the climate of the times when in 1865 he referred to the idea of criticism along party lines as absurd :

to impugn a government for its colonial policy  
was a device resorted to only when no other  
sources of indictment lay readily at hand. 1

In this atmosphere, the Colonial Office staff could not necessarily rest easy in the belief that parliamentary scrutiny in colonial affairs was a myth, but they were sure that colonial debates and probing questions on colonial matters would be few and far between.

As a lifelong friend of Gladstone's, it was not surprising that Roger's imperial outlook counselled against any radical revision of the imperial relationship. Like Gladstone, he firmly believed in the inevitability of colonial independence, but that separation should be brought about in a friendly manner and not by discarding colonies against their will.<sup>2</sup> He opposed further territorial accessions to the empire which could only add more expense to the running of colonial affairs, but regarded colonial independence in terms of making new informal bonds of kinship and sentiment, rather than as a negative abdication of responsibility. If Rogers' outlook influenced the shape of British Colonial policy throughout the 'sixties, it was ably augmented by the cloistered philosophies of both Sir Thomas Elliot, the assistant undersecretary since 1847, and Sir Henry Taylor, Chief of the West Indies Department.<sup>3</sup> Taylor's views were much more those of a convinced

1. Hansard, (3), 23 March 1865, CLXXVIII, 170-175.

2. See G.E. Marindin, op.cit., pp.158 and 297.

3. For adequate accounts of Rogers' assistants see doctoral theses of W.P. Tyler, op.cit. and G.J. Sellers, op.cit. Also E. Dowden, (ed), Correspondence of Henry Taylor, (Lon. 1888), Taylor's own Autobiography, two vols., (Lon. 1885) and useful biographical notes in Sir A. West, Contemporary Portraits, (Lon. 1920), pp. 70-72 and 104-109.

separatist than Rogers and his opinions were equivocally expounded in a letter to the Duke of Newcastle in February 1864 in which he described the colonies as a kind of 'damnosa haereditas'.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of Rogers' relationship with Granville is of particular relevance to this survey and it might be a truism to suggest that a combination of Granville's disinterestedness and Rogers' dogmatic application to the colonial issues between 1868 and 1870, assisted towards a pessimistic view of the colonial connection. If each problem was supposed to be judged upon its merits, there is some ground for the belief that the fatalistic conception of the traditional Liberal outlook on empire inclined, in reality, towards a more stereotyped application of colonial policy. The withdrawal of troops from New Zealand at a time of acute crisis in the colony in 1869 was an example of this. Naturally, it was a minister's task to know what the public and parliament would accept, especially since he was responsible for defending colonial policy in parliament, but Rogers was free from such restraints in his correspondence with the colonies. Certain it was that Granville knew the nature of the issues involved in his term at the Colonial Office, but there has been a difference of interpretation in the extent to which he relied upon the decisions of Frederic Rogers. Recent accounts have shown that Granville fully approved of everything sent from the Colonial Office in his name, and that he sometimes toned down Rogers' language,<sup>2</sup> while an earlier account suggests that Rogers made most of the decisions in 1868-1870 and that Granville's response to the New Zealand problem was largely the response of Rogers.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, Granville did have to defend his despatches in the House of Lords, especially those concerning New Zealand. In view of Granville's yielding character and the superior experience of his permanent under-secretary, it is difficult to dismiss the possibility that Granville's apparent toughness towards New Zealand was really the dogmatic rigidity of Rogers, suitably embellished with

1. H. Taylor, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, pp. 234-235.

2. W. D. McIntyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51, C. C. Eldridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

3. W. P. Tyler, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

Granville's presentation. Personalities play a large part in the relationship between a minister and his senior civil servants, and it is on this point that suspicions of Granville's vulnerability to persuasion must rest. When, towards the end of his life, Rogers reflected upon his career at the Colonial Office, it was not really surprising to find him regarding Granville as 'the pleasantest and most satisfactory' of all the Secretaries of State under whom he had served.<sup>1</sup> What stands out above all in the continuing debate on the role of Lord Granville as Colonial Secretary from 1868-1870 is the desultory nature of his actions and opinions. Despite the cursory utterances echoed on the colonial question within the confines of the Cabinet in this period, it was Granville's ineptitude which did most to bring about the storm of protest which marked the birth of the imperial federation movement in London in 1869.

The great controversy in imperial relations in the years 1869-1870 was really out of all proportions to the original actions of the government in the withdrawal of colonial garrisons. In short, the government blundered in failing to clarify their intentions, but, in retrospect, it does seem likely that some individuals in the government looked upon the absence of a separatist colonial policy with regret. Extreme separatist sentiments did play a part in the pressures exerted on actual policy-making. The extent to which they actually influenced national policy is difficult to determine, but they added to the neurosis which seemed to characterise debates on the colonial question. Canada may have been a special excuse for the exercise of extreme separatist beliefs, but it was an easy step to apply this practice to the general colonial situation, and there were many who interpreted subterfuge in government circles.<sup>2</sup>

1. G.E.Marindin, op.cit., p.264.

2. Froude wrote in April 1870 that "Gladstone and Co. deliberately intend to shake off the Colonists. They are privately using their command of the situation to make the separation inevitable." See J.Skelton, *The Table-Talk of Shirley*, (Lon. 1895), p.142.



The imperialist revival engendered by Granville's insensitivity towards New Zealand in 1869 had deeper roots than he and his contemporaries must have originally imagined. In support of this, what J.E.Tyler wrote in 1938 is pertinent:

... the imperialist revival lay in the logic of the immense changes which were now coming over world politics, changes which precipitated a general reaction against laissez-faire in which imperialism was to play its signal part. It was due neither to the particular sins of Granville nor the protests of his critics. Nor was it but a passing phase. Born of a new age, it could only die, as it was born, along with it. 1

The conditions were ripe for a changing attitude towards the empire, so that, in this light, Granville's conduct merely crystallized a development which would probably have sparked into life on another issue if he had not provided one. Had Granville's sins really been the only reason for the genesis of a new imperialist movement in London, then its life would have expired almost immediately the government had cleared its name in 1870. In fact, of course, it was no transient phenomenon, and it is in the great global changes previously outlined that the explanation for its persistence must be sought. As D.L.M. Farr has noted, it was precisely because Lord Granville's toughness coincided with the first signs of a new imperial sentiment based upon world events that it aroused so much controversy.<sup>2</sup> Coming when it did at a time of transition when attitudes towards empire were in a state of flux, Granville's toughness towards New Zealand had the effect of contributing substantially to the emergence of a movement.

The crisis of opinion extended to the colonial question in general and was the product of a convergence of factors which were apparently unrelated, but which were given a sudden and stunningly new meaning about the year 1870. Out of this fermentation of imperial attitudes emerged a new concept of empire which offered to set in motion a means of solving the colonial question. In 1869-1870, those colonists who met in London to protest against the government's ineptitude in colonial policy could be lightly dismissed as irresponsible, but colonial reactions were more widespread and sensitive than either Gladstone or Granville could have originally envisaged.

1. J.E.Tyler, op.cit. p.20.

2. D.L.M. Farr, *The Colonial Office and Canada*, p.289.

CHAPTER 3The Emergence of the MovementColonial Reactions

In his Reminiscences, Goldwin Smith argued that his opinions on the colonial question were shared by many people in influential circles:

Some of our statesmen avowed them, more were inclined to them. 1

Even if the government did not adopt a policy of abrupt separatism, however, they foolishly allowed this interpretation to be placed upon their actions. Thus, the awkward position in which they found themselves was really the result of attempting to hold the balance between the impatient distrust of the Manchester School outlook and the accepted need for retrenchment, which had begun several years earlier. This task placed them in the position of resisting bold constructive action while simultaneously preventing radical departures of policy. They handled the situation badly, but it was a sterile condition of affairs which demanded nothing more than the maintainance of the status quo.

Colonial reactions were indeed gloomy. They betrayed a keen awareness of extreme separatist sentiments in Britain and they were disappointed. Writing to his wife from London, Alexander Galt, one of the founding fathers of the Dominion of Canada, revealed a deep impression of the eagerness of British politicians to wash their hands of Canada:

1. G.Smith, Reminiscences, p.169.

I am more than ever disappointed at the tone of feeling here as to the colonies, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that they want to get rid of us. They have a servile fear of the United States, and would rather give us up than defend us..... Day by day I am more oppressed with the sense of responsibility of maintaining a connection undesired here. 1

Another contemporary of Galt's, George Cartier, had devoted his energies in the 'sixties to the fostering of the idea that Canadian Confederation would not weaken the tie with Britain, but, on the contrary, would strengthen it. He was fully aware of the trend of thought in Britain which deemed that Canada was a security risk, but he, nevertheless, declared his faith in the British people:

I know there is in England a school of politicians which disdain the colonial possessions and which deny their value to the mother country. Cobden and Bright are their leaders, but in spite of them the general feeling of the people is that the colonies should not be abandoned. 2

On a tour of the American continent in 1869; Michael Hicks Beach, the later Conservative Colonial Secretary and future Earl St. Alwyn, commented on the state of feelings in Montreal towards Britain:

People are disgusted with what they think a desire on the part of England to get rid of them; they are intensely loyal to the "old country", especially to the Queen and her family. 3

Colonial loyalty, of course, was an awkward embarrassment to the Liberal Cabinet, but reactions of dismay were not confined to Canada. In New Zealand, there was an outcry against the government's apparent separatism. Sir Philip Wodehouse, a former governor at the Cape, expressed his beliefs unequivocally:

1. Galt to his wife, 14 January 1867, O.D.Skelton, Life and Times of Sr. A.Galt, (Toronto 1920), pp. 410-411.
2. J.Boyd, Sir George Etienne Cartier, His Life and Times, (Toronto 1914), p.358.
3. Lady V.Hicks Beach, Life of Sir Michael Hicks Beach, (London 1932) Vol. 1, p.28.



In North America we have unmistakeable indications of the rapid establishment of a powerful independent State. In Australia it is probable that its several settlements, with their great wealth and homogeneous populations, will see their way to a similar coalition. In New Zealand the severance is being accomplished under very painful circumstances. 1

In an article on 'The New Colonial Policy' in March, 1870, the Spectator referred to the government's treatment of the colonies as 'the boldest and most startling innovation in modern statesmanship'. Lord Carnarvon's memorable speech in the House of Lords on 14 February 1870, in which he referred to Liberal policy as 'cheeseparing in point of economy and spendthrift in point of national character' and as leading to national decay, earned the gratitude of Sir John Macdonald, the Canadian Prime Minister and a staunch supporter of the British connection. In a letter to Carnarvon written in April 1870 Macdonald communicated his suspicions of Liberal Colonial Policy:

We are glad to know that we have in you a friend. I may almost say a friend in need for we greatly distrust the men at the helm in England who cannot, I fear, be considered as appreciating the importance of maintaining the empire as it is, intact. We indulge the belief here, however, that Messrs. Bright, Lowe and Gladstone (shall I add Lord Granville ?) are not the true exponents of the public opinion of England. We may perhaps be obliged to appeal from the Government to the people of England. 2

This pessimism was exactly what Carnarvon had expected. He had warned Granville of the danger of employing 'harsh terms and severe logic' in his despatches to the colonies which were not the remedy to heal wounded feelings.<sup>3</sup> Colonial reactions to the government's treatment of

1. Quoted by Robert Torrens, Liberal M.P. for Cambridge, in the House of Commons, 26 April 1870, Hansard, 3, CC, 1823.
2. Macdonald to Carnarvon, 14 April 1870, Sir J. Pope, The Correspondence of Sir J. Macdonald, (Toronto 1921), pp. 132-134.
3. Hansard, 3, CXCI, 199, see also Carnarvon to Dufferin, 31 October 1874, Sir A. Hardinge, Life of the Fourth Earl of Carnarvon, Vol. II, p. 96.

New Zealand in particular were fully represented by Robert Torrens in the House of Commons in April 1870.<sup>1</sup> There was clearly widespread concern in the colonies about the government's policy in the sphere of colonial relations. Even talk of annexation to the United States was wildly proclaimed in New Zealand and Granville admitted to Gladstone that:

Verdon the agent for Victoria....is much alarmed about New Zealand, that from what he hears here, and from what he is told from Melbourne he believes that they will separate. 2

Goldwin Smith wrote to James Bryce from Toronto in January 1871 informing him that the policy of withdrawing the troops from Canada had resulted in carrying away 'a good deal of the Canadian loyalty on which you are told to rely',<sup>3</sup> but Smith, of course, had set his heart on the union of Canada and America, and his assertions were therefore not without motive.

In general, colonial reactions conveyed a sense of indignation and bitter disappointment, especially in New Zealand and Canada. However, even before the defenders of the imperial connection in Britain had begun to gather their forces in 1869, there was already evidence of at least an incipient interest in empire a year earlier. The formation of the Royal Colonial Society in June, 1868 had actually preceded the advent to power of Gladstone's first ministry in December 1868, and thus it was not a defensive response to Liberal desires for retrenchment. Other developments, however, proved to be ominous for the new government. The conduct of Liberal policies did provide the necessary stimulus for the growth of an 'early imperialist' movement which sought to check the apparent 'policy of drift' in colonial affairs and to combat the alleged separatism of the Liberal Cabinet.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the first year of

1. Torrens listed a cross-section of colonial reactions to the government's policy, Hansard, CC, 1820-1824.

2. Granville to Gladstone, 30 June 1870, A.Ramm, op.cit., p.104.

3. G.Smith to Bryce, 26 January 1871, Bryce Papers, Ms. 16, ff 24-28.

4. Membership of both groups overlapped, but the primary aim of the early imperialist movement was specifically to condemn the Liberal government's colonial policy, while the new society simply sought to provide a centre where empire enthusiasts could express opinions and discuss imperial issues.

Gladstone's administration a certain polarization in the movement had yielded some sort of immature organisation whose primary aim was to rally public opinion against the government's blundering insensitivity in colonial affairs. There were indeed direct links between the Royal Colonial Society and the 'early imperialists', but the emergence of the latter was directly attributable to widespread fears about Granville's colonial policy, and the tenuous connection between them became rather ambivalent as the aims and methods of the two groups became more obviously divergent.

### The Royal Colonial Society

Formed in London as the result of a Preliminary Meeting of June 26 1868 called by public advertisement, the general aim of the Royal Colonial Society was to serve as a forum for the diffusion of information about the colonies. Owing to the lack of any real method of ascertaining the number of colonists resident in London at the time, the June meeting was only sparsely attended - a fact which itself seemed to demonstrate the need for such a rallying centre.<sup>1</sup> Undeterred by this eventuality, however, it was decided to establish the organisation as a working reality on the basis of the prevailing ignorance of colonial affairs in Britain and even in the colonies themselves. As chairman of the June meeting and the first President of the new society, Viscount Bury's position seemed somewhat incongruous in view of his earlier opinions on the impossibility of maintaining the colonial connection, as expounded in his book, The Exodus of the Western Nations, published in 1865. Subsequent controversy has centred not on Lord Bury's role as the President of the society, but on who was the originator of the society. At the Inaugural Meeting of the society in March 1869, Bury admitted that he was not the real founder of the society, but that this honour belonged to the first honorary secretary, A.R.Roche.<sup>2</sup> The issue has become something of a mystery to historians who

1. A.Folsom, *The Royal Empire Society*, (London 1933), p.37. See also T.R. Reese, *The History of the Royal Commonwealth Society, 1868-1968*, (London 1968).

2. P.R.C.I., Vol. 1, p.72.



have been puzzled by Bury's later claim, in 1885, to be the founder of the society.<sup>1</sup>

Those who attended the Preliminary Meeting in June were not then pledged to the objective of strengthening imperial unity, more especially because the main idea of the meeting was simply to give interested persons the opportunity to air their views on the colonial question whether or not they favoured the connection. At this stage, therefore, the proceedings were largely perfunctory and there was no real crystallization of ideas which could prompt a public declaration in favour of imperial unity. At the Inaugural Meeting in March 1869, however, Lord Bury referred directly to the harmful influences of Goldwin Smith and the Manchester School, and the society officially adopted the motto 'United Empire', thus clearly placing it at variance with existing separatist attitudes and parliamentary indifference. Nevertheless, the society was in essence a non-political organization whose purview was confined to academic topics related to the colonies. In this way, it could hope to maximise the support of members of parliament interested in defending the colonial connection by cutting across party lines. Both Gladstone and Granville attended the Inaugural Dinner on 10 March 1869, a glittering occasion with an array of noblemen and gentlemen, and Granville even became one of the society's illustrious twelve Vice-Presidents.

In its efforts to preserve impartiality, the society was largely successful, but it remained aloof from practical politics and thus inevitably failed to have any real influence upon government policy. In any case, it merely expressed a conviction and made no claim to exert any influence upon the policy-making process. The avenues along which the society's promoters moved were always politically respectable in the sense that they rarely, if ever, diverted their mode of action from the seminar room. This was the accepted format of procedure. Judging from the paucity of

1. Lord Bury, *The Unity of the Empire*, *Nineteenth Century*, XVII, March 1885, p. 384. Both Folsom, *op.cit.*, pp.36-37 and C.A.Bodelsen, *Studies in Mid-Victorian Imperialism*, (Copenhagen 1924), p.94, n.2, supported the view that Roche was the real founder, but more recently C.C.Eldridge, *op.cit.*, p.95, n.7, has favoured Bury's own claim.

evidence about the society in memoirs and biographies of statesmen of the period, it would seem that colonial affairs scarcely figured in the thoughts of most of them, and that the society was of little real importance to them in the world of practical politics.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to escape the conclusion that it appeared as a useful club for a leading statesman to belong to in its formative years since membership involved no danger of a political scandal and no commitment other than academic discussion. An indication of the unimportance of party politics in the society can be witnessed by a perusal of the list of members elected as vice-presidents, who were all leading politicians.<sup>2</sup> Only an organisation completely devoid of party politics could have reconciled Lord Granville, Edward Cardwell and Chichester Fortescue with the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, the Earl of Carnarvon, Sir Stafford Northcote, and Charles Adderley. And only such an organisation could have, as its president, a prominent Liberal politician pledged to support 'United Empire'.

The Colonial Society had received the hearty endorsement of most leading statesmen in 1869 and it has been referred to on numerous occasions as an antecedent of the Imperial Federation League formed in November, 1884. In a limited sense, this was true because it was unquestionably useful in helping to shape ideas on the subject of imperial federation and the society acted as a springboard in the decade of the 'seventies for the promotion of ideas of closer imperial union by the early advocates of imperial federation who had joined the society.<sup>3</sup> While no real organisation existed for the promulgation of imperial federation before 1884, it was obvious that the Royal Colonial Institute would be regarded as a natural channel for attempts to popularise such an objective. In the great agitation of 1869-1870, however, the society played no official part. Instead, it was a semi-coherent group of mainly discontented colonists who succeeded in creating a condition of affairs which focussed public attention directly upon the existing colonial

1. Folsom, op.cit., pp.252-253 mentions this point and ascribes the paucity of evidence to the fact that membership of a colonial organization received no political recognition and was considered unimportant.

2. See P.R.C.I., vol.1.

3. Renamed the Royal Colonial Institute in March 1870.



relationship and underlined the need for some form of reorganisation along the lines of the method of conference. It was not, however, due to their objectives that the Colonial Society took such a strong dislike, it was rather with the irresponsible methods and the discourteous language that the society felt disenchanted. Apart from Lord Bury's ubiquitous activities in the controversy and the antics of a few other society members, such as Henry Blaine, Edward Wilson, and James Youl, the organization was officially outside the agitation.

#### A Transitory Phase (March-November 1869)

The direct cause of the extra-parliamentary rumpus which developed in June through the medium of the Times newspaper was Lord Granville's harsh treatment of New Zealand which was epitomised in an especially stiff despatch from the Colonial Office to New Zealand on 21 March 1869.<sup>1</sup> This despatch left no doubts as to Granville's opinion regarding responsibility for the existing Maori War in the colony and the Colonial Secretary rejected appeals from colonial ministers for a temporary suspension of the military evacuation and for a loan for defence purposes. Both Granville and Sir Frederic Rogers implied that the native disturbances had been caused by the land-hunger of the settlers and that they must restore order by their own efforts. The tone of this and subsequent despatches, each drafted by Rogers and approved by Granville, was the subject of a letter of protest to the Times on 18 June 1869 signed by Sir George Grey, the late Governor of New Zealand, and four prominent New Zealanders : Sir Charles Clifford; Henry Sewell; H.A. Atkinson; and J. Logan Campbell. In the letter, Grey and his influential friends protested that Granville's despatch of March was both groundless and unjust, and declared that:

the policy which is being pursued towards New Zealand will have the effect of alienating the affections of Her Majesty's loyal subjects in that country, and is calculated to drive the colony out of the Empire. 2

1. P.P., XLIV (625-626), pp. 1-2.

2. See the Times, 18 June 1869 and P.P. XLIV (616-617) pp.24-25.



A period of six weeks elapsed before Arthur Kinnaird, Liberal M.P. and a trustee of the Colonial Society, wrote to Gladstone warning him that Granville underestimated the gravity of the crisis in New Zealand and that a meeting was to be arranged in London to discuss the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Events moved as Kinnaird had predicted, but in a much more far-reaching manner.

On 4 August 1869 a meeting of self-styled 'influential colonists in England' was convened in the Colonial Society's rooms to protest against the toughness of Granville's New Zealand policy, and it was resolved to appoint a committee to communicate with the different colonial governments regarding the state of relations existing between Britain and her self-governing colonies. The resulting circular dated 13 August 1869, which commented adversely upon the constitution of the Colonial Office as a medium of friendly intercourse and condemned parliamentary indifference towards colonial matters, proposed a conference of colonial representatives to meet in London in February, 1870 to discuss the administration of colonial affairs.<sup>2</sup> Three fellows of the Colonial Society - Henry Blaine, James Youl, and Henry Sewell, one of Grey's associates and a signatory of the protest letter to the Times in June - signed the circular which was to be sent throughout the colonial empire. This action created a considerable stir when it was published in the press on 26 August 1869, but the general response was favourable. Lord Bury, however, was quick to inform Granville that the Colonial Society was not responsible for the views expressed in the 'Youl Circular', as it came to be known, and he hurriedly dissociated the society from the proposals.<sup>3</sup> Granville accepted Bury's plea and immediately set about repairing the situation by issuing another Colonial Office despatch, this time to all of the colonies concerned. Dated 8 September 1869, Granville's circular despatch pointed out the practical objections to the aims of the Youl Circular - the adequacy of existing machinery, the diversity of issues affecting the different colonies, and

1. Kinnaird to Gladstone, 31 July 1869, enclosed with Gladstone to Granville, 2 August 1869, Granville Papers, P.R.O. 30/29/57, quoted by C.C. Eldridge, op.cit., p.99.
2. P.P. XLIX, 447-467.
3. A.Folsom, op.cit., p.197.

the unsatisfactory character of 'a body of gentlemen resident in London, acting in pursuance of their own views or of mere written instructions, under influences not always identical with those which are paramount in the colony, and without the guarantee which their recommendations may derive from having passed through the Governor's hands.'<sup>1</sup>

As Granville had doubtless expected, the replies from the colonial governments were against the idea of a conference and most of them either simply agreed with the Colonial Secretary's views or declined to be represented.<sup>2</sup> In October 1869, however, the Colonial Society's President, Lord Bury, was rather surprisingly drawn into the controversy when he curiously accepted the chairmanship of a much-enlarged committee that was pursuing the very object previously sought by the Youl Circular of August, - a conference of colonial representatives to meet in London. Doubtless aware of the confusion which this sudden change of heart might engender, Bury explained his action in a letter to Lord Granville in which he seemed to apologise for the resuscitation of the conference scheme. He argued that the question raised by the committee 'would not be allowed to drop until settled one way or another' and that the committee should act:

As far as possible in concert with Her Majesty's Ministers.....to prepare the way for the assembling of the proposed Colonial Conference by concerting with the delegates from the colonies the subjects to be discussed and by giving them a place of meeting and an organised body with whom to communicate on all preliminary arrangements, which was work that the Government could hardly do for itself. 3

As president of the Colonial Society, Bury's involvement with this renewed attempt at operating outside Colonial Office channels was all the more surprising and, to Granville, very injudicious. The Colonial Secretary did not hide his opposition to the suggestion, while Lord Carnarvon seemed

1. P.P., XLIX, 447-467.

2. For the various replies from the colonial governments, see P.P., XLIX, 454-467. See also the Annual Register, 1870, pp. 113-114.

3. A.Folsom, op.cit., p. 199.



very concerned that the Colonial Society would lose its non-party character.<sup>1</sup>

Messrs. Youl, Blaine and Sewell formed the nucleus of the new larger committee which also included the Duke of Manchester, Lord Alfred Churchill, Major-General Sir William Denison, John Eldon Corst, Edward Wilson, and H.A. Atkinson. With Granville's opposition uppermost in their minds, the committee spent its time debating upon the expediency of pursuing the matter further. Bury seemed rather reluctant to take further action, while the Duke of Manchester was the most enthusiastic supporter of confrontation. As a compromise decision, the divided committee decided to adopt a resolution that a deputation should wait on Lord Granville with the intention of urging him to 'recognise the necessity of providing without delay for the free expression of colonial opinion upon colonial affairs' and to dispel any misconceptions as to the objectives of the committee. The deputation was to consist of Lord Bury, the Duke of Manchester, Lord Alfred Churchill, Sir Charles Nicholson, and Messrs. Sewell, Youl, Blaine, Corst, Westgarth, Montgomerie, Roche, and Wilson, all fellows of the society. Simultaneously, a sub-committee was appointed to examine Lord Granville's despatch of 8 September 1869, regarding the Youl Circular. It reported that a lack of information and understanding by people in England and in the colonies prevented a cordiality of feeling between Her Majesty's subjects at home and abroad, and it regretted Lord Granville's decision to advise the various colonial governments not to send delegates to the proposed colonial conference.<sup>2</sup> While the committee concentrated its efforts on gaining admittance to the Colonial Office and considered the report of its sub-committee, however, another initiative was being taken by a figure who had been involved with the Colonial Society from its inception. What made Edward Wilson pursue an individual course by hiring a set of rooms in the Cannon Street Hotel, London in order to sponsor a public debate on the 'colonial question' in November 1869 seems to have been a combination of impatience, genuine

1. A.Folsom, op.cit., pp.199-200. The letters of both Granville 17 October, and Camarvon, 25 October, are printed in the European Mail (for Australia and N.Z.), 3 December 1869.

2. A.Folsom, op.cit. p.201.



concern, and a desire to keep up the pressure on the government. Whatever the reasons for his inspiration, another 'front' had been opened up from which further assaults could be launched against the government's resistance and apparent inertia.

### The Cannon Street Group

As the financier and prime mover of a new series of weekly meetings in the rooms of the Cannon Street Hotel beginning on 24 November 1869, Edward Wilson played a leading role at the meetings, although James Youl chaired them. Wilson, an English-born colonial who, as proprietor of the Melbourne Argus, had returned to England in 1864, had been involved with an earlier group of Australians who had organised an Australian society in England in 1855. Under the title 'The General Association for the Australian Colonies' (GAAC), the group met to promote colonial interests, but it was dissolved in 1862 due to lack of funds.<sup>1</sup> The Australian contingent living in London in 1868 at the time of the preliminary meeting of the Royal Colonial Society in June, attended that gathering in force, but were not among its instigators. Wilson had admitted to an attempt to form just such a society a year earlier in 1867, but he sadly confessed that :

it is only by mere accident that any of us who represent the Australian colonies have heard of this meeting at all. 2

The ex-Australian colonists, however, were preponderant in numbers at the June meeting. Subsequent to these events of June 1868, Wilson had played an ubiquitous part in the developments connected with attacks on Lord Granville's colonial policy, but the Cannon Street meetings were real evidence of his dedication, persistence and apparently inexhaustible energy.

1. Folsom, op.cit., p.39.

2. P.R.C.I., 1868-1869, p.12.

As a kind of foretaste of what was to come, Wilson had written to the Times as a colonist and an Englishman deprecating what he believed to be a policy which would destroy the colonial empire. Entitled 'National Disintegration', Wilson's letter of 10 November 1869 perceived what he regarded as a dramatic change of policy towards the colonies and he warned against a policy of indifference :

we certainly ought not to moult away these colonies  
one by one as feathers which we have become too  
spiritless and decrepit to retain. 1

Having publicised the cause, the meetings took place on a regular weekly basis from 24 November 1869 to 5 January 1870 - a total of six sessions.<sup>2</sup> With Wilson and Youl, both Blaine and Sewell participated along with a small group of Colonial Society members. To this nucleus of agitators, other diligent workers for imperial unity arrived:- Francis P. de Labilliere, a Victorian Colonist who had also been devoting his energies to preserving the empire in other institutions such as the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science; Sir George Grey, who had written the early protest letter to the Times regarding New Zealand and Granville's despatches; and Frederick Young, whose chief interests had been devoted to the movement for state-aided emigration to the colonies and who, in 1874, became secretary of the Royal Colonial Institute. Among respected members of the Colonial Society who attended were:- Sir Charles Nicholson; Sir Charles Clifford; Lord Alfred Churchill, Hugh Childers M.P., R.A. Macfie M.P., R.R. Torrens, M.P. and Sir Henry Drummond Wolff. The links with the Colonial Society were obvious, especially since over a third of the society's council were present.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the other man who, with Wilson, was a leading figure in the Cannon Street

1. The Times, 10 November 1869.
2. Evidence seems to show that there was no meeting on 29 December 1869 which accounts for six rather than seven gatherings.
3. The First Council of the Colonial Society contained 21 members of whom Henry Blaine, Hugh Childers, Lord A. Churchill, Sir Charles Nicholson, George Verdon, Edward Wilson, Sir H. Drummond Wolff and James Youl were present at the Cannon Street meetings. See P.R.C.I. 1868-1869, for the complete list.



enterprise was William Westgarth, a Scottish born Australian colonist who had spent 17 years in Victoria and returned to England in 1857 as a successful entrepreneur, and who was active in every imperial association from the GAAC to the Imperial Federation League of the 'eighties.

The object of the meetings was explained on the first day by Wilson in his opening address: a crisis in imperial relations had been reached and the Colonial Secretary wanted to disband the empire. Such a momentous decision demanded that the voice of the people of England should be heard and the raison d'être of the meetings was to direct the attention of the public to this dangerous policy. In the ensuing discussion, in which Labilliere and Sir George Grey took part, the Colonial Office despatches to New Zealand were condemned and the advantages of empire to both mother country and colonies were emphasized, culminating in a series of resolutions drawn up by Westgarth which were passed.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the resolution establishing the meetings as a working reality, a second resolution was eventually carried after some disagreement which affirmed, "that this meeting deprecates the Colonial policy of Her Majesty's Government as illustrated by the recent despatches of Lord Granville."

The initial response of the press appears to have been a mixed one.<sup>2</sup> The Times gave good coverage of the early meetings, while the European Mail included the fullest reports, but the general view of the weekly gatherings was rather sceptical, if not unfriendly. Inevitably, the Colonial Office opposed the meetings from the very start. Writing to Lady Rogers in November 1869, Sir Frederic Rogers observed the success of his efforts to defeat the promoters of the colonial conference:

They are, as may be seen by the papers, agitating to the best of their powers, but I think we shall beat them. 3

1. Times, 25 November 1869; The European Mail, 9 December 1869.
2. See C.S.Blackton, 'The Cannon Street Episode', Historical Studies, XIII (1969) pp. 522-523. Bodelsen, op.cit. pp.102-103, presents a careful analysis of the London Press.
3. G.F.Marindin, Letters of Frederic Lord Blachford, p.279.



At the second meeting on 1 December 1869, Edward Wilson warned of the danger of allowing the sessions to be regarded as specifically 'New Zealand meetings' and he emphasized their value to Imperial, not merely colonial, interests.<sup>1</sup> William Westgarth tabulated eight general resolutions for the consideration of the members at subsequent weekly meetings, so that the first two Cannon Street meetings were really of a preliminary nature. The Pall Mall Gazette had already presented a very sober opinion of the first Cannon Street meeting whose main purpose it perceived to be to abuse Lord Granville,<sup>2</sup> but it was at the third meeting of 8 December 1869 that there was clear evidence of a lack of common purpose and an unruliness which invited the scorn of the press.<sup>3</sup> All that this session achieved after a series of mechanical diatribes was the endorsement of a rather platitudinous resolution confirming that the colonies were of major importance to the empire.

On the 8 December 1869, however, there occurred a new development. Lord Bury resigned the chairmanship of the Youl Committee which had succeeded in obtaining permission to meet Lord Granville on 15 December 1869. In resigning, Bury again dissociated the Colonial Society from the plans to hold a colonial conference, but he agreed to remain the leader of the deputation to meet Lord Granville.<sup>4</sup> At the fourth meeting of 15 December 1869 another of Westgarth's original eight resolutions affirming the loyalty of the colonies to Britain was unanimously carried while Sir George Grey indulged in a demonstration of his powers of sarcasm directed towards Lord Granville.<sup>5</sup>

1. The European Mail, 9 December, 1869.

2. The Pall Mall Gazette, 26 November 1869.

3. The European Mail, 31 December 1869.

4. This episode was a rather strange affair. The Times, 28 Dec. 1869, published a letter from Lord Bury to Mr. James Youl which declared the former's termination of his connection with the Youl Committee. Three days later, however, the European Mail, 31 Dec. 1869, published a letter from Lord Bury addressed to Messrs. Youl, Sewell, and Blaine, dated 9 Dec. 1869, in which he resigned the chairmanship of the committee. The letter published in the European Mail indicates, however, that Bury did not actually resign the chairmanship until after the deputation had met Lord Granville on 15 Dec. 1869. A reply from James Youl, dated 23 Dec. 1869, printed in the European Mail (31 Dec. 1869) seems to support this conclusion. A Folsom, op.cit., p.202, appears equally confused and Bodelsen did not even mention it.

5. The European Mail, 31 Dec. 1869.

The fourth session afforded ample evidence of how the meetings had degenerated into personal attacks on Lord Granville and useless platitudes on the value of the colonial connection.

The highlight of the 15 December 1869 was undoubtedly the Youl Committee deputation, led by the cautious Lord Bury, to the Colonial Secretary. Along with Bury, the Duke of Manchester, Lord Alfred Churchill, Sir Charles Nicholson and Messrs. Youl, Sewell, Blaine, Gorst, Westgarth, Montgomerie, Roche and Wilson, other notable participants were Frederick Young, Francis Labilliere, Leonard Wray, C.W.Eddy, and Arthur Kinnaid. In total, the deputation was about thirty strong and the interview with Granville lasted about an hour. Having listened patiently to several short speeches condemning the Colonial Office and criticizing the Government's colonial policy, Granville's reply was predictably cold. He repudiated the Youl Circular's description of his colonial policy and denied the need for a colonial conference. His reply concluded that:

I should be exceedingly sorry to see England deprived of her colonies but this country will never attempt to retain them by brute force, but I believe that the bonds that unite us, though slender, are elastic and much stronger than some suppose. I doubt whether any attempt to define our relations more strictly would have a strengthening effect. 1

In these circumstances, anything which Granville said was vulnerable to misunderstanding, but such bluntness was open to the interpretation that he would not have been sorry to see some colonies emancipated. The interview had also been conducted in private, the only reporter being a Colonial Office sympathizer. On hearing about the outcome of the meeting with Granville, both the Times and the Pall Mall Gazette poured scorn on 'a class of men whose beliefs are dreams, whose thoughts are guesses, who swallow the conclusions they accept.'<sup>2</sup>

1. Granville's reply reprinted in the Times, 17 Dec. 1869, and the European Mail, 24 Dec. 1869.
2. Pall Mall Gazette 18 Dec. 1869, Times 18 Dec. 1869,



At the fifth meeting of the Cannon Street Colonists on 22 December 1869, Granville's reply was considered unsatisfactory, but the chief complaint of the Chairman, James Youl, was that all the press reports of the meeting were extremely unfair - perhaps not surprising in view of the fact that only one 'Downing Street' reporter had been present. As the penultimate Cannon Street meeting, it achieved very little. The third of Westgarth's eight resolutions was carried unanimously after a desultory discussion and another resolution was carried which set in motion a means of creating the National Colonial and Emigration League.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with its past behaviour, a series of angry resolutions was its first consideration, however, and they focussed attention yet again on the government's New Zealand policy and on censuring Lord Granville. Thus, by the end of the year, the meetings had become totally disordered and had fallen into widespread disrepute. A letter sent to the European Mail and signed 'Spectator' contained a resumé of the Cannon Street gatherings and emphasized an early manifestation of 'haste, indecision and want of preparation' at the meetings. According to the writer, there were three major weaknesses in the meetings. First, that although the originator of the meetings, Edward Wilson, was known to be a high-minded, patriotic man, he had called to his aid spirits of less doubtful character who were either confirmed enemies of the Colonial Office or who were of mediocre sincerity. Secondly, it was strongly argued that the chairman, James Youl, was incompetent for failing to control the proceedings and for lacking a real understanding of the true points of the business on the agenda. Finally, it was absurd to allow each of Westgarth's eight resolutions to be considered seriatim at the weekly meetings, a rate of progress which ensured that they would ultimately be lost from sight. As a final solemn condemnation of the episode, the writer summed up the meetings where 'irregularity had reigned triumphant' as, 'ill-conceived, badly-managed and an absolutely futile movement'.<sup>2</sup>

1. The European Mail, 31 Dec, 1869.

2. European Mail, 31 Dec. 1869.



From the evidence of this research, Bodelsen's view that the meetings were badly planned is unquestionably correct. Partly because of Sir George Grey's presence, the meetings had often become inextricably entangled in the New Zealand issue and, as the Pall Mall Gazette had argued, 'a purely exceptional and isolated case such as this was an unfortunate starting-point for a movement in favour of comprehensive changes in the colonial system of the empire.'<sup>1</sup> In later years, Labilliere confirmed the fact that imperial federation had never been broached at the Cannon Street meetings<sup>2</sup> and, strictly speaking, Westgarth's resolutions had been directed towards administrative reform rather than organic change. The meetings had sought to improve the existing colonial relationship, but it was the English press which wrote in such ambiguous terms as an 'Anglo-Saxon Federation' and an 'English Federation'.<sup>3</sup> On the 21 March 1870, Westgarth included a kind of verbal autopsy upon the meetings in a paper given at the Royal Colonial Institute entitled, 'On the Colonial Question'. He felt that one cause of the movement's weakness and eventual failure was the rough treatment given to it by the pro-government press, while the government's decision to placate the New Zealanders by giving them a loan for purposes of self-defence tended to have a mitigating effect on the agitation.<sup>4</sup> A retrospective rebuke by Lord Bury in the House of Commons on 26 April 1870 against Youl, Sewell and Blaine was typical of his inconsistent role in the whole affair.<sup>5</sup> Declaring them to be a 'Colonial "Cave of Adullam" ', Bury continued that a group, 'came to be formed at the east end of the town, round which every description of colonial discontent appeared to have a tendency to crystallize itself.'<sup>6</sup> Speaking after Bury in the same debate, William Monsell, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies, added that it had only served to produce 'angry controversy'.<sup>7</sup>

1. Pall Mall Gazette, 20 Dec. 1869.

2. F.Labilliere, Federal Britain (Lon. 1894), p.20.

3. see especially the Times, 27 Nov. 1869 and 8 Dec. 1869.

4. P.R.C.I., I., (1870), pp.59-61.

5. The only feasible explanation of his inconsistency seems to be that he had fears of killing the Royal Colonial Institute after only eighteen months of its life.

6. Hansard,(3), 200, 1847-1854.

7. Hansard, ibid, 1882.

All this seemed to point to the Cannon Street meetings as a mixture of fruitless controversy and ignominious failure, yet it did not seem an accurate verdict to the participants of the agitation. Only six years later Frederick Young wrote about it in a totally different light:

It was thus, that the memorable meetings,....became the signal for the 'turning of the tide'. The success of these meetings was most remarkable. They seemed at once to touch the springs of national feeling, and elicited in a. unmistakable manner from a most influential and powerful section of English society a thoroughly sympathetic colonial sentiment. 1

Unlike Frederick Young, the Times did not regard the meetings as a turning-point in the history of colonial relations, but it was compelled to admit that:

by common consent they have proved a failure..... yet they may boast that they have set politicians talking everywhere about the colonies and their relations with England. Reviewers and pamphleteers at home have taken up the subject. Every colonial mail adds something to the discussion. Our columns furnish abundant evidence of the attention it has excited. 2

This was a fair and accurate epitaph of the Cannon Street episode. They had attracted considerable attention and had made an impact on the mind of an informed press public that a crisis had been reached in imperial relations. Parallel with the movement at Cannon Street during the latter part of 1869, there had also developed a revived agitation in favour of state-aided emigration of the unemployed to the colonies, a movement obviously connected with empire unity. Not only was the movement closely associated with the agitation to preserve the empire, but the participants were all either fellows of the Royal Colonial Society or those who had been involved in the Cannon Street episode. Both Edward Wilson and Frederick Young were supporters of the agitation along with the historian, James Froude

1. F.Young, Imperial Federation of Great Britain and her Colonies. (Lon. 1876) p.xiv.
2. Times, 18 January 1870.



Moreover, one of the most accessible channels through which expressions of empire unity and support for government-assisted schemes for emigration could be publicised was the National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences. Already, in 1868, Edward Jenkins, the young Radical barrister who was to play such an important part in the early imperialist movement, had given a paper on emigration before the Birmingham meeting of the association.<sup>1</sup> Then, in September 1869, the Bristol meeting of the association turned its attention to 'The Legal and Constitutional Relations between England and her Colonies' to which Labilliere, John Gorst and R.A.Macfie each contributed a paper. The president of the association, Sir Stafford Northcote, also gave a speech in favour of empire unity in his opening address to the meeting:

I must frankly say that I could not have taken the chair as your President, except upon the clear understanding that the object of the Council in inviting this discussion, was, not to loosen, but to strengthen the bond which unites the different portions of the Empire. 2

Northcote's function as president of the association obviously placed him in a very tentative position with regard to the imperial connection, but his interest in the question was evident from his involvement in the Colonial Society as a vice-president, and he did toy with the idea of imperial federation as a senior Conservative minister under Lord Salisbury in the 1880's.

#### The Westminster Palace Hotel Conference (19-21 July 1871)

Bodelsen argued that the year 1871 marked a distinctly new phase in the development of the imperial movement because it changed from being a mere disorganized protest movement to a much more orderly and constructive body which sought to change the relationship between the mother country and her colonies by a constitutional reform. There was clearly a change

1. T.N.A.P.S.S., (Birmingham), 1868.

2. T.N.A.P.S.S., (Bristol), 1869, pp.6-7.

in purpose and more of a semblance of organisation about the stage which the movement had reached by 1871. The occasion for the change seems to have been the publication of two articles: Imperial Federalism and An Imperial Confederation, by Edward Jenkins, who had already been active in the cause of assisted emigration and had gained some notoriety as the author of 'Ginx's Baby', a social satire published in 1870. As the son of a Presbyterian minister, who had emigrated to Canada, Jenkins grew up in Montreal and completed his training as a barrister in England where he was called to the bar in 1874. In that year he was also appointed as Agent-General for Canada, which he held until 1876, and his position as Liberal M.P. for Dundee during the years 1874-1880 combined to give him certain credentials as an 'imperial specialist' in a House of Commons which was notoriously ignorant about colonial policy. He had also flirted with membership of the Colonial Society - joining in 1869 and leaving in April 1870 - but he seems to have been disappointed with its practical intentions, especially in view of its unreliability in the Youl circular affair.<sup>1</sup> According to Henry Lucy, Jenkins totally ignored parliamentary tradition when making his maiden speech, and the attempt to take the House by storm combined with his 'atrocious taste in dress' convinced them of his 'sublime egotism'.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his generally unfavourable reception in the House of Commons in 1874, Jenkins had certainly made a noteworthy impact on the semi-coherent movement for empire unity in 1871. By the publication of his two articles which appeared in the January and April editions of the Contemporary Review, Jenkins has been widely credited with the birth of discussion on the subject of imperial federation. The terminology was neither specific nor capable to accepted definition, but, as the historian George Burton Adams argued in a paper delivered before the State Historical Society of Wisconsin on 22 February 1899 :

1. He did, however, rejoin the Colonial Society in 1874-75 as a member of the Council, but left permanently in 1876.
2. Henry Lucy, *Men and Manner in Parliament*, (Lon. 1919), pp.148-151. Lucy went further in reporting Jenkins as "one of the least-liked men in the House" because of the catholicity of his contempt for those who differed from him, regardless of private friendships or party loyalty. H. Lucy, *A Diary of Two Parliaments : The Disraeli Parliament, 1874-1880* (Lon. 1885), pp.427-429.



What Mr. Jenkins really did in inventing the name, was to put together two words, both of which had been in frequent use in the preceding ten years,.....In doing so,.....this helped to crystallize the ideas of the opponents of the government's policy and to form them into a party.....Mr. Jenkins justly deserves the honour of beginning the imperial federation movement, as a movement with a definite aim and purpose. 1

According to Adams, who summarized the situation a mere five years after the dissolution of the Imperial Federation League in December 1893, the major achievement of Jenkins clearly lay in his giving the movement a sense of practicality. The removal of the subject from the sphere of vague idealism to the arena of practical politics, however, was not fully achieved until over a decade later, after a relentless struggle to gain acceptability through the channels of the press, contemporary literature and the Colonial Institute.

In the first of Jenkins' articles on Imperial Federalism, he roundly condemned a parliament in which only 48 acts out of a total of 293 passed in the previous session were 'Imperial', and proposed a Federal Parliament for Imperial affairs which would leave provincial matters to provincial governments.<sup>2</sup> Eschewing dogma, Jenkins pursued his badgering role in his second article, An Imperial Confederation, in which he refused to propound any specific type of federal union, but simply confirmed the need for the use of the federal principle. In melodramatic tone he presented the two possible futures for the empire as either 'Confederation or Confusion' :

Federalism alone, in some form or other, is the principle upon which the constituents of the Empire can be permanently welded together.....We cannot go back; we cannot remain as we are: our only chance of unity is Federation. 3

1. G.B.Adams, 'The Origins and the Results of the Imperial Federation Movement in England,' A Biennial Address, Proceedings of the Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1899, p.106.
2. Contemporary Review, XVI, (Jan. 1871) pp.167-188.
3. Contemporary Review, XVII (April 1871) pp. 66-67.

It seemed that imperial federation was the universal panacea for most of Britain's outstanding problems. It would improve the prospects for a real system of imperial defence, trade and emigration and simultaneously remove the existing anomalous relations between the colonies and the Colonial Office. The fear that other nations were catching up with Britain in the world, the obsession with the size and progress of states and the assumption of racial superiority which typified the views and priorities of later federationists were all explicit in Jenkins articles. But Jenkins was not alone in his early advocacy of imperial federation.<sup>1</sup> Under the editorship of Froude, Fraser's Magazine also took up the cause with a series of articles on the colonial question in 1871. Accompanying the perfunctory condemnation of Liberal colonial policy was a more positive approach which looked to the future of the empire. In two consecutive and anonymous articles which appeared in July and August entitled 'Great Britain Confederated', the federal solution was suggested as a kind of school catechism for some future generation in the form of questions and answers. Froude never became an ardent federationist, even if his early contribution to the debate on the colonial question appeared to give credence to this supposition. He did, however, allow Fraser's Magazine to be used to air views in favour of consolidating the empire.

This flurry of literary activity propounding the cause of imperial federation which began in January 1871 reflected a visible change in the nature of the movement. Hitherto, the chief objectives had been to discredit what seemed to be a Liberal policy of drift and to resist the tide of separatism. Following the publication of Jenkins articles, however, a new aggressive posture was adopted which was no longer content to defend the imperial connection - it sought to forge a new outlook on empire, an outlook which would press for a means of harnessing the potential strength of the empire by some kind of constitutional reform.

1. In February, 1871 R.A.Macfie, the Liberal MP. for Leith, 1868-1874 and a dedicated supporter of the cause of imperial federation, who was also a member of the Colonial Institute, read a paper at the Institute entitled, 'On the Crisis of Empire - Imperial Federation'. P.R.C.I. II, 1870-1871.  
See also R.A.Macfie, *Colonial Questions Pressing for Immediate Solution, Papers and Letters*, (Lon. 1871).



Thus, in the summer of 1871 a conference of people interested in the colonial question was held in London. The object of this conference, which was held at the Westminster Palace Hotel between 19-21 July, was to afford an opportunity for the free discussion of a variety of colonial issues. According to Bodelsen, the conference was organised by Jenkins, Labilliere, Edward Wilson, William Westgarth, Viscount Sandon and Robert Torrens, the Liberal M.P. for Cambridge, but in later years, Frederick Young attributed its promotion to himself, Jenkins and Labilliere:

In 1871 a conference on Colonial questions got up by Edward Jenkins,.....my friend Mr. Labilliere, and myself, was held at the Westminster Palace Hotel.....That, I believe, was the starting-point of the Imperial Federation movement. 1

Among the guarantors of the expenses of the conference were Lord George Hamilton, M.P., Viscount Sandon, Jenkins, Wilson, Westgarth and Robert Torrens M.P. each of whom contributed ten pounds.

These meetings were far removed from the rough and ready gatherings of Cannon Street and they were attended by much more distinguished and reputable public men. When Jenkins read the inaugural address on the evening of 19 July 1871, the company of prominent men from informed British and colonial circles who were assembled before him was a clear indication of the progress of the movement. Both the Duke of Manchester and the Earl of Shaftsbury chaired the meetings, while the Earls of Airlie and Lichfield and Mr. E.Pears, Secretary of the Social Science Association, attended together with seventeen M.P.s from both political parties. Among the Conservative M.P.s were Lord Eustace Cecil, Lord George Hamilton, Viscount Sandon, M.Baillie Ochrane, Robert Fowler and E.B.Eastwick, while Thomas Brassey, Colonel E.T.Courley, Arthur Kinnaid, McCullagh Torrens, W.McArthur and R.R.Torrens represented the Liberal party. According to the

1. Extract from the Morning Post, 21 June 1913. Young was interviewed on his 96th birthday in 1913, the year of his death. Young Papers, Newspaper Cuttings Book, pp.144-145.

list of attendance published in 1872, there were nine Tory M.P.s and eight Liberal M.P.s. who were actually present at the meetings, but these were only the names of those who gave permission for their publication.<sup>1</sup> Other notable figures present at various intervals during the three days of discussions were Sir Charles Nicholson, Sir George Young and Sir Charles Clifford, while the Colonial Institute was well represented by Frederick Young and C.W.Eddy, and both Youl and Blaine of Cannon Street fame mingled with the more august crowd of empire enthusiasts.

The scope of discussion was very comprehensive, including papers on emigration, the reform of the Colonial Office, and a paper on 'Imperial and Colonial Federalism' by Labilliere.<sup>2</sup> Papers on emigration by Edward Clarke, McCullagh Torrens and the Rev. S.Herring afford ample evidence of the close connection between the agitation for state-aided emigration and the movement to consolidate the empire. Even such a specialised subject as 'Land Transfers' by Robert Torrens<sup>3</sup> found its way on to the agenda. However, Labilliere's contribution was much more topical and evoked comments from several members at the conference. His offering was nothing less than a gallant attempt to set the wheels of discussion on imperial federation in motion, and if it seemed a little vague and appeared idealistic to some members, it was only fair to remember the fact that this was the first serious public discussion on the subject. The idea was not new and the subject had been aired in contemporary articles before July 1871, but it had never been openly discussed as a serious possibility by such an eminent group of men before.

1. The nine Conservative members were:- Cecil, Hamilton, Sandon, H.Barnett, W.Charley, Cochrane, C.Dalrymple, Eastwick and Fowler, and the eight Liberals were:- Brassey, Courley, Kinnaird, McArthur, R.Torrens, W.M.Torrens, G.Whalley and W. Morrison. The proceedings of the conference were published under the title 'Discussions on Colonial Questions', (Lon. 1872), but the attendance list is of dubious accuracy. e.g. R.Macfie attended, but is not mentioned in the list, and Sinclair Aytoun, Liberal member for Kirkcaldy, 1862-1874, is also not included.
2. Ibid., pp.72-83.
3. Torrens interest in the question stemmed from his experience in South Australian politics and his intellectual background as the son of Robert Torrens, the political economist. See L.Robbins, Robert Torrens and the Evolution of Classical Economics. (Lon. 1958).



Labilliere's paper is worth a little detailed analysis not because of its novelty, but because he raised several aspects of the problem of deciding on the type of scheme to federate the empire, which perplexed later federationists in the 'eighties. Interestingly, he emphasized the originality of the word 'confederation' which, he argued, had not been seriously propounded before then - previous ideas having been limited either to Colonial Office reform or to a Colonial Council like that in India.<sup>1</sup> Labilliere toyed with two systems of confederation: one which provided for direct elections to an Imperial Confederate Parliament of at least 200 members; and the other which also included a Parliament of the Empire, but which would be chosen by the existing English Parliament and the Colonial Parliaments acting as electoral colleges. In suggesting defence as the great purpose of the mighty confederation, Labilliere foreshadowed the great debate of later Federationists between a union for defence and a commercial union, and, like them, he underestimated the force of colonial nationalism when he admitted that:

Were an Imperial Confederation to be now formed, all its members would unhesitatingly acknowledge the right of England to the largest influence in it..... being the most populous and powerful, as well as the parent, State of the Empire, she ought to have the most influence. She would therefore, for years at least, have the preponderating position in the Imperial Confederation. 2

This was clear evidence of an ignorance of colonial conditions and priorities, but if it dazzled Labilliere by its splendour, it did not convince his audience. While Jenkins did not disapprove of his scheme, both Edward Wilson and Robert Torrens regarded it as impracticable, and the remarks of Mr. Strangways should be noted for their candour:

1. op.cit. p.74

2. op.cit. p.79.

the question would have to be dealt with by practical men, able to look at all its bearings. ....speakers had dealt with the question from an Imperial point of view alone, and scarcely made a reference to the colonial side of the question. What would confederation give the Colonies ?..... He....would also them simply to look at the matter from a plain practical point of view, and not be led away by sentiment. 1

Having removed the glitter from Labilliere's scheme by sheer realism, the blunt approach of Strangways implicitly raised another aspect of the problem which concerned the later advocates of imperial federation. This was the phenomenon of colonial federalism. Labilliere had referred briefly to the matter in his paper, but the question as to whether or not the application of the federal principle in Australia and South Africa would assist the progress towards the grander scheme of imperial federation was a moot point. Presumably, Labilliere thought that it would, but, in later years, there was no doubt that many regarded it as a step towards independence and away from imperial federation.

According to the circular which announced the intentions of the promoters of the conference, the discussions were to have been non-political and the meetings were to have represented all shades of opinion. To this extent the conference was a success, but it was only a temporary success. The original aim of the promoters of the conference was to establish machinery which would facilitate regular meetings in the future.<sup>2</sup> Thus the Executive Committee of the Conference, which included Edward Jenkins as the Chairman, Labilliere as the Honorary Secretary, McCullagh Torrens, Frederick Young, Mr. F.Chesson, and Captain Bedford Pim, was given permanent status and a series of motions culminated in a general agreement to have 'frequent discussions on colonial subjects' in the future. Unfortunately, although the idea of subsequent meetings was welcomed, it was never actually pursued so that the Westminster Palace Hotel meetings of 1871 marked the solitary achievement of the early imperialists as the

1. Strangways was a former Attorney-General of South Australia, op.cit. p.91.

2. Thus, Jenkins anticipated annual conferences. See op.cit., preface, vi.



only gathering which had shown a definite bias in favour of imperial federation. It was, however, no meagre accomplishment for, even if it was a mere reflection of the change in accepted attitudes towards the empire, this fact alone was significant. The men involved<sup>in</sup> the extra-parliamentary activities of the Yowl circular, Cannon Street, and the Westminster Palace Hotel assembly were pioneers of a revived interest in empire. In the space of three eventful years between 1869 and 1871 a movement started by a handful of unknown colonial expatriates living in London had attracted the attention and support of a large group of well-known, respected public figures in England. The fundamental metamorphosis in the movement during these years was unquestionably its evolution towards support for imperial federation, although it was subject to various interpretations. At least the idea and the desirability of the subject had received public attention, and it was no longer immediately dismissed as a playground for eccentrics.

The conference of 1871 had certainly not exhibited unity in its opinions on closer unity which was hardly surprising in view of the embryonic nature of the movement. Indeed, many of those who attended the meetings were simply not federationists in the sense that Labilliere was, and they shrank from the self-intoxication which seemed to bestow itself on the diehards of the movement. The less exuberant adherents to the cause, men like Frederick Young, Thomas Brassey, Edward Wilson and the Duke of Manchester, refused to allow themselves to be overcome by pure enthusiasm and sentiment. They accepted the desirability of closer union, but they had reservations about detailed schemes of imperial federation. One notable feature of the conference, however, was the extent to which most of the papers and discussions assumed the continued maintenance of Free Trade. From the commercial viewpoint in the early 'seventies, it was widely accepted that any attempted alterations in the constitution, directed towards a closer union of the empire, would preclude any fundamental change in the economic system. Bodelsen pointed this out when he wrote:

The fact that no Federalist entertained the idea that a federation might conversely bring about an abandonment of English Free Trade in favour of the Colonies, shows that it was quite realized that the mother country would occupy a predominant position in the proposed federation. <sup>1</sup>

1. C.A. Bodelsen, *Studies in Mid-Victorian Imperialism*, (Copenhagen 1924) p.138.

To be fair, however, the movement was beginning to flourish at a time when the cherished doctrine of free trade was still worshiped as an infallible and eternal law of nature. It was really only in the 'eighties when men began to anticipate a harder future for Britain in the world that unquestioning devotion to free trade dogma began to be undermined. Until then, free trade seemed to explain Britain's greatness.

An attempt to classify and define the groups behind the agitation of 1869-1871 shows immediately that they were not politically motivated.<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-Australian contingent included Edward Wilson, William Westgarth, Sir Charles Nicholson, James Youl and F.P. Labilliere, while a tiny group of parliamentarians - the Duke of Manchester, Lord Alfred Churchill, J.E. Corst, and Robert Macfie - combined with them to form the nucleus of most of the agitations connected with empire unity in these years. Outside parliament, other men joined the movement at various stages of its development. These included Henry Blaine, Sir George Gray, Sir William Denison, Henry Sewell, Frederick Young, and Edward Jenkins. Broadly speaking, the second larger group of parliamentarians can be sub-divided into those who had a special interest in empire and those who were less identifiable as professing no obvious special interest in the colonies. Arthur Kinnaid, H. Drummond Wolff, McCullagh Torrens,<sup>2</sup> Viscount Milton, Robert Torrens and Colonel Maude merited inclusion in the former group, while Chichester Fortescue, Baillie Cochrane, Lord George Hamilton, Thomas Brassey, E. Eastwick and R. Fowler were members of the latter group. What was especially significant, however, was the fact that the majority of initiatives in parliament which attacked the Liberal colonial policy and which sought to introduce the debate on imperial federation into practical politics, came from Liberals.

#### Parliament and Empire Unity

By the time the Westminster Palace Hotel meetings had convened in July 1871, events in parliament had also indicated a change in the nature of debates on the almost proverbial 'colonial question'. The main emphasis

1. C.C. Eldridge provides a useful categorisation of the various groups involved in the early imperialist movement. *England's Mission*, pp. 115-116
2. See W. McCullagh Torrens, *Twenty Years of Parliamentary Life*, (Lon. 1893).



in parliamentary debates on the colonies in 1869-1870 had been an assault on Lord Granville's ostensible policy of separatism, but in 1870 the elements of a change in the purpose of such debates could be detected. On 26 April 1870 Robert Torrens brought a motion before the House of Commons for a Select Committee on the political relations between Britain and her self-governing colonies.<sup>1</sup> As one of a small group of M.P.s in the House who were interested in the empire, Torrens' main suggestion for the creation of envoys sent to Britain as colonial representatives on the same footing as charge de'affaires of foreign countries was not well-received chiefly because it was vulnerable to the criticism that it would weaken rather than strengthen the imperial connection. Torrens had envisaged this objection, and argued that the only alternative to separatism was the official recognition of the colonies as on the same footing as foreign states in alliance. He had also considered the other suggestions frequently raised as improvements to the colonial connection:- colonial representation in parliament; a Council of Advice similar to that in India; and a Council of Colonial representatives exterior to parliament and superior in certain imperial questions, but he had rejected them all as either impracticable or simply inconsistent with the theory of the constitution.

Torrens' motion was seconded by E. Eastwick, the Conservative member for Penryn, another enthusiast of imperial unity who attended the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference of 1871, but he disagreed with the idea of having colonial envoys and seems to have supported the motion simply because he believed that Britain was entering upon an entirely new stage of colonial policy. Torrens' initiative resulted in a lengthy debate on the colonial question in which Lord Bury, Viscount Sandon, Charles Dilke, Robert Fowler, William Monsell, and even Gladstone each contributed viewpoints, but when forced to a division on the subject, the House voted by a majority of 43 to reject the motion.<sup>2</sup> What was significant about the debate, however, was

1. Hansard, 3, 200, 1817-1908.

2. According to a very interesting article by D.L.M. Farr, Sir John Rose and Imperial Relations: An Episode in Gladstone's First Administration, C.H.R., Vol. 33, (1952), pp. 19-38, Viscount Bury was officially deputed to reply to the motion which the government had no difficulty in defeating 110-73.

that it amply illustrated how party issues had still not coloured the form of debate on the colonial question. Criticism of Liberal policy was naturally implicit, but a glance at the division list shows that the colonial question had still not become a party affair by 1870.

The following June, this time in the House of Lords, Lord John Russell put forward a motion for a Royal Commission to inquire into the security arrangements for the empire as part of his own private campaign against the apparent Liberal policy of 'drift' in colonial affairs.<sup>1</sup> After a long debate, however, he withdrew the motion. It was nearly a year later on 12 May 1871 when R.A. Macfie called the attention of the House of Commons to the relations between Britain and her colonies when he moved a resolution for a Select Committee to consider improvements in the existing relations with a view to "the permanent maintainance of the best and most cordial interconnection between all parts of the empire."<sup>2</sup> A study of Hansard during these years shows that it was during this debate that the notion of a 'confederation' was first seriously promoted as a solution to the colonial question, although Macfie clearly did not suggest any concrete scheme other than a preliminary conference of representatives from the empire to pursue greater reciprocity and co-operation, and the debate did not centre on imperial federation. According to Lucy, Macfie had taken up the subject of the relations of England to her colonies "by way of light distraction",<sup>3</sup> although he was a persistent parliamentary supporter of closer union as well as one of the earliest advocates of imperial federation. His annual speech on the subject in the three years between 1871-1873 earned him widespread criticism inside the Commons and he seems to have been regarded as a bore.

Among those who replied to Macfie's motion, both Lord Bury and Edward Knatchbull-Hugessen,<sup>4</sup> the Liberal Under-Secretary of State for

1. Hansard, (3), 20 June 1870, 202, 451-485.

2. Hansard, (3), 206, 750-770.

3. H. Lucy, *Men and Manner in Parliament*, p.247.

4. E. Knatchbull-Hugessen, (1829-1893) Liberal M.P. 1857-1880, served as Under-Sec. at Home Office 1860, 1866 and as Under-Sec. for the Colonies 1871-1874. He became the first Lord Brabourne in 1880 whence he joined the Conservatives.



the Colonies, rejected his plea. In view of Macfie's pride in advertising his connection with the Colonial Institute wherever and whenever he could, it was perhaps inevitable that Bury would oppose his motion, but it was Knatchbull-Hugessen's response to the motion which caused an uproar on the Liberal front benches. Having spent a short time exposing the weaknesses of the confederation argument, he closed his speech in a manner which was hardly in keeping with responsible office:

he confessed that there had sometimes floated before his mind a vision of a confederation of all English speaking people, bound together by a tie too light to be galling or oppressive but too strong to be broken by hostile attack. 1

Coming from one of the chief spokesmen on Liberal Colonial policy in parliament, this statement obviously upset Gladstone who had never sympathized with the movement in favour of closer union. Although Knatchbull-Hugessen had admitted that such a vision was relegated to the distant future, his verbosity had virtually associated him with the new movement and must have appeared to them as an explicit change of heart by the Government, which it most definitely was not. Macfie's motion was eventually withdrawn, but Knatchbull-Hugessen's contribution to the debate had added an element of unexpected controversy which had caused a stir in the Liberal Party.

Knatchbull-Hugessen's parliamentary career as Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office from 1871 to 1874 involved him in several Commons debates connected with the movement for closer union, but, for a Liberal spokesman on colonial affairs, he seemed to betray unusually sensitive feelings in this area. His political career was a disappointment mainly because of his reputation as a political wit and because he never rated highly in Gladstone's estimation as a hard worker.<sup>2</sup> Evidence in the Gladstone papers

1. Hansard, 3, 206, 767.

2. The best analysis of Knatchbull-Hugessen's character and career is in W.D. McIntyre, *The Imperial Frontier in the Tropics 1865-1875*, pp.60-65. The author had access to 'The Political Diary of Lord Brabourne 1858-1888' which is housed in the Kent Archives Office, Maidstone. It is also interesting to note that Brabourne attended the Adjourned Conference of 18 Nov. 1884 which officially launched the Imperial Federation League.

dating from as early as August 1865 amply demonstrates Knatchbull-Hugessen's resentment regarding his career,<sup>1</sup> but his contributions to debates on colonial affairs in the Commons equally illustrate the disparity between his own acceptance of imperial responsibilities and those of the government he represented. For example, the speech in which he seemed to associate himself with Macfie's idea of a confederation received a distinctly hostile reaction from Gladstone, as Knatchbull-Hugessen noted in his political diary:

I made a speech which I suppose was successful, as it was much cheered. Gladstone, however, is not fond of speeches in favour of our Colonial empire, and remarked to me that I had spoken 'an excellent bit of bunkum.' Not very encouraging! Of late years there has been a cry, by no means just, that 'the liberals would like to give up the Colonies', which cry I set myself to disprove wherever and whenever I can, for it is mischievous and untrue as regards the great body of the Liberal Party. But if sentiments of loyalty to the Colonial Connection are termed 'Bunkum' by the Liberal Prime Minister, the task will be difficult. 2

This private summary of the situation revealed his dilemma. He was acutely conscious of the criticisms of his Government's colonial policy and, unlike either Granville or Gladstone, he sought to disarm the colonial zealots in parliament by proving once and for all that their colonial policy was neither a new policy nor a party policy. Unfortunately, he over-reacted and in attempting to defend Liberal policy he had merely embarrassed Gladstone. Evidence shows that Knatchbull-Hugessen's political sympathies with the Liberals, and especially with their colonial policy in general, were not strong and he made several more accommodating gestures to the Government's critics after 1871. In the debate on Fiji in June 1872<sup>3</sup>, for example, he again appeared to endorse Tory policy instead of putting his party's case, and between 1874-1880 he gave further support to Disraeli's imperial policies. It was hardly surprising, therefore, when he joined the Conservative Party in 1880.<sup>4</sup>

1. See his correspondence with Gladstone, Gladstone Papers, Add. Mss. 44111.

2. Brabourne Diary, Vol. iv., p.558, quoted in W.D.McIntyre, op.cit. p.63.

3. Hansard, 3, 212, 19-217.

4. Knatchbull-Hugessen to Gladstone, 5 Nov. 1882, Gladstone Papers, Add. Mss. 44111, f. 57.



With a noble persistence which typified the irrepressible 'member for Leith', Macfie insisted on bringing the colonial question before the House again on 31 May 1872 when he called this time for a Royal Commission to inquire into the means by which the colonies could participate in the conduct of Imperial affairs.<sup>1</sup> In arguing that the Government had publicly disavowed any separatist policy, but that they had taken no positive steps towards strengthening the imperial connection, Macfie was quite right. However, his claim that imperial federation was the means by which it could be effected and that nobody really opposed the idea was an exercise in wishful thinking. The suggestion of an Imperial Council of State evoked little support other than the usual perfunctory observations on the worthiness of the subject. Knatchbull-Hugessen questioned Macfie's credentials when he contrasted his lack of parliamentary experience and his notable paucity of parliamentary support with the magnitude of his annual objectives. Not only were the House becoming tired of his lonesome ventures in the colonial cause, by which the subject had been thoroughly discussed in parliament within the last two years, but he was not aware of any new circumstances which could justify the House considering it again. As regards federation, he regarded it as both superfluous and unwise when he had heard of no complaints from the colonies.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Macfie's motion was withdrawn.

The climax in the efforts to persuade the Commons to accept the need for some form of inquiry into colonial relations was reached on 28 February 1873 when Macfie made a final attempt to urge the House to appoint a Select Committee on colonial relations, but this time with special emphasis on emigration to the colonies.<sup>3</sup> Lord Bury, Sir Charles Adderley and Knatchbull-Hugessen all opposed the motion which Knatchbull-Hugessen deplored as 'not only useless, but.....positively mischievous.'<sup>4</sup>

1. Hansard, 3, 211, 912-938.

2. Knatchbull-Hugessen's remarks, Hansard, 3, 211, 926-935. Hugh Childers wrote that Knatchbull-Hugessen's speech was "the only redeeming feature of a dreary discussion where the speakers were the only hearers." Childers to Gavan Duffy, 14 June 1872, S.Childers, Life and Correspondence of Rt. Hon. H.C.E.Childers, 1827-1896, vol.1,(Lon. 1901) p.210.

3. Hansard, 3, 214, 1102-1123.

4. *ibid.*, 3, 1119.

Sir Charles Adderley referred to it as 'an annual sentimental exercitation'<sup>1</sup> and Viscount Bury injected an unmistakeable personal animosity into the debate when he objected to Macfie being considered as an authority on the subject. Bury claimed that the Colonial Institute had officially dissociated itself from Macfie's personal obsessions, an assertion which led Edward Wilson to defend Macfie against Bury in a letter to the Institute's Secretary, Dr. Eddy.<sup>2</sup> However, there was clearly no hope of a change in the main body of opinion in the House of Commons and three years of fairly continuous pressure by a tiny group of M.P.s in the House had really achieved nothing in the way of forcing parliament to adopt a positive attitude towards changing the relationship between Britain and her colonies. What they had achieved - the official disavowal of separatism and the publicising of the 'colonial question' - may have seemed little reward for their efforts, but it is doubtful whether greater success could have been won in the circumstances. The pioneers of closer union faced an indifferent House of Commons, most of whom regarded their antics as either tiresome or chimerical, but, in any case, impracticable. It was one thing to defend the colonial connection, but it was quite another to attempt to change it. What must be said about the movement for closer unity inside parliament is that there was no concerted strategy. Most of those who supported Commons motions designed to improve the colonial connection were not federationists. Robert Torrens, E. Eastwick, Robert Fowler, and Baillie Cochrane each agreed that the existing imperial relationship was intolerable, but they differed as to how it could be improved, and to them imperial federation was nothing more than a vague aspiration.

The debate of February 1873 was the last of its kind in these formative years, but perhaps the most curious feature in the light of the growing interest in the colonial question was its almost total absence from parliamentary debates between 1874 and 1886. Bodelsen was doubtless right when he suggested that this was because nobody any longer suspected the Government of pursuing a separatist policy, while the idea of imperial

1. *ibid.*, 3, 1113.

2. Wilson to Eddy, 1 March 1873, quoted in A. Folsom, *op.cit.*, pp. 180-181.



federation was not really considered to be within the sphere of practical politics.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if the focus of the campaign for closer union shifted from parliament after 1873, it did not disappear completely from political life. Public speeches, letters to the press, articles in journals, and the academic debates of the Colonial Institute provided the essential continuity in the movement's development in the years up to the formation of the Imperial Federation League in 1884. Moreover, the cause had scored an important success in attracting to its ranks the undisguised support of W.E. Forster in 1870. The Liberal member for Bradford had served as Under-Secretary of State for the colonies from 1865 to 1866, Vice-President of the Committee of the Council on Education in 1868 and joined the cabinet in 1870. His brief six months tenure at the Colonial Office was an invaluable experience in view of his later connections with the cause of closer unity in the 'eighties. Wemyss Reid dubbed him as 'the first Liberal Imperialist'<sup>2</sup> and Forster's initial interest in the empire can be traced at least as far back to his days at the Colonial Office.<sup>3</sup> It was in a speech to his Bradford constituents on 17 January 1870 that Forster expressed his satisfaction that the colonial question was being brought before the notice of the public and that his dream of empire unity would not be chimerical:

I believe that the time will come whe., by some means or another, statesmen will be able to weld a bond together which will unite the English speaking people in our colonies at present - unite them with the mother country in one great confederation. 4

The very fact that Forster openly identified himself with such a cause at a time when Granville, Bright and Lowe were giving the impression of being separatists was additional evidence of how party politics was a negligible factor in the debate on empire in the years 1869-1871.

1. Bodelsen, op.cit. p.n. 127.
2. S.J.Reid,(ed), Memoirs of Sir Wemyss Reid, (Lon. 1905), p.318.
3. Forster to his wife, 11 Jan. 1866, T.Wemyss Reid, Life of the Rt. Hon. W.E. Forster, (Lon. 1888), p.216.
4. The Times, 18 Jan. 1870.

No doubt Forster's early adherence to the movement was magnified as an event because of the almost total absence from it of most other public men, but his advertised association with the cause of closer unity was nevertheless an unexpected bonus for them. In an address given to the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh on 5 November 1875, entitled 'Our Colonial Empire', Forster proclaimed the essential oneness of the English race and showed himself as standing practically alone among his contemporary statesmen in preaching a federation of the empire when no real organization for imperial federation existed:

I believe that our union with our Colonies  
will not be severed; because I believe that  
we and they will more and more prize this  
union, and become convinced that it can only  
be preserved by looking forward to association  
on equal terms,.....we shall welcome them as  
our partners in a common and mighty Empire.  
.....who talks now of casting off the Colonies ?  
what more popular cry at present than the  
preservation of our Colonial Empire ?     1

In such passionate terms, Forster displayed his faith in the federal principle, but he foreshadowed the caution of the federationists of the 'eighties when he refused to commit himself to any specific scheme of federation. Arguing that any scheme would be premature, he confined himself to the role of preaching the gospel of unity rather than disintegration, and thus concentrated on the desirability of having colonies rather than proposing any blueprint for implementation. In its moderate purview, however, it was nevertheless a bold speech to make at a time when parliament had amply demonstrated its disapproval of vague resolutions. Shortly after this speech, Gladstone confided to Granville that Forster was 'more Tory' than he was in relation to the colonies,<sup>2</sup> doubtless thinking of Disraeli's famous Crystal Palace speech of June 1872. Despite Gladstone's private reservations about Forster's sudden public concern for empire unity, however, the movement now had an ideology, influence and a certain dignity which it had never possessed before 1870.

1. W.E. Forster, *Our Colonial Empire*, (Edin. 1875) p.5.

2. Gladstone to Granville, 16 December 1875, A. Ramm, *op.cit.*, I., p.478.  
See also Sir Algernon West, *Recollections, 1832-1886*, (Lon. 1899), p.82.



It has been suggested that Forster was 'walking in the dry places of opposition seeking rest and found Imperial Federation',<sup>1</sup> but this ignored his imperial predilections which existed before the electoral defeat of the first Gladstone Government in 1874 and for which there is conclusive evidence. As yet, however, the community of sentiment which could be said to have developed by 1875 was no real basis for any permanent organizational structure when there was an obvious inability to agree on details. Indeed, it was this very 'neutral' approach - the deliberate avoidance of concrete proposals and the cautious intentions - which explained the frequency with which the subject of imperial federation was raised in the Colonial Institute in the years between 1871 and 1884.

#### The Movement Identified and Changed

To suggest that the sum of the events of the years 1869-1875 represents the birth of a distinct movement in favour of imperial federation is to claim that some degree of coherence and homogeneity of thought had evolved with regard to the future of the empire. Bodelsen was right when he identified this evolution as a change from the defensive to the offensive, but it was an uncoordinated progression. Several of the most active participants in the movement were involved in every stage of its development, but this was evidence of a unanimity of sentiment rather than widespread agreement on the practicalities of improvement. Thus, Macfie, Labilliere, Wilson, Westgarth, Youl and Young could be regarded as the common denominators in the sequence of events, yet if they agreed on closer unity as the overriding priority, there was plenty of room in that outlook for gradations of opinion on specific aspects of the issue and for varieties of degree in the application of imperial federation. Clearly, the struggle which had been conducted for several years had yielded no actual organization which supported the cause of closer union, but changing world circumstances had rendered the idea of a federation of the

1. This sardonic comment originated from the acidic pen of Lord Bury in his article, 'The Unity of the Empire', Nineteenth Century, vol. 17, March 1885, p.384. It was subsequently used in a slightly modified form by G.B.Adams, op.cit. p.108.

empire more valid as a topic for discussion than ever before and, after the departure of Frederic Rogers from the Colonial Office in 1871, there was some justification in the belief that official attitudes towards the empire would be more flexible in the future. Hugh Childers reflected this kind of cautious optimism when he wrote to Gavan Duffy in Australia :

the recent changes in the personnel at the head of the permanent office are very favourable to the sound treatment of large questions; but these traditions cannot be got rid of in a day. 1

As Childers suggested, the process of educating the public and the official mind would be a long-term task, but at least the prospects were no longer so unfavourable.

A perusal of the literature of the period after 1871 explains in part the absence of any permanent machinery espousing the specifically federalist solution. The two articles by Edward Jenkins in the Contemporary Review for 1871 had favoured imperial federation as the all-embracing solution to most of Britain's outstanding problems, but the multiplicity of detailed schemes which were suggested in the ensuing years amply illustrated the diversity of opinion as to what constituted 'imperial federation'.<sup>2</sup> However, the federal principle was undoubtedly the most popular choice of the advocates of closer unity. There were as many schemes as there were individuals, as Bodelsen noted when he emphasized that imperial federation was to some extent becoming 'the happy hunting ground of cranks'.<sup>3</sup> Even within the area of this study, however, the idea was not new. Lord John Russell, it will be remembered, had frequently returned to it and Arthur Mills had already referred to it as 'a popular and fashionable idea' in his article on 'Our Colonial Policy' in the Contemporary Review of June 1869. In fact it became customary to refer to any plan for a closer

1. Childers to G. Duffy, 19 April 1872, S. Childers, op.cit. vol.I, p.208.
2. For a detailed analysis of the numerous schemes purporting to be federal plans for the empire, the definitive work is still Seymour. C.Y. Cheng, *Schemes for the Federation of the British Empire*, (New York 1931).
3. Bodelsen, op.cit. p.131.



unity of the empire as a 'Federation'. After 1871 detailed schemes for imperial federation became numerous although many of them could not be taken seriously. In 1873 a small newspaper, "The Colonies", became involved in the great debate. Owned by S.W.Silver, a member of the Colonial Institute, the newspaper published a debate between two correspondents in the months of January, February and March who signed themselves 'Philo Colonus' and 'H de B.H.', and in which the possibilities of a great British Union were thoroughly discussed. This initial debate, however, was extended in 1875 to include letters from Frederick Young, the Duke of Manchester, and Francis Labilliere, and the correspondence was published separately by Young in 1876 as a book entitled 'Imperial Federation.'<sup>1</sup>

In pursuance of the campaign, Labilliere read a further paper before the Colonial Institute in January 1875 entitled 'On the Permanent Unity of the Empire,'<sup>2</sup> and in the months of April, July and October 1879 the Westminster Review published a series of articles collectively entitled, 'The Federation of the English Empire'. Finally, among the proliferation of articles and reviews circulating at the close of the decade, Alexander Staveley-Hill's, 'An Empire's Parliament' was read before the Colonial Institute in 1880,<sup>3</sup> thus demonstrating the continuing value of that body to enthusiasts of closer union. Perhaps not unnaturally, it was even claimed by Major Boose, one of the Institute's few permanent staff members, that the organization was the first public body to advocate the federation of the empire.<sup>4</sup> This heterogeneity of opinion was useful in maintaining a continuous debate on the subject, but it was clearly hopeless as a means of bringing the subject of closer union nearer to a working reality. To achieve this, some kind of well-defined formula was desirable, yet in the decade after 1871 there was no sign of such progress being made. The root of the problem lay in a confusion of terminology. Thus, not all advocates of imperial unity were federationists and many of those who considered themselves to be in the latter group would have been hard pressed to prove their claims. The majority of schemes propounded by

1. Sir F.Young, *Imperial Federation*, (Lon. 1876.)

2. P.R.C.I., vi (1875), pp.36-85.

3. P.R.C.I., xi (1880), pp.136-177.

4. J.R.Boose, *Memory Serving*, (Lon. 1928), p.97.

individuals were simply not based upon the federal principle of a division of sovereignty where the concept of co-ordinate powers necessarily applied. Indeed, it was a more common practice in these early days of the Movement to begin with the assumption that Britain would dominate such a federation and that colonial autonomy would have to face a setback. The theoretical accuracy of the terminology was a matter for academics rather than for amateur enthusiasts of empire, but it was nevertheless an important aspect of the debate. After all, it was no use adopting schemes of closer union based upon honest and well-meaning, but ill-informed enthusiasm where there had been no effort made to define the terms involved. As we shall see, the role of the academic in the great debate on the future of the empire was neither unimportant nor irrelevant because he was dealing with those very problems against which practical politics was set.



## CHAPTER 4

### The Great Debate

What must have irritated academics of the period was the way in which the term 'Imperial Federation' was used quite indiscriminately to describe any scheme or propensity which favoured closer ties within the empire. In short, it was an abuse of terminology. It will be recalled that the architect of the phrase was supposed to have been Edward Jenkins, but other evidence indicates that this was not the case. Sir Frederick Young made a retrospective claim to be one of the inventors of the phrase when he was reported as saying:

Who originated the phrase I do not know,  
but I rather fancy it was Mr. de Labilliere  
or myself, possibly the two of us together. 1

Whether this assertion was simply the outcome of a poor memory or whether it was actually true, is perhaps a fruitless line of inquiry, but, however it came about, the phrase quickly gained a popularity which provoked a great academic controversy among those in professorial circles who regarded it as an etymological monster and a political humbug. This great debate could not fairly be dismissed as an exercise in academic self-indulgence when the issues and obstacles that were raised by such men were no less important to practical politicians who were actively involved in the movement and who were actually faced with the problem of taking steps towards the attainment of an "Imperial Federation". The absence of any accurate definition of the phrase was certainly an open invitation to all believers in empire. In a letter to a Victorian correspondent, dated 4 September 1872, Hugh Childers identified the bandwagon effect:

It is ineffably amusing to watch the varying  
tone of great men who, knowing nothing, and  
not caring very much about the past Colonial  
controversy, hazard opinions to catch the  
popular breeze of the moment. 2

1. Young Papers, extract from the Morning Post dated 21 June 1913, Newspaper Cuttings Book, pp.144-145.
2. Childers to Mr. J.O'Shanassy, S.Childers, op.cit, vol.1, pp. 211-212.

While the controversy centred upon what the term 'imperial federation' really meant, however, it unavoidably embraced a whole range of problems connected with the empire such as the perpetuation of free trade, the question of imperial defence, and the role of postal communications. In this academic debate, the names of Goldwin Smith, Edward Freeman, James Froude, and Professor Seeley were especially prominent, but well-known politicians like W.E. Forster, James Bryce, Lord Bury, the Marquis of Lorne and even the notable Lord Blachford also had some contribution to make. The Imperial Federation League was formed in November 1884, but the favourable reception which was accorded to this event was an imperfect veneer concealing a background of widespread disagreement regarding the validity and the accuracy of the term. At its inception, the League was caught up in an avalanche of articles and press comment attempting to define the term. Commentators on the subject could not resist the temptation of linking the idea of imperial federation with the thorny question of Home Rule for Ireland, and during the momentous debate on Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill in April 1886, it was hardly surprising to detect federationists launching themselves into the fray with what seemed to them to be ready-made solutions to the Irish problem.

The federal principle obviously appeared as a possible solution to the Irish question, although Irish Home Rule was really a separate political party issue. In an article dealing with the relationship of federalism to Home Rule for Ireland, Henry Thring pinpointed the danger of over-simplifying the issue:

federation between the dominant head of the  
Empire and a dependent community is a contradiction  
in terms. 1

1. H. Thring, 'Imperial Unity and Home Rule', Contemporary Review, March, 1887. Thring was a distinguished parliamentary draftsman who occupied the position of Parliamentary Counsel to the Treasury from 1869-1886. He published a small pamphlet in 1865 entitled 'Suggestions for Colonial Reform' in which he favoured colonial independence, and, not surprisingly, he was a firm opponent of imperial federation which he condemned in an article entitled, 'The Fallacy of Imperial Federation', Nineteenth Century, Vol. 19, 1886, pp. 22-34.



Thring clearly attributed such a proposal to a 'mere confusion of thought', and federationists were undoubtedly in danger of misunderstanding and misrepresenting the nature of the Irish problem when they ventured to suggest that Irish self-government was consistent with imperial unity. The dichotomy of thought between those who regarded increased self-government for Ireland as synonymous with imperial dismemberment, and those who believed that imperial unity pointed towards more Irish self-government also illustrated the need for a strictly coherent theory of imperial federation. 'Imperialism', presented as a political term devoid of emotive connotations, indicated a relationship of superiority of the head of the Empire to its component parts, while 'federation' involved a written compact between independent states upon a basis of equality. It was not surprising to Edward Freeman and Goldwin Smith that no well-defined theory of imperial federation existed, therefore, and they both regarded it as a chimera created by Englishmen who totally misunderstood the growth of colonial nationalism. In the sphere of academic debate upon the merits and defects of imperial federation, therefore, both Freeman and Smith led the attack against a movement whose objective they dismissed as completely impracticable.

Following in the footsteps of Goldwin Smith, for whom he had a high regard, Freeman achieved one of his lifelong ambitions when, on 16 October 1884, he delivered his inaugural lecture as the new Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Between the years 1885-1890 he was a prolific writer on many contemporary subjects, producing in this period at least eighty articles and reviews for various periodicals.<sup>1</sup> One of his chief aims in many of the articles and letters which he wrote was to identify the proper meaning of 'Home Rule' which he considered to be abused.<sup>2</sup> Like Goldwin Smith, Freeman was obsessed with the need to define terminology accurately and the logic of his mind urged him to look with disdain upon imperial federation. As a historian, Freeman had already devoted some of his time to a historical study of federalism which he never wholly completed

1. W.R.W. Stephens, *Life and Letters of E.A. Freeman*, (Lon. 1895), Vol. II, p. 298.

2. See, for example, his article 'Prospects of Home Rule', the *Fortnightly Review*, Sept. 1886.

but which was nevertheless published in 1863 as a single volume.<sup>1</sup> Convinced that historical study did more than anything else to lead the mind to a definite political creed, Freeman recognised his own predilections in foreign and domestic politics and set himself the task of exhibiting the actual working of Federal Government throughout history rather than attempting to deal with the subject as an abstract concept. However, his approach to the subject still demanded a definition of federalism if only for historical purposes. He described the ideal of a Federal Government as 'the most finished and the most artificial production of political ingenuity' which, in short, meant:

A Federal Union will form one State in relation to other powers, but many States as regards its internal administration. This complete division of sovereignty we may look upon as essential to the absolute perfection of the Federal ideal. 2

Clearly, therefore, Freeman could be regarded as an acknowledged authority on the question of federalism so that his unequivocal hostility towards the idea of imperial federation and his ruthless condemnation of the movement's leaders was heavier artillery than the League had expected to resist. Turning his attention to imperial federation, Freeman gathered together his arguments in an article entitled 'Imperial Federation' in the April 1885 edition of MacMillan's Magazine and made repeated references to them in his regular correspondence with James Bryce.<sup>3</sup>

1. His 'History of Federal Government' was republished posthumously in a new form in 1893 edited by J.B.Bury and entitled, 'The History of Federal Government in Greece and Italy'. The latter work was a reprint of the original volume, but with the addition of a new chapter on Italy and a new fragment on Germany which were discovered among Freeman's papers and intended for his second volume.
2. E.A.Freeman, History of Federal Government in Greece and Italy, p.3.
3. Jurist, historian and politician, Bryce was Liberal M.P. for Tower Hamlets 1880-1885, and for South Aberdeen from 1885-1906. As a Gladstonian Liberal, Bryce was under-sec. for foreign affairs in 1886, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1892-1894, President of the Board of Trade 1894-1895, Chief Secretary for Ireland 1905-1907, and British Ambassador in Washington 1907-1913. He was a consistent supporter of the I.F.L. and was a member of the League's Special Committee which devised a plan to reorganise the empire in 1892.



What must have embarrassed federationists was Freeman's passion for accuracy and lucidity of statement which, coupled with his own clearness of conception and exact precision in the use of words, he regarded as the sine qua non of serious work. Imperial federation was a branch of inquiry which was directly connected with history and thus Freeman's approach to the investigation was simply to trace it to its origins and expose it as having no historical basis. In this way he could dismiss federationists as either confused thinkers or careless writers, but it is the structure of his arguments which is worth closer scrutiny for the purposes of this study. In an excellent synopsis of Freeman's life and character, Bryce attributed to his friend a 'perfect frankness' and a 'simple directness' which made him express himself with an absence of reserve,<sup>1</sup> as the following extract from his reprobation of imperial federation shows:

First, there is the name; then there is the thing. It may be some objection to the name that it is altogether meaningless, or rather that it is a contradiction in terms ..... It tells a little against the name of the scheme that what is "Imperial" cannot be "Federal", and that what is "Federal" cannot be "Imperial". It tells a little against its substance that none can expect the scheme to carry out its professed purpose except those who have forgotten the existence of India and the existence of the United States. 2

Such bluntness could hardly be ignored, although federationists continually argued that the meaning of the terms was not as important as the general desire for closer relations between the mother country and her self-governing colonies. The chief criticisms which Freeman made, however, are worth noting simply because they raised fundamental questions which federationists ultimately had to answer.

It was a common argument of federationists that some sort of federal relationship already existed between Britain and her colonies and that

1. J. Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, pp. 270-271.
2. E. A. Freeman, *Imperial Federation*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, April 1885, p. 430.

therefore the vague aspiration of imperial federation would not involve any major constitutional upheaval. Indeed, the emphasis of this line of thought was that it would be an almost imperceptible transition which would render the whole operation painless. Freeman, however, wasted no time in exposing such a presumption. First, he complained that this reasoning had no historical basis because there was no voluntary union of independent states keeping some powers to themselves and granting other powers to a central authority of their own creation. As the mother country, Britain was a central authority older than the colonies, which were recipients of certain powers granted to them. Thus, when federationists claimed that an American state had no more of a direct voice in the foreign affairs of the American Union than a British colony had in the foreign affairs of the British Empire, they overlooked the fact that a British colony was a subject community which had never had a voice in such matters, whereas an American state had no direct voice in foreign affairs simply because this was one of the powers which it had ceded to the Federal authority. Secondly, the logic of Freeman's line of reasoning enabled him to point to the fact that the British colonies had no voice, either direct or indirect, in choosing representatives in the British Parliament who were responsible for foreign affairs, whereas the American states and their citizens did have a voice in selecting those who were responsible for foreign affairs. Thus, the citizens of the several states, as citizens of the United States of America, had an indirect voice in choosing the President, while the states comprising the American Union chose the representatives in the Senate. In short, the difference between the position of an American state and the position of a British colony was simply the difference between federation and subjection. The British colonies had never been in a position to cede certain powers to a central authority, they only possessed such powers as Britain had chosen to grant them. Clearly, such a condition of affairs was 'imperial', but it could not be 'federal'.

Not content with exposing the abuse of terminology with regard to the existing state of things, Freeman also surveyed the intentions of federationists. He observed that:



The question in truth comes to this: shall an "empire" break up or shall it be changed into a federation? To speak of changing an imperfect federation into a perfect one gives a false idea of the case. What is really proposed to be done is not to change a lax confederation into a closer one or an imperfect confederation into a perfect one. It is to bring federation, as a perfectly new thing, where at present there is no federation, but its opposite, subjection. And it is proposed to bring in federation, not only as a perfectly new thing, but under circumstances utterly unlike those under which any of the present or past confederations of the world ever came into being. The proposal that a ruling state.....should come down from its position of empire, and enter into terms of equal confederation with its subject communities, is a very remarkable proposal, and one which has perhaps never before been made in the history of the world. 1

By emphasizing the novelty of such an intention, Freeman had focussed attention upon an aspect of the issue which continued to embarrass federationists engaged in debating the future of the empire. W.E. Forster preached the gospel of a 'complete and equal and perfect federation'<sup>2</sup>, but critics of the movement suspected imperial federation of being a ruse designed to perpetuate British hegemony rather than a scheme based upon a division of sovereignty between distinct and co-ordinate governments, and the phantom of "predominance" stalked federationists throughout the life of the movement. Among the group of prominent men in public life who were hostile to imperial federation, several of them referred to the impracticability of a ruling state admitting its subject states into a federal relation. Sir Charles Adderley, later Lord Norton and a former Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office during the Conservative administration of 1866-1868, conveyed his opinion of Britain's role in the proposed federation in language which was remarkably reminiscent of Edward Freeman:

There is about as much chance of the English people turning their ancient Parliamentary system into such a constitution, as of their deliberately restoring feudalism or the Heptarchy.....A Minister coming down to the House with a proposal for abolishing Parliament, and issuing writs for a Federal Congress, would be immediately consigned to Bedlam. 3

1. E.A.Freeman, *ibid.*, pp.435-436.
2. W.E.Forster, 'Imperial Federation', *Nineteenth Century*, XCVI, Feb.1885.
3. Charles Adderley, 'Imperial Federation - Its Impossibility', *Nineteenth Century*, XVI, Sept. 1884, Like Freeman, Adderley regarded imperial federation as nonsense and in his notes for 1885 he remarked upon how he attacked the movement in letters to the press. See W.Childe-Pemberton, *Life of Lord Norton*, (Lon. 1909) p.266.



By depriving imperial federation of any experience to recommend it, therefore, it was marooned as a distinctly new scheme which could be judged only on its abstract merits, and not according to any bogus precedent. What annoyed Freeman and other believers in terminological exactitude was the pretentious way that imperial federation was espoused. Schemes were proposed which were labelled 'imperial federation' but which ignored actual conditions and had not the slightest regard to the chance of their ever being accepted. If there was to be any real hope of achieving closer relations between the mother country and her self-governing colonies, a more meaningful phrase than imperial federation was desirable from the standpoint of accuracy. There was a good deal of wisdom in the advice that if "federation" meant some wholly new device which the world had never witnessed in its history at any time, then it was better to discuss the merits of the new device by calling it by some new name of its own, and not by using old names in a strange way which distorted their accepted meaning.

Freeman arrived at the heart of the controversy when, having exposed the spurious nature of the terminology, he turned his attention to the implications of applying the federal principle to the British Empire. His conclusions, he felt, were at variance with what federationists pictured as somehow making Britain greater. In past federal unions, such as Switzerland and the United States, the member states gained in political position by joining the Union, but it involved a simultaneous loss of sovereignty and position with regard to the right to maintain peace and war. In many of the past examples of federal unions, however, the states had never known separate independence, and, in any case, any nominal loss in power and position was always fully compensated in other ways. Argued in terms of a balance sheet of loss and gain, therefore, it was less obvious that Britain stood to gain from giving up her position as a ruling power in order to become a component part of a larger federal state. In short, it meant the emasculation of the British Parliament which would have to give up its widest and greatest powers to some other yet imaginary assembly. Doubtless, many federationists had not thought of such a prospect and even those who did, such as Forster, could only offer a modicum of comfort by the prediction that Britain's future in a more competitive and hostile world might be less bleak if she was prepared to reassess her position vis-à-vis her empire. Of course, such essentially defensive strategy was based upon the implicit assumption that the residuum of Imperial powers resided in the hands of Britain alone, and



that, therefore, the application of the federal principle to the empire would be an act of magnanimity - a gift to the colonies from Britain of a share in those affairs which had hitherto been her own exclusive preserve. This conundrum was simply the product of attempting to reconcile a position of predominance with the status of equality, as conveyed by Freeman's dictum that what was 'Imperial' could not be 'Federal'.

Clearly then, if the colonies were to be admitted into a federal relationship with Britain as a method of effecting a closer union between the head of an empire and its subject colonies, the reality of such a proposal meant that the parliament of the United Kingdom would perforce be content with jurisdiction over purely local affairs of the United Kingdom, and sending representatives to some new grandiose institution which would administer the affairs of the Empire. Not only did historical experience seem to vitiate imperial federation at its source, but the fact that federationists seemed to base their vision of a united empire more upon hope and sentiment rather than upon adequate preparation and a careful appraisal of the possibilities and the probabilities, did little to produce a convincing argument for imperial federation. Freeman, however, did not hesitate to translate the vision of the British Empire, united by the federal principle, into practical terms. In one of his earliest letters to Bryce connected with imperial federation, Freeman stated his view with characteristic candour:

....to me Imperial Federation seems to be, not an intelligible proposal which one deems unjust or inexpedient, and therefore argues against, but a mere heap of vague, meaningless, and contradictory phrases, pure and mere babble in short,.....  
 .....What is Imperial Federation ?.....

Some say, a Federation of the British Empire, the Queen's dominions, or something of that kind. That means a Federation in which we all shall be outvoted by Hindoos and Mahometans. Some say (as if it meant the same thing) a Federation of the English-speaking people. That, indeed, gets rid of the barbarians; but it implies the partnership of the United States, which will hardly be got for an 'Imperial' concern,.....

In either case, the kingdom of Great Britain and its Parliament will have to sink to the level of the State of Rhode Island and its Legislature. 1

1. Freeman to Bryce, 16 Dec. 1886, Bryce Papers, Mss. 7, ff. 256-258. This letter is also to be found in W.R. Stephens, Life and Letters of E.A. Freeman, Vol. II, pp. 356-357.

The assertion that the supremacy of the British Parliament would disappear and that it would have no more power than the Legislature of a Swiss Canton or of an American State did not really correspond with the august conception of a "Greater Britain" which federationists were so often keen to delineate. Indeed, if the federal principle were to be strictly applied to the British Empire, then there was much weight in the additional argument that the British Empire would simply cease to exist. With concern for accuracy, of course, it all depended upon what was understood by the epithet, "Greater Britain"... As Freeman argued:

Is the people of Great Britain, is the Parliament of Great Britain, so delighted with the existence of what in the cant of the day is called a "Greater Britain", as to be ready to give up to that Greater Britain all that has hitherto made Britain great in a wider sense than the original one of being geographically greater than the lesser Britannia (*italics*) of the mainland ? 1

Greatness, therefore, had a bifurcated meaning : either it meant being the undisputed ruling power of a vast and universally venerated British Empire or it meant, in a new sense, being a member of a politically united group of states in which a new greatness, based upon co-ordinate powers, could be established. In the process of such a novel metamorphosis, however, it was difficult to imagine the transition from one form of real, incontrovertible greatness to another apparent, but less tangible, greatness ever gaining widespread acceptability. What made this adjustment difficult to comprehend, let alone accept, was the fact that it involved a change in kind as well as in degree which was obscured by the inappropriate use of the phrase 'imperial federation'. In short, the terminology concealed a qualitative as well as a quantitative change in the objective to be attained.

The academic debate which persisted in the 1880's as to the meaning of imperial federation also touched upon the danger of encouraging separatism within the United Kingdom. Given the fact that the watchwords of the 'eighties were Ireland and Empire, the investigation of the meaning of imperial federation occasionally followed the path which led to the

1. E.A.Freeman, Imperial Federation, Macmillan's Magazine, April 1885, p.440.



debate on the Irish issue, but it also raised the question of how far the application of the federal principle to the British Empire would allow a Parliament of Great Britain to exist. As Freeman warned in his article on 'Imperial Federation', it would have been far more in accordance with the federal principle of a distinct identity for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales to enter the new Union as separate states with their own separate state legislatures than for them to enter collectively as the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> As will become evident later in this study, the temporary association of imperial federation with separatist ideas in Ireland and Scotland was another embarrassment for advocates of the movement. Even if such a notion could have entered the arena of theoretical possibility, however, the claim that it would not have been an attractive proposition for the constituent elements of the United Kingdom had much to recommend it. Freeman's argument that for Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland each to sink to the political level of a Swiss Canton or an American State would not be considered as promotion of status, contained the innuendo that their absorption in the United Kingdom was of greater benefit to them than they would readily admit. Not only would this kind of arrangement have been difficult to assess in terms of the impact on each of them, but there would be little doubt that separatists in Wales, Scotland and Ireland would have regarded it as nothing more than a stepping-stone, or halfway house, towards total independence from England.

As the foremost literary critic of imperial federation, whose arguments it has been expedient to utilise for the purposes of this study, Freeman could hardly fail finally to focus his attention on the scope of the proposed federation as part of his relentless condemnation of the movement. The purview of imperial federation was an aspect of the debate to which all critics of the movement regularly referred, and it involved some vital points of detail. For example, the place of India in the proposed federation was of particular interest as the celebrated jewel in the crown of empire, and the fate of such colonies as Malta, Gibraltar, and the West Indies was repeatedly questioned. Clearly, if the scope of the

1. E. Freeman, *ibid*, p.440

federal principle was restricted to the white self-governing colonies, then the people of India, and of any other part of the empire which fell outside this category, would be subject to the United Kingdom and the white self-governing colonies. Such an anomalous arrangement might certainly have been imperial, but it would not have been federal.

Not only was there little homogeneity of opinion as to the scope of imperial federation, but, more especially, the role of India in such an arrangement was a particular source of embarrassment to federationists, many of whom had doubtless never considered the practical implications of their aspirations for closer unity. For this reason, it was hardly surprising that comparatively little attention was paid to India. In the concluding part of his diatribe on imperial federation, Freeman pointed to the fact that India was the most prized possession of the empire, but that it was frequently overlooked by advocates of the federal relationship:

In truth, in this particular argument, India, so present to every mind in every other argument, India, the choicest flower of the Empire, the brightest jewel in the imperial crown.....seems suddenly to be forgotten. <sup>1</sup>

The omission of India, however, was not difficult to explain.<sup>2</sup> She did not figure in the plans and arguments of most federationists simply because it was widely accepted that India was ruled permanently by Britain and that she was a more obvious example of 'Empire' than the white self-governing colonies. In this respect, therefore, it was generally believed that her connection with Britain had a degree of permanence which was in marked contrast to the historically changing relationship of the self-governing colonies to Britain. As Dr. S.R.Mehrotra wrote in 1961:

The reasons why India was 'forgotten' or 'ignored' by the early federationists are not far to seek. She was quiet and securely in hand....The white colonies were rapidly advancing in self-government and nationhood and it was widely felt that unless some positive effort was made to draw them closer to the mother country they would drift into sovereign independence. The immediate challenge came from the self-governing colonies; the

1. E.Freeman, *ibid.*, p.444.

2. The only recent work on this aspect of the topic is S.R.Mehrotra, 'Imperial Federation and India, 1868-1917', J.C.P.S., 1961-1963, Vol. 1., pp. 29-41.



problem of determining future relations with them was the urgent one. India posed no such pressing problem. 'Federate or disintegrate' could not be said of the British empire in India. 1.

In reality, a federal relationship with India was simply absurd and Freeman was probably correct in emphasizing the point that nobody had ever meant to support such a proposal. Yet, if India was not to be admitted to federal rights in an imperial federation, critics of the movement persisted with the view that she was, nevertheless, too important to be neglected. What most federationists probably settled for was a case of having the best of both worlds - to apply the federal principle to the white self-governing colonies and Britain, but to maintain India's position as a foreign dependency under the suzerainty of the United Kingdom. It is true that a handful of federationists did try to accommodate India in their various schemes of imperial reorganisation in the 'eighties,<sup>2</sup> but generally it was believed that the problem of India was one which merely added to the already immense difficulties standing in the way of the practical realisation of imperial federation. Consequently, it was understandable that most federationists did not wish to add to those difficulties by raising the spectre of India's role. In 1876, Frederick Young had made no attempt to disguise his belief as to the place of India in an imperial federation. He excluded her on the ground that her inhabitants were 'not of the British race',<sup>3</sup> and, in later years, he complained that the task of federating the British Empire was 'already complicated enough' without further complicating it by worrying about India's inclusion.<sup>4</sup> Another dedicated supporter of imperial federation, and a close friend of Young, Francis Labilliere, wavered between handing India to the new Federal Government of the Empire and allowing her 'some means of representation in the Federal Parliament'.<sup>5</sup> However, if some federationists delighted in

1. S.R.Mehrotra, *ibid.*, p.29.

2. See S.Y.C. Cheng, *Schemes For The Federation Of The British Empire*. Individual examples of attempts to include India in an imperial reorganization are, H.Mortimer-Franklyn, *The Unit of Imperial Federation*, (Lon. 1887), G.F.Brown, 'The Federation of the British Empire', *P.R.C.I.*, 1886, vol. 17., p.294, and S.W.Kelsey, *Imperial Federation*, (Lon. 1903),

3. F.Young, *Imperial Federation*, (Lon. 1876), p.64.

4. F.Young, *A Pioneer of Imperial Federation in Canada*, (Lon. 1902), pp.148-149.

5. F.Labilliere, 'The Political Organization of the Empire', 14 June, 1881. Paper read at the Royal Colonial Institute, *P.R.C.I.*, Vol. XII(1880-81) pp. 355-356.

propounding their own solutions to the problem of India, it was clear that nobody ever seriously contemplated a situation whereby all the English-speaking parts of the empire could be outvoted by Hindoos.

The debate on the role of India in an 'imperial federation' revealed yet another significant aspect of the movement's semi-coherent ideology. Without doubt, their conception of the empire was racial. This was perhaps the only feature of the theory which gained unanimity. The idea of a closer union between the mother country and her self-governing colonies based upon a community of race, religion, language and culture did have an aura of credibility about it which must have softened the hearts of even the most ardent opponents of imperial federation. Whilst he was busy exposing the absurdity of the terminology, even Freeman demonstrated a warmth of feeling for the idea of 'a lasting friendly union of the English and English-speaking folk' in contrast to the maintainance of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> Freeman was referring to the prospect of harmonious relations with the United States of America as a symbol of the unity of English-speaking peoples, but he was well aware that federationists did not include America in their vision of imperial unity. It was of further annoyance to Freeman, therefore, that federationists could frequently talk about a 'Federation of the English-speaking people' and 'Anglo-Saxon unity' without including the United States in their schemes. In short, this situation was yet another outcome of using words without attempting to define their meaning.

The basic assumption on the part of most federationists that the colonies in the self-governing areas of the empire were 'Englishmen across the seas' received a welcome fillip in 1883 when Professor Seeley's 'Expansion of England' was first published. As Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University from 1869 to 1895, the year of his death, Seeley was certainly the most outstanding academic luminary within the ranks of the federation movement. His 'Expansion of England' consisted of two series of lectures delivered at the university which were widely

1. E. Freeman, op.cit., p.445.



acclaimed in Britain, placing him immediately in the front rank of the movement advocating imperial unity. Not surprisingly, his volume acquired the sanctity of a religious treatise for many federationists and Seeley took an active part in the work of the Imperial Federation League, becoming a member of the Council and of the Committee of the League and assuming the leadership of the Cambridge branch of the League. His meteoric rise to fame as a literary exponent of imperial unity, however, was never followed by any other form of achievement in this area and there is good cause to believe that his collection of lectures on the empire represented the summit of his contribution. Bodelsen claimed that his career after 1883 must have been something of a disappointment to federationists after the widespread public attention which he initially attracted, and he dubbed him 'a man of one book'.<sup>1</sup>

AS an excellent statement of the case for imperial unity, if not explicit imperial federation, Seeley's book succeeded in popularising the cause of closer unity in the 'eighties, but it did not create it. John Morley, who was prompted to review Seeley's observations a few months later, confirmed this fact when he noted that:

The chances of the time have contributed to make Mr. Seeley's book,.....singularly opportune and have given to a philosophical study the actuality of a political pamphlet.....Mr. Seeley's book has thus come upon a tide of popular interest. 2

Nevertheless, the structure of Seeley's arguments, if not original, did reflect the main currents of thought on the question of imperial unity, and it did raise certain questions and posit several hypotheses which were central to the academic debate in the 'eighties.

1. C.A.Bodelsen, op.cit., p.151. Bodelsen reported that Seeley's book sold 80,000 copies in the first two years of its publication, but it was a harsh indictment of the man who had written 'Ecce Homo' and one assumes that Bodelsen was only referring to Seeley's contribution to imperialist writings.
2. J.Morley, 'The Expansion of England', Macmillan's Magazine, Feb. 1884, pp. 241-242. Bodelsen suggests that Seeley's interest in imperial unity was something of an accident in that it was the success of his book, more than anything else, which caused him to promote that object. Bodelsen, op.cit., p.151.

Few historians would have challenged Seeley's basic premise that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had witnessed an unparalleled expansion of the English race in the world, but there was much less optimism about the opportunities which he claimed England could make use of for the future. Using examples from the past to show how some states had declined in the world and how other states had surpassed them in power, size and influence, Seeley claimed that England had the choice either of coming to terms with a more competitive world and establishing a new relationship with her colonial empire which would set her 'on a level with the greatest of these great states of the future'<sup>1</sup>, or of allowing the chance to pass and thereby ceasing to be a world power. However, by emphasizing the importance of improvements made in steam and electricity, and by demonstrating how the federal principle had resulted in 'the possibility of highly organised states on a yet larger scale',<sup>2</sup> Seeley was presenting the case for ideas already in existence, although his own lack of originality was adequately compensated for by his competence as a writer. With a preference for the macrocosmic approach to history, which caused him to dwell upon the size of states and how this determined their relations with other states in the world, Seeley's treatment of the case for a consolidation of the empire was remarkably similar to that of James Froude, who had published his arguments in Fraser's Magazine in 1870.<sup>3</sup> Like Froude, Seeley's hopes for the future of England lay in an expansion of the state as well as the nation, a distinction which enabled him to omit India from the imperial reorganisation. The desire to present an argument which was theoretically consistent, however, was not easy to accomplish when basic premises were subject to a medley of interpretations.

It was an accepted feature of contemporaneous literature on imperial unity that the major task facing federationists was to 'reunite the scattered fragments of the same nation'<sup>4</sup> and that Greater Britain, which

1. J. Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, p. 350.

2. J. Seeley, *ibid.*, p. 348.

3. 'England and her Colonies' and 'The Colonies Once More' were reprinted in J. A. Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, (Lon. 1890), vol. II, pp. 180-216 and 397-438.

4. J. Froude, *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 210.



meant the white self-governing colonies, was not 'in the ordinary sense an Empire at all', but 'a natural growth, a mere normal extension of the English race into other lands' which meant only 'a very large state.'<sup>1</sup> With such a profound faith and pride in the vigour of the English-speaking people in the world, neither Edward Freeman nor Goldwin Smith had any objection, but it was on this fact that agreement between them and the federationists ended. Commenting upon Seeley's book almost a year after its publication, Goldwin Smith, as critical as ever, pointed out that the British Empire was the product of an unplanned expansion of a people and not the result of a deliberate expansion of the English State. The only real political bond which he believed could exist between the mother country and her colonies was mutual citizenship so that it was more accurate to talk in terms of a multiplication of Englands rather than an expansion of England.<sup>2</sup> Both Freeman and Smith were therefore great believers in the English-speaking peoples, or the Anglo-saxon race, but the only aggregation in which they placed their faith was a lasting friendly alliance between the scattered English people of the world, including the Americans, and not an Imperial Federation. Freeman did not attempt to disguise his racialism when he wrote to Bryce:

I don't want closer union with the dependent colonies; I want to see them as dependent colonies. That is, I go in for the English folk all over the world, wherever they dwell and under whatever government, and not for this nuisance of a "British Empire".<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Goldwin Smith's belief in 'an Anglo-Saxon franchise, including the United States'<sup>4</sup>, was a different interpretation than that at which Seeley had arrived. A recognition of the virtues of, and the affinity between, the English-speaking peoples in the world, which Freeman called 'a fellowship in civic rights',<sup>5</sup> was the only form of regrouping which

1. J. Seeley, 'The Expansion of England', pp. 343-344.
2. G. Smith, 'The Expansion of England', *Contemporary Review*, April 1884, pp. 524-540.
3. Freeman to Bryce, 16 Jan. 1887, Bryce Papers, MSS. 8, ff. 1-3.
4. G. Smith, 'Straining the Silken Thread', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Aug. 1888, p. 246.
5. Freeman to G. Smith, 19. Aug. 1888, published in W. R. W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of E. A. Freeman*, Vol. 2., p. 384.

both Smith and Freeman would tolerate and it was one which they regarded as comparable in vision and grandeur to imperial federation.

In terms of theoretical consistency, therefore, both Freeman and Smith revealed that the logical limit of using such terms as 'Anglo-Saxon unity' and 'English-speaking union' meant the inclusion of the United States, as well as the white self-governing colonies, in an imperial reorganization. Whilst the incomplete theory of imperial federation was overtly racial, of course, it did not really provide for the inclusion of Americans, which was repeated evidence of how far federationists had no clear idea of what their terminology meant. More than once Freeman had exhorted federationists to avoid using terms loosely since they only created difficulties for those who wished to use them accurately about past events and they merely caused confusion and misunderstanding about recent events. In retrospect, therefore, the task which Freeman and Goldwin Smith had set themselves was one of exposing the spurious nature of the terminology and then to demonstrate the real consequences of applying the federal principle to the British Empire. Their approach was simply one of elucidation. However, according to Bryce, Freeman's quest for terminological accuracy and his method of assessing contemporary events in the light of historical origins embodied a fundamental weakness. This was that it did not really equip him to appreciate statemanship looking forward and trying to find solutions to difficult problems.<sup>1</sup> To this extent, Freeman was anchored in the past and it was not surprising, therefore, that his own dictum about history and politics prevented him from sympathizing with the federationist movement.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Bryce, whilst accepting the criticisms of inaccuracy and absurdity levelled at the terminology, nevertheless felt that the movement was virtuous and that:

it is not mere babble, although it is admittedly at present vague, There is a sound idea at the root, and only to that idea is anyone who joins it committed.<sup>3</sup>

1. Bryce quoted S.R.Gardiner, the historian, in his *Biographical Studies*, p.274.
2. Bryce wrote that, "he sometimes made history present politics as well as past." J.Bryce, *ibid.*, pp.274-275.
3. Bryce to Freeman, 24 Dec. 1886, Bryce Papers, MS.9, ff. 259-262



Thus, Bryce's willingness to join a movement, whose name he regarded as stupid and whose objectives he believed were confined to retaining the political connection of the colonies to Britain and preparing for a readjustment of that connection to maintain imperial unity, and Freeman's total aversion for anything 'unhistorical' was simply the difference between the practical politician and the theoretical academic.

Similarly, Goldwin Smith's manner of approach to imperial federation was not without criticism. His most recent biographer claimed that:

Goldwin Smith's thought contained contradictory elements.....and (his) opinions were often based more on moods and emotions than on rational analysis. ....He had certain rooted prejudices which his thinking never transcended.

In an optimistic age which clung to a belief in progress amid the passing of other beliefs, Goldwin Smith was more than half a pessimist. ....Despite his keen and penetrating intellect he was usually a destructive rather than a creative critic. He shut more doors than he opened. 1.

Preferring the idea of a free commonwealth to that of empire and priding himself as a member of the English-speaking peoples, Goldwin Smith's sense of individual morality and his self-imposed intellectual isolation from the political scene in Late-Victorian England combined to make him an uncompromising critic of imperial federation. His view that the destiny of the colonies was absolute independence from Britain, mitigated by ties of kinship and sentiment, was consistent with the mainstream of nineteenth-century Liberal thought as applied to colonial affairs, but 'his masterly invective irritated or silenced opponents oftener than it convinced them.'<sup>2</sup> By the 'eighties, of course, traditional Liberal attitudes towards colonial independence did become markedly unpopular, although Gladstone's denunciation of imprudent imperialist ventures did not prevent him from becoming involved in Egypt, the Sudan, South Africa and Afghanistan during his second ministry, 1880-1885.<sup>3</sup>

1. Elisabeth Wallace, Goldwin Smith: Victorian Liberal, (Toronto 1957), pp. 282-284.

2. E. Wallace, *ibid.*, p. 285.

3. See Dr. I.M. Oumpston, 'The Discussion of Imperial Problems in the British Parliament, 1880-1885', T.R.H.S., XIII (1962), pp. 29-47.

Accompanying the main attack by Freeman and Goldwin Smith on the federation movement and its semi-coherent ideology, other public figures inveighed against what they too easily dubbed 'the jingo spirit'. Predictably, Lord Blachford condemned the idea of imperial federation which he dismissed as 'hollow and impracticable.....'<sup>1</sup>, 'an unattainable phantom,'<sup>2</sup> and he deprecated all attempts to arrive at some kind of new relationship with the colonies. For Blachford, the establishment of permanent machinery to promote the cause of imperial federation was simply designed to cash in on the sentiment of empire which would guarantee it a bandwagon effect, but he remained unconvinced;

I totally disbelieve in the possibility of Federation, into which the world is running with its eyes shut, and really think that the question ought not to go 'by default'. The cat wants belling. <sup>3</sup>

In the event, Blachford need not have worried because a few months later, Edward Freeman's explosive condemnation of imperial federation was published which ensured that serious analytical discussion of the question was not neglected. However, Blachford was also afraid that the notion of a great Anglo-Saxon alliance, if it was at all feasible, might 'degenerate into a successful or unsuccessful contrivance for bullying the rest of the world.' To posit the idea that such a conception was capable of achievement on the grounds, 'that Anglo-Saxons - the great exterminators of aborigines in the temperate zone - would, when confederated, set a new and exceptional example of justice and humanity, seems to me a somewhat transcendental expectation.'<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Blachford was unmoved by the emotional and imaginative aspects of empire which seemed to account for the popularity of imperial federation, but he was not alone in his sober approach to the question of constitutional relations between Britain and her self-governing colonies.

1. Blachford, 'The Integrity of the British Empire', Nineteenth Century, Vol. II, (1877), pp.361.
2. Quoted in G.E.Marindin, Letters of Frederic Lord Blachford, p.425.
3. Blachford to Sir H.Taylor, 20 Jan. 1885, G.Marindin, ibid, p.423.
4. Marindin, ibid, p.426.



Lord Bury's contribution to the debate upon the future of the empire merits inclusion in the category of 'analytical opponents' to imperial federation as a representative of the school of thought which rejected the prophecy of most federationists that the fate of the empire rested upon the two extremes of federation or disintegration. The presentation of these two stark alternatives had been one of the most consistent and distinctive features of the movement's ideology since its genesis in 1869-1871, yet it had failed to convince the men who had had the most experience in administering the empire, and those who had developed a deep interest in the sphere of colonial problems and relations. Lord Bury felt himself to be just such a sceptic. He rejected the fundamental assumptions upon which the demand for closer unity was based and, regarding himself as a veteran in colonial affairs, he claimed in 1885 that all talk of separation had disappeared and that:

The fact is indisputable that Imperial unity is practically stronger than it was twenty years ago, though, logically, to a student fresh from his books it may seem strange that such should be the case. <sup>1</sup>

Bury's argument involved an admitted volte face. As the author of 'The Exodus of the Western Nations' twenty years previously, he had hoped for and predicted the separation of the self-governing colonies from Britain, but he claimed that new circumstances had developed in the early 'eighties and that imperial unity could be maintained by 'the unwritten law of custom and the strong bond of mutual advantage,' rather than by a written Federation.<sup>2</sup> The new circumstances to which Bury referred meant the offers and acceptance of military assistance from Canada and the Australian colonies to serve in the Egyptian and South African ventures from which the Gladstone government could not extricate itself. Using this development as clear evidence of imperial unity, Bury attempted to disarm the federationist argument, epitomised by W.E. Forster, that the centrifugal forces at work in the empire were stronger than the centripetal influences, and there seemed to be a good deal of justification for the view that the

1. Bury, 'The Unity of the Empire,' *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 17, March, 1885, p.387.

2. Bury, *ibid*, p.391.

direction of colonial policy would be better suited to the concept of partnership than to a superfluous paper constitution which would not tie the colonies any closer to Britain than a loose association based upon friendship.

In the debate upon what imperial federation meant and what constituted its basic assumptions, it was true that many of the criticisms of the ideology went unanswered and the absence of any effective replies to the damaging analysis of Freeman and the remorseless logic of Goldwin Smith left the impression that no effective replies were possible. Several of the more prominent public figures in the movement, including Forster and Bryce, admitted that the title of the cause was a misnomer and it was responsible for repeated embarrassments to many advocates of closer unity. Labilliere denounced Freeman's objections as being both technical and etymological,<sup>1</sup> but he offered nothing concrete in defence of the terminology other than the desirability of closer unity, and this limited response to the academic emasculation of imperial federation was evidence of how far federationists were fighting a rearguard action from the very beginning. The movement could boast of no real theorist or detached investigator who could give it academic credibility. Seeley misunderstood and underestimated colonial nationalism, Bryce regarded the name as absurd, and Froude was never a federationist.<sup>2</sup>

Like Seeley, Froude believed in a common British nationality for the empire which he hoped would ultimately find practical expression in some form of closer union, but he never formed any clear conception of how such a union could be effected. It will be recalled that, unlike Seeley, however, Froude really had been a pioneer of the maintenance of the colonial connection in 1870 and that he had championed the cause of a consolidation of the empire when the direction of government policy seemed to point the opposite way. His early contribution to the debate on the colonial question had doubtless been forgotten by 1885 when he suddenly

1. F. Labilliere, *Federal Britain*, (Lon. 1894), pp. 206-208.

2. His biographer claimed that he, 'was an advocate of Federation long before it had become a popular scheme', H. Paul, *Life of Froude*, (Lon. 1905), p. 252, but a perusal of his 'Oceana' repudiates this.



reappeared, almost three years after Seeley's rise to fame, as the author of 'Oceana, or England and her Colonies'. As a book which was little more than a record of Froude's visit to Australasia, sprinkled with a number of interesting, but often inaccurate, observations, it was similar to Charles Dilke's famous 'Greater Britain' published in 1868, but less scholarly. Notwithstanding its limited value as a contribution to the debate on empire in 1885, Oceana was a success. In the summer of 1886, Froude reported that it had sold 75,000 copies.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite his advocacy of the imperial connection, Froude warned against untimely schemes and blueprints favouring imperial federation:

Ingenious schemes brought forward prematurely, perhaps in the interest of some party in the State, can only fail and are therefore to be deprecated.....A federation contrived by politicians would snap at the first strain. 2

It would be reasonable, therefore, to place Froude in that category of men who had protested against the disintegration of the empire during the early stages of the movement, but who had not offered the federal solution as an alternative. Froude did come into rather unpleasant conflict with both Freeman and Goldwin Smith, but it was chiefly due to clashes of opinion over interpretations of history that an academic rivalry existed.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, Froude did gain a reputation for indifference to truth and it was as a Tudor historian that Freeman had such a personal dislike of him. Goldwin Smith also made no attempt to disguise his detestation of Froude whom he regarded as, 'the most unveracious writer who ever profaned the calling of a historian.'<sup>4</sup> Obviously Froude's association with the cause of closer unity

1. H. Paul, *Life of Froude*, p.347.

2. Froude, *Oceana*, p.339.

3. Freeman's correspondence contains several references to 'Froude-smiting'. See W.R.W. Stephens, *Life and Letters of E. Freeman*, Vol. II., and the conflict was also maintained in the *Nineteenth Century*, e.g. J.A. Froude, 'A Few Words on Mr. Freeman,' Vol. 5, (1879), pp.618-637.

4. Goldwin Smith to Bryce, 5 June 1874, Bryce Papers, Mss 16, ff. 34-35.

did little to reduce this animosity, but it did not prevent him from ironically succeeding Freeman as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford after the latter's death in March 1892, a position which Froude held until his own death in 1894.

Clearly, an abandonment of theoretical discussion in favour of direct action hardly seemed worthwhile when the movement had not silenced its academic critics and offered no satisfactory alternative to its impracticable terminology. Yet, while the debate continued and the dice were heavily loaded against the arguments of the federationists, established machinery in the shape of the Imperial Federation League was set up in 1884. In retrospect, the value of the great theoretical debate, which has been largely overlooked by imperial historians, was that it provided for a detailed study of what imperial federation really meant, surely a necessary preliminary to establishing a permanent organization. As we have witnessed in this account, the terminology was simply meaningless from the standpoint of political analysis and many of the basic assumptions of federationists were uncompromisingly rejected. In terms of the desirability of closer union, this brand of imperialism was certainly respectable enough to appeal to a Victorian public who probably still regarded the colonists as 'Englishmen across the seas', but to those who understood the force of colonial nationalism and to whom terminological accuracy really mattered, the criticism that they lacked imagination made no lasting impression upon men who fully appreciated the limitations within which it was possible to work. If the survey just presented appears unbalanced, therefore, this was how the situation appeared and perhaps it was surprising that, despite these circumstances, a small group of relatively unknown men could institutionalise an ideology which few of its adherents really understood.



## CHAPTER 5

### The Making of the Imperial Federation League 1884-1885

#### The Uncertain Background

In a broad sense, the process by which accepted views of empire were slowly undermined was an essentially defensive response to a more competitive world in which Britain's future seemed extremely uncertain. To those Victorians who were aware of the global changes which had occurred in the decade of the eighteen-seventies, it must have seemed obvious that Britain's future could not rival the greatness of her past and that the days of her unchallenged pre-eminence were over. As we have seen, however, a handful of largely unknown colonial expatriates supported by a few public men in Britain had begun to see the empire in a new light and their early campaigning, if virtually unco-ordinated as a strategy, had been directed towards popularising the optimistic idea that the empire could offer a future potentially greater than anything which the world had hitherto experienced. This new outlook on empire which had struggled to survive in the 'seventies and which had been nurtured and protected in the Royal Colonial Institute reached the stage of maturity in 1884, when the Imperial Federation League was founded.

As an organization specifically committed to applying the federal principle to the white-self-governing colonies in the empire and as a forum for the legitimate discussion of the controversial politics of imperial federation, the new League was the logical successor to the ill-fated Westminster Palace Hotel Meetings of the summer of 1871. Yet, if there is sufficient evidence to indicate how the League was established, it is less clear why attempts to set up a new institutional framework in the eighteen-eighties were successful, whereas similar efforts in the early 'seventies had failed. Moreover, there does not seem to be any obvious reason why the League was formed in 1884. The answer to these questions lies in a combination of exogenous circumstances rather than in a singular event of profound importance, so that the emergence of the League should be seen as the result of a set of cumulative events which occurred in the early eighteen-eighties. Because of the absence of any precise isolated event which could conveniently explain the League's appearance in 1884, it is worth re-stating J.E.Tyler's account of what happened:



The eighteen-eighties have an importance which is all their own .... The necessary interval had by this time elapsed for the new forces, which the keen eye of Disraeli and others had discerned ten years before, to have manifested themselves with unmistakable strength. Their influence upon both British thought and British policy was magnified in consequence.....

It was inevitable that the imperialist revival, itself derived from the motive causes of the great change, should enter upon a period of remarkable development and progress. 1

Tyler attributed the new development along organizational lines in the struggle for imperial unity to two major features: the agricultural and industrial depressions which showed a new persistence and the unmistakable activity of foreign powers in areas of the world which threatened the safety and independence of the British colonies. Both of these developments had been evident in the eighteen-seventies, but by the first half of the succeeding decade they began to assume a degree of permanence which forced the country to realise that it had to begin to adjust itself to a more competitive, and perhaps hostile, world. In short, the gloomy forecasts of the future which the pessimists of the early 'seventies had predicted began to manifest themselves in the early 'eighties to an extent where the general public could neither ignore nor misunderstand them.

According to Sydney Buxton<sup>2</sup>, it was foreign affairs which played the principal part in the politics of the early 'eighties and it was foreign policy and "foreign complications, wars and rumours of wars, which embarrassed our finances and injured our trade."<sup>3</sup> Antagonism between France and England occurred over the New Hebrides issue and the British occupation of Egypt, while German activity in New Guinea and Samoa was forced upon the attention of England by New Zealand and the Australian colonies. Buxton wrote that, 'all these dangers and adversities had....fostered the feeling that the different parts of the great British Empire could and should be more closely knit together by some system of Federation'<sup>4</sup>, but economic

1. J.E.Tyler, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity (1868-1895)*, p.27.

2. After unsuccessfully contesting Boston as a Liberal in 1880, Sydney Buxton was returned for Peterborough at a by-election in 1883. Losing his seat in 1885, he sat for the Poplar Division of Tower Hamlets 1886-1914 as a strict Gladstonian Liberal and became under-secretary of State for the Colonies 1892-1895.

3. S.Buxton, *Finance and Politics: An Historical Study (1783-1885)*, (Lon.1888) Vol. II, p.302.

4. S.Buxton, *ibid.*, p.303.



developments also contributed to this widespread feeling of uneasiness. The bad harvests which played a significant part in the electoral defeat of Disraeli in 1880<sup>1</sup> returned to complicate the difficulties facing Gladstone's Ministry and were an integral feature of the overall picture of depression and gloom. Already, in May 1881, the National Fair Trade League had been formed which campaigned for a modification of the system whereby England pursued Cobdenite doctrines of Free Trade while other nations adopted the mantle of Protection against British competition.<sup>2</sup> As an essentially defensive response to a changing world, a significant characteristic of the new League's posture was its concern for the imperial connection.<sup>3</sup> It clearly manifested an interest in imperial preference as a means of combating the rivalry of the foreigner, thus demonstrating the existence of a relationship between trade depressions and the revival of ideas of imperial unity. By advocating reciprocity arrangements within the empire, of course, the League foreshadowed the arguments of the commercial federationists of the Imperial Federation League who campaigned for some form of Imperial Customs Union or Zollverein. However, such a policy involved cutting across the lines of Cobdenite orthodoxy and it thus found few friends in the Liberal Party. As a defensive and nationalistic phenomenon, the idea of disarming foreign competitors by introducing those very practices which Britain sought to destroy nevertheless seemed an untenable position and Gladstone denounced it as tantamount to a situation whereby 'if a man strikes you on one cheek, you should smite yourself on the other cheek.'<sup>4</sup> The strategy of the Fair Trade movement, from this point of view, was certainly paradoxical, but its ideology lay in what it conceived to be a realistic assessment of a new set of circumstances. D.C. Platt was right to argue, therefore, that:

1. See T.Lloyd, *The General Election of 1880*, (O.U.P. 1968).
2. For an account of the rise and fall of the Fair Trade Movement, see B.N.Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain (1881-1895)*, (New York, 1943). Two established works on the origins of the Fair Trade Movement in Britain are C.J.Fuchs, *The Trade Policy of Great Britain and her Colonies since 1860*, (Lon. 1905) and S.H.Zebel, 'Fair Trade: An English Reaction to the Breakdown of the Cobden Treaty System,' *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.XII, (1940), pp.161-185. J.E.Tyler, *ibid.* pp.27-37, might also be consulted.
3. The League's programme was published in the Times, 3 August 1881, See also C.J.Fuchs, *op.cit.*, pp.195-196.
4. Quoted by E.L.Denians, *Finance, Trade and Communications 1870-1895*, C.H.B.E., vol. III, pp.223.



the renewal of the demand for Protection after the 1870's was not intended, as in the past, to secure a special position for British manufacturers, but to ensure equality of treatment,<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore against this uncertain background that the formation of the Imperial Federation League should be set and not according to any other elusive fact. Thus, the navy scare of 1884 was simply another layer of response in a cumulative process of uncertainty and enforced readjustment. In this light, the establishment of permanent machinery in support of imperial federation in 1884, in contrast to the Westminster Palace Hotel Meetings of 1871 which failed to secure any form of continuity, can be explained. The gathering of 1871, which had shown a marked interest in imperial federation, was a by-product of the great 'crisis of opinion' in colonial relations during the period 1869-1871. It will be recalled that this controversy was the direct result of a misunderstanding due to government incompetence in public relations and that it was magnified in consequence of this. The meetings of 1871, therefore, were founded upon government misadventure rather than upon the imminent threat of foreign rivalry and economic despair. To this extent, they were simply premature. It was true that prophecies of doom had been made in the early 'seventies by men like Froude, but they were largely ignored. It was only when the potential challenge became an actual challenge that the conditions were propitious for the establishment of some form of permanent organization advocating imperial federation. In this new light, therefore, the creation of the Imperial Federation League in 1884 can be readily understood. Its raison d'être was simply that it represented, like the Fair Trade League, an urgent response to an obviously changing world and, since it had its roots in the political controversy of 1869-1871, it could be regarded as the maturation of an evolutionary process.<sup>2</sup>

1. D.C.Platt, Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, (1815-1914), (Oxford 1968), p.83.
2. Apart from Tyler's brief summary, the only other attempt to explain why the League was formed in 1884 appears to be W.Greswell, The Imperial Federation League, National Review, Vol.14, (1889), pp.186-187.



The Formation of the League, July-November 1884

If the years of Gladstone's Second Ministry acted as a kind of historical catalyst on the federationist movement, it was not surprising to discover links between the new League and the National Fair Trade League of 1881. Thus, like the former, the latter grew out of a series of meetings at the Westminster Palace Hotel and several of its prominent figures in 1881 found their way into the new League in 1884.<sup>1</sup> Among those who had been involved in the Fair Trade movement and who were active members of the new League were Frederick Young, an ardent federationist and the Honorary Secretary of the Royal Colonial Institute between 1874 and 1886, and Sir Alexander Galt, Canada's first High Commissioner between 1880 and 1883 and a member of the Executive Committee of the Imperial Federation League. In this context, it may be of interest to note that Robert Macfie, one of the pioneers of the federation movement in the early 'seventies, had more than a nodding acquaintance with the Fair Trade movement during its early years, and was also connected with the founding of the Imperial Federation League.

Gradually it became obvious to both budding and confirmed federationists that the Fair Trade League was an awkward vehicle for the promotion of imperial federation, and that the time was ripe for the creation of an institution specifically committed to an imperial reorganisation based upon the consolidation of the existing empire. In short, federationists were imperialists first and possible protectionists afterwards, and it must not be forgotten that many federationists were staunch Free Traders who did not accept that imperial federation involved a fundamental change in the economic system. Even to commercial federationists, those who favoured some form of imperial preference or a Zollverein, protection was only a means to an end and not an end itself. In later years the distinction did become blurred and it was often difficult to tell whether fiscal policy was only an instrument used by federationists to advocate a consolidation of the empire or whether protectionists used the sentiment of imperial unity as a disguise for their primary interest in securing protection per se.

1. Brown identifies the Fair Trade meetings at the Westminster Palace Hotel as early as the summer of 1879. B.H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain 1881-1895*, p.21.

As one writer put it :

as an imperialist movement, Fair Trade was suspect. The League was never quite able to overcome the impression that many of its members were merely stowaways on the good ship Empire because their own protectionist ship had little prospect of making port. 1

As it became obvious in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties, however, the Imperial Federation League was also dogged by suspicions of ulterior motives, but it was able to accommodate divisions of opinion within its ranks due to the accepted goal of imperial federation which could mean all things to all men.

The idea of establishing the League in 1884 has been attributed to Francis de Labilliere, who summarised the circumstances thus:

The next step forward was the formation of the League for the special advocacy of Imperial Federation. It was evident, when the principle of maintaining the unity of the Empire had been so widely accepted, and the idea of its federal union adopted by so many people, that the time had arrived for a further advance. Accordingly, early in 1884, in a conversation with Sir John Colomb, I suggested the formation of a society with the special object of promoting the policy of Imperial Federation; and we determined to seek the co-operation of some whose sympathies we knew to be warmest in the cause. 2

As a result of this conversation, therefore, Labilliere and Colomb set about enlisting the support of known advocates of the cause so that a small committee was formed between January and March of 1884, which, besides Labilliere and Colomb, included Sir George Baden-Powell, William Westgarth, J. Dennistoun Wood, and Frederick Young. It was this tiny group of federationists that prepared the ground for the formation of the League.

1. B.H. Brown, *ibid.*, p.89.

2. F.de Labilliere, *Federal Britain*, (Lon. 1894), p.28.



On 9 April 1884, the committee, minus Sir George Baden-Powell and William Westgarth, both of whom could not attend,<sup>1</sup> approached W.E. Forster with a proposal that he and other interested public men should be invited to a conference for the purpose of advocating the permanent maintenance of the empire. Forster accepted the invitation and the original committee of six was deliberately enlarged to sixteen members in order to make the necessary arrangements for the proposed conference, over which Forster had agreed to preside. The inaugural meeting was scheduled for 29 July, 1884 at the Westminster Palace Hotel in London, a familiar venue for such a gathering, and the ten members who were recruited on the enlarged Provisional Committee were H.O. Arnold-Forster, Sir Daniel Cooper of New South Wales, W.J. Courthope, R.A. Dobell of Canada, William Gisborne of New Zealand, Harold Finch-Hatton, Alexander Staveley-Hill, Conservative M.P. for West Staffordshire from 1874 to 1885, Sir Roper Lethbridge, J.B. Watt of New South Wales, and Sir Samuel Wilson of Victoria.

The participants who formed the nucleus of the group behind the setting up of the League can easily be identified. According to the extent of his participation, Labilliere must be recognised as the most dedicated founder member of the new League. He had been a major contributor in the debate upon 'the colonial question' in the years 1869-1871 and, as one of the earliest members of the Royal Colonial Institute, he had worked relentlessly within that institution to promote the cause of imperial federation throughout the decade of the eighteen-seventies. Born in Melbourne, Victoria in 1840, Labilliere had been one of the most active figures among colonial expatriates living in London in the decade of the 'sixties in the field of imperial unity, and he must be regarded as one of the movement's chief ideologists. Captain John Charles Ready (later Sir John) Colomb had been a fellow of the Royal Colonial Institute since 1872 and had worked since then to arouse public interest in problems of imperial defence. He had originally taken up the study of this topic as early as 1867 when he published his pamphlet, 'The Protection of Our Commerce, and Distribution of Our War Forces Considered' and he was a prolific writer on the importance of

1. Labilliere, *ibid.*, p.28.

naval defence of the empire in the eighteen-seventies, producing his famous 'Defence of Great and Greater Britain' in 1880. Not unnaturally, Colomb's advocacy of closer union within the empire was for the purpose of defence and it was for this reason that he entered the House of Commons as the Conservative M.P. for Bow and Bromley in 1886, a constituency which he represented until 1892.<sup>1</sup> J. Dennistoun Wood was a rather more obscure figure. Born in Tasmania in 1819, Dennistoun Wood had a British education and settled in Victoria where he became Attorney-General. He returned to England in the early eighteen-sixties and, as one of a large group of Australian expatriates living in London, Dennistoun Wood attended the Cannon Street meetings of 1869-1870 and the Westminster Palace Hotel meetings of 1871. As a fellow of the Royal Colonial Institute, he also showed himself to be a cautious federationist when in 1877 he read a paper before the society advocating a strong federal assembly and a court of appeal for the empire, but indicating an awareness of colonial feelings and opinions.<sup>2</sup> The fourth member of this tiny group, George Baden-Powell, was not a colonial although he did have a measure of colonial experience. He had been private secretary to Sir George Ferguson Bowen when the latter had been governor of Victoria between 1873 and 1879, and he served in the West Indies during the years of 1882-1884 as commissioner investigating colonial administration. Baden-Powell became a fellow of the Royal Colonial Institute in 1879 and in the early years of the League's life he quickly gained a reputation for schematisation of which his most consistent theme was an animosity towards colonial self-government,<sup>3</sup> when he died in 1898, he had been Conservative M.P. for Kirkdale, Liverpool for several years.

1. Colomb was elected M.P. for Great Yarmouth in 1895-1900 and again from 1900-1905. See H.D'Egville, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union, A Short Record of the Life-work of the Late Sir John Colomb*, (Lon. 1913).
2. P.R.C.I., Vol. 8., (1877), pp. 3-44.
3. See his paper entitled 'National Unity' read before the Royal Colonial Institute 9 Dec. 1884, P.R.C.I., Vol. 16., See also 'Our National Future', *National Review*, Feb. 1885 and 'Representative Government for the Empire', *Contemporary Review*, L, (1886).



Born in Edinburgh in 1815, William Westgarth had emigrated to Melbourne, Victoria in 1840 where he became a member of the Legislative Council in 1851 and the first president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce. Returning to Britain in 1857, Westgarth set up a business of colonial brokers in London and helped establish the London Chamber of Commerce in 1881, but he was also very active in helping to establish the Royal Colonial Society in 1868 and he was an enthusiastic participant in the Cannon Street meetings and the subsequent Westminster Palace Hotel gatherings. Like Labilliere, Westgarth must be regarded as a real pioneer of imperial federation among the Australians living in London in the eighteen-sixties, and his devotion to the cause took him back on a visit to Melbourne in 1888 to preach the gospel of closer union to the Banker's Institute of Australasia. Of the small group who set up the League, however, the most notable figure was Frederick Young. Having become a fellow of the Royal Colonial Institute in 1869, Young proved himself to be a most industrious secretary to the society for twelve years between 1874 and 1886 after which he became a vice-president and attended every annual general meeting from 1869 until illness interrupted his record in 1909.<sup>1</sup> Born in Britain in 1817 Young's involvement in the movement for imperial unity dated from his early interest in state-assisted emigration to the colonies in the mid-eighteen-sixties to his death in 1913 at the age of ninety-six. Although not directly involved with the Cannon Street meetings, Young was nevertheless a close friend of Labilliere and he did join the Young Committee deputation to Lord Granville in December, 1869. His most overt connection with imperial federation probably dated from his attendance at the Westminster Palace Hotel rendezvous of 1871, after which he published a number of lectures, letters, pamphlets and miscellaneous writings advocating complete federal union between Britain and her white self-governing colonies. After the formation of the League in 1884, Young used the new organization and the Royal Colonial Institute to advance the cause of closer union throughout the 'eighties and 'nineties, and his well-known enthusiasm as an ardent federationist placed him in the category of a pioneer of the Federation movement.<sup>2</sup>

1. T.R. Reese, *The History of the Royal Commonwealth Society, (1868-1963)*, London 1963, pp.95-96.

2. His career can be analysed by reference to the Young Papers deposited at the Royal Commonwealth Society in London.



If Labilliere and Young could be regarded as the two most important founding fathers of the imperial federation movement in Britain, what linked all six members who formed the core of the group in 1884 was their common membership of the Royal Colonial Institute. The fact that both Labilliere and Dennistoun Wood were members of the Council of the Institute and Young was its Honorary Secretary was further evidence of the importance of that society to the growth of the federation movement. It was largely at the Institute and through the work of fellows of the society that the imperial federation movement had been nurtured in the 'seventies and it was no surprise to discover, therefore, that the provisional committee which arranged the conference of July 1884 held all its meetings at the Institute's rooms in the Strand, London.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the additional ten members who comprised the enlarged provisional committee also had identifiable links with the Institute, with the exception of Arnold-Forster. This motley group of men included the colonial expatriate who had taken up residence in London, the experienced civil servant with a background in the colonial service, and interested politicians who had either a particular interest in certain parts of the empire, such as Finch-Hatton who had lived in Queensland from 1876 to 1883,<sup>2</sup> or a general interest in imperial unity, such as Staveley-Hill.<sup>3</sup> Sir Samuel Wilson had emigrated from Northern Ireland to Australia at an early age, where he gained political experience as a member of the Legislative Council in Victoria and returned to the United Kingdom whereupon he became Conservative M.P. for Portsmouth. The less easily identified colonists included J.W. Courthope, R.A. Dobell, W. Gisborne and J.B. Watt, but Sir Daniel Cooper was more recognisable as an expatriate from Australia who had been involved in the 'early' imperialist movement and whose name had appeared as one of the guarantors of the Westminster Palace

1. T. Reese, *op.cit.*, p.67. and F. Labilliere, *op.cit.*, p.29.
2. Finch-Hatton was the fourth son of the Earl of Winchilsea. While involved in the establishment of the League, he also sought election to the House of Commons as a Conservative, although he was not successful in this venture until 1895 when he became Conservative M.P. for East Nottingham.
3. Staveley Hill had used the Royal Colonial Institute to propound his own solution to imperial unity. As Conservative M.P. from 1868 to 1900, he represented Coventry and West Staffordshire, becoming a supporter of tariff reform and, therefore, a commercial federationist.



Hotel meetings of 1871. Roper Iethbridge represented the civil servant element of the committee, having retired from the Indian Civil Service and becoming Conservative M.P. for North Kensington in 1885 and again in 1886. However, Hugh Oakeley Arnold-Forster merits separate attention because of his different background and in view of his total commitment to the vitality of the League's organization during the early years of its operation. As a nephew and adopted son of W.E.Forster, the League's first chairman, Arnold-Forster shared his father's interests and acted as his private secretary and aide during his campaign to set up and consolidate the new organization.<sup>1</sup> Alongside Labilliere, Arnold-Forster worked feverishly as a provisional secretary during the founding months of the League between April and November 1884, but he was simultaneously involved in the campaign to strengthen and expand the navy during the Autumn of 1884. Entitled, 'The Truth About The Navy', Arnold-Forster produced a series of articles which were published by W.T.Stead in the Pall Mall Gazette and which created such public concern that Gladstone's administration was impelled to increase naval expenditure in the following year.<sup>2</sup> Having contributed his first article on 'Our position as a naval Power', which was published in the Nineteenth Century in 1883, Arnold-Forster followed it with another attack upon the government's complacency summarised in his article on 'The People of England versus Their naval Officials' published in the same journal in the Autumn of 1884. However, it was not until Stead's assistance was enlisted in August of that year that public consternation was finally aroused.<sup>3</sup>

1. Born in 1855, Arnold-Forster was the grandson of Dr. Thomas Arnold of Rugby and the nephew of Matthew Arnold, the poet. His father William Delafield Arnold, died in 1859, a year after his mother's death in March 1858, leaving him an orphan. Having been adopted by his father's sister, who was married to W.E.Forster, Hugh Oakeley Arnold changed his name to Arnold-Forster. See H.O.Arnold-Forster, *A Memoir*, by his wife, (Lon. 1910).
2. Evidence has shown Arnold-Forster to have been the instigator of the whole campaign. See F.Whyte, *The Life of W.T.Stead*, (Lon.1925), vol. 1., pp.145-155 and H.O.Arnold-Forster, *A Memoir*, *ibid.*, pp.52-61.
3. See Stead to Gladstone, 11 October 1884, Gladstone Papers, Add.Mss., 44305, ff 344-347.

As an indication of the sequence of ideas which possessed Arnold-Forster after 1881, the volumes of the nineteenth Century are invaluable and his article on 'The Liberal Idea and the Colonies' which appeared in 1883 was significant not only as casting light upon his own views of imperial unity, but also as an interesting account of Liberal politics vis-a-vis the empire. Arguing from the premise that separation from the colonies was not part of the true Liberal idea, Arnold-Forster presented the situation of 1883 as 'an almost perfect opening for the display of the Liberal statesmanship of the future' which could bring 'the people of this country into close political contact with men of their own race who are seeking the same goal.'<sup>1</sup> By demonstrating what Liberal Party policy towards the empire ought to have been from the standpoint of 1883, it was hardly surprising that he considered the party's record and his own position in relation to it as unsatisfactory. In the years 1882-1883 Arnold-Forster was adopted as one of the two Liberal candidates for Devonport, but his allegiance to the Liberal Party became increasingly strained as a result of the government's Egyptian policy and the lack of any constructive Liberal policy towards the colonies. Undoubtedly his father's difficult position in the party after his resignation as Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1882 must have had an unconscious effect on Arnold-Forster's attitude when he resigned from the Westminster Liberal Association in 1883, but his letter of resignation pointed to a different reason when he wrote that the government had no dignity and that 'it may only be a matter of time before this Ministry estranges the colonies and possibly fools away the Empire.'<sup>2</sup> By 1884, therefore, both Arnold-Forster and his father were federationists and estranged Liberals.<sup>3</sup>

1. H.O. Arnold-Forster, The Liberal Idea and the Colonies, nineteenth Century, vol. 14., (1883), p.391.
2. H.O. Arnold-Forster, A Memoir, by his wife, pp.20-21.
3. W.E. Forster wrote to Lord Ripon soon after his resignation, "Now that my Irish burden is off my shoulders I have time to think of other public matters," 1 Jan. 1883, Ripon Papers, Add MSS 43,237, ff 192-194.



During the months of May and June, the provisional committee devoted its activities to soliciting the support of prominent politicians and inviting them to attend the proposed conference. The fact that letters of invitation were sent to senior figures of both political parties and to public men who were not avowed federationists showed how far the great gathering was regarded as an opportunity to assess the potential strength of the movement in terms of how many prominent people would be attracted, but it was also a necessary preliminary step to take at that stage of the proceedings. Thus, Lord Carnarvon, as a known sympathizer of colonial attachment, but not a federationist, was sent a written invitation from Labilliere to attend the conference, but he declined the offer.<sup>1</sup> If the success of the meeting was measured in terms of the number of important public figures who attended and who were willing to lend their names and influence to the movement, then the conference of July 1884 met with almost unqualified approval.

When W.E. Forster addressed the opening conference as the chairman on 29 July, the assembled multitude included prominent politicians of both parties, colonists and ex-settlers. Besides the long-established supporters of the cause - Frederick Young, F.P. de Labilliere, Sir Charles Clifford, and William WestgARTH - Earl Rosebery and the Marquis of Normandy, former Governor of Nova Scotia, Queensland, New Zealand and Victoria, attended together with a host of M.P.s : James Bryce, Joseph Cowen, Sir Henry Holland, Sergeant Simon, W.H. Smith, Edward Stanhope, and Sir Eardley Wilmot. Among the notable colonial contingent were D'Alton McCarthy, Oliver Mowatt, Premier of Ontario, Sir Charles Tupper, the second Canadian Commissioner, and two Agents-General, Captain Charles Mills of Cape Colony and Sir Saul Samuel of New South Wales.<sup>2</sup> In this connection it might also be noted that several of the company who gathered together on that auspicious occasion had also attended the earlier conference at the Westminster Palace Hotel almost exactly thirteen years previously in July, 1871. These included such dedicated adherents to the cause as Sir Charles Clifford, Sir Daniel Cooper, Sir Eardley Wilmot, and Messrs. Labilliere, Potter, Silver, WestgARTH, Denistoun-Wood, and Young. In view of their early importance in the

1. Carnarvon to Young, 20 June 1884, Young Papers, File 1, No. 25.

2. For an attendance list of the conference see the Report of the Conference held 29 July, 1884 at the Westminster Palace Hotel, (Lon. 1884) pp. 4-12.

shaping of the movement, the names of Edward Jenkins and the Duke of Manchester were conspicuously absent, but the Royal Colonial Institute was well represented, illustrating yet again the close connection between the imperial federation movement and the Institute. W.F. Forster had been a fellow since 1875 and was a former vice-President of the Institute, while the Marquis of Normanby had been present at the first meeting of the Institute in June 1868 and was still a vice-President. A surprising participant at the conference of 1884, in view of his earlier hostility towards the movement in 1869 and his later deprecation of the League,<sup>1</sup> was Lord Bury who must have attended in order to confirm his dislike of the cause. Despite the absence of a Gladstone and a Salisbury, however, the occasion was a landmark in the history of the movement and Forster noted in his diary that it was 'a real success'.<sup>2</sup>

Many well-known sympathizers with the cause and budding federationists could not attend the meeting, of course, but numerous letters expressing support for the objects of the conference were received and proudly announced by Labilliere. Among the correspondence from those who had been expected to attend were letters from J.B. Watt and Roper Lethbridge, two of the founder members of the conference, and from the Earl of Dunraven, Sir Alexander Galt, Lord George Hamilton, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Alexander Staveley-Hill, the Marquis of Lorne, Robert Macfie, Lord Reay, Professor Seeley, W.T. Stead, Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, and James Youl. In total, about one hundred and four people assembled in the Westminster Palace Hotel to participate in the consultations and over eighty letters of support were reported.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, a survey of the list of attendance of the inaugural meeting did not reveal an assembly of people who could be remotely

1. See his article, 'The Unity of the Empire', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 11, (March 1885), pp. 381-396. Bury made a short speech at the conference in which he wished the cause every success, an action which further demonstrated his incongruous position vis-a-vis the movement. Report of the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference, pp. 47-48.
2. T.W. Reid, *Life of W.F. Forster*, (Lon. 1888), p. 598.
3. Report of the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference, pp. 12-24. These statistics are not precisely accurate because some conferees failed to sign their names, but they give a good idea of the approximate size of the meeting.



regarded as the elite of British and colonial politics, but, as J.E. Tyler wrote, 'the names pointed to something more than a hole-and-corner meeting of enthusiastic nonentities'.<sup>1</sup> For those who may have hoped to tie a particular party label on the conference, the composition of the gathering did seem to allow for the interpretation that it was a predominantly Liberal cause. As far as the Report of the Proceedings managed accurately to identify those present, there were nineteen M.P.s who actually attended : fourteen Liberals and five Conservatives.<sup>2</sup> However, any meaningful conclusions which such a survey may have offered were limited both by the fact that the conference was only of a purely consultative nature and the statistics did not take account of those men who supported the cause, but did not attend. Moreover, before a party label could be attached to such an event, the political predilections of all those present would have to be tabulated, a task which is virtually impracticable.

In the opening proceedings, W.E. Forster spoke of the need to preserve the unity of the empire by binding its several parts together and he claimed the purpose of the meeting to be to find an acceptable way of achieving it. As a practical politician he urged upon the assembly the need for action and his phraseology must have been familiar to those federationists who had attended the discussion of 1871:

we must not stand by looking on. we must not suppose that present ties are in themselves strong enough to bear straining; they require to be pulled and knit together. Difficulties may arise.....which might lead to separation if we do not take care to prevent them...  
.....it must be clear that the relations of our Colonies with the mother country must ultimately end either in disintegration or in some form of Federation.<sup>3</sup>

1. Tyler, op.cit., p. 108. One writer, A.F. Mattersley, *The Colonies and Imperial Federation. 1754-1919*, Pietermaritzburg 1919, p. 59, claimed that few colonial public men attended the July conference and that they took no active part in the proceedings. whilst few in number and cautious in their approach, however, they did contribute to the general debate.

2. Report of the Conference, pp 7-12

3. Ibid., pp. 27-28

Here again was the presentation of the argument in the form of the two stark alternatives - Federation or Disintegration - as voiced both by Frederick Young and Edward Jenkins in the early 'seventies, and it was hardly surprising, therefore, to find this phrase included in the first resolution of the meeting moved by W.H.Smith. Whilst emphasizing the fact that the conference was not there to discuss the details of any scheme of Federation, or indeed to prepare any scheme for approval, Smith had been primed to move the first resolution which deserves to be quoted in full :

That the political relations between Great Britain and her Colonies must inevitably lead to ultimate Federation or disintegration. That in order to avert the latter, and to secure the permanent unity of the Empire, some form of Federation is indispensable. <sup>1</sup>

However, although Smith regarded his proposition as incontrovertible and Lord Rosebery seconded it, it did not go unchallenged. Having arrived late at the meeting because of official duties and having missed Forster's opening speech, Sir Charles Tupper was just in time to oppose the wording of Smith's resolution. Tupper had fastened on to the phraseology of the resolution which he regarded as abstract and in need of some degree of modification. His compelling logic prevented him from subscribing to the dictum, commonly expressed in the writings of federationists, that there was no choice between federation and separation because, if it was necessary to inquire into the practicability of federation at some later date, then it was too soon to assert dogmatically that federation was 'indispensable' to prevent separation. In short, Tupper had detected a flaw in the reasoning of the resolution which, if accepted, would have placed the movement in the absurd position 'of declaring to the world that the connection can only be maintained by a federal union, but that we do not know whether a federal union is practicable.'<sup>2</sup> The objection, therefore, was a technical point which would undoubtedly have received Edward Freeman's seal of approval for terminological accuracy, but it was also of crucial practical importance if the movement was to avoid the criticism that it admitted that the existing relationship between Britain

1. Report of the Conference, p.30.

2. Ibid, p.45.



and her colonies was unsatisfactory, yet, it had no specific federal solution. Such a posture would have given an unexpected authority to the arguments of the 'voluntary tie' school of thought whose concept of imperial reorganisation was limited to ties of kinship and sentiment.

The upshot of Tupper's timely intervention was to change the original wording of the first resolution so that the word "essential" was substituted for the word "indispensable", and to remove the dictum of 'Federation of disintegration.' After several semantic alterations, the final form of the resolution was passed unanimously as 'that, in order to secure the permanent unity of the Empire, some form of Federation is essential'.<sup>1</sup> In all, the conference adopted six distinct resolutions which included the establishment of a society to advocate and support the principle of federation so as to educate public opinion about the value of the empire and the creation of a Provisional Committee to deal with the details of forming the new society and submitting a progress report to an adjourned conference in the coming autumn.<sup>2</sup>

Having achieved something concrete from their deliberations, the foundation of the League was laid and the rest of the spadework was left to the new Provisional Committee at Rosebery's original suggestion. The temptation to advocate a particular scheme, even as a halfway house towards federation, had been wisely eschewed as too premature, although initiatives were made in this direction. One impatient colonial conferee, T. J. Wainlass from Ballarat in New South Wales, supported the idea of a Colonial Council comprising the Colonial Secretary, the Canadian High Commissioner, and the various Agents-General of the other colonies based upon the examples of the Council of India and the British Cabinet, but his speech was interrupted by Frederick Young, and dismissed by Forster, as being out of order.<sup>3</sup> Lord Rosebery also associated himself with tentative proposals in order to achieve a modicum of progress towards the goal of federation. Confessing that any cut and dried scheme of federation would have been unacceptable, Rosebery did, however, suggest that the movement ought to have been doing

1. Ibid., p.54

2. Ibid., pp. 68-69.

3. Ibid., pp. 50-51.

something positive and that a royal commission or a committee appointed by the government and composed of experienced statesmen and colonial representatives, and reporting to parliament, might have been a useful means of inquiry. Alternatively, the government could send invitations to the colonial governments asking them to submit schemes and ideas in order to assess colonial opinions regarding imperial federation. As a stepping-stone towards federation, Rosebery even proffered the idea of colonial delegates sitting in the House of Lords rather like delegates in the Senate of the United States, and although he admitted that it would be 'a large change', he denied that such a 'tentative experiment' would interfere with the financial control of the House of Commons over imperial affairs.<sup>1</sup> In view of Rosebery's later caution and elusiveness in the life of the League, these remarks made during the preliminary meeting are surprising and it is tempting to attribute his early zeal in the movement to a five month world tour between September 1883 and January 1884, which involved a three month sojourn in Australia and New Zealand, and a freedom of thought uninhibited by office.

Rosebery's idea of a royal commission or a select committee was opposed by Sir Henry Holland and Mr. R. Dobell who were both sceptical of the official approach to the problem, but William Gisborne's speech was much more damning. As a prominent politician from New Zealand and an advocate of imperial federation for defence purposes, Gisborne warned that the hard, practical questions which faced the movement could not be left altogether to be regulated by a mere impulse of feeling, and his address suggested a weakness in the main structure of thought which pervaded the whole conference. Most of the speeches from Englishmen seemed to have been oblivious to the idea of a colonial nationalism and the emphasis upon the virtues of the English race and Anglo-Saxon unity seemed to exemplify the extent to which Seeley's basic premises had thoroughly penetrated the English federationist mind. It was a weakness, however, which was not obvious to the conferees and, as long as no really specific schemes were aired, it did not matter.

1. Report of the Conference, pp.39-42.



The preliminary conference adjourned in order to wait for the public launching of the League in the autumn and received the widespread approval of the British press.<sup>1</sup> Although The Times applauded the conference as 'a sign of the times', it was forced to admit that the vagueness of the question weakened its appeal to public opinion.<sup>2</sup> Copies of the resolutions were sent to the Colonial Office, the Canadian High Commissioner and to the officials of the various colonies throughout the empire, but the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, Sir Robert Herbert, was not impressed and expressed a feeling that the whole venture had been a waste of time.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred by the lack of enthusiasm of the official mind, however, the Provisional Committee set about its organising operation between August and November. Led by W.E.Forster as its chairman, the Provisional Committee had eight vice-chairmen, two treasurers and two secretaries with power to add to their number. The vice-chairmen included Frederick Young, Captain Colomb, Sir Daniel Cooper, W.Courthope, W.Gisborne, A.Staveley-Mill, J.B.Watt, and Sir Samuel Wilson, while the names of Harold Finch-Hatton and J.Dennistoun Wood as the treasurers, and F.I.de Labilliere and H.O.Arnold-Forster as the secretaries, gave an indication of how far the majority of real activists in the group were colonial expatriates and not British politicians.<sup>4</sup>

W.E.Forster was undoubtedly unique among well-known British statesmen in his dedication to the cause of imperial federation, as his few private letters indicate, but his devotion to the cause was not confined to presiding over a conference and lending his name to the movement. Between August and November 1884, he was actively involved in the less attractive task of organising the next stage in the movement's development. The second conference was scheduled to meet on 18 November and, as the date approached, Forster wrote to his wife conveying his innermost thoughts about the movement:

1. For a list of press comment, see the propaganda extracts in the Report of the Proceedings of the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference, pp.69-106
2. The Times, 30 July, 1884.
3. C.O. 323/359, Minutes of 8 August, 1884 Quoted in R.A.Shields, The Imperial Federationists and their Cause, Pennsylvania Ph.D. thesis, (1961), p.79.
4. R.Dobell was subsequently co-opted onto the committee.

The more I look at it, the more I find that Tuesday's meeting is critical, and its success, I fear, depends upon my opening speech. I must not only carefully consider what to say, but I must have Sunday and Monday for conference with Oakeley (Forster's adopted son) and one or two others, and also I must be myself in the arrangements for the conduct of the meeting, speakers, etc.....

I fear my dearest wife will think me faithless in not coming down; but, after all, this colonial business remains my great work. 1

In view of the paucity of Forster's private correspondence relating to the movement for closer union, this confidential letter to his wife is of considerable importance, containing irrefutable proof of his total commitment to the cause of imperial federation and indicating a close co-operation between father and son in their efforts to make a success of the venture. What stood out from Forster's own pen was his own awareness of the responsibility of being chairman of the meeting and his careful preparedness, as exemplified by his concern for detail, both vital qualities in a successful organiser.

In the interim period between August and November it is also worth noting that Sir Charles Tupper had received qualified approval of his performance at the July conference from Sir John A. Macdonald, the Conservative Premier of Canada. Although pleased with Tupper's contribution, Macdonald was singularly unimpressed about the practicability of any 'legislative Confederation' ever being worked out<sup>2</sup> and this event is worth noting if only because it was evidence of an early colonial response to the meeting of July, and a lukewarm response which betrayed an uncertainty as to what imperial federation really meant.

At home, Lord Carnarvon had also been discussing imperial federation during these months with Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, the Speaker of the Assembly in Victoria, although the discussions had frequently merged into

1. Forster to his wife, 14 November, 1884, *Ibid*, op.cit., p.599.
2. Macdonald to Tupper, 13 August, 1884, E.M.Saunders, *The Life and Letters of Sir Charles Tupper*, (Lon. 1916), vol. II, pp.38-39.



the Irish question.<sup>1</sup> Lord Rosebery's early enthusiasm at the July conference had also not abated during the interim period, and his original suggestion at the conference of creating a vigilance committee of members of both Houses of Parliament to ventilate and monitor the discussion of colonial questions,<sup>2</sup> received the studied attention of the Provisional Committee in August. Having discussed the proposal with Forster and submitted a prospectus to the Committee in August, Rosebery received further encouragement from H.O. Arnold-Forster, who wrote to him that the Provisional Committee would be grateful 'to receive any further suggestions which may occur to you as likely to be useful in view of the coming meeting', and that it was intended to give the adjourned conference 'a practical form.'<sup>3</sup>

When the second conference met on 18 November, 1884 the Imperial Federation League was officially established and a series of recommendations dealing with its creation, organisation and conduct were submitted by the Provisional Committee and unanimously adopted by the meeting. W.E. Forster chaired the conference which was similar in size and composition to its July predecessor and which also met at the Westminster Palace Hotel. Altogether, about one hundred and twenty-three people assembled in the hall of the hotel to witness the public launching of the League, and, although less than twenty M.P.s actually attended the gathering, there were thirty-four M.P.s who had expressed their willingness to serve on the General Committee.<sup>4</sup> In total, there were ninety-four people who were interested in serving on the General Committee and, of the thirty-four M.P.s who were included in this figure, twenty were Liberals and fourteen were Conservatives.<sup>5</sup> The General Committee, assisted by a smaller Executive

1. Carnarvon's Journal, 18 October, 1884, Sir A. Hardinge, The Fourth Earl of Carnarvon, 1831-1890, vol. III, p.148.
2. Report of the Conference, op.cit., p.41.
3. Arnold-Forster to Rosebery, 12 August, 1884, Rosebery Papers, MSS. 10081, ff. 194-195.
4. Report of the Adjourned Conference, 18 Nov., 1884, Imperial Federation Pamphlets, Rhodes House Library, Oxford.
5. Report of the Adjourned Conference, ibid., pp.2-5.

Committee, was given the task of conducting the affairs of the League until its next general meeting which, because of a general election in the autumn of 1885, did not take place until 15 February, 1886.

Apart from those resolutions dealing with the creation of the League and the administrative technicalities of immediate arrangements after the conference, several of them are worth more than just a cursory glance. The object of the League was unequivocally stated to be the permanent unity of the empire by means of federation and that the federation of the future would not interfere with the existing rights of local parliaments as regards local affairs. However, the League did commit itself to one particular direction which was significant. By adopting the resolution that any scheme of federation was to combine on an equitable basis the resources of the empire for the maintenance of common interests and to provide adequately for the organised defence of common rights, the League certainly seemed to be in the position of advocating imperial defence by means of colonial financial aid. One of the pioneers of imperial federation in Canada, Lieut.-Colonel George T. Denison, gave this view a measure of authority when, in later years, he wrote that:

No other object was given to the public. It was really formed to secure colonial contributions to Imperial Defence. <sup>1</sup>

The last of the resolutions under review was much more perfunctory, emphasizing the need to use every constitutional means to bring about the object for which it was formed and to invite the support of men of all political parties. Financially, two of the resolutions had provided that membership of the League was to be open to any British subject who paid an annual registration fee of one shilling and that the League welcomed donations and subscriptions from those who accepted its principles. Both of these articles provided clues to the League's weak financial position from its very birth. As an avowedly propagandist organisation its plan of campaign included publications, lectures, meetings, the collection and dissemination of information and statistics to monitor league progress, and the interchange of views between federationists in Britain and in the

1. G.T. Denison, *The Struggle for Imperial Unity*, (Toronto 1909), p.78.



empire, but such an ambitious purview could not have been adequately financed by an annual fee of one shilling. Thus it was that the League relied from the onset on a small group of benefactors for its survival and this precarious financial base dogged its life throughout the years 1884 to 1893, and must surely have played a part in the organisation's ultimate collapse. Writing after the demise of the League in 1894, Labilliere confirmed this point when he wrote that :

the expenses of the society from the first were known to be borne by a few rich, generous supporters; so that sufficient importance was not attached to the enrolment of a large number of annual subscribers of small sums - a matter which would have had due attention, had the executive sought to build up the organisation of the League by steps, instead of launching out into office expenses far beyond its income from ordinary subscribers. <sup>1</sup>

Clearly, Labilliere's hindsight blamed poor organisation for the League's ambitious strategy and its impending financial insolvency, but he seemed to forget the possibility that it might have overreached itself simply because it had begun its career on a wave of imperial enthusiasm and consequent high expectations. The League's coffers could only boast £ 275. 2s. 6d. in November 1884, a paltry sum in view of its intended campaign and the great acclaim with which it was received, but it certainly appeared to be stronger than its financial base indicated. <sup>2</sup>

In another sense, the League was also not as strong as it seemed. Already, at the July conference, Forster had apologised for and attempted to explain away the word "federation", a predicament which would have amused Edward Freeman, when he said that :

1. Labilliere, op.cit., p.51.

2. For an abstract from the League's accounts in November 1884 see the report of the Adjourned Conference, op.cit., p.8.

What we want is that, agreeing as we do in principle, we should so express that principle as not to give rise to misconception here or in the Colonies. In using the word "Federation", we do not by any means to bind ourselves to a particular form of Federal Parliament. It may be effected by representation in the Imperial Parliament, or it may be by a Council of representatives of the Colonies. we want to convey the notion that ultimately, hereafter, there must be a union, in some form or other, of England with her Colonies, on terms of perfect equality to the Colonies as well as to England; and I do not know any word which will better express that notion than the word "Federation". 1

It was an important speech coming from the movement's guiding spirit and it amply demonstrated the fact that the name of the organization was a misnomer, inappropriately identifying imperial federation with a much more general and non-committal interpretation of closer unity,<sup>2</sup> and, in this sense, it seemed to vindicate the theoretical objections advanced by Freeman. However, if the League harboured within its ranks men of all shades of opinion regarding closer unity, the significant fact from the point of view of practical politics was that something had been done to further the cause of empire unity. Forster was obviously fully aware of the League's studied vagueness in 1884, but its importance lay less in terminological accuracy and concrete proposals, than in the fact that some form of action, however controversial and inadequate, had been taken and it was up to the movement's adherents to make the most of their opportunity.

At the November conference, Forster's cautious optimism was repeated when he spoke of the need to avoid specific proposals and blueprints:

I do not think that it follows that it may be years before we arrive at some conclusion; but it would be most unwise to take the thing into our own hands at once and to sketch out any particular plan. 3

Obviously it was much too early to start thinking in terms of actual schemes for closer unity, although there had been numerous suggestions made in previous years. It was strange, therefore, that Forster's biographer,

1. Report of the Conference, 29 July, 1884, p.46.

2. ... All, The British Commonwealth of Nations, London 1900, p.100.

3. Report of the Adjourned Conference, op.cit., p.12.



T. Weymiss Reid, should have written in 1888 that 'a detailed scheme for the formation of the Imperial Federation League was laid before those present on behalf of the provisional committee'<sup>1</sup>, unless he meant to suggest the arrangements for the actual establishment of the League. If, on the other hand, a scheme was prepared at that early date, then there is no evidence to substantiate Reid's assertion and, in the absence of Forster's private correspondence, such an interpretation must remain dubious. Whilst refusing to commit himself to any scheme, however, Forster did lend his support to an 'alliance for mutual defence' which he regarded as 'absolutely necessary' and, to this extent, he must be grouped with those, like Sir John Colomb, who favoured federation for defence purposes. Forster did mention colonial tariffs, but he only skirted the issue and limited his speech to promising 'more trade between England and her Colonies than would exist if there was a separation',<sup>2</sup> a provision which, if it meant anything, meant extending the benefits of free trade to the protectionist colonies.

As the Chairman of the League, Forster's speeches and opinions were obviously important as an indication of the League's intentions and strategy, but there were more energetic and adventurous federationists within the League's ranks who privately urged further action and whose aims included a Federal Parliament representing Britain and her colonies as the sine qua non of wholesale imperial federation. Frederick Young must be included in such a group and, as one of the veterans of the movement, his correspondence with the Marquis of Lorne, the former Governor General of Canada, demonstrated the difference between private ambition and public acceptability. Even before the July conference, Lorne had written to Young warning him of the danger of hasty action and revealing little faith in Young's idea of a Federal Parliament which he thought would founder on the rocks of tariff problems and defence disputes. Instead, Lorne suggested having a precis made of the articles and speeches of public men on imperial questions with a view to the precis being transmitted with

1. T.W.Reid, op.cit., p.298

2. Report of the Adjourned Conference, op.cit., pp.12-13.

queries founded on them to leading men in the colonies inviting an expression of their opinions on them.<sup>1</sup> Such a proposal did have the merit of attempting to assess colonial opinion on imperial federation, a contingency which many federationists appeared to deem unimportant, and it bore the marks of a man who had great experience of colonial life and an appreciation of colonial sensibilities. As if by unwitting design, Lorne's emphasis on colonial opinion did find expression at the November conference through the awareness of Lord Rosebery, who stressed the importance of raising a responsive echo in the colonies to a national impulse coming from the mother country, but Young remained undaunted in his personal quest for a Federal Parliament. Replying to Lorne's letter, Young did, however, concede the value of his proposal, which he regarded as 'most excellent', but refused to abandon 'long cherished ideas, strengthened by much and careful study'.<sup>2</sup> Since both men were League members, their divergence of opinion about methods of introducing the federal element into the political system was significant in that it foreshadowed identical arguments throughout the life of the League, and Lorne's remarks in particular recurred in the speeches and writings of both colonial and British statesmen in the ensuing years.

Despite this undercurrent of debate which appeared to demonstrate the impossibility of arriving at some consensus of opinion on tactics and schemes, the federationists did set in motion a means of establishing contact with the empire when numerous League branches were established in Britain and in the colonies. In Britain, the League's chief strongholds were in London and in the home counties, the industrial centres of Lancashire and Yorkshire and in Scotland where it was welcomed by many Scottish Home rulers who saw in it a means of advocating separatism.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the empire, branches were established in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Gibraltar, Barbadoes and British Guiana between 1885 and 1888, while the Cape Town branch was actually formed a month before the central League in Britain.<sup>4</sup> In Canada, the parent branch was

1. Lorne to Young, 10 April, 1884, Young Papers, File 1, No. 45, (1).

2. Young to Lorne, 12 April, 1884, *ibid.* File 1, No. 45 (2).

3. Tyler, *op.cit.*, p.111.

4. Bodelser, *op.cit.*, p.208.



founded at Montreal in May 1885 under the leadership of D'Alton McCarthy and subsequent branches were organised at Ingersoll in Ontario in May 1886, at Halifax in Nova Scotia in December 1886, at Peterborough in Ontario in April 1887, and at Victoria in British Columbia in 1888.<sup>1</sup> The League made little progress in Canada up to 1887 with only three branches operating, but the necessary impetus for expansion was provided in 1887 as a result of the Commercial Union Movement, supported by Goldwin Smith, which sought to unite Canada and the United States by means of fiscal arrangements.<sup>2</sup> The growth of the League in Canada after 1887, therefore, was based upon a commercial union of the various parts of the empire as a means of disarming the Commercial Union Movement and appealing to the history of Canada and the United Empire Loyalists. The Toronto branch was established in February 1888 and became the headquarters of the League in Canada, but the formal acceptance of a policy of imperial preference in March 1888 as one of its major objectives was not a step which was welcomed by the League in Britain, which, with its Liberal Chairman and many Liberal supporters, deprecated any such departure from free trade as both impracticable and divisive.

In Australia, the League appeared in June 1885 and chose the colony of Victoria as its beachhead where a branch was established in Melbourne. However, although membership of the branch had reached one thousand by August 1885 and several minor branches had been formed elsewhere in Victoria, the League was never very successful in Australia where it was generally regarded as an insidious menace to Australian nationalism.<sup>3</sup> In Hobart, Tasmania a branch was formed in March, 1888 and the first branch in New Zealand was only established at Christchurch in June, 1889 after several campaigns to overcome apathy.<sup>4</sup> Of all the colonies, therefore, the

1. For an account of the League's expansion and history in Canada, see *Imperial Federation League in Canada*, Imperial Federation Pamphlets (Rhodes House, Oxford), pp.1-13, and G.Denison, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, pp.78-80, 85-97, and 117-129.
2. For the case against imperial federation and in support of commercial union in Canada, see Goldwin Smith, *Canada and the Canadian Question*, (Toronto 1891).
3. The best accounts of imperial federation in Australia are Henry I.Hall, *Australia and England*, (Lon. 1934) and R.A.Shields, *The Imperial Federationists and their Cause*, Pennsylvania Ph.D.(1961), pp.216-245. However C.S.Blackton, 'Australian Nationality and Nationalism: The Imperial Federationist Interlude, 1885-1901', *H.S.A.N.Z.* (Nov.1955) vol.7. No.25. pp.1-16 is a useful synopsis.
4. The chief obstacle to imperial federation in New Zealand was not hostility but torpor. See Keith Sinclair, *Imperial Federation: A Study of New Zealand Policy and Opinion, 1880-1914*, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London



League was most successful in Canada where, as we have seen, it was largely a vehicle to promote preferential tariff arrangements with Britain, rather than an organization to achieve imperial federation.

At the end of 1884, an eventful year for federationists and the climax of achievement for those who had advocated the cause of closer unity since 1869, the prospect for the future of the League must have appeared rosy. The movement had entered upon a new phase in which theoretical discussion was finally converted into direct action and imperial federation could be spoken of in terms of practical politics, or so it seemed. Characteristically, Frederick Young wrote to a correspondent towards the end of the year claiming that imperial federation had caught the public's eye following the founding of the League and that leading public figures were rallying to the cause in great numbers. As if to bask in the glory of having disproved the allegations of the movement's remorseless critics, Young claimed that the federationists would no longer be dismissed as 'mere dreamers' and that the cause was now a matter of practical politics.<sup>1</sup> For this optimism, Young could certainly be forgiven, although, as we have seen, the opponents of the movement were also beginning to gather their strength and to marshal their facts for a theoretical onslaught led by Edward Freeman.

#### The League As a Working Reality 1885

Even if an attempt to survey the first year of the League's progress does appear as a modest task, it, nevertheless is rendered difficult by the paucity of relevant information. In the light of the publication of the League's monthly journal, Imperial Federation, which first appeared in January 1886 and was a regular periodical until the League's demise in December 1893, a clearer perspective is possible, although much activity must remain unaccounted for. Not unnaturally, the main objective of the League's leaders during its first full year in operation was to consolidate their recent success and build up the membership, although there were dedicated federationists who must have wanted to move more quickly than was possible.

1. Young to Mr Conderoy, 10 Dec. 1884, Letter Book, R.C.I., (R.C.S., London).



However, in February 1885, W.E. Forster came forward with an article published in the Nineteenth Century, entitled "Imperial Federation", which enabled him to reconstruct and elaborate upon his speeches given before the July and November conferences of 1884. This article is worth close analysis not only because it was responsible for Freeman's great diatribe on imperial federation in April 1885, but also because it demonstrated how far Forster's line of thought had developed in relation to his position as the League's chairman since November 1884. Moreover, as the authorised spokesman of the League, his comments upon its progress and difficulties were obviously important as an indication of the method of approach which the League was likely to adopt in its early years and as a valuable insight into the League's priorities vis-a-vis schemes of closer unity.

Arguing that the colonial policy of the Liberal government, if continued, would result in the loss of the colonies unless a new outlook on the empire could be imprinted on official minds, Forster committed himself to advocating 'an organization for mutual defence and for common control of foreign policy.'<sup>1</sup> In conformity with his earlier speeches on the subject he emphasized the wisdom of avoiding attempts to define such an organization and contented himself with the assertion that its actual form would 'change from time to time according to the increase of the strength of the colonies, whether absolute or relative'.<sup>2</sup> However, Forster did toy with several ideas regarding actual schemes of imperial federation, and he was clearly convinced that 'the ultimate form of federation' was a new and paramount Imperial Parliament with subordinate Parliaments, 'as that which Congress bears to the American State Legislatures, or the German Reichstag to the Prussian or Bavarian Landtags'.<sup>3</sup> As a practical politician, however, Forster confessed that such a proposition was premature, although he emerged from the discussion as a supporter of the formation of a Board of Advice along the lines of the India Council. This halfway house towards federation had been advocated at least as early as 1879<sup>4</sup> and it meant the appointment of the

1. Forster, 'Imperial Federation', Nine. Cent., vol. 17, (Feb. 1885), p. 204.

2. Forster, *ibid*, p. 204.

3. Forster, *ibid*, pp. 207-208.

4. See Earl Grey, How Shall We Retain The Colonies, Nineteenth Century, Vol. 5 (June 1879), pp. 935-954.



agents of the colonies to a Board of Advice to assist the Colonial Secretary, and perhaps the Cabinet, in the Management of Colonial affairs. Even as a stepping-stone towards imperial federation, this proposal would have faced overwhelming cynicism and indifference in a House of Commons traditionally impatient with architects of political union, but it did at least have the merit of being a more readily workable scheme at the time than the radical restructuring of the Imperial political system, which a 'new' Imperial Parliament would have involved. The idea of introducing a federal element into the empire, of creating some form of looser association than a cut and dried Federal Union, was something to which an uncompromising Edward Freeman had not really given much importance. Yet, to dismiss such a proposal as not being 'federal', was really to introduce a rigidity into the debate which was a recipe for inaction. The presentation of the argument in terms of black and white - either a full Federal Union or nothing - was to give the debate a simplicity which it did not possess and which was therefore eschewed by those active federationists who wanted to be doing something for the cause instead of just waiting for something to happen.

In an article in which Forster had virtually committed the League and its members to the promotion of some form of Colonial Council or Committee of Colonial representatives which would manage the defence of the empire and contribute to the formulation of its foreign policy, it was predictable that he would avoid a similar commitment in the area of commercial relations. To have done so, would have been to court disaster, but Forster did refer briefly to colonial tariffs and his comments, however cautious, did reveal sufficient to be worthy of emphasis in this survey. With characteristic realism, Forster admitted that the colonies had an inalienable right to initiate protectionist legislation as they desired and he confessed that such action could only be combated by argument and persuasion. However, by advising that no resolution of the Colonial Board of Advice would be binding on a colony unless officially approved by its own government and then adding that, 'the opinion of the Home Government, supported in all probability by many of the Colonial Governments, could not but have great weight in checking protectionist legislation in any colony, and .....in furthering Free-trade'<sup>1</sup> was tantamount to a contradictory

1. Forster, op.cit., p.214.



statement. Forster clearly wanted the best of both worlds, yet it must be evident from this statement that the Chairman of the League regarded closer union as inextricably bound up with the maintenance and extension of Free Trade in the empire. His position in relation to an Imperial Zollverein was more consistent and clear as regards the need for a general equalisation of taxes within the empire, but Forster either forgot or chose to ignore the fact that Free Trade inside the empire, but not outside of it, meant a departure from Cobdenite orthodoxy which prescribed universal Free Trade and not limited Free Trade.

In an attack upon Forster's article in the same journal in March 1885 Lord Bury seized upon Forster's dubious interpretation of colonial independence and denounced the League as:

Another instance of that craze for over-legislation  
which never can rest without tinkering our institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Having exposed the inconsistency of Forster's aims regarding colonial tariffs and having denounced Forster's apparent ignorance of colonial susceptibilities, the brunt of Bury's attack was directed towards the creation of the League, which he castigated as both superfluous and harmful to the unity of the empire. The only reply to Bury's accusations came from Harold Finch-Hatton. Finch-Hatton's report rested upon two basic points: first, that the League existed in order to combat the fallacy perpetrated by Bury and others that the permanent unity of the empire was a patent fact and, secondly that Bury's assertion that imperial federation had never entered a colonist's head was both a mischievous and a crass statement to make when all he had to do was to peruse the composition of the General Committee of the League to see that colonists were well-represented.<sup>2</sup>

Although extremely vitriolic towards Bury, Finch-Hatton's reply was not entirely convincing. It lacked any kind of imagination and confidence which the occasion demanded and it was doubtful whether such tired abuse could pass for argument. Thus, although Finch-Hatton exposed unnecessary ambiguities in a few of Bury's statements, he did not do enough to dismiss his opponent's arguments as worthless.

1. Lord Bury, 'The Unity of the Empire', *Nineteenth Century*, (March 1885), vol. 17., p. 382.
2. H. Finch-Hatton, 'Lord Bury and Imperial Federation', *National Review*, April 1885, pp. 207-219.

In 1885, Lord Lorne who had been a keen supporter of imperial federation since the birth of the league, published his book, 'Imperial Federation' in which he summarised his own approach to the subject. As can be ascertained from his early correspondence with Young, Lorne's overriding concern was to invite colonial opinions on the subject so as to avoid the obvious criticism that 'Downing-street rule (was) again to be revived'.<sup>1</sup> In addition to comments on the role of the League and the need to proceed slowly, Lorne remarked that 'much interest has been shown in its aims by numbers of the hand-workers among the industrial classes' and that 'an inclination to dwell....upon a commercial understanding' had also exhibited itself.<sup>2</sup> The significance of these remarks lay in the promotion of an identity of interests between the British working classes and the federation movement. In the political climate of Victorian England in the mid-eighteen eighties with the passing of the Third Reform Bill and the struggle to provide some principle or creed which would give a degree of consistency and coherence to Radical politics, such a strategy made sense even if it was only propaganda. Already, in January 1885, Frederick Young had written to George Potter, the president of the London Workingmen's Association, encouraging him to advocate imperial federation as being in the interests of the industrial classes and inviting him to solicit support for the campaign.<sup>3</sup> Following Young's initiative, Potter chaired a meeting of the Association which discussed imperial federation as a means of providing security against recurring trade depressions and thus improving the lot of the labouring classes. Such an argument could hardly fail to attract the support of the meeting and a resolution calling for the promotion of free trade throughout the empire as a way of arriving at a fiscal and political union of the colonies with the mother country received unanimous approval. The combined efforts of Young and Potter received an unexpected bonus when Lord Rosebery lent his support to the meeting in a letter to Potter presenting imperial federation as "pre-eminently a workingman's question".<sup>4</sup>

1. Lord Lorne, *Imperial Federation*, (Lon. 1885), p.105.

2. Lord Lorne, *ibid.*, pp.11-12.

3. Young to Potter, 12 January, 1885, Letter Book R.C.I.

4. For Rosebery's letter and a report of the meeting see *The Times*, 15 January, 1885.



As we shall witness later, such a move by Rosebery was consistent with his later strategy in speeches on imperial federation, although his apparent identification with a policy of abolishing tariffs within the empire was perhaps unwise in the light of colonial adherence to tariff policies. It would be inaccurate to suggest that the League ever seriously contemplated a strategy designed to acquire the widespread support of the British working classes, but federationists were fully aware of the importance of widening the base of their support and thus hoped to appeal at least to the material interests of 'labour.' If Young's approach to Potter represented the only serious effort to harness working-class support to the cause, the League's journal, Imperial Federation, did include several articles entitled, "What We Offer To The Working-Classes" in the monthly editions for the year 1886,<sup>1</sup> perhaps hoping that working men would pool their wages once a month in order to buy a copy to read in their local public house.

With regard to a survey of the League's progress for the year 1885 it must be pointed out that only three main sources of information provide evidence of early League activity and that because of their rag-bag nature, the historian's task here is to dig the nuts and raisins of important events out of a veritable suet of literature on imperial federation. The journal Imperial Federation provides a retrospective analysis of League progress and the establishment of League branches throughout Britain in 1885, while the Young Papers indicate a picture of an active federationist's enthusiasm set against a background of limited action. An earlier writer on the subject has utilised in the main the various articles which appeared on imperial federation in contemporary reviews and journals to describe the stage which the movement had reached by the end of the year.<sup>2</sup> Although providing an excellent discussion of the various viewpoints of ardent federationists and of their critics, such an account serves only to highlight yet again the diversity of thought on the subject and thus hardly merits a lengthy composition on what was being written at the time. The debate as to what imperial federation meant in terms of an actual scheme of imperial reorganization was carried on throughout the life of the League so that to dwell on groups of articles written by lesser known figures in the movement at any given time would only serve to re-emphasize the disunity and fragmentation of opinion that existed.

1. See, for example, Imperial Federation, Jan., Feb., and March, 1886.

2. R.A.M. Shields, The Imperial Federationists and their Cause, Pennsylvania Ph.D., 1961, pp.96-106.



In terms of League strategy in 1885, however, one further event is worth recording in the context of federationists attempts to consolidate the success of November 1884. If an appeal to the labouring classes in Britain could be justified in 1885 then so too could an effort to solicit support in the universities. It was to Frederick Young's credit that he was aware of the importance of the quantitative support of the working-classes and he was equally cognisant of the value of both Oxford and Cambridge branches of the League which he regarded as "the most important centres influencing national thought and speech."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Young viewed success at these two centres as vital to the working of the League in Britain and early reports seemed favourable to the vitality of the Cambridge branch which numbered one hundred and fifty university personnel alone.<sup>2</sup> At Cambridge, Professor Seeley presided over the branch while support for the venture, besides coming from the mayor of the town, was bestowed upon the branch by the Prince of Wales and at Oxford Professor Montagu Burrows headed the branch from its inception. As Chichele Professor of History, Burrows main concern as a federationist was more with the relative decline of Britain's role in world affairs in the face of a more hostile and competitive future in which both France and Germany seemed to pose as real military threats, rather than with the political technicalities of federalism. Burrows advocacy of imperial federation thus rested on reasserting the role of Britain in an imperial context which meant colonial assistance towards imperial defence.<sup>3</sup>

Before the year was out, it was quite clear, however, that Young's hopes for success at Oxford and Cambridge were not to be fulfilled. Writing to Harold Finch-Hatton at the start of the year, Young had already admitted that the great wave of enthusiasm which had accompanied the creation of the League was not supported by adequate financial resources which were "very limited".<sup>4</sup> By February 1886, a little over a year later, Young was

1. Young to Harold Finch-Hatton, 15 January 1885, Letter Book R.C.I.
2. Canon J.N. Dalton (Cambridge branch secretary) to Young, 11 May, 1885. Young papers, File 11, no. 20.
3. F. Burrows, 'Imperial Federation', National Review, 14, (1885), pp. 363-380.
4. Young to H. Finch-Hatton, 15 Jan., 1885, Letter Book, RCI.



to be found complaining about 'apathy' and 'ignorance' at Oxford and Cambridge where he had looked for influence and inspiration, and seemed to view with solemn resignation the fact that such a disappointment could only be salvaged by "the light which some energetic enthusiasts like myself may help to shed upon them."<sup>1</sup> A simultaneous glance at the January 1886 edition of Imperial Federation, however, seemed to convey paradoxically a healthy state of affairs, especially concerning League progress at Cambridge. Statistically, the journal reported a distinguished membership of one hundred and forty-four and its brief account ended on a note of optimism with a reported speech by Arnold-Forster who claimed that the movement was "in a fairer way of making progress than it had previously been at any time in the history of the League".<sup>2</sup> Obviously the League's journal was essentially a propaganda weapon which explained the discrepancy between Young's private comments of disappointment and the journal's unashamed optimism designed for public consumption, but what was really significant about Young's pessimistic account was his confession as to the weak position of the League in terms of financial support. As will be revealed later, the League's poor pecuniary base jeopardised its very existence barely two years after its inception.

If Frederick Young's fears about League finances and the League's public support proved subsequently to be well-founded, however, W.F. Forster showed no such uncertainty in 1885. Writing to Sir George Bowen from Germany in the late summer of 1885, Forster claimed that 'Our Federation movement is gaining great strength - the idea possesses men's minds',<sup>3</sup> although this happy observation was simultaneously tempered by an admission that premature plans had to be studiously avoided and that a way had to be found whereby colonial attitudes towards imperial federation could be

1. Young to J.T. Hayes, 12 Feb., 1886, *ibid.*

2. Imperial Federation, January 1886, p.13.

3. Forster to Bowen, undated but the fact that Forster left for a holiday by boat to Germany on 9 August 1885 indicates that the letter was written at the end of August, T.W. Reid, *Life of Forster*, p.609. Forster's letter to Bowen dated 'August 1885' was also reprinted in S. Lane-Poole, *Thirty Years of Colonial Government: A Selection From The Despatches and Letters of Sir George Ferguson Bowen*, (Lon. 1899), pp. 359-360.

measured. Apart from these comments, Forster's letter to Bowen contained other significant points which revealed his stage of thought on the movement almost a year after the birth of the League and which therefore deserves more comprehensive treatment :

My own impression is that, at first at any rate, we had better aim at concert among the Governments, rather than at an Imperial Parliament.....

We must remember that, in order to realise Federation, we only want (1) an organization for common defence, (2) a common foreign policy. Practically, great steps have been recently made; not merely as regards defence, thanks to Australian aid, but as regards foreign affairs. I do not believe that any Colonial Secretary will in the future venture to disregard any large self-governing Colony in negotiating with any foreign government, in matters affecting such Colony.<sup>1</sup>

In accordance with Lord Lorne's approach, Forster had clearly given first priority to ascertaining colonial desires, although his ultimate goal remained a new federal parliament for the empire, and he regarded Australian manoeuvres in 1884 and 1885 as evidence of a significant advance towards the attainment of co-operation in both defence and foreign policy. Not only did Forster regard Australian assistance in the Sudan episode as a step towards an integrated imperial defence system, but he also believed that Australian pressure on the Colonial Secretary, Lord Derby, to carry out a limited annexation of New Guinea in the face of German encroachment on the island represented a major advance towards colonial participation in imperial foreign policy.

When the ill-fated second ministry of Gladstone came to an expected end on 9 June 1885, Forster had clearly viewed this event with considerable relief from the backbenches since it would 'make foreign policy easier'<sup>2</sup> and Lord Derby's removal from the Colonial Office must have helped to reduce the genuine misgivings of the Australian colonies.<sup>3</sup> There was little real

1. Forster to Bowen, August 1885, T.M.Reid, op.cit., pp.609-610, and S.Lane-Pool, op.cit., pp. 359-360.

2. Forster to Bowen, August 1885, S.Lane-Poole, ibid, p.360.

3. Testimony to Lord Derby's unpopularity in Australia and New Zealand because of his neglect of colonial interests is afforded by evidence in the Rosebery Papers. See especially MSS., 10082, ff. 117-118 and 225-228.



evidence at this stage to indicate that the League could expect anything more from the Tories under Lord Salisbury than they had received from the Liberals under Gladstone in the past year. The political opponents of the Liberal government and those Liberals who were federationists had been inclined to believe the worst of the government in the sphere of imperial relations, and although there was no fear or talk of separatism, their record in both foreign and colonial policy had few redeeming features. Given Gladstone's attitude towards the empire and the stigma of indifference to empire which haunted the Liberal party from 1869, it was hardly surprising that the Liberal leader had never publicly uttered a word of appraisal on imperial federation. Privately, however, Gladstone dismissed it as 'chimerical if not little short of nonsensical',<sup>1</sup> an ominous augury for the future of the League as far as influencing the official mind. John Bright, the great Radical Quaker who had resigned from the government over the Egyptian crisis in 1882, corroborated this evidence of Gladstone's views on closer unity when he wrote:

Much interesting conversation on Colonies and Federation. Mr. Gladstone agreed with me that the wisest plan is to leave the Colonies much as they are.<sup>2</sup>

On the matter of imperial federation, of course, both Bright and Gladstone were agreed. Bright's attention had first been drawn to imperial federation in 1883<sup>3</sup> but his most sustained attacks on the subject in the press and in his speeches were delivered in 1885 and 1887. In January 1885, he condemned imperial federation as 'ludicrous',<sup>4</sup> and in the same year he congratulated Lord Norton, formerly Charles Adderley, for deprecating the

1. Sir Edward Hamilton, Gladstone's private secretary, recorded the prime minister's words in his diary, the day following the establishment of the Imperial Federation League, 19 November 1884, Hamilton Papers, Add. MSS, 48638, f. 58.
2. R.A.J. Walling, *The diaries of John Bright, 1885*, p. 524, quoted by J.L. Sturgis, *John Bright and the Empire*, (Lon. 1969),
3. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
4. *The Times*, 30 January 1885.

idea which was 'very ignorantly harangued about'.<sup>1</sup> It was over the issue of Irish Home Rule that Bright and Gladstone differed after 1886, and with the latter's conversion to Home Rule, all progress on other questions was subordinated to this issue, although some federationists, like Frederick Young and Sir George Bowen, did regard imperial federation as relevant to Gladstone's obsession with Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

If little encouragement could be expected from the Liberal leader, however, many federationists must have taken heart from a totally unexpected public speech made by the new Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who led the 'caretaker' Conservative ministry between June 1885 and February 1886. Speaking on a wide variety of 'Home Questions' at Newport in October 1885, Salisbury referred briefly to the relationship between imperial federation and the Irish question, arguing that the former had little relevance to the solution of the latter. However, Salisbury did not dismiss imperial federation per se as a possible way of securing the closer unity of the empire. Instead, he cautiously reflected upon its potential relevance to the integrity of the empire and indicated an open-mindedness about the subject which seemed to suggest that he was capable of being converted to the cause. In view of the fact that the League's journal claimed later, and ambitiously, that Lord Salisbury's sympathies were entirely in accordance with the League,<sup>3</sup> the main text of his speech merits attention:

In speaking of Imperial Federation as entirely apart from the Irish question, I wish to guard myself very carefully. I consider it to be one of the questions of the future. I believe that the drawing nearer of the colonies of this country is the policy to which English patriots must look who desire to give effect in the councils of the world to the real strength of

1. W. Childe Pemberton, *Life of Lord Norton*, pp. 265-266.
2. For the view that the Irish problem 'obstructed' Liberal party achievements on all other fronts after 1886 see D. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, (O.U.P. 1972)
3. *Imperial Federation*, February 1886, pp. 35-36.



the English nation.....Our Colonies are tied to us by deep affection, and we should be guilty not only of coldness of heart, but of gross and palpable folly, if we allow that sentiment to cool, and do not draw from it as much advantage for the common weal of the whole of the English race as circumstances will permit us to do. I know that the idea of Imperial Federation is still shapeless and unformed, and it is impossible for any man to do more than to keep his mind open to a desire to give effect to aspirations which bear the mark of the truest patriotism upon them, and therefore I wish to avoid any language that may seem to discourage the plan in which perhaps the fondest hopes of high Imperial greatness for England in the future may be wrapped. 1

Coming from the Prime Minister, this was a significant speech which contrasted sharply with Gladstone's reticence on the subject. Yet, Salisbury had committed himself to nothing, other than a repeated belief in the integrity of the empire and a rather blunt confession of faith in the English race. Moreover, if his comments on imperial federation seemed to point to an ignorance of colonial rationalism and a belief in 'Imperial greatness for England', the importance of Salisbury's Newport speech lay less in what he actually said than the fact that a British premier had deemed it necessary to say something respectfully in public about imperial federation at all. This at least was proof of the fact that the idea was making an impact, however small, on the highest echelons of the Conservative Party.

A final development connected with the internal administration of the League is worth recording at the close of 1885 simply because it offers one of those rare insights into the operation of the League which, because of the paucity of relevant information and a notable absence of any official League minutes, must be regarded as invaluable. The event in question was a rather distressed letter written from the offices of the League in Victoria Street, London to Lord Rosebery from L.Sergeant, the League's General Secretary. In this letter to Rosebery, an obviously perturbed Sergeant outlined a minor conspiracy, apparently conducted by

1. Speech at Newport, 7 October 1885, H.Lucy, Speeches of the Marquis of Salisbury, (Lon. 1885), p.134.

Arnold-Forster and supported by Sir John Colomb, to remove him from the General Secretaryship and to prevent Lord Rosebery from contributing to the League's journal, the first issue of which was due to be published in January 1886.<sup>1</sup> Sergeant's chief criticism and complaints were unmistakably directed at Arnold-Forster who seemed to be using his stepfather's authority as chairman in order to make a number of new arrangements. As well as suggesting a measure of high-handedness used by Arnold-Forster in obtaining a business contract with the publishing firm of Cassells and Company who were to print and publish the League's journal,<sup>2</sup> Sergeant also pointed to the fact that the sub-committee established to place the journal on a permanent footing<sup>3</sup> had been persuaded by Arnold Forster to remove him and substitute the Reverend S. A. Swaine, a member of the General Committee of the League, who would combine the posts of General Secretary and editor of the new journal. To this extent, Sergeant's grievance was understandable and his letter to Rosebery bore the unmistakable hallmarks of resentment against the almost clandestine activities of Arnold-Forster.

It was the final section of Sergeant's letter, however, which was 'the least pleasant part' of his communication to Rosebery and which is worth close examination:

There is, in a certain quarter, a great jealousy of your Lordship's relation to the question of Imperial Federation. You might not care for, or be surprised at this; but I am bound to say that expression is openly given to this feeling. Mr. Swaine said in the office two days ago to a gentleman enquiring about the journal, "Mr. Arnold-Forster does not seem to want Lord Rosebery to write in the journal". He has repeated the same to me, and I have had other still plainer indications of the feeling I refer to.

The sum of the matter is that the Journal has been annexed in the interests of individuals or a group (of their ideas I mean - not personally) and it will apparently be conducted on those lines. 4

1. Sergeant to Rosebery, 15 December 1885, (marked "Confidential"), Rosebery Papers, Add. MS. 10084, ff. 247-248.
2. Arnold-Forster took up employment with Cassells in the autumn of 1894 and subsequently became one of the directors of the company.
3. The sub-committee of four was Arnold-Forster, W. J. Courthope, S. W. Norton, and Canon Dalton.
4. Sergeant to Rosebery, 15 December 1885, *op. cit.* f. 248.



In the absence of any accessible reply from Rosebery, Sergeant's assertions must remain unsubstantiated. Whether his comments represented a distortion of the truth perpetrated by a troubled mind or whether they were an accurate description of the events is impossible to ascertain, but the fact that Sergeant had been appointed General Secretary to the League on Rosebery's personal recommendation would have been sufficient reason for any anti-Roseberyites to have wanted his removal from the secretaryship. To this extent, Sergeant's letter embodied a consistency of argument which lent his accusations a degree of credibility. With regard to internal administrative re-arrangements in the machinery of the League, Sergeant's fears for his own position proved well-founded. In June 1886, personnel alterations introduced Arthur Loring as the League's new Organising Secretary and Sergeant's services were therefore rendered superfluous.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1885, therefore, was a year of mixed blessings for the League. Outwardly, it appeared to be riding on the crest of an imperialist wave and with an apparently enthusiastic clientele of recognised public figures, ...s from both parties and many colonial adherents, the League's future seemed to be promising. Although experiencing rough treatment at the hands of Edward Freeman, John Bright and Lord Bury, the League had wisely eschewed the idea of a scheme of imperial federation and led by the sound judgement of W.E. Forster the League had more than survived its first year of life. Concealed by this panoply of success, however, all was not well with the League. Even an enthusiastic and devout federationist like Frederick Young had admitted the League's failings in Oxford and Cambridge, and his private correspondence revealed a deep concern for its weak financial position. As the year 1886 was to show, it was the League's inadequate pecuniary resources which threatened its continued existence rather than any other course of events. In many ways, 1886 represented a watershed in the history of the League's progress.

1. Sergeant resigned the secretaryship in September 1886.

## CHAPTER 6

### 1886 : A Year of Decision

#### Early Progress

The progress of the League in Britain could never be entirely divorced from the pattern of political events which occurred at the time and the year 1886 contained events of a momentous nature in British politics which affected the future of the Liberal Party and the thorny problem of Irish Home Rule. In the course of two general elections which produced victory and then defeat for Gladstone, and which riveted the attention of the public first on Chamberlain's 'unauthorised programme' and, secondly, on Gladstone's First Home Rule Bill for Ireland, such a medley of events could hardly fail to make some impact on the imperial federationist movement.

Gladstone formed his third ministry in February 1886, nearly three months after the inconclusive general election of November 1885 and party politics came to be dominated by the epic debate on Gladstone's 'Government of Ireland Bill' in the House of Commons between April and June 1886. Alongside these national events, however, the Imperial Federation League continued its quest for closer union and took a tentative step in that direction when it confronted the new Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, with a deputation in August urging him to call a conference of colonists in London to discuss ways and means of effecting the unity of the empire. However, long before federationists became involved in the Irish debate and in petitioning Lord Salisbury, all activists in the movement had concentrated their attentions on another event of considerable importance in the history of the League.

After having been postponed in the autumn of 1885 due to the impending general election, the First Annual Meeting of the League was held on 15 February 1886 in the reception-room of the Mansion House, London under the presidency of the Lord Mayor, Mr. Alderman Staples. The well attended gathering was able to read the League's first annual report which proudly displayed statistics relating to new League branches in the colonies and claimed to have registered over a hundred meetings in Britain



alone. In addition to the circulation of over seventy-five thousand pamphlets and the inclusion of seventy M.P.s from both parties on the General Committee, the report also emphasized the importance of the new journal in classifying the opinions of public men and in furnishing information about imperial federation.<sup>1</sup> While federationists talked about the movement receiving a new impetus as a result of the annual meeting, however, the report did contain a grain of doubt when it emphasized the need for more financial assistance to support the journal. It was obvious that the special donation fund, established in November 1885 to finance the new project, could not have sustained the journal for more than two years. The report thus registered a twin appeal for donors to the new fund and for an increase in its annual subscribers,<sup>2</sup> and the League's journal endorsed the appeal for annual subscriptions of four shillings in order to receive a regular copy of Imperial Federation.<sup>3</sup> Based upon such a small sum of money and a refusal to allow advertisements to help pay the cost of running it, it was hardly surprising that the journal's future was precarious from the start.

One minor achievement which the League made much of in the early months of 1886 was the part it played in the convening of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition due to be held in the summer of that year. The purpose of this event was simply another means of maintaining public interest in the colonial question and of providing information on Britain's overseas possessions, but the League planned to use the occasion as a convenient opportunity to arrange a conference and a banquet dedicated to the discussion of imperial federation. The League's journal reported in April that the Executive Committee had resolved to hold a conference on imperial federation in its various aspects to coincide with the exhibition, and in that month a special sub-committee of the League was appointed to make arrangements for speakers at the conference.<sup>4</sup> While the League was

1. *Imperial Federation*, I, March 1886, pp. 78-79, and 81-83.

2. *Ibid*, I, p.79.

3. *Ibid*, I, April 1886, p.91.

4. See especially *Imperial Federation*, I, for April, May and June 1886.

involved in this feverish activity, however, the untimely death of its Chairman, W.E. Forster, on 5 April 1886 removed from the scene one of the movement's most dedicated stalwarts and its guiding light. The League owed much to Forster, especially the sagacity of his leadership, and it must be said that his successors showed neither the same degree of devotion nor the capacity of judgement which had characterised his command. When he died he left what appeared to be a flourishing organisation, although the Irish debate and the question of imperial tariffs soon exposed the inherent disunity of the League's membership during and after 1886.

There was no shortage of willing replacements to assume the vacant League leadership, although the election of Lord Rosebery did not provide the cause with the most enthusiastic helmsman available. Rosebery was chosen presumably because his name carried weight and because, in a movement largely promoted by men who were not eminent political figures, nobody else could have lent the organisation the same prestige.<sup>1</sup> Yet Rosebery's claim was 'not without opposition'<sup>2</sup> perhaps because he had identified himself with the experiment of having colonial delegates sitting in the House of Lords and with the idea of a royal commission to enquire into the practicability of some definite scheme for imperial federation. Moreover, as Foreign Secretary in Gladstone's third ministry, it was probably felt in some quarters that he would be fully occupied with ministerial duties and thus unable to devote sufficient attention to League affairs. This supposition was apparently verified when the Executive Committee of the League introduced an amendment to the constitution of the League whereby, in addition to the Chairmanship, a Vice-Chairmanship was also created. Both officers were to be subject to annual re-election and it was pointed out by Sir Henry Holland that if the Chairman was simultaneously involved as a Cabinet Minister, the vice-chairman would assume the onerous duties of leadership.<sup>3</sup> In this way,

1. Tyler, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, p.112.
2. G.W. Rusden, *The History of Australia*, (Lon. 1897), Vol. III, p.486. Rusden, a colonial expatriate, served on the General and Executive Committees of the League between 1884-1892 when he returned to Australia.
3. *Imperial Federation*, I, July 1886, p.186.



therefore, a convention was naturally established whereby the chairman and vice-chairman would belong to opposite political parties, a situation which also furthered the professed non-party character of the League. On 3 June 1886 Rosebery was offered and subsequently accepted the chairmanship of the League and Edward Stanhope, former President of the Board of Trade in Salisbury's first ministry, took the vice-chairmanship. Rosebery held the League presidency<sup>1</sup> until his official resignation in August 1892, although the continuity of leadership which his five year reign provided concealed an attitude of diffidence to, and even periodic irritation with, the position of leader. Already, in April 1886, Colonel Howard Vincent, an activist on the Executive Committee and future leader of the commercial union school of thought within the League, had written to Rosebery begging leave not to consider his letter of resignation<sup>2</sup>, and this must be regarded as the beginning of Rosebery's enigmatic relationship both to imperial federation and to the Imperial Federation League.

An important development in 1886 was the parallel growth of the Fair Trade League and of trends of opinion which put economic questions within the context of imperial unity. There was no crisis of opinion on economic issues in the 1880's, but there was a distinctive uneasiness about foreign competition which caused a convergence of opinion on the value of empire. Not all Fair Traders were out and out protectionists. Thus some Fair Traders, like Lord Dunraven, Sir Alexander Galt and Sir Charles Tupper, emphasized imperial preference before protection and trade retaliation, and, as we have already observed, membership of the Fair Trade League, the Imperial Federation League, and the Royal Colonial Institute frequently overlapped. However, in 1886 another layer of opinion was added to the cumulative pattern of thought on the value of empire. The London Chamber of Commerce had been formed in 1880 largely as a result of Canadian pressure and by the mid-eighties it had clearly identified itself with imperial federation as a means of reviving trade.<sup>3</sup> In July 1886 the

1. Strictly speaking, the terms "president" and "vice-president" were only officially introduced in March 1888, but the position of League leader was loosely referred to as either Chairman or President before then.
2. Vincent to Rosebery, 15 April 1886, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10085, f.165.
3. B.H.Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain, 1881-1895*, pp 91-93.



London Chamber sponsored the first Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire which met in connection with the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, and which proved to be a useful forum for the interchange of ideas on imperial trade. With a Liberal government still in office, a public debate on changes in tariff policies with a view to the creation of an Imperial Zollverein was naturally ill-advised and thus most speakers followed the recommendations of the Marquis of Lorne who emphasized the need for patience.<sup>1</sup> The London Chamber became another avenue through which the question of imperial federation was frequently discussed and kept before public notice, although it was primarily concerned with some form of commercial union of the empire. As might be expected, of course, the League did not commit itself in any particular direction regarding the commercial aspects of imperial federation, but several of its members were actively involved in economic discussions outside League perimeters. Thus, Lord Dunraven, ex-president of the Fair Trade League and parliamentary under-secretary at the Colonial Office from June to November 1885 and again from August 1886 to February 1887, was a member of the Executive Committee of the Imperial Federation League, who plainly regarded Fair Trade and imperial unity as 'almost synonymous terms',<sup>2</sup> Dunraven was unsettled in League ranks chiefly because he feared that unless the League concerned itself more with fiscal problems the empire would disintegrate as a result of divergent tariff structures.<sup>3</sup> On this point he certainly echoed the sentiments of other federationists with known commercial union sympathies such as Galt, Tupper and Vincent, and even Frederick Young did not shrink from a cautious support of fiscal harmony as a means of federating the empire.

If the Colonial and Indian Exhibition was claimed as a successful enterprise<sup>4</sup>, however, the most significant feature of the event was the two-day conference which centred upon a number of papers read by known

1. Ibid., p.92.

2. Dunraven, *Past Times and Pastimes*, (Lon. 1922), Vol. II, p.134.

3. Young to Dunraven, 9 February 1886, R.C.I., Letter Book.

4. By 23 October 1886, Over five million had visited the exhibition. See *Imperial Federation*, I, November 1886, p.291.



federationists such as Professor Seeley, Sir Alexander Galt and Captain Colomb. Taking advantage of the presence in London of delegates from League branches throughout the empire, the conference was an opportunity to discover how far the colonies were in harmony with the mother country regarding such common issues as naval defence, reciprocity arrangements and emigration, and it has been regarded as the parent of the first Colonial Conference which met in 1887.<sup>1</sup> However, apart from this attempt to assess colonial predilections on imperial federation, another approach along these lines had already been made by federationists in parliament. On 4 June 1886, Howard Vincent asked the government if it would support the idea of official colonial representatives being invited to London for the occasion of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in order to discuss closer union of the empire for defence purposes, the joint regulation of foreign affairs and the extension of commerce.<sup>2</sup> Gladstone's reply for the government was characteristically discouraging. He confessed that he did not mind the examination of a "great political and constitutional question" being conducted along voluntary lines, but he rejected Vincent's proposal because he believed that the forthcoming Exhibition was hardly a suitable occasion when there was not one colonial premier or cabinet minister in London and, in any case, no specific federal scheme had yet met with colonial approval.<sup>3</sup> Undaunted by the Prime Minister's rebuff, Vincent was determined to persuade Gladstone and virtually re-iterated his proposal, adding that advantage could be taken of the presence in London of James Service of Victoria and Sir Alexander Stuart of New South Wales in order to discuss imperial federation.<sup>4</sup> Gladstone again rejected the proposal with a note of sarcasm informing Vincent that since both Service and Stuart sat on the opposition benches of their respective legislatures they could hardly be considered as suitable delegates to the type of conference proposed,<sup>5</sup> and there the matter ended.

1. J. Tyler, *Struggle for Imperial Unity*, pp. 112-113. For a full account of the conference see *Imperial Federation* (supplement). I, August 1886.
2. *Hansard*, 3, 306, 1015.
3. *Ibid.*, 1015-1016.
4. *Ibid.*, 1016.
5. *Ibid.*, 1016.

However, if Gladstone had personally poured cold water on such a bold proposal to set the wheels of discussion on imperial federation with the colonies in motion, progress on this front was only temporarily thwarted. At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the League on 17 July, 1886, at which delegates from League branches in the colonies also attended, A. McGoun, the secretary of the League in Canada, proposed:

that a deputation of the League shall attend upon the Prime Minister or Colonial Secretary, urging him to call a Conference, or to appoint a Royal Commission, to be composed of accredited representatives of the United Kingdom and of each of the self-governing colonies, for the purpose of suggesting some practical means whereby concerted action may be taken;

1) for placing upon a satisfactory basis the defence of the ports and commerce of the Empire in time of war,

2) for promoting direct intercourse, commercial, postal and telegraphic between the several countries of the Empire in time of peace - and any other means for securing the closer Federation or union of all parts of the Empire. 1

The fact that the resolution gained acceptability because it emphasized defence rather than trade, and referred guardedly to 'Federation or union' was an indication of how far the wording of the proposal had been subject to considerable discussion and amendment by League members.<sup>2</sup> Clearly an effort had been made to minimize official objections to the proposal, which the inclusion of commercial rearrangements would have immediately provoked, and, to this extent, the outcome must have been a disappointment to those federationists, like Vincent, Galt and Tupper, who advocated a commercial federation of the empire.

The Gladstone government having lost the general election of July 1886, the League deputation waited upon the new Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, from whom they had good reason to expect a sympathetic reception, on 11 August 1886. In the presence of Lord Salisbury, Edward Stanhope, the new Colonial Secretary, Earl Dunraven, the Under-Secretary of State for the

1. Imperial Federation, I, August 1886, p.215.

2. Tyler, op.cit., p.113.



Colonies, and Sir Robert Herbert, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, the large League deputation was introduced, in the "unavoidable absence" of Rosebery, by Lord Brassey.<sup>1</sup> Although this was certainly Brassey's most important responsibility to date in the activities of the League, it was by no means the apogee of his career in the movement and he was definitely no new recruit to League ranks. As the immensely wealthy son of the great railway contractor, Thomas Brassey had been Liberal M.P. for Hastings continuously from 1868-1886 during which time he had been Civil Lord of the Admiralty between 1880-1884 and had acquired a reputation as an expert on naval affairs, a fame augmented by the publication of Brassey's Naval Annual in 1886. Created a baron in July 1886, Brassey continued his parliamentary career in the House of Lords as an enthusiastic advocate of an expanding navy who believed that Britain's future rested upon a vigorous naval defence policy. Naturally, therefore, Brassey must be grouped with those federationists who favoured closer union by means of defence. Having attended the early Westminster Palace Hotel Conference of 1871, it was surprising that Brassey had not been one of the founder members of the League in 1884, but the peripatetic nature of his position at the Admiralty ensured that he was absent from Britain throughout that eventful year. In the mid-1880's, however, Brassey had regularly spoken in favour of closer union as a Liberal M.P. As early as April 1879, Brassey spoke of 'keeping together all the members of the Anglo-Saxon family' and of the need to 'draw closer together the scattered members of the Empire'<sup>2</sup>, while he was still praising the virtues of the 'alliance of all English-speaking people' as the tie which gave real unity to the Empire to his Hastings constituents in October 1885.<sup>3</sup> In August 1886 he joined Finch-Hatton as one of the honorary treasurers of the League, a position he held until 1892 when he became vice-president of the League.

1. A full account of the deputation is in *Imperial Federation*, I, September 1886, pp.256-258.
2. Speech delivered before the Annual Meeting of the Birkenhead Liberal Association, 17 April 1879, A.H.Loring (ed), *Papers and Addresses of Lord Brassey: Political and Miscellaneous (1861-1894)*, (Lon. 1895) p.57.
3. Speech at St. Leonards, 5 October 1885, *ibid.*, pp.149-150.



The League deputation was a large influential body of over seventy federationists. Among the assembly were such veterans of closer union as James Youl, Sir Daniel Cooper, Sir Robert Fowler, Sir Charles Nicholson, Sir Charles Clifford, Frederick Young, and Francis Labilliere - all of whom had been actively involved in the agitation of 1869-1871. There was also no shortage of M.P.s - twenty-six attended - while there was a very liberal sprinkling of representatives from the colonies.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Brassey and Colomb, all the speakers were colonials, James Service, former Premier of Victoria, Peter Redpath, representative of the League in Canada and of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce, and P.L. Van-der-Byl, of the Cape. Service was not a member of the League and he used the opportunity to express Australian concern at the presence of France in New Caledonia and Germany in New Guinea, while the other speakers concentrated their efforts on justifying the need for a conference or royal commission on imperial relations with a view to closer unity.

Salisbury's reply was certainly sympathetic, if understandingly guarded, confessing that he could not remember any such feeling 'having grown up so suddenly' as that which expressed support for imperial federation, he did not underrate the importance of the deputation and regarded it as quite remarkable since;

this wish has not yet formed itself in the shape of definite propositions. It expresses more a sentiment an instinct, a consciousness of a want, than the proposal of a formed policy to which men can pledge themselves. This seems to be still in the future; and I have known some of the most important advocates of this scheme deprecate earnestly the premature formation of definite and detailed proposals. I believe that that is a very wise conclusion, because the subjects with which you have to deal are of enormous complication and difficulty; but I think it would be a very great mistake to imagine that, because we have not definite propositions before us, therefore the movement is shadowy and unreal..... I hope that the day may come when not only we may contribute to the support materially of the means of defence, but that the men who give their lives and careers for the defence of their country may be drawn together more closely in an organised whole for the defence of the whole Empire. 2

1. Imperial Federation, I, op.cit., p.256.

2. Salisbury's Speech, Imperial Federation, ibid., pp.258-259.



Coming from the Prime Minister, this was a most encouraging speech and, as The Times pointed out, Salisbury had not given definite assurances to comply with the deputation's requests, but he had moved as far in that direction as the circumstances justified and as practical statesmanship would allow.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of his speech, Salisbury seemed far happier to acquiesce in the need for closer union for defence purposes than in commenting on trade policy, which he had admitted to be a delicate though interesting question connected with imperial federation. In general, however, most federationists must have left the Colonial Office in high spirits with every indication of hope for the success of their resolution,

Yet, despite the euphoria which the League deputation had manufactured, a private remark by Lord Brassey revealed a distinct note of gloom about the League's future. Writing to Lord Rosebery, the League Chairman, on the following day of the deputation, Brassey claimed it as 'a success', but his letter contained private thoughts which would have shocked many adherents to the cause:

As treasurer I have been looking into finances.  
We are poor. Two questions demand consideration.

- A. The continued publication of our journal.
- B. The possibility of fusion hereafter with the Colonial Institute. I hear they have ample funds.

No hasty decision should be taken, but these points may come up later. Meanwhile, we are doing good. 2

On the face of it, these were quite startling comments which were given added significance because they emanated from the pen of the new treasurer. Here was a League official displaying obvious doubts about the organisation's financial capacity to sustain its independent journal which had only been in existence for eight months. Further, Brassey's suggestion of a possible merger with the Royal Colonial Institute in order to overcome the financial dilemma illustrated the weakness of the League's administrative structure in coping with the grandiose objectives which it had set itself. Clearly, reliance on personal donations to supplement the League's meagre

1. The Times, 12 August 1886.

2. Brassey to Rosebery, 12 August 1886, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10086, ff. 55-56.

income from membership and from the journal was unsatisfactory from a practical standpoint. The fact that Brassey had already undertaken to contribute fifty pounds a month for ten months to League coffers in order to assist the League in advancing the cause of imperial federation throughout 1886 gave an added legitimacy to his speculations.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not he knew it, Brassey's fears of financial insolvency did not represent a new departure of thought on the League's prosperity. Rather, in view of Frederick Young's gloomy forebodings a year earlier, they fitted into an already established pattern of disappointment vis-à-vis finance.

Salisbury's promise that the government would give serious consideration to the requests of the League deputation was ultimately borne out by the facts. Even the traditional scepticism of the Colonial Office appeared to be overcome when the assistant under-secretary, Robert Meade, admitted that the League delegation was "important and representative"<sup>2</sup>, but the League's triumph was not a total victory. In September 1886, Edward Stanhope resigned the vice-chairmanship of the League owing to his responsibilities as the new Colonial Secretary, thus negating the whole point of having introduced a constitutional amendment providing for two League figureheads in May. Given his unexpected resignation and the cautious role he played in the preparations and activities leading to the arrangements for a colonial conference to be held in London in 1887, it must be assumed that his official position as Colonial Secretary proved to be too embarrassing to be reconciled with the less august position of vice-chairman of the League.

When a distinguished member of the League's Executive Committee, Sir Samuel Wilson, asked the government whether it would be willing to establish a joint committee by both Houses in order to study imperial federation, Stanhope had responded in a very bashful manner<sup>3</sup> and when

1. Imperial Federation, I, July 1886, p.186.
2. C.O. 323/364, Minutes of 31 August 1886, quoted in R.A. Shields, *The Imperial Federationists and their Cause*, Pennsylvania Ph.D.(1961), p.131.
3. Hansard 3, 3 September 1886, 308, p.1182.



Wilson pursued this line of approach in the House, Stanhope admitted that the wheels of consideration for a colonial conference had been set in motion, but he studiously avoided any reference to imperial federation. Evidence of the growing interest in imperial affairs, however, was given royal expression in the Queen's Speech during the prorogation of parliament in September when federationists received added encouragement in the royal words:

there is on all sides a growing desire to draw closer in every practical way the bonds which unite the various portions of the Empire. <sup>1</sup>

Thus, Stanhope's circular letter of 25 November 1886 inviting the colonial governments to send delegates to attend a conference in London in 1887, the year of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, in order to discuss practical means of improving imperial defence and communications was an official recognition of the increasing interest in 'empire'. It was significant, however, that Stanhope's circular despatch specifically designated imperial defence and imperial communications as the two key subjects for debate, and deprecated the discussion of any topics falling within the range known as "Political Federation" on the grounds that there had been no obvious expression of colonial opinion in favour of it.<sup>2</sup> The exclusion of imperial federation from the agenda of the conference was, of course, entirely in accordance with Salisbury's cautious optimism expressed to the League deputation of August. Yet, despite the obvious Colonial Office rebuff to the League, the convocation of the first Colonial Conference in 1887 has been regarded as a major achievement of the League.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the League's share in the summoning of the Colonial Conference was difficult to estimate and the issue is really only of academic interest. One writer on the subject has argued that the League cannot be given the sole credit for the convening of the conference since there had been a recognisable growing interest in imperial affairs, especially in defence matters, for some time and that some sort of working arrangement for the discussion of imperial

1. Ibid., 309, 1350.

2. C.O. 312/64, Colonial Office Confidential Print, Circular letter to Colonial Governors, R.A.Shields, op.cit., p.128.

3. Tyler, op.cit., p.115.

defence would have emerged even without the prompting of the League.<sup>1</sup> In the hierarchy of causes which accounted for the decision to convene the conference, the actual role of the League must be subordinated in importance to the established concern for colonial contributions to naval defence and to the occasion of the Golden Jubilee. Tyler's view that the League's role was indispensable was therefore an exaggeration, but it must be added that the changing climate of opinion, which was the sine qua non for such a conference, was itself the partial result of League exertions over the past two years. Thus, the first Colonial Conference was at least a by-product of League efforts since 1884 and it represented an important institutional success for federationists.

In the years after 1884 it was increasingly difficult to separate two broad strains of imperialism, and imperial federation could easily be subsumed within the more glittering, spectacle of territorial expansion as coined in the watchwords 'scramble for Africa'. By 1886, the term 'imperialist' had become 'a praise rather than an abuse'<sup>2</sup> and the Colonial Conference of 1887 seemed to represent a symbol of the age which incorporated both the 'old' imperialism of consolidation and the 'new' imperialism of expansion. Whether the imperialism of expansion represented change or continuity in imperial policy and whether there were oversimplifications involved in denoting specific 'schools of thought' on imperialism are still issues of controversy among historians of empire, but the fact remains that during these years the imperial federation movement struggled to maintain its separate identity in the mainstream of imperialist fervour and faced increasing competition for public attention.

1. J.E.Kendle, The Colonial Conference System, 1887-1911, London Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1965, p.20. C.O. 323/366, W.F.Murray (secretary to the London Chamber of Commerce) to Strathope, 9 December 1886 quoted in Shields, op.cit., p.131 also shows that the League did not originate the idea of a colonial conference.
2. R.Koebner and H.Schmidt, Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840-1960, (Cambridge 1964), p.186.



not unnaturally, the League made much of the royal blessing given to closer union and on 15 October 1886 a new manifesto was published and circulated in the name of Lord Rosebery on behalf of the Executive Committee of the League. Although claiming that the royal announcement constituted 'an epoch' in the history of the movement and that the League's policy had been seriously recognised for the first time by Her Majesty's Government, the carefully worded circular did not suggest any new plan of campaign and merely urged League branches to take full advantage of the bonanza.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the most striking feature of the manifesto was its emphasis on the fact that no definite scheme of federation had ever been advocated by the League and that the headquarters in London invited all branches to keep it informed of any progress which they might make as a result of their renewed efforts.

By the end of 1886, the hopes of all federationists centred on the forthcoming Colonial Conference which, by bringing the colonies into direct contact with the mother country in order to discuss matters of mutual concern, seemed to offer the best chance of success in terms of practical results. After two and a half years of complaining the League's record of success had been limited as regards concrete achievements, which was hardly surprising given its extremely precarious financial position and the diversity of its membership. Federationists could at least congratulate themselves on having avoided those issues, like trade and specific schemes of federation, which would have precipitated open disunity and, apart from the Irish question, they had largely preserved their aloofness from party politics. Yet, with regard to this last point, there was clear evidence to show that some federationists had joined the League for reasons which were not entirely in accordance with the posture of neutrality in party politics.

Two considerations may help to shed some light on the motives for joining the League of Sir Stafford Northcote and James Bryce, both early members of the new organisation in 1884. Northcote's distinguished

1. The original letter of the Chairman to League members can be found in Imperial Federation Papers, mss. II, Royal Commonwealth Society, London. The letter was also published in full in Imperial Federation, November, 1886, pp. 300-301.

ministerial record as a former President of the Board of Trade and Chancellor of the Exchequer in previous Conservative governments, coupled with his lengthy experience in earlier organisations connected with colonial questions, such as the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science and the Royal Colonial Institute, made him a valuable recruit to League ranks. Such credentials would have entitled any person who possessed them to speak with some authority on imperial affairs and thus Northcote's private opinion of imperial federation is of considerable significance to this survey. Writing to a correspondent before the League was even formally established, Northcote was prepared to support the federationists in their quest for closer union, but there was some doubt about his sincerity:

They should be encouraged to do their best to produce a plan which we could discuss in a friendly spirit; and they should collect and diffuse information. I don't see any harm in our making a grant for this purpose; but we must be careful not to let it take such a form as would conveniently connect the leaders with any particular schemes.

The idea of a great Imperial (Federation) including all or most of our principal colonies is the one which has the most fascination about it. I believe it would be impossible to work it in the form which is sometimes spoken of \_\_\_\_\_ that of absolute free trade within the Empire and a general tariff on all outside produce. But we might try whether a council of some sort might be established on which the colonies as well as the principal seats of industry in this country might be represented, and questions of common interest might be discussed..... The scheme of a great Colonial Federative Council, to be established by Act of Parliament, or by authority of government, hangs fire;.....If possible, let us be the first to get hold of the question. I will take an opportunity of discussing it with Lord Salisbury. 1

1. Northcote to R. Winn, first Baron St. Oswald, 6 September 1884, Salisbury Papers, Class D., Vol. 17., ff. 186-187. Italics the author's. There is no trace of a discussion with Salisbury.



what was significant about this correspondence was not Northcote's private reservations about imperial federation, but the fact that he thought it might be useful for the Conservative Party. Northcote's subsequent reluctance to play an active role in League affairs and his increasing disinterest in imperial federation after he became Lord Iddesleigh in 1885 would seem to vindicate this allegation of insincerity.

The second consideration which indicated that concern for party politics haunted the minds of at least some federationists involved the role of James Bryce. At the end of 1886, Bryce was still busy parrying the verbal blows of Edward Freeman against imperial federation, but his motives for joining the League and for accepting the presidency of the Oxford branch of the League were also questionable from the standpoint of dedication to the cause:

Further, the movement exists, and the question is, shall we let it go its own way, make foolish and mischievous proposals, get into the hands of Tories and be used for selfish political purposes by them; or shall we try to keep it under control and out of Tory hands ? 1

As one of the preponderant group of Liberal M.P.s who attended the founding conference of July 1884, Bryce's major fear appears to have been the fact that the Conservative Party may have regarded the League as a vehicle for their own designs. On the basis of these two pieces of evidence from accredited representatives of both political parties, therefore, it must be acknowledged that membership of the League was a matter of mere political expediency for at least some so-called federationists.

In many ways, the idea of avoiding party politics in such an emotive sphere of public policy was in any case chimerical and it was hardly surprising therefore that, despite efforts to eschew party conflict in the striving for imperial unity, the party label occasionally appeared at times when issues of a particularly controversial nature arose. The controversy of 1886 which above all else served to introduce a degree of polarisation between Liberals and Tories within League ranks was the Irish issue, and it is a development which deserves separate attention insofar as it helped or hindered the cause of imperial federation.

1. Bryce to Freeman, 24 December 1886, Bryce Papers, ms. 9, f.259.

### Ireland and Imperial Federation

As the major issue of the parliamentary session of 1886, the Irish Home Rule controversy presented imperial federationists with a dilemma. Some of them regarded Home Rule as tantamount to imperial dismemberment, while others believed that the concession of self-government to Ireland in accordance with the Liberal tradition of freedom and self-reliance would be conducive to a wider scheme of imperial unity. It is tempting to show that this division of thought was identical with the division between Liberal and Conservative federationist M.P.s and there is some foundation for such an identification. However, there is a danger of oversimplifying what was a complex question by this kind of approach.

Clearly, party politics were the most influential factor which determined the views of most M.P.s upon the Irish question, but this fact must not be allowed to obscure an immense number of gradations of thought which characterised federationist assessments of the Irish controversy. M.P.s who belonged to the General Committee of the League naturally attract the historian in a manner which the less well-known federationists do not, but the importance of the role of M.P.s in the movement must not be overstated, and the differences which lay underneath party labels must not be minimised. For many federationists, party politics were simply irrelevant to the Irish conundrum; they viewed the Irish question in a purely imperialist context and closer union was their over-riding concern.

If attention is focussed solely on the federationist M.P.s, there can be no doubt that an overwhelming number of them opposed Irish Home Rule. A study of the division list of M.P.s who voted on Gladstone's "Government of Ireland Bill" on 7 June 1886 shows that only eighteen federationist M.P.s supported Irish Home Rule, all of them being Liberals, while fifty-nine of them opposed it.<sup>1</sup> A more detailed point of interest

1. A "federationist" M.P. was one who was included in the list of the General Committee of the League as published in the May 1886 edition of Imperial Federation (no list was published for either June or July). The statistics are arrived at by comparing this list of M.P.s who were League members with the House of Commons division list of 7 June 1886, Hansard, 3, 806, 1240-1245.



is that of the twelve M.P.s who were also members of the League's Executive Committee, only four of them favoured Home Rule and the remaining eight voted against it. This shows clearly how far these public men regarded Irish Home Rule as the antithesis of imperial unity. An even closer look at the division list reveals another significant fact. At the time of the great debate on Irish Home Rule in parliament, the League boasted seventy-seven M.P.s : forty-nine Conservatives and twenty-eight Liberals. Apart from the growing number of Tory members, these figures also demonstrated the difficulties of the Liberal party because ten of the original twenty-eight Liberal M.P.s opposed Gladstone's Irish measure and subsequently transferred their political allegiance to Liberal Unionism after 1886.

In party terms, these figures confirm the argument that, where Ireland was concerned, a polarization of opinion between Liberal and Conservative federationist M.P.s did exist, and they also show that over three-quarters of the M.P.s who belonged to the League denounced Home Rule. As long as Gladstone remained obsessed with Ireland and the Liberal party was pledged to his policy of Home Rule, the issue proved to be a fairly continuous source of embarrassment for a movement which sought to remain above party politics, and it weakened the Liberal party's association with the League. Indeed, never again was Liberal representation to come near Tory membership in terms of the numbers of House of Commons men attached to the General Committee.

Unfortunately, W. E. Forster did not live long enough to witness the introduction of Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill in the spring of 1886, but he did comment upon the relationship of the Irish issue to imperial federation in a letter to Sir George Bowen shortly before his death. Bowen was an advocate of Home Rule which he regarded as a stepping-stone towards imperial federation, but Forster was much less optimistic:

There are two marked differences between our relations with the Colonies on the one hand and with Ireland on the other hand; (1) Ireland has already what the colonies have not, viz. her voice in foreign affairs, and her share in the common defence; (2) but she is not the independent home government which the colonies have. The great difficulty, however, is that there is no proposal and hope by Federation to tighten the bond with our Colonies, Home Rule in Ireland would, on the

rate at present, be used as a lever for loosening the bond which unites the two islands - probably even for severing the Union. 1

Forster had, in fact, fastened on to two considerations which were reportedly discussed in the great debate on Home Rule in the House of Commons and which were central to the whole relationship between Ireland and the federationist cause. In the first place, Ireland could not be treated as a self-governing colony simply because she was part of the United Kingdom and was governed by the British Parliament where she had representatives and, secondly, because of her representation in the House of Commons she already had at least a theoretical voice in the formulation and administration of foreign and defence policies - something which the colonies did not possess. These two considerations really rendered the theory of imperial federation inapplicable to the Irish issue.

Yet, federationists like Sir George Bowen and Sir Alexander Galt refused to admit that the Irish question was separate from the cause of imperial federation. In a speech before the Royal Colonial Society in June 1886, Bowen argued that imperial federation was 'the system that would render best and safest....the concession....of some measure of local autonomy for Ireland,' but it was not quite clear whether he advocated federation as an excuse for Home Rule in Ireland or whether he supported Home Rule as a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of a wider scheme of imperial federation.<sup>2</sup> Galt was much more emphatic on the relationship between Home Rule and imperial federation. In 1883, he had unequivocally stated that Irish Home Rule was an essential precondition of imperial federation<sup>3</sup> while, in 1886, his opinion had travelled as far as advocating local parliaments for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, in a truly imperial legislature in which the colonies would join.<sup>4</sup>

1. Forster to Bowen, August 1885, S.Lane-Poole (ed.), *Thirty Years of Colonial Government*, Vol. 1, pp.355-360.
2. G.F.Bowen, 'Federation of the British Empire,' 15 June 1886, *I.R.C.I.*, Vol. XVII, pp.282-316.
3. Sir A.Galt, 'The Relations of the Colonies to the Empire: Present and Past,' January 1883, *I.R.C.I.*, Vol. XIV, pp.391-408.
4. Sir A.Galt, 'The Means by Which Imperial Federation May be Carried Out', 1 July, 1886, *Imperial Federation*, 1, August 1886, p.271.



Ironically, the trend of Galt's thinking as a federationist coincided with Edward Freeman's arguments in his great critique on imperial federation. Although ridiculing the terminology, Freeman had argued persuasively that if the federal principle was to be applied to the British Empire it was more logical to allow England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales to enter the new union as separate states than for Britain to attempt to represent all of them. For Freeman this was a proposition which was entirely in accordance with federal principles and this explained why he regarded federation, though not imperial federation, as a possible solution to the Irish problem. Curiously, therefore, his acceptance of the federal principle as a method of solving the Irish problem placed Freeman in the same position vis-a-vis Ireland as many federationists, albeit for entirely different reasons. In his correspondence with Bryce, however, Freeman showed that he was not a positive advocate of separatism within the United Kingdom, although, as a confirmed Home Ruler, he did confess rather reluctantly that 'there seemed to be more of a tendency to federation in Britain than he had imagined.'<sup>1</sup>

Because the political concept of federalism necessarily presumed the existence of independent self-government, it was therefore natural for many federationists to support Irish Home Rule as a stepping-stone towards a wider, but as yet undefined, scheme of imperial federation, and indeed one of the most significant features of the debate on the Irish question both in the House of Commons and in the Liberal party during and after 1886 was this 'tendency to federation'. Gladstone's problem lay in reconciling the traditional Liberal principle of self-government to the widely accepted need for maintaining the integrity of the empire. Yet, it was here that Liberal policy was suddenly complicated by numerous cross-currents and the order of priorities within Liberal ranks varied according to how members of the party envisaged the future role of the party after 1886. Thus, one source of serious disagreement was whether or not Irish P.s should remain at Westminster after the establishment of an Irish Parliament. For federationists like Rosebery, reversion was a cardinal

<sup>1</sup>. Freeman to Bryce, 4 July 1886, Bryce Papers, ms. 7, ff 236-237.



feature of their imperialistic conception of Home Rule and, in any case, total exclusion would have left them vulnerable to the damaging claim of their critics that Home Rule was synonymous with the dismemberment of the empire. For others, notably William Harcourt, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, retention was considered necessary in order to ensure a Liberal majority in the House of Commons after 1886.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the order of priorities, however, total exclusion seemed too much like separatism to attract much support in an age of imperialism.

In introducing the Bill to the House of Commons on 8 April 1886, Gladstone referred to the impossibility of drawing a distinction between affairs which were Imperial, on which Irish representatives would normally be allowed to vote, and affairs which were not Imperial.<sup>2</sup> This observation led the Prime Minister to the conclusion that Irish M.P.s could not feasibly remain at Westminster and it also ruled out any idea of partial retention which would have introduced a constitutional dilemma if a ministry had a majority in the absence of Irish M.P.s, but lost it immediately they returned. Such a posture placed Gladstone in the position of preserving the fiscal unity of the empire by arranging that three-quarters of the total revenue collected in Ireland (from customs and excise duties) should be levied under the Imperial authority, paid into the Imperial treasury and appropriated towards paying for a fixed Irish contribution to Imperial expenditure, yet denying Irish members a voice in such fiscal proposals. By guaranteeing an Irish contribution to Imperial expenditure and safeguarding free trade, however, Gladstone invited the criticism that his proposal involved 'taxation without representation' - a contingency which had occasioned the revolt of the American colonies a century earlier. As an ingenious effort to reconcile imperial unity with diversity of legislation, the scheme also attracted criticism on the grounds that it broke up the political unity of the United Kingdom and that it was a hybrid measure which could not satisfy two rival concepts of Home Rule: the nationalist and the imperialist. As we have seen, there were many Liberals - including all the federationists) - who were strongly in favour of the retention of Irish

1. D.A.Harmer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, p.152.

2. Hansard, (3), 304, 1056-1057.



M.P.s<sup>1</sup>. They clearly regarded total exclusion as too closely identified with the aspirations of Irish nationalism whereas the kind of settlement that they hoped would emerge from the debate was one which would strengthen the imperial idea.

The claim of the minority of federationists that federation represented "the one satisfactory solution to the Irish difficulty"<sup>2</sup> certainly seemed to gain increasing importance in the years after the failure of Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill. In 1889 Rosebery, still the President of the League, wrote to Gladstone that the longer the Liberals prevaricated in working out the details of the next Home Rule Bill, the more it would "approximate to the federal principle."<sup>3</sup> Another federationist, Ronald Munro-Ferguson, Liberal M.P. for Leith Burghs and a close confidant of Rosebery, wrote of the importance of "Home Rule being an item in the Imperial Federation Scheme". He obviously regretted the League's official refusal to take sides on the issue of Home Rule when he complained that "if we had only made our start on that line, instead of on the parochial, how much healthier matters would be."<sup>4</sup> Another Liberal, Hugh Childers, who was not a federationist but who had been a vice-president of the Royal Colonial Institute since 1868 and had a great interest in the empire, wrote to Gladstone that the 'Federal idea' had been gaining ground in Scotland where Scottish Home Rule was growing rapidly, and he felt that federalism had to be either adopted or repudiated by the Liberal party once and for all.<sup>5</sup> Gladstone's reply was cool and emphatic. He refused to accept that it was necessary 'as a condition of settling Irish Home Rule to say eye or no on Imperial Federation'.<sup>6</sup> Coming from the Liberal

1. J.Saxon Mills, Sir Edward Cook, K.B.E. : A Biography, (Lon. 1921), pp. 84-85. Rosebery's conception of the Irish problem was imperialistic and he favoured retention, but he was prepared to subordinate this consideration to Gladstone's scheme in order to arrive at some formula which would solve the problem. After 1886, Rosebery regarded the federal principle as the means by which the Irish problem could be solved.
2. F.Young to H.V.Holton, 30 April 1886, R.C.I. Letter Book.
3. Rosebery to Gladstone, 11 August 1889, Gladstone Papers, Add. Mss.44289,f.9.
4. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 30 August 1889, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10017, ff. 148-149.
5. Childers to Gladstone, 10 October 1889, Gladstone Papers, Add.Mss.44132, ff. 295-296.
6. Gladstone to Childers, 11 October 1889, *ibid.*, f 298.

leader who regarded imperial federation as 'glorified form of Downing Street government',<sup>1</sup> this was a natural attitude for him to take. Even during the epic debate on the first Home Rule Bill in 1886 Gladstone, although fully cognisant of parliamentary concern for imperial unity, made no gesture towards a consideration of imperial federation as part of his Irish scheme. Indeed, the evidence contained in a letter to John Morley in which he considered fears about imperial unity to be 'needless'<sup>2</sup> demonstrated how far the Liberal leader was concerned about imperial federation. For Gladstone, imperial federation was simply irrelevant to the Irish question.

It was certainly true that Gladstone based his whole approach to Home Rule on the principle and practice of autonomy which he held to be 'perfectly compatible with the full maintainance of Imperial unity',<sup>3</sup> and this admission in the House of Commons embodied a consistency of thought which was typical of his view of empire. Doubtless, Gladstone would have liked to give full colonial status to Ireland, but his knowledge that this would have been almost wholly unacceptable to parliament forced him to rely on what the Marquis of Hartington called a 'novel experiment',<sup>4</sup> an attempt to govern a country according to a system the like of which had never been used before. It was here, between the granting of colonial status and the maintainance of the legislative union, that the idea of federalism was mooted as a more satisfactory compromise. Without doubt, several federationists looked to the federal principle as the remedy for Ireland's problems and as the precursor of imperial unity, but the chief responsibility for suggesting federation as a possible solution to the Irish difficulties in 1886 was attributed to Joseph Chamberlain.

1. Viscount H. Gladstone, *After Thirty Years*, (Lon. 1928), p. 100.

2. Gladstone to Morley, 21 April 1886, *op. cit.*, Add. Mss. 44548, f. 75.

3. Hansard, (3), 10 May 1886, 304, .577.

4. B. Holland, *The Life of the Duke of Devonshire*, (Lon. 1911), Vol. II, p. 152.



Chamberlain's role in the Liberal split of 1886 has been the subject of constant debate and reappraisal by historians, but his attitude towards federation and, more especially, imperial federation has in contrast been neglected. In view of his later career as Colonial Secretary and champion of the Zollverein project as a means of effecting the economic unity of the empire, Chamberlain's reluctance to join the Imperial Federation League in the 'eighties and his comparative silence on the subject of imperial federation may have seemed strange. Garvin claimed that, although he was sympathetically disposed towards the idea of imperial unity in the 'eighties, Chamberlain considered the adoption of actual schemes to be premature<sup>1</sup>. Yet, there is clear evidence to show that 1886 was an important year in the evolution of Chamberlain's thought both on federation vis-a-vis Ireland and on imperial federation per se, and, although not a League member, he played a significant part in introducing the principle of federation as a subject for debate and discussion in the House of Commons.

With regard to Ireland, Chamberlain remained a consistent opponent of any Home Rule scheme which involved a weakening of the imperial connection, and this included the departure of Irish M.P.s from Westminster. Like many Liberals, Chamberlain's conception of Home Rule was imperialistic and was inextricably tied to the value he placed on empire. By anticipating a harder future for Britain in a more fiercely competitive world in the late Victorian era, the empire began to assume a new importance to him as a means of resisting foreign competition and military dangers so that, in the light of his gradual reappraisal of the possibilities of empire, it was therefore logical for him to deprecate Gladstone's version of Home Rule as synonymous with imperial disintegration. A recent writer on the role of Joseph Chamberlain in the political crisis of 1886 has claimed that the Radical leader's main aim in this troubled year was not so much to destroy Gladstone's Home Rule policy as to destroy Gladstone's influence over the party; an influence which he identified as obstructing the passage of a backlog of Radical reforms.<sup>2</sup>

1. J.L.Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, (Lon. 1933), Vol. I, pp.494, and 498.
2. D.Harmer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, pp. 120-121.

However accurate this interpretation may be, it must not be allowed to obscure the irrefutable fact that Chamberlain had begun to toy with the idea of federation in relation both to Ireland and the empire.

Chamberlain's attitude towards federation appears to have undergone a number of reversals which gave credence to assertions of inconsistency by his critics. During the Christmas period of 1885, he wrote to his Radical partner, Charles Dilke, acknowledging the fact that federation would involve "the entire recasting of the British Constitution and the full and complete adoption of the American system".<sup>1</sup> Despite Dilke's repudiation of "any scheme of Federation" he had ever heard of<sup>2</sup>, Chamberlain contented himself with supporting "the principle of federation" and made no secret of where he thought the central issue lay:

The retention of the Irish representatives is clearly the touchstone. If they go, separation must follow. If they remain, federation is possible whenever local assemblies are established in England and Scotland.<sup>3</sup>

On the 9 April 1886, Chamberlain kindled a fire which spread throughout the House of Commons when he revealed his view that the solution to the Irish conundrum might be found in "some form of federation".<sup>4</sup> Yet, in rejecting the federative examples of Germany and the United States, and, at least implicitly, the idea of imperial federation, the Radical leader offered no detailed scheme of federation between Ireland and England which might have satisfied the House. Given the traditional dislike of the House of Commons for novel suggestions and ill-defined expedients, the wisdom of Chamberlain's strategy was at least questionable. Before an Irish legislature could be federated, it had first to be created.

1. Chamberlain to Dilke, 26 December 1885, S. Gwynn and G. Tuckwell, *The Life of the Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Dilke*, (Lon. 1917), Vol. II, pp. 199-201.
2. Dilke to Chamberlain, 1 May 1886, *ibid.*, p. 216.
3. Chamberlain to Dilke, 3 May 1886, *ibid.*, p. 217.
4. *Hansard*, (3), 304, 1206.



In the event, Chamberlain's proposal was received with a mixture of surprise and consternation. The indignation felt by many members was doubtless due to a widespread conviction in the impracticability of Chamberlain's sudden public conversion to the federal principle, but there was also a good deal of confusion evident in the debate. From that point onwards almost every contributor to the debate commented in some way on the merits and demerits of federation, and imperial federationists must have been delighted with what appeared to be a shifting emphasis towards the wider implications of federation for the empire. Certainly this was how some members of the House of Commons interpreted Chamberlain's speech on federation. T.M. Healy, the Nationalist member for Londonderry South, did not oppose a scheme of federation per se, but he complained that:

Ireland,.....should not have to wait until the Colonies -  
Victoria, South Africa, Nova Zembla, and Heaven knows  
where else the British Empire ranges - consent to  
federate in an Imperial Senate.<sup>1</sup>

As far as Healy was concerned, the Irish problem needed an immediate solution, not one which prescribed further delay, and he obviously took Chamberlain to mean a proposal which subordinated Ireland to the wider concern for federating the empire. However, as the debate unfolded, it was clear that Healy was not alone in making this assumption. John Morley, an avowed opponent of imperial federation, spoke of the ambiguity of Chamberlain's scheme and of "airy fabrics of federation" which meant effectively that the question would be suspended until "all the Cabinet, all England, all Ireland, and all our Colonies agree to some common scheme of federation."<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain's retort that he had said nothing about the colonies was accurate, but Morley's claim that the Radical leader had implicitly meant to include them seemed to carry more weight than his adversary's quiet denials. This situation was really a direct outcome of the tendency for two separate issues occasionally to merge and overlap. Thus, an area of common ground for both pro- and anti- Home Rulers and for federationists was the unity of the empire, and the Irish question was not the sort of problem which would admit a convenient demarcation between arguments confined to Ireland and arguments specifically related to imperial federation. The situation was obviously

1. Ibid, 1210.

2. Ibid, 1271-1272.

complex so that there was no singular well-defined pattern of interpretation placed upon the untidy relationship between Ireland and imperial federation. Doubtless many participants in the debate on Irish Home Rule were determined to compartmentalise the problem and hoped to deal with it on its own intrinsic merits irrespective of larger, but separate issues. Others, and notably federationists, were obsessed with linking Ireland to their grandiose vision of the imperialism of unity and consolidation, which recurring analogies with the colonies seemed to authenticate. Thus, at the risk of being intolerably trite, it must be pointed out that the arguments for and against Home Rule, in those areas where federationists rubbed shoulders with those who were not committed to a grander plan, could be shaped to suit virtually any hierarchy of thought. In this way, such staunch opponents of imperial federation as Morley and Freeman, found themselves supporting Home Rule along with Frederick Young, Sir Alexander Galt and Lord Rosebery who were recognised federationists. Such strange bedfellows exemplify the point that the Irish issue involved a variety of cross-currents of thought and opinion which frequently led discussion down unintended paths and sometimes made it inextricably confused.

Henry Labouchere, a former parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies and a conspicuous <sup>imperial</sup> proponent of the Radical School in the Liberal party which opposed 'active/policies'<sup>1</sup>, also seems to have thought that Chamberlain had advocated imperial federation rather than just federation as a solution to the Irish question. Referring to it as 'an extraordinary scheme', Labouchere complained that:

the Irish Question was to wait until the  
Canadians, New Zealanders, and all were  
asked to join in a scheme of federation. 2

Sir Charles Russell, Gladstone's Attorney-General, made the same mistake. As the great debate entered its sixth night, Russell pointed to the fact that:

as regards the state of opinion in the Colonies  
and in England and Scotland on the question....it  
is impossible to hold out the least prospect that  
within any reasonable time a scheme of federation  
will be ripe for practical application.<sup>3</sup>

1. R.J.Hind, Henry Labouchere and the Empire 1880-1905, (Lon. 1972), p.36.
2. 18 May 1886, Hansard, 3, 305, 1341.
3. 25 May 1886, *ibid.*, 306, 55.



Not only did several members misunderstand Chamberlain's advocacy of federation, many more used it consciously to declare their opinions on imperial federation. Murray Finch-Hatton, the Conservative member for Spalding in Lincolnshire and a member of the League's General Committee, represented the majority of federationists who opposed Home Rule and feared for the safety of the empire. During the course of the mammoth debate on Home Rule in parliament, Finch-Hatton deprecated the way in which Ireland had become a party political battleground and he outlined a scheme of imperial federation which would grant to Ireland, and to Wales, Scotland and England if they desired it, control over their domestic affairs, while it would also be possible to have an Imperial Parliament sitting at Westminster in which 'every part of the Empire' might be represented according to the burden which they bore of Imperial taxation. For Finch-Hatton, the federal principle was the obvious remedy for the Irish problem, but he also believed that it would be 'an entire solution, not only of this question, but of many other great questions that affected the Empire'<sup>1</sup>, and thus the Conservative member for Spalding was in the rather novel position of advocating imperial federation first and Irish Home Rule second: a view which ignored the vitally important point that the essence of federation rested upon previously existing independent bodies, and was therefore inapplicable to Ireland in 1886.

In effect, Finch-Hatton's argument was based on a false premise, giving added authority to the criticisms and warnings of Edward Freeman, who blamed terminology for unnecessary confusion. In any case, his plan was never seriously considered by the House of Commons, and the comments of two members in particular were quietly devastating. T. Burt, the Liberal Radical member for Morpeth, alluded to Finch-Hatton's scheme as 'a very poetic description' of federation and one which was extremely attractive, although it was 'a simple vision' and they could not really wait 'until the whole British Empire was ripe for Federation'.<sup>2</sup> Samuel Whitbread, the wealthy entrepreneur

1. 12 April 1886, *ibid.*, 304, 1368.

2. *Ibid.*, 304, 1371.

and Liberal member for Bedford, condemned Chamberlain's advocacy of federalism which would 'make large alterations both in the Parliamentary Government of England and Scotland' and this criticism applied equally to Finch-Hatton's scheme which involved changes for which, according to Whitbread, there was 'no demand'.<sup>1</sup>

Another twist to the relationship between Home Rule and imperial federation occurred during the great debate in parliament in 1886 when certain members who did not advocate federation as a solution to the Irish problem, nevertheless used the arguments of the federationists as a means of destroying support for Home Rule. Thus, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, a former Chief Secretary for Ireland and Colonial Secretary under Disraeli, was a member of the League's General Committee, but he did not favour federation as a solution to the Irish problem. Yet, on 13 April 1886 Hicks Beach launched an attack on Gladstone's Home Rule Bill which could easily have been mistaken for an argument used by those federationists who regarded Home Rule as a first step towards imperial federation:

when all other countries in the world are consolidating their resources, when our most remote Colonies are endeavouring to draw together in closer union with the Mother Country, we should be asked to take the first step in splitting up the very kernel around which our great Empire is formed. 2

this was a simple matter of interpretation. Hicks Beach was using the growing popularity of imperial unity as a contrast to the apparently separatist nature of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill in order to show how it worked against the tide of current concern for empire. In this way, he rather melodramatically referred to Home Rule as 'a step backward' in the history of Britain.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as we have seen, many federationists argued that Home Rule was consistent with the widespread interest in the unity of the empire simply because it would make imperial federation easier to achieve.

1. Ibid., 304, 1399-1400.

2. Hansard, (3), 304, 1518-1519.

3. Ibid., 1519.



To them, Irish self-government did not necessarily mean Irish separation; it was an early opportunity to create more favourable conditions for the application of the federal principle at a later date.

When Gladstone opened the discussion on the second reading of the Home Rule Bill on 10 May 1886, the debate was frequently interspersed with references to imperial federation and its relationship to Ireland. S. Hoare, the Conservative member for Norwich, argued that the Colonial Exhibition might have been regarded as the commencement of the 'great work' of imperial federation, but he feared that the colonies 'would not care to join in such a scheme of federation if the United Kingdom was first to be broken up', and he was convinced that they would remain aloof because 'they would feel that if we could not keep our own kith and kin together we would not be expected to keep our colonies.'<sup>1</sup> B. Fletcher, the Liberal member for Chippenham in Wiltshire, made no effort to invalidate his predecessor's comments and proceeded to put the case for establishing local government in Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales. According to Fletcher, who was not a League member, the various M.P.s from these areas would meet at Westminster to discuss 'Imperial work alone' and this arrangement 'would lead up to the federation of our colonies.'<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, Fletcher was shortly followed by a recognised federationist, Viscount Ebrington, who opposed Home Rule. As the Liberal member for Tiverton, Ebrington had attended the decisive Westminster Palace Hotel meeting of July 1884, and he displayed a concern for imperial federation in his speech to the House of Commons, but he concluded that Home Rule involved 'putting an obstacle in the way of federation' especially since it meant establishing a dependency in which 'a large section of people have always hitherto declared themselves to be in favour of independence.'<sup>3</sup> This view probably owed something to a knowledge of the readiness of the colonies to set up tariffs against British manufacturers, even though Gladstone's measure had provided for the fiscal unity of the empire, and it was usually couched in the familiar terminology of 'centrifugal forces.'

1. 10 May, 1886, *ibid.*, 305, 635

2. *Ibid.*, 305., 637

3. *Ibid.*, 305, 666

The centrifugal aspect of Irish Home Rule was, of course, one of the main talking-points in the debate and a feature of many federationist arguments, although, like several other views, it was used to support various opinions. The emphasis of F.A.Yeo, the Liberal member for Gower in Glamorgan, was representative of that body of opinion which regarded Irish Home Rule as 'a promise of Home Rule for Wales, for Scotland, and the rest of the United Kingdom', an argument originally propounded by Murray-Finch-Hatton earlier in the debate.<sup>1</sup> As a supporter of imperial federation, Yeo believed in the retention of Irish M.P.s at Westminster and put forward what he felt was a solution to the problem of a fluctuating majority in the House of Commons by arguing that:

a British statutory subordinate Parliament, consisting of English, Scottish and Welsh members should be created to consider domestic affairs, and from the consideration of which the same affairs should be withdrawn as were withdrawn from that of the Irish Parliament.....That would be a great step in the direction of federation, and might lead to negotiations with the Colonies and a further development of the principle. 2

Yeo's scheme, which began with the modest aim of introducing a measure of decentralization in the British constitution, undoubtedly over-simplified the enormous complexities of the Irish problem, but it raised the embarrassing question of self-government for both Wales and Scotland as a logical corollary of Irish Home Rule. The significance of this contribution to the debate was amply demonstrated on 7 June 1886 when Banister Fletcher reappeared in the House of Commons to ask the Prime Minister whether he would incorporate provisions for the self-government of England, Scotland and Wales in the Irish Home Rule Bill and thus rename the bill the "Government of Great Britain and Ireland Bill."<sup>3</sup> Gladstone refused to enlarge his intentions and predictably reminded Fletcher of the huge complications of such a proposition, adding that, in any case, there was no evidence that 'the wants and wishes' of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland were the same.<sup>4</sup> Although dismissed by the Prime Minister, however,

1. 17 May 1886, *ibid.*, 305, 1207.

2. *Ibid.*, 305, 1209.

3. *Ibid.*, 306, 1142-1143.

4. *Ibid.*, 1143



the emergence of this demand was at least understandable, particularly in view of the way in which the federal principle had been thoroughly discussed as a result of Chamberlain's initiative.

It was thus as a result of these frequent references to the federal principle, and the way in which it had occasionally become enmeshed in the movement for imperial federation, that Chamberlain rose again in the House of Commons to elucidate his position vis-a-vis federation and Ireland. On 31 May 1886 he stated unequivocally that federation was a solution to the Irish problem which was quite consistent with imperial unity and which gave large powers of local government to Ireland, but, he added, 'it would involve so great a disturbance of the English Constitution that....it was outside the range of practical politics.'<sup>1</sup>

This, however, was not the end of the matter. Having announced that some form of federation was unlikely after all, Chamberlain then promptly heightened an already controversial debate by reintroducing the federal principle as an alternative scheme to Gladstone's which, although not fully worked out, meant adapting to British circumstances the Canadian Constitution of 1867, with its distribution of power between the Dominion and the provincial authorities. To avoid being misunderstood again, Chamberlain was careful this time to emphasize that:

You may find - I will not say the details - but the lines of such a plan in the present Constitution of Canada; not, however, in the relations between Canada and this country, - those are the wrong lines, and lines against which I protest, and which mean separation, - but in the relations inter se of the provinces of Canada and the Dominion Parliament. Those are the relations which I, for one, am perfectly prepared to establish tomorrow between this country and Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Chamberlain accepted the principle of Home Rule, the giving of greater powers of self-government to Ireland, but he could not agree to the establishment of co-ordinate parliaments which, for him, meant ultimate

1. Ibid., 575.

2. 1 June 1886, *ibid.*, 306, 697.

separation. The Canadian analogy probably satisfied him in that the Canadian Constitution provided for strong centralized government by the Dominion Executive when necessary, so that the quasi-federal nature of the constitution contained unitary elements which meant the subordination of the Provincial governments to the Central government in certain cases. It was this 'subordination' which appealed to Chamberlain; it meant perhaps a remodelling of the United Kingdom on the basis of some form of Home Rule all round, but it ruled out disruption.

Here, at last, was Chamberlain's federal principle in full bloom. The analogy between Canada and Ireland, however, was not accepted by one Irish member, T. Sexton, the Nationalist member for Sligo, who called it 'a very misleading allusion.'<sup>1</sup> Sexton argued that when Canada ultimately obtained what she wanted, she became contented and loyal, but he pointed out that Ireland either did not want or could not wait for federation, and that what Ireland wanted was Gladstone's Home Rule Bill. If it was passed into law, the settlement arrived at in the case of Canada would be 'precisely and absolutely reproduced in the case of Ireland'. Moreover, Sexton reiterated the familiar argument that there was no comparison in principle between Ireland and the Colonies, and he confessed that he did not know how far the public mind of Britain had advanced towards an acceptance of federalism, although the Home Rule Bill itself could be regarded as:

a stepping stone to ultimate federation, because you can only enter into federation on the basis either of independent States or existing local legislatures. When the day comes that you desire Imperial Federation, then Ireland, by reason of her existing local legislature, will be prepared to take her place as a member of such Federation. 2

Sexton's speech is worthy of notice if only because it showed that the Irish nationalists believed that if federation was a coming phenomenon then Gladstone's measure, rather than Chamberlain's would equip them to adapt to the change, and it also demonstrated how far imperial federation still figured in men's minds when discussing Ireland.

1. Ibid., 701.

2. Ibid., 710-711.



Predictably, Gladstone did not comment on imperial federation during the debates on Ireland, but he did refer vaguely to the subject of federation with which he observed many members were 'greatly enamoured' and which he admitted was a 'noble object'. He came nearest to mentioning imperial federation when he made a fleeting allusion to the empire and roundly declared that:

if means can be devised of establishing a more active connection with our distant Colonies, the idea is well worthy of the attention of every loyal man. The idea of federation is a popular one.....but I suspect that it is beset with more difficulties than have as yet been examined or brought to light. <sup>1</sup>

This was Gladstone's way of recognising the validity of discussing federation, a wise concession in view of the regularity with which it had been canvassed during the debates on Ireland, but it did not prevent him from gently discarding it as a practical possibility. The Prime Minister's policy towards Ireland was simply local independence subject to Imperial unity, although there was a variety of opinion as to how to preserve this unity. In many ways this policy was similar to the traditional Liberal attitude towards the colonies: tightening the tie was regarded as unwise since it was likely to make it burst, while relaxing the connection was often the way to provide for its durability.

Partly because of his submersion in European affairs and partly due to his lack of interest in the Irish question<sup>2</sup>, Rosebery played no part in helping to shape the details of the Home Rule Bill, although he supported Gladstone's measure. Not for the first time, the League's new leader seemed equivocal. He obviously did not regard Gladstone's legislation as tantamount to an Irish separation otherwise he could not have remained as a senior member of that ministry, and in a letter to Munro-Ferguson he explained how

1. Gladstone's summary, 7 June 1886, *ibid.*, 1221.

2. 2 April 1886, Sir Edward Hamilton's Diary, Hamilton Papers, Add. Ms. 48643, f. 63. See also Randolph Churchill to Salisbury, 5 May 1886, Salisbury Papers, quoted in R.J.Hind, *op.cit.*, p.n. 249, and Lord Crewe, Lord Rosebery, Vol. 1., pp.279-280.

he viewed the situation:

Those who oppose the Irish Govt. Bill appear to confuse two essentially different and indeed antagonistic principles. They confuse Union with Centralization. Union, it appears to me, no more implies one legislative body for their kingdom than it implies one form of religion. If union were centralization where would the British Empire be with its countless Colonies possessing separate Legislatures and separate Executives ? The true spirit of that Empire lies in this, that every part of it should be contented and ruled so far as may be by its own representatives, consistently with that imperial unity which is as dear to us as to any of our opponents. 1

With this interpretation, Rosebery clearly distanced himself from most Liberal federationists who favoured the retention of Irish M.P.s at Westminster. This statement seemed to suggest that he looked to the establishment of Irish self-government and a distinct Irish Parliament as the first stage of a process whereby Home Rule would be granted to the other regions of the United Kingdom within the context of imperial unity. Having separate legislatures, therefore, did not mean separation : it simply meant reconciling local independence with imperial unity. Yet, Rosebery's views did not coincide with Gladstone's outlook in this respect. For Rosebery, imperial federation lay at the root of his interpretation as to how to harmonize self-government with the integrity of the empire. At Christmas of the previous year he had written to Reginald Brett :

I cannot understand people preferring separation to Home Rule. I detest separation, and feel that nothing could make me agree to it. Home Rule, however, is a necessity both for us and for the Irish. They will have it within two years at the latest, Scotland will follow, and then England. When that is accomplished Imperial Federation will cease to be a dream. To many of us it is not a dream now, but to no one will it be a dream then. 2

1. Rosebery to Munro-Fergus, 4 May 1886, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10017, ff.23-24.
2. Rosebery to Brett, 23 December 1885, Marquess of Crewe, op.cit., Vol. 1., p.279.



Rosebery's Irish prophecy proved wrong, but it is interesting to note how far his opinions displayed in private correspondence were in many ways similar to the numerous comments voiced in the House of Commons in favour of granting Home Rule to all the regions of the United Kingdom as the starting-point of achieving imperial federation.

On the eve of the crucial division on the Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons, many federationists must have wondered whether or not the result, whichever way it went, would be a signal either for the obstruction of imperial federation in the immediate future or for the beginning of federalism in Britain which would lead to that federation of the empire, cherished for so long by League activists. The feelings of one public figure in the Liberal party, A.J. Mundella, showed once again how much of an impact the discussion of federation had made on men's minds when applying themselves to the Irish question. Writing to Rosebery at the last minute before the critical vote in parliament, Mundella congratulated him on becoming the new leader of the Imperial Federation League, which he regarded as 'a good stroke of business' for the Liberal party, but he felt that he could not join the movement because he could not see his way to 'some practical plan of Federation', although it would get them 'over the Irish difficulty.'<sup>1</sup>

For most of the prevailing discussion of federation and of imperial federation in parliament, Chamberlain had been responsible and he had made a greater impact on the House of Commons in this respect than had all the federationist members put together. Yet, Chamberlain's activities had not really advanced the cause by any appreciable distance. Indeed, the debates on the Irish question had revealed how far the movement was divided on the subject. As we have seen, there was no rigid division of thought on Ireland among federationists because of the numerous cross-currents of opinion and the gradations of priorities which prevented any simple conclusion. It must be said, however, that while Chamberlain can be credited with shifting the emphasis of debate towards federation and its disputed ramifications, he was also to blame for much of the confusion which characterised the parliamentary discussions. He virtually bungled the case for federation by making

1. Mundella to Rosebery, 6 June 1886, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10085, ff.215-216.

occasional references either to Canada or to the colonies in general, so that members were left to draw their own conclusions. In this way, therefore, he allowed himself to be put in a position where he had to dissociate himself publicly from the cause of imperial federation. His almost casual Canadian analogy really invited his critics to misrepresent his case and it must be pointed out that the evidence of his performance in the House of Commons seemed to suggest that he was not quite clear in his own mind as to the details of his own proposals.

To be fair to Chamberlain, however, his belief in federation as a solution to the Irish problem was held in deadly earnest despite the suspicions that it might have been a clever deception designed to upset Gladstone. The fact was that Chamberlain was rapidly moving towards imperial federation as a central feature of his changing views on Britain's future in the world from the standpoint of 1886. It can be said that this year marked the point from which imperial federation began to occupy a new position in the Radical leader's mind, and thus it was probably no exaggeration to suggest that he even welcomed the numerous allusions to imperial federation during the debates on Ireland. Indeed, given Chamberlain's frame of mind at this time, he may have found it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid slipping gently from a limited use of the federal principle to a much more ambitious purview which embraced the whole self-governing empire. This observation is substantiated by reference to two developments in 1886 which offer unmistakable evidence of his trend of thought. Barely a month after the defeat of the Home Rule Bill in parliament, Chamberlain was to be found supporting Lord Hartington's candidature for Rossendale, Lancashire in the general election campaign and there he made what was his first public speech in favour of imperial federation. Addressing the Liberal Unionist supporters in Rawtenstall on the subject of Ireland and the colonies, Chamberlain concluded his speech unequivocally :

I hope we may be able sooner or later to federate, to bring together, all these great independencies of the British Empire into one supreme and Imperial Parliament, So that they should all be units of one body. 1

1. Rawtenstall, 8 July 1886, C.W. Boyd (ed)., Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches Vol. I., (Lon. 1914), p.279.



Later the same month, the estranged Radical leader displayed a much more specific commitment to imperial federation. Writing to Sir Alexander Galt, an active member of the General Committee of the League and an identified advocate of tariff reform, Chamberlain agreed with Galt's emphasis on "the great importance of securing a commercial union with the colonies as a preliminary step towards a closer federation."<sup>1</sup> Here lay the germ of his momentous 'Tariff Reform Campaign' which split the Conservative Party in 1903.

### Conclusion

Without question, The Imperial Federation League was wise to remain officially aloof from the Irish question, but this safe policy did not deter several federationists from pursuing an independent line in the House of Commons in favour of a grand vision which would solve both the Irish quarrel and the problem of closer imperial union in one stroke. Unfortunately, in terms of a balance-sheet of gains and losses, the federationist cause emerged from the debates on Ireland on the debit side.

Imperial federation had clearly made little impact on the minds of those important political figures that mattered such as Gladstone, Hartington, Harcourt, Salisbury and Morley, and if it had influenced Chamberlain, it was obvious that he had not yet managed to translate it into meaningful terms. Even those federationists who were senior political personalities, such as Sir Michael Hicks Beach, and Lord George Hamilton, had not regarded imperial federation as a vital topic to be discussed within the context of the Irish problem. Clearly, the Irish debate had occasioned a thorough public discussion of the imperial relationship, but it did not produce any general consensus of opinion on the relevance of imperial federation to Ireland. On the contrary, as far as imperial federation figured at all as an interesting strand of the debate, discussion proved at best to be fragmentary. For several participants in the parliamentary debates, imperial federation was only mentioned in order to be summarily dismissed. There could be no concerted assault by federationists on the House of Commons principally because there was an absence of agreement among federationists as to how imperial federation was related to Ireland. There were in fact so many

1. Chamberlain to Galt, 20 July 1886, Chamberlain Papers, JC/15/138.

varying priorities and cross-currents of opinion on the subject that it was possible to be a federationist and convincingly oppose or support Home Rule without appearing ridiculous, and it was also feasible to oppose imperial federation per se, yet to be able to use the arguments of the federationists to suit another standpoint.

The only morsel of comfort which the Imperial Federation League could extract from the Irish debate was the undeniable fact that more M.P.s favoured federation than were actual members of the League, an observation which the League Journal had frequently repeated since its inception. However, the most important fact to emerge from the Irish problem which affected imperial federation was the extent to which contemporary thought on the theory of federation was confused and muddled. For this, the League was not to blame, but there was no doubt that Ireland exposed the weakness of the theory.

In general, 1886 was a year of considerable progress as far as the forthcoming Colonial Conference was concerned, but it was also a time when the movement's unity and theory were tested and found wanting. From the standpoint of 1886, however, the position and achievements of the League must not be assessed too harshly. There is often a tendency among historians to impose a degree of retrospective scepticism upon movements which had many reasons for feeling optimistic at the time, and it is difficult to appreciate just how speculative it all was. The year 1886 must have ended not with thoughts about Ireland and what might have been, but with a euphoria about what the year 1887 might hold for dedicated federationists. At least as far as the Colonial Conference was concerned, Ireland was a subject which was outside their brief for discussion.



## CHAPTER 7

### The Troubled Years 1887-1889

As far as a record of the League's history is concerned, probably the most significant development to occur during 1887, apart from the Colonial Conference, was the growth of economic questions connected with empire. As we have seen, the League harboured within its ranks a group of federationists united in the belief that a closer union of the empire could be best achieved by some form of commercial union which would bind together the various parts. Galt, Tupper, Dunraven and Young in particular had associated themselves on several occasions with the Fair Trade movement and they did not fear the consequences of a possible change in Britain's own trade policy in order to further the idea of economic unity in the empire. What was different about the events of 1887, however, was the rapid and sudden popularity within the Conservative Party of the idea of a reform of Britain's free trade policy, and the emergence of Howard Vincent as the movement's chief spokesman and recognised leader. There were several links between the Fair Trade League and the Imperial Federation League apart from just an overlapping membership, but what was significant about the renewed vigour of the former body was the way in which concern for primarily economic issues was carried over into the latter organization. From 1887 the beginnings of a polarisation within the federationist movement between the commercial union school of thought and those who adhered rigidly to free trade could be detected. This split was not new, it had been evident even before the birth of the League, but it had never hardened into serious factions opposed to each other as long as the League pursued general objects favoured by all. Only when more detailed matters merited consideration was this inherent disunity to become manifest and it was due to the increasing importance of economic issues that Vincent began to occupy a more dominant and disruptive role within League ranks after 1887.

Hand in hand with the growing emphasis on aspects of trade policy within League perimeters, the concern about Britain's commercial policy spread not only to the mass organization of the Conservative Party, but also to the Leadership. There was ample evidence in several private remarks made by Lord Salisbury to show that the new Prime Minister did not swallow whole

the doctrinaire arguments of Cobdenite orthodoxy. The relevance of these developments which occurred after the Colonial Conference lay in the fact that, although concern with specific economic questions did not necessarily involve a corresponding emphasis on problems of imperial unity, it almost invariably did. As one writer has put it, the tariff question and the imperial question were by no means as closely linked before 1887 as they were after, and if the accent seemed to be on either trade or empire, "when the time came for definitions, ...it was found that the terms could be used almost interchangeably, to the advantage of advocates of both."<sup>1</sup> Even developments of an economic nature on the other side of the Atlantic were to have far-reaching effects on the progress of the federationist movement. The League in Britain could only claim success in Canada as a direct reaction to the ephemeral popularity of the Commercial Union agitation which sought to link the economic and political destiny of the Dominion to the United States. Broadly speaking, therefore, the story of the League in these troubled years is largely one of increasing disunity, weak leadership and financial strain, but it must be told in the context of the serious challenge to free trade, of the important developments in Canada, and of the rise in importance of Howard Vincent.<sup>2</sup>

Before federationists could take heart at the prospect of the Colonial Conference due to start on 4 April 1887, a word of warning was sounded by the great Radical figure of John Bright. Bright was a very desolate individual in Liberal politics after the British bombardment of Alexandria in 1881 and the Irish conundrum of 1886, and he was equally uncomfortable when it came to imperial affairs with regard to closer union. Failing to understand the main factors which sustained interest in imperial federation, however, did not mean that Bright was hard put to find terms

1. B.H.Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain*, p.95.

2. There are no Vincent papers as such, but the several references made to him and his activities in the League by R.Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery in the Rosebery papers are vitally important for an assessment of his role in the movement in 1891.



of abuse for it. In reply to a letter of invitation from the Manchester Statistical Society to hear a paper by Howard Vincent on imperial federation, Bright curtly referred to the subject as 'the offspring of the jingo spirit' which was founded on 'ignorance alike of history and geography.'<sup>1</sup> Yet, Bright's hatred of imperial federation was not based solely on stubbornness, it was supported by three main reasons. First, he believed sincerely that England's 'blind' foreign policy might involve her in war with one or several European nations and the colonies would have no direct interest in such blunders. Secondly, Bright was well aware that the tariff policies of Canada and of the Australian colonies divided them from Britain and, finally, he was convinced that the self-governing colonies would prefer separation to any new infringements on their recently-acquired sovereignty. Undoubtedly, Bright's Quaker instincts impelled him to dismiss imperial federation as increasing the possibility of war and he probably regarded it as a retrograde step for a colony to submit to a new form of 'centralisation' after having struggled to obtain self-government. However anachronistic these views may have seemed, Bright's public castigation of imperial federation certainly seemed to strike a note of accord with Edward Freeman who wrote to Bryce that it was 'a different point of view', but that there was 'quite force in what he says.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite this early verbal barrage against imperial federation, the League's journal opened the new year in a characteristically optimistic fashion with an editorial feature which boasted of 1886 as the League's annus mirabilis - a year when they had stormed 'Giant Despair's bulwarks', when they had gained an uncompromising recognition of their principles, and a year when their resources and supporters had grown and multiplied.<sup>3</sup> Given the propaganda role of the journal such a claim was at least understandable, although the confidence it displayed only served to conceal the League's weak financial situation rather than to convince the public that

1. H.J. Leach, *The Public Letters of John Bright*, (Lon. 1895, rep. N.Y. 1969), pp. 226-227. The letter was also published in the *Times*, 14 Jan. 1887. The League's retort 'Mr. John Bright Answered' appeared shortly after in *Imperial Federation*, II, Feb. 1887, p.35.

2. Freeman to Bryce, 21 January 1887, Bryce Papers, MS. 8, f.4.

3. *Imperial Federation*, II, Jan. 1887, pp.12-13.



federation was just around the corner. Nevertheless, the journal was right to highlight the fact that the idea of a representative conference from all parts of the Empire, except India, would have been dismissed as impossible a year earlier.

The period between the new year and the official opening of the first Colonial Conference in April was characterised by feverish background activity for the League in preparation for the great occasion, but it was also a time when the League arranged for its second annual general meeting and when Sir Henry Holland replaced Stanhope as the new Colonial Secretary. Stanhope was moved to the War Office and the League welcomed his return to the vice-chairmanship of the movement alongside Rosebery. Holland, of course, was no stranger to League ranks. He had been a member of the League from its infancy and had actively participated in the Executive Council until attaining office, although his attitude towards the League as a government official at the Colonial Office seemed to undergo a noticeable change in 1887 which indicated less enthusiasm and more caution. This is indicated by a series of letters between the League's Secretary, A.E. Loring, and the new Colonial Secretary in the months of February and March which were published in the June edition of the League journal. On 10 February 1887 the Executive Committee of the League passed a resolution expressing a desire that the League "may be associated by means of one or more delegates with the forthcoming Imperial Conference." Needless to say, the official Colonial Office response was hardly enthusiastic. The reply from John Bramston, the Assistant Under-Secretary, on behalf of Holland contained a rebuff to the effect that the presence of delegates from the League at the Conference would have been contrary to the intention of Stanhope's circular despatch of November 1886 which expressly deprecated the discussion of any subjects falling within the range of Political Federation. Undaunted by this cold reply, the Executive Committee persisted with another letter to Holland which pointed out that the League had neither contemplated nor proposed the discussion of Political Federation at the Conference and they referred to the League deputation to the Prime Minister of August 1886 when the only subjects for discussion which they advocated were defence and postal and telegraphic communications. This letter of 23 March 1887 seems to have met with some degree of success because the Colonial Office reply of 4 April 1887, although it still resisted the idea of League delegates at the Conference, did allow "several gentlemen who are members of it to be present in consideration of the



interest taken by them in important Colonial questions".<sup>1</sup>

Two conclusions can be drawn from this episode. In the first place, the League was obviously suspect and the Colonial Office did not want the Conference to be associated in any way with imperial federation. Secondly, and perhaps the most disappointing outcome, was Sir Henry Holland's attitude. Like Stanhope before him, Holland's commitment to the League seemed to fade and disappear with the arrival of new responsibilities of office. R.A.Shields who has used the Colonial Office records, has shown that Holland's other consideration in this affair was the danger that if the League was allowed to send official delegates to the Conference then the Colonial Office would not be able to refuse similar requests from the Chamber of Commerce, the Royal Colonial Institute and other organizations interested in colonial affairs.<sup>2</sup> However, in retrospect, the events between August 1886 and April 1887, during which time the movement fought for some concession to imperial unity, did seem to illustrate the fact that the League had had the door slammed in its face just as it was about to experience a moment of triumph. Still, some degree of consolation was drawn from the arrangement of a celebrated banquet given by the League to the colonial representatives two days before the opening of the Colonial Conference on 2 April 1887. They could at least claim the distinction of being the first body of Englishmen privileged to entertain the colonial representatives, an event which the League's journal rather pompously labelled as 'a landmark in history'.<sup>3</sup>

One other development which occurred shortly before the historical occasion of the first Colonial Conference and which merits attention in this survey was the second annual meeting of the League which took place in the saloon of the Mansion House on 31 March 1887. Even with such a perfunctory affair as this, it must be noted that the League experienced repeated disappointments. Not only was the Lord Mayor unable to preside over the opening ceremony, but the Earl of Carnarvon, who had just joined

1. This series of four letters can be found in *Imperial Federation*, II, June 1887, p.135.
2. C.O. 323/370, Minutes of 18 February 1887, quoted in R.A.Shields, "The Imperial Federationists and their Cause, 1869-1893", Pennsylvania, Ph.D., 1961, pp.129-130.
3. *Imperial Federation*, II, May 1887, p.90.

the League, was also indisposed, and Lord Rosebery, the League's Chairman, regretted yet again that he could not attend. Evidence shows that by this time many League members were becoming impatient with Rosebery's recurring failures to attend important League events, and Munro-Ferguson wrote to Rosebery that the League was "in a great state of mind" and "frustrated by the dismal news" that he would be absent from the meeting, adding that he would "hear from Loring (and from most other people also...)"<sup>1</sup>. This warning of hostility was confirmed four days later when Munro-Ferguson told Rosebery that there was "still a great commotion among the Federation people - I'm afraid they will be angry".<sup>2</sup> Munro-Ferguson's inside information to Rosebery finally evoked a response from the League President who revealed a reciprocal irritation with the League when he asked, "Why do not the League postpone their annual meeting if they are in such despair?"<sup>3</sup> Coming from the ostensible leader of the movement, these were unsympathetic words and they amply illustrated Rosebery's lack of dedication to the movement which had been apparent a year earlier. This attitude, which was so different from his earlier enthusiasm of 1884, seemed to show that Rosebery regarded the duties of leadership of the League as both onerous and tiresome, although it cannot<sup>be</sup> suggested that he was any less committed to the actual cause of imperial federation.

Another disappointment which manifested itself at the meeting was the question of finance, a topic which was always high on the League's list of priorities. The late Premier of Victoria, James Service, had been given the formal task of proposing the adoption of the report of the proceedings of the Executive Committee during the previous twelve months, but he somehow managed to overlook a rather unsavoury aspect of the details, Professor Seeley who stepped into the arena to second the motion of his predecessor, however, did not forget to call attention to the need for more money. In fact, the feeling conveyed is that Seeley had touched upon

1. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 18 March 1887, Rosebery Papers, Ms 10017, ff. 57-58.
2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 22 March 1887, *ibid.*, f. 59.
3. Rosebery to Munro-Ferguson, 23 March 1887, *ibid.*, ff. 60-61.



a very sensitive area which many federationists would rather have avoided. Sparing no thought for diplomatic niceties, Seeley launched into an extremely blunt appraisal of the financial situation facing the League. Referring to the last paragraph of the report which expressed a need for a capital fund independent of subscriptions of at least £500 a year, Seeley confessed that such a figure was a modest request, but he complained of a misunderstanding:

One might suppose that a League like this would number its members and subscribers by hundreds of thousands. And yet when I look at this report I do not find figures of that magnitude. I find ....., "Subscribers to the journal exceed 100," and I find further on that the members of the League, exclusive of those belonging to various branches.....now number over 800. Surely there is a misunderstanding somewhere. Where it is I think I know,.....Almost every person that I meet ...looks favourably upon the League, and wishes it well; but comparatively few can be brought absolutely to join it. 1

Seeley's sentiments were solemnly echoed by succeeding federationists including Colomb and Young who urged the audience to persuade people to put their hands in their pockets instead of simply registering their approval of the League. Clearly, the League was confronted with a dilemma which many pressure groups before and after them have had to overcome - the fact that although their potential membership was unlimited, few people who sympathized with the cause had actually bothered to join.

Koebner and Schmidt claimed in 1964 that the Colonial Conference of 1887 was "the only institutional success of the Imperial Federation League"<sup>2</sup>, while the historian of the Colonial Conference system, J.E.Kendle, referred in 1965 to the League's share in the summoning of the Conference as its "most important achievement."<sup>3</sup> The irony of these assessments, however,

1. Seeley's speech, Imperial Federation, II, May 1887, p.107.
2. R.Koebner and H.Schmidt, Imperialism, p.186.
3. J.E.Kendle, The Colonial Conference System 1887-1914, London University Ph.D., (1965), p.19. Other important sources are:- R.Jebb, The Imperial Conference, Vol. 1, (London 1911); J.E.Tyler, The Struggle For Imperial Unity, Chap. 12.; and J.E.Tyler, The Development of the Imperial Conference 1887-1914, Cambridge History of the British Empire, III, Chap. II. Kendle's thesis was published as a book, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 1887-1911, in 1967.

is that the League regarded the institution of regular colonial conferences as a means rather than as an end in itself, although, under Rosebery's guidance, it did direct its energies towards the aim of regular conferences as a realistic appraisal of the situation in the late 'eighties. During the Conference, as we have seen, the League was not allowed any official participation, but several prominent federationists did manage to sit as observers during the opening proceedings. Among those who attended this glittering occasion were federationists like Sir Henry Barkly, Sir Alexander Galt, Lords Dunraven and Brabourne, and many M.P.s who were members of the League including Captain Colomb, Henniker Heaton, G. Baden Powell, Howard Vincent and Sir Samuel Wilson. Two other federationists worth noting were Frederick Young and Arthur Loring, the League Secretary, who completed a strong federationist interest in the Conference.<sup>1</sup>

It would be pointless to give a detailed analysis of the Colonial Conference of 1887 simply because the proceedings are largely irrelevant to a survey of the federationist movement and because the episode has already been subject to a searching re-examination by J.M. Kendle. The only aspect of the Conference to which allusion is worthwhile, apart from Lord Salisbury's famous pronouncement on imperial federation, is Hofmeyer's plan for a closer union of the empire which utilised both commercial and military factors as a means of integration. Both before and during the Conference, the Conservative Government made strenuous efforts to avoid the discussion of any subjects which were remotely connected with imperial federation and as it progressed the conference did follow the two main subjects designated by the Stanhope despatch, devoting ten of the twenty days to imperial defence alone, and avoiding the essence of the problem of closer union. Indeed, it was Queensland and the Cape which took the initiative in insisting upon discussing the commercial aspect of closer union and who would have "gladly discussed federation itself"<sup>2</sup> had it not been for the caution of Holland and Salisbury. In anticipation of colonial

1. For a list of both conferees and observers, see Parliamentary Papers, LV1, (C5091), pp.1-5.

2. J.E. Tyler, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, p.116.



enthusiasm, the British Prime Minister had already remarked in his opening speech to the Conference that any scheme of imperial federation was "a matter for the future rather than for the present",<sup>1</sup> although this statement did not prevent both Sir Samuel Griffith, Premier of Queensland, and Jen Hofmeyer of Cape Colony from venturing into the sensitive area of preferential trading arrangements as a means of consolidating the empire.

It was Griffith who first broached the subject of an alteration in British trading policy, but it was Hofmeyer who came stoutly to his aid and introduced detailed suggestions which in his opinion obviated the need to come to terms with controversial 'Constitution-making'. In simple terms, Hofmeyer advocated a common Imperial tariff to operate against foreign goods and a small Imperial duty of two per cent which could be collected and used for the general defence of the empire.<sup>2</sup> Hofmeyer was careful to emphasize that his scheme was not a Protectionist measure at all, but a Revenue measure which would also assist the cause of imperial unity, and he realised that 'some bod with legislative and....administrative powers' would have to be created, 'a sort of limited Parliament by the side of the British Parliament and the various Colonial Parliaments'.<sup>3</sup> It was here that the Cape delegate appealed to his audience and offered a warning to those colonial conferees who belonged to the Imperial Federation League:

It would be difficult indeed to limit and describe the rights and powers of a fiscal Parliament as compared with the rights and powers of the Imperial Parliament, and of the various Colonial Parliaments. But I wish those delegates who are great advocates of Imperial Federation to understand that this after all is a much smaller difficulty than you would have to grapple with if you entered into a larger measure of Imperial Union or political federation. The small body which would have to be created would perhaps be the germ of an Imperial Federation afterwards; or if it failed, Imperial Federation itself would have to be thrown overboard for good as utterly hopeless. 4

1. Parliamentary Papers, op.cit., p.5.
2. For the full discussion see Parliamentary Papers, op.cit., pp.461-488.
3. Parliamentary Papers, op.cit., pp.467-468.
4. Parliamentary Papers, op.cit., p.468. Federationists among the colonial delegates were James Service of Victoria, Sir Saul Samuel of New South Wales, and Sandford Fleming of Canada who was also president of the Ottawa branch of the Canadian League.

This speech made a deep and lasting impression upon the Conference and the delegates from Newfoundland, Natal, New Zealand and the Australian Colonies all spoke appreciatively of the address. One delegate, Mr. John Robinson of Natal, even went as far as describing the scheme as "the only concrete proposal which has been brought before this Conference, bearing directly upon the unification of the Empire,"<sup>1</sup> and he urged the assembly to put forward some definite expression of opinion in support of it. Predictably, the only official reaction was one of unmistakable reluctance, as Holland reminded the gathering that they were not there to have resolutions proposed. However, the episode had at least revealed that a few colonies desired some form of closer union and that "others wished for an exploration in depth of imperial political relations."<sup>2</sup>

As a unique experiment in imperial co-operation, the Conference of 1887 did prove to be, in Salisbury's words, "the parent of a long progeniture",<sup>3</sup> although few who were present could have assumed that there would be future conferences. There could be little doubt in May 1887 that most federationists only regarded the Conference as a stepping-stone towards some kind of more meaningful closer union, and certainly not as an alternative to imperial federation. Yet, it was equally true that the League must have felt a deep satisfaction with the convening of what was the first 'Conference of the Empire' which seemed to give publicity to and further the federationist cause. From the standpoint of May 1887, therefore, the Conference must have appeared as an achievement of the highest value and promise for the future of the cause, and it represented the climax of years of campaigning for many League stalwarts who had been involved in an uphill struggle against both indifference and inertia since 1869. In terms of unity within the movement, the League's flag was never to fly higher than it did in the summer of 1887.

During June of 1887 the "clamour of the busy knot who called themselves imperial federationists"<sup>4</sup> went on unaware of the startling

1. Parliamentary Papers, *op.cit.*, p.4.
2. J.F.Kendle, *op.cit.*, p.26.
3. Parliamentary Papers, *op.cit.*, p.5.
4. J.Morley, *Life of W.F.Gladstone*, III, p.386.



developments which had begun to percolate through the Conservative Party from its grass roots party organizations to the leadership itself. By the summer, the Fair Trade movement had begun to capture widespread support from an increasing number of Conservative local party organizations which pressed for action and passed resolutions favouring Fair Trade, Protection, and commercial federation of the empire. What was significant about this shifting emphasis towards the tariff issue was the extent to which fair traders and outright protectionists began to link their demands for a change in the existing tariff structure to the idea of imperial unity. As B.H. Brown wrote over thirty years ago in his detailed study of the attempts to reform the economic system after 1881 and of the political developments which arose in the course of such efforts, the connection between the tariff question per se and the idea of using it as a means of binding the empire together, "had the effect of enlarging and dignifying the issue, of surrounding it with an air of history."<sup>1</sup> In this way, the commercial union school of thought began to grow in popularity and importance within the Imperial Federation League and the dividing-lines between fair traders, protectionists, and federationists became increasingly blurred in the period immediately following the Colonial Conference.

The most striking feature of the latter half of 1887 was the emergence of Howard Vincent as the new, dynamic leader of the re-invigorated Fair Trade League and the most active and articulate representative of that body of opinion within the Imperial Federation League which favoured commercial union of the empire. Starting his political career as a member of the Westminster Liberal Association in 1884, Vincent's political views changed as a result of a world tour in that year which "turned him into an ardent Imperialist" and convinced him of how the Liberal Government's neglect of the colonies would lead to "the early overthrow of the unity and commercial prosperity of the Empire".<sup>2</sup> According to his biographers, Vincent was certain that by 1885 "the time had come when Imperial Federation was urgent",<sup>3</sup>

1. B.H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain, 1881-1895*, (N.Y. 1943).

2. S.H. Myles and F.D. How, *The Life of Sir Howard Vincent*, (London 1912), pp. 155 and 158. See also Mundella to Rosebery, 14 October 1885, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10084, ff. 36-37.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

but he was also interested in the cause of Fair Trade with which he "threw in his lot"<sup>1</sup> in the same year, a step which proved to be wisely chosen in the industrial climate of Sheffield.<sup>2</sup> Vincent's popularity with the artisans and manufacturers of Sheffield stemmed more from his association with the Fair Trade agitation than from his advocacy of imperial federation, and, although he began as "an amateur in economics"<sup>3</sup>, he was soon recognised as a brilliant orator and by 1887 stood out as the Fair Trade movement's most respected spokesman. Although he was never entirely acceptable to the House of Commons and exerted little influence there, Vincent appeared to be personally popular with many members of both parties, with the exception of a number of disgruntled Liberals who regarded him as "a humbug unparalleled".<sup>4</sup>

Despite private exhortations from other Tory sympathizers not to embarrass the Conservative Government which maintained an uneasy alliance with the Liberal Unionists after 1886, Vincent took up the Fair Trade cause in deadly earnest in November 1887 and precipitated a minor political earthquake within the party. Displaying a "singular want of tact"<sup>5</sup>, Vincent captured the Oxford Conference on a Fair Trade motion by a huge majority and went on to claim fifty-two chambers of commerce throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> It took the heavy artillery of Lord Salisbury to reverse the decision the next day and in a powerful speech at Derby, with Vincent alongside him, the Tory chief emphasized that neither he nor his followers were in any way committed to the doctrine of Protection.<sup>7</sup>

1. Ibid., p.168.

2. As Conservative M.P. for Central Sheffield, Vincent held the seat continuously from 1885-1908.

3. Op.cit., p.191.

4. Mundella to Rosebery, 14 October 1885, op.cit., f. 37.

5. Lady G.Cecil, *The Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, Vol. IV., p.177.

6. W.H.G.Amytage, *A.J.Mundella(1825-1897)*, p.263.

7. *The Times*, 20 December, 1887.



With free trade still second in sanctity only to the Gospels, it would have obviously been suicidal for either political party to have publicly considered a modification in the economic system. Yet, there was not the slightest doubt that the mass organization of the Conservative Party had moved away from Cobdenite orthodoxy. Even more significant was Lord Salisbury's private conversion to fair trade. In a confidential letter to George Goschen, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Salisbury complained of "the growing protection of the world" and of each nation's right "to inflict....retaliation." What the Prime Minister could not understand was that if retaliation was the basis of self-defence both for individuals in society and for nations in the world, then why was it "not true as to hostile tariffs?"<sup>1</sup> Three days later, however, Salisbury emphasized to Goschen that he was "not suggesting now any practical application of the principle - but only trying to ascertain, for guidance in public discussion, how far our lines of thought coincided.....over what is still an academic discussion."<sup>2</sup> It was the flimsy Liberal Unionist alliance and the possibility of a short-term rise in food prices which appeared to tie the Prime Minister's hands at this juncture, but evidence of a growing challenge to free trade was irrefutable.

Developments in Canada during this period also had an impact upon the imperial federation movement in Britain and served to divide the League yet further. It was during the year 1887 that the flower of Commercial Union in Canada blossomed into a concerted attack on the imperial connection led by the "Anti-Imperialist", Goldwin Smith.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this development for the League in Britain appears, in retrospect, to have rested upon three major effects, two of which boded no good for the success of the parent body in London. The happiest by-product of the growth of commercial union in Canada for the federationist cause in general was the fillip it gave to the League in Canada which had languished since its

1. Salisbury to Goschen, 18 November 1887, Salisbury Papers, Class D, Vol.VI, f. 52.
2. Salisbury to Goschen, 21 November 1887, *ibid.*, ff.53-54.
3. R.C.Brown, "Goldwin Smith and Anti-Imperialism," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.XLIII,(1962), pp.93-105.

creation in 1885. As Colonel Denison, a pioneer of imperial federation in Canada, wrote some years later:

it was not until the Commercial Union movement alarmed the people and proved the necessity for prompt action that the cause of Imperial Federation became a strong and effective influence upon the public opinion of Canada. 1

Yet, if this was a positive stimulus, another event served to threaten the unity of the League at home. On 24 March 1888 at the Annual General Meeting of the Canadian League an amendment was made to the constitution of the League in Canada which was at variance with the parent body's constitution and was deprecated by the League in Britain. The amendment which provoked so much controversy among federationists in Britain was that of introducing Imperial preference in raw and manufactured products.<sup>2</sup> Although the resolution did not carry much weight in the Canadian House of Commons, mainly because it was felt that the issue required more detailed analysis, the Canadian League was still at odds with the home organization for having taken this step and this situation only added to the split within the parent League between commercial federationists and those federationists who were free trade stalwarts. It must be remembered that Canadian federationists viewed closer union from a very narrow standpoint: it simply meant the introduction of preferential trade within the empire. This development, therefore, was extremely divisive and Denison did not underrate its importance as an event which contributed to the League's demise in 1893 when he wrote that:

Within five years this cause of difference had, I believe, much to do with the disruption of the League in Great Britain. 3

1. Col. G. Denison, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, (Toronto, 1909, p.97.
2. For a full account, see Denison, *ibid.*, pp.91-97. The League in Britain deprecated the strategy and advised the Canadian League to approach the other colonies and not to disturb the mother country with the proposal, *Imperial Federation*, III, May 1888, p.89.
3. Denison, *ibid.*, p.96.



The third effect of Canadian developments on the movement in Britain was that the Colonial Office demonstrated yet again that it did not take the League and its campaign very seriously. As far as the Colonial Secretary, Sir Henry Holland, and his permanent officials were concerned, the commercial union of Canada with the United States was not something which they felt that they could prevent, and they did not exhibit undue public concern. Clearly, the League had made little impression upon the Colonial Office,<sup>1</sup> and although the Colonial Secretary and his staff were not prepared to encourage commercial union, the reality of the situation was most appropriately exclaimed by the "new Imperialist", Joseph Chamberlain, who wrote to Lord Lansdowne, the Canadian Governor-General, that "if Canada determines to ask for Commercial Union she will have to get it" and if Canada wanted it "we can hardly refuse."<sup>2</sup> In short, there was little that the Colonial Office could have done, even had it not been imbued with the fatalism bequeathed by Frederic Rogers.

In summary, it can be said that the rise to prominence of economic issues, the events in Canada, and the emergence of Howard Vincent all served to weaken the federationist movement in Britain and the disunity within the League only became increasingly evident in the next two years. One final glance at the League's position at the end of 1887 serves to underline another factor to which attention has been called, namely, the lack of financial resources.

As a result of the gloomy meeting of March at which Seeley had so bluntly referred to League finances, a special dinner was given by the League to Stanhope and Holland on 6 July 1887 partly in order to congratulate them upon the extent to which they had furthered the League's objects, but also in order to make an appeal for more funds.<sup>3</sup> On this

1. For a fuller treatment of Colonial Office reactions to this event, see R.A. Shields, *op.cit.*, pp. 252-256.

2. Chamberlain, and Lansdowne to Chamberlain, 8 November 1887, Chamberlain Papers, quoted in R.C. Brown, *Canada's National Policy 1883-1900: A Study of Canadian - American Relations*, (Princeton 1964), p. 149.

3. *Imperial Federation*, II, August 1887, pp. 163-169.

occasion, Rosebery managed to attend and preside over the gathering, giving a lively speech which seemed out of character with his previous remarks to Munro-Ferguson. An idea of the paucity of League funds can be appreciated by reference to Rosebery's speech in which he made a remarkable observation :

we have come to this: that we have to decide now whether we are to throw up all our work or to continue it. We have at this moment but a very limited income, and it is proposed - in order to meet the expenses, which our income does not at present meet - to raise a guarantee fund of not less than a thousand pounds a year for three years. ....I want you to consider...whether we can raise such a guarantee fund as will enable us to go on for three or five years longer. 1

Once again the League was described as tottering on the brink of financial insolvency, a condition which had been familiar to the organization during its three year existence. Rosebery's appeal for funds was not unsuccessful, the Chairman himself donating one hundred pounds, but the occasion stood in marked contrast to the celebrated success of the Colonial Conference.

By the beginning of 1888 the League had still not been tempted to produce any "cut and dried" scheme of federation for the empire despite the impatience of some federationists and the taunts of Goldwin Smith who tormented them with accusations of vagueness and mere platform-talk of an indefinite kind.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless the success of the Colonial Conference seemed to point to the fact that any further progress towards imperial unity would be achieved along the lines of co-operation rather than federation, and, as one writer has put it:

Men approaching the Imperial problem from the standpoint of practical politics began to recognize its stupendous magnitude. The...first Colonial Conference closed the door on ideal Imperialism and ushered in practical Imperialism. The era of ideal Imperialism was very fruitful of paper plans. The age of practical Imperialism was not less concerned with the ideal, but more engaged in its fulfilment.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Ibid.*, p.165.

2. Goldwin Smith, *Straining the Silken Thread*, Macmillan's Magazine, August, 1888.

3. A.L.Burt, *Imperial Architects*, (London: 1913), p.225.



In short, a preoccupation with schemes for closer union seemed both unwise and unnecessary when the wheels of imperial unity had already been set in motion.

The year 1888 was an uneventful one for the League in general. The Times, which in June 1887 had referred to imperial federation as a 'universally recognised ... thing desirable in itself'<sup>1</sup>, noted in February 1888 that, "just at the moment the subject of Imperial Federation has ceased to attract daily attention".<sup>2</sup> One of the major problems of the League was how to keep the subject in public view and in this the organization did not prove to be singularly successful. Without doubt one of the most decisive factors involved in the League's failure to rekindle the torch of agitation in 1888 was the changing nature of the problem of closer union itself. It was ironical that while the League had resisted the temptation of formulating a scheme of imperial federation, there was a gradually shifting emphasis away from the discussion of general principles and towards a more detailed debate upon what closer union actually meant. Tyler was correct in observing that "it appeared to be more profitable to consider the machinery of closer union than to spend time on the now generally accepted proposition that the maintenance of imperial unity was desirable"<sup>3</sup>, but this qualitative change in the issue held the seeds of destruction for the League. Once the organization devoted itself to the actual details of closer union, it immediately experienced a polarisation in its membership between opposing groups divided from each other on numerous questions, and especially on the tariff problem. In retrospect, therefore, 1888 can be depicted as a time-lag during which the League had to take stock of the situation and decide upon its next strategy - a strategy which had to promise and produce something equally as concrete as its previous energies had done. In this light, it is easy to understand the League's dilemma and it is difficult to imagine what other path it could have trodden other than that which led to the emergence of a definite scheme and the organization's sudden demise.

1. The Times, 21 June 1887.

2. Ibid., 2 February, 1888.

3. Tyler, op.cit., p.176.

Any other approach to the question which did not appear to have a direct and relevant bearing upon the further development of imperial unity obviously invited the criticism of prolonged sterility and this was partly why the League adopted "periodic conferences" as a new, readily attainable objective.

Certainly up to 1887 the movement could claim to have been purposeful, but it still had an unfulfilled mission which was nothing less than the federation of the empire. Yet, the movement's leaders, Rosebery, Stanhope and Brassey condemned comprehensively any pledge towards an actual scheme of federation and, in any case, there was still no great consensus of opinion as to what imperial federation really meant. Indeed, there is much evidence to show that many League members had never really accepted the axiom that federation was even desirable and, among the plethora of alternatives which were always available, it would appear that federation proper was relegated in importance to other "entering wedges" which might or might not lead up to it. Apart from the idea of some looser association or halfway-house, such as a Council of Advice or the admission of colonial representatives sitting in parliament, the chief tendency among federationists was to concentrate upon one particular aspect of integration which would generate other links of closer-union. After 1887 it was hardly surprising that the two main areas of concentration were defence and commerce, although there were other channels along which closer union was pursued. For example, John Henniker Heaton restricted his conception of closer union to the specific matter of postal communications and bridged both Gladstone and the House of Commons separately in 1886 in order to attract attention to his idea of an "Imperial Penny Postage".<sup>1</sup> Such activities were less well-known to the public in general, but they nevertheless constituted an invaluable contribution to the overall campaign for closer union.

1. See, for example, J. Henniker Heaton to Gladstone, 29 October 1886, Gladstone Papers, Add. MSS., 44499, ff. 106-107, and Hansard, 3, 30 March 1886, 304, 261-293. Heaton was Conservative M.P. for Canterbury 1885-1910.



Because of the shifting emphasis towards primarily economic issues in the debate on closer union during 1887, it was the commercial union school of thought which seemed the most active and vociferous group within the League in these years, although their homogeneity of thought has been exaggerated. What united them most was a lack of faith in free trade which was covered with a veneer of imperial sentiment, but there was still plenty of room for differences of opinion as to the extent to which the old economic system might be dismantled and what should replace it. By definition, the stalwarts of free trade also appeared as an opposing group who were united in defence of the economic system and who, placed their faith in the military aspect of closer union. As a result of the Colonial Conference, imperial defence must have seemed a logical path towards closer union which did not interfere with "economic nationalism", and it did not involve the colonies playing a part in the framing of Imperial foreign policy. In general, this division of thought between two broad groups did correspond with party alignments. Thus, the chief spokesmen of the defence group, especially Colomb and Brassey, were Liberals and it must be remembered that one of the League's basic objectives established under W.E. Forster in 1884 was the "organized defence of common interests". There had certainly never been any mention of a change in the tariff structure of Britain. Correspondingly, the most articulate advocates of commercial union were Conservatives: Vincent, Dunraven, and Staveley Hill. Too much can be made of this, however, and it might be noted in retrospect that an equally eminent member of the defence group, Lord Charles Beresford, was the Conservative M.P. for Waterford, while H.O. Arnold-Forster, the nephew of a staunch free trader and the Liberal Unionist M.P. for Belfast, later became a confirmed supporter of imperial preference.

At the Third Annual Meeting of the League on 21 March 1888 the most significant feature of the proceedings was Rosebery's official announcement that the League's immediate task was not to devote its energies towards producing a definite scheme of federation, but to engage in more practical work which he regarded as "a series of biennial or triennial conferences"<sup>1</sup> along the lines of the first Colonial Conference. It was

1. Imperial Federation III, April 1888, Special Supplement, pp.1-2.

rather strange therefore that the League President<sup>1</sup> had spoken in the House of Lords only two days earlier on 19 March 1888 and cheerfully suggested the idea of inviting the self-governing colonies to send their Agents General to be represented in the upper chamber.<sup>2</sup> Because Rosebery had not spoken in his capacity as the League President and because this proposal was mentioned only as part of a wider measure of House of Lords reform, it would not be fair to attribute too much significance to this event, but it did appear as a rather inconsistent move on Rosebery's part in view of his speech at the League's annual meeting. Still, this was not the first time that Rosebery had toyed with the idea of colonial representation in parliament, and his speech at least triggered a reaction from E.A. Freeman, who urged Bryce not to "go in for all the 'Imperial' clatter."<sup>3</sup>

Two events occurred in the summer of 1888 which caused the League to tread very carefully in its desire to avoid matters of a controversial party political nature. The League had made little real headway in Scotland, despite having branches in the two largest cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, but in June 1888 it came to the notice of the League that the Scottish Home Rule Association had officially declared its support for imperial federation. Far from being welcome news, of course, such a development was distinctly dangerous. In a statement of its political creed the Scottish Home Rule Association asserted that the restoration of a national Legislature and Executive to Scotland had become a necessity and that those who lived north of the border were "Scotsmen first and Britons afterwards." The Association added that when such a legislature had been established it would then welcome the colonies into a real imperial parliament, "if it were relieved of the local legislation which at present retards the great plan of Imperial Federation."<sup>4</sup>

1. From March 1888, the League's leader acquired the title of President, while the Vice-Chairman became the Vice-President.
2. Hansard, (3), CCCXXIII, 1571.
3. Freeman to Bryce, 29 March 1888, Bryce Papers, Ms.8, ff.37-38.
4. Imperial Federation, III, July 1888, pp.123-124.



At a time when the Irish Home Rule controversy was still a subject of great public interest and political party concern, the League obviously realised the danger of becoming associated with Scottish Home Rule and the journal immediately announced that the League did not accept that its federation campaign might result in Home Rule. Moreover, the journal added that its rejection of Home Rule applied to separatists anywhere in Britain, a safety measure which doubtless referred to the unsolved Irish problem.

This was clearly the wisest action to take in the circumstances. Scottish support was one thing, but support from so radical a group as the Scottish Home Rulers was an entirely different matter. It was in vain therefore that Thomas McNaught, the "Colonial Secretary" of the Scottish Home Rule Association and a member of the Imperial Federation League, wrote to the journal in order to convince federationists that Home Rule to the four portions of the United Kingdom would do much to advance the cause of imperial federation.<sup>1</sup> Only a few dedicated federationists such as Labilliere and Young could have accepted the federal idea for Britain, but the idea of Home Rule principally for imperialist reasons was gaining ground in both Scotland and Wales during these years. As we have seen when dealing with the Irish question in 1886, the Home Rule idea was becoming popular in Scotland because it was believed by many that it could be developed to form part of a wider measure of imperial federation which would allow Scotland an enhanced role in an imperial reorganization.<sup>2</sup>

The other event which caused much soul-searching within the League leadership was also connected with domestic politics, but it was Irish Home Rule which once again proved to be so divisive. Between 19 June and 28 June 1888 three letters between Cecil Rhodes and Charles Stewart Parnell, the great Irish leader and spearhead of Home Rule, appeared in the daily press. In this correspondence, Rhodes linked the fortunes of Irish Home Rule to the commencement of changes which would bring about imperial federation and Parnell reciprocated by approving of colonial representation

1. Letter dated 3 August 1888, Imperial Federation, III, September 1888, p. 174.
2. See D. Hamer, Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery, pp. 156-160.



at Westminster and by admitting that continued Irish representation at Westminster would facilitate such a step. By itself, this correspondence, if a little surprising, seemed perfectly harmless, especially since Rhodes was not a member of the League. However, controversy arose when the League decided to publish these letters in the journal in accordance with its traditional claim to publish anything connected with the cause of imperial federation.

Sir Henry Holland, who had just been elevated to the peerage as Lord Knutsford, decided that the publication of the "Rhodes-Parnell Correspondence" in the journal involved the League in an unnecessary area of domestic party politics, and he wrote to Rosebery that in view of the intention of the Executive Committee to bring certain resolutions forward concerning the correspondence, he had "no option but to withdraw for the present from the League."<sup>1</sup> The League's Secretary, Arthur Loring, was immediately disturbed by the Colonial Secretary's grievance particularly since Knutsford had made it clear that he hoped to be able to "return to the fold"<sup>2</sup> and the available evidence shows that a great deal of effort was made to repair the damage and restore the League's non-political position. Knutsford, however, was unconvinced and telegraphed to Loring that "my withdrawal holds good!"<sup>3</sup>

It was only after the Executive Committee had agreed to the introduction of a special head note at the beginning of all correspondence and extracts printed in the journal that the problem was resolved.<sup>4</sup> The new head note which first appeared in the August edition of the journal simply stated that party politics were of no importance to the League and that the League was in no way responsible for any opinions which were expressed in its correspondence. Having thus been placated, Knutsford wrote to both Rosebery and Loring that he was "glad to be able....to remain a member of the League", although he reaffirmed his decision to withdraw

1. Knutsford to Rosebery, July 1888, Imperial Federation Papers, Ms.II, Royal Commonwealth Society, London, The Exact date is indistinct, but the month and year can be determined.
2. Knutsford to Loring, 14 July 1888, *ibid.*, (have not been numbered)
3. Knutsford to Loring, 17 July 1888, *ibid.*
4. Knutsford to Colomb, 19 July 1888, *ibid.*



from the Executive Committee as long as he remained Colonial Secretary.<sup>1</sup> The whole episode centred upon the need to prevent any views on domestic politics from becoming mixed up with the question of imperial federation, but it was difficult to decide exactly where the jurisdiction of the Executive Committee ended and where that of the editor began. Stripped of its drama, the event was a classic illustration of how fragile the League's position was in respect of party political matters. Yet, although Knutsford's position may have been embarrassing as a member of the Conservative Government, it could hardly be said that he was one of the most devoted federationists especially since, as Colonial Secretary, he had done nothing to help the League and indeed had frequently poured cold water on League enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another embarrassment occurred for the League at the end of July. During a meeting of the League Council on 31 July 1888 an unmistakable anxiety was evident when Downes Carter, the President of the League in Victoria, announced that the time for caution was over and that the League ought to have an active policy. He was firmly supported by Sir Frederick Young whose restlessness was apparent in his defence of Downes Carter:

I do feel very strongly that the time has now come when we should consider something more definite with regard to the programme we are to put forward.....I am a very progressive person in connection with this League, and I am one of those who want to go forward, as I do not agree with those politicians who are always hesitating.<sup>3</sup>

1. See Knutsford to Rosebery, 21 July 1888 and Knutsford to Loring, 21 July 1888, *ibid.*
2. Knutsford's quiet rebuffs to the League are best summarised by R. A. Shields, *op.cit.*, whose chief primary source is Colonial Office records.
3. *Imperial Federation*, III, September 1888, pp. 172-173. Young had been knighted in January 1888.

Young's brash speech clearly separated him from most other federationists in his impatience to instil a new impetus into League policy and it also represented nothing less than a scathing attack on Rosebery's rather lifeless leadership. In reply to this twin assault, Rosebery expressed considerable doubt that the League could do more and he warned them that "if we wish to keep the League together we must be very "kittle" of suggestions that the House of Commons is only to transact certain business and careful not to embark on any great constitutional scheme for the regulation of the affairs of the Empire." In conclusion, the League President reaffirmed his previous policy of "cautious vigilance."<sup>1</sup>

Having refused to be goaded into producing a scheme, the league, in Young's eyes, had been tried and found wanting. Such disagreement reflected the dilemma of the organization's situation throughout 1888, a position which was frankly sterile. Yet, moderation and passivity at least kept the League together which was obviously Rosebery's first priority and there had been no widespread colonial agitation for producing any scheme. It was on this latter aspect, therefore, that Young made an unequivocal speech on 6 September at Johnstone in Scotland, calling for the appointment of "a Commission to go round the various colonies, not to advocate any particular policy, but to ascertain the views of the colonists themselves on the subject"<sup>2</sup>. Rosebery, who was the suggested leader of such a commission, wrote to Young that the League was "grateful" to him for his speech and added that it would be a "pity" if it were not repeated elsewhere, although he did not "entirely" agree with Young's views.<sup>3</sup>

Rosebery's major public contribution to the federationist cause in this dreary year was his famous speech on "Commerce and Empire" at the Leeds Chamber of Commerce on 11 October 1888. Here, the League President dwelt upon foreign and colonial policy, and unhesitatingly pointed to the fact that "our foreign policy has become more of a colonial policy,

1. Ibid., pp.173-174.

2. Johnstone Speech, Young Papers, File III, no. 13.

3. Rosebery to Young, 13 September 1888, ibid., File II, f.28.



and is becoming every day more entwined with our colonial interests than has ever been the case before." Adding that it would be impossible in the future to maintain the existing "loose and indefinable" relations with the colonies and keep them attached to the empire<sup>1</sup>, Rosebery's far-sighted words received the acclaim of The Times which referred to them as "particularly original and valuable", although it was relieved that no federation scheme had been proposed and it contrasted his views on imperial affairs with those on Home Rule of which it disapproved.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, the nearest the League came to being cordially associated with any federal scheme in 1888 was as a result of a speech by Lord Brassey at the Glasgow and West of Scotland branch of the League on 24 October 1888. Rosebery introduced Brassey to the audience as "no dreamer of dreams; ...not a visionary philosopher; ...not a random rhetorician," but as "a man of business and the greatest amateur traveller in the world".<sup>3</sup> Until that moment, Brassey had always argued that it was not the League's task to manufacture schemes of federation, but this time he allowed himself to indulge in the possibility that the first Colonial Conference must "in the course of time lead up to the establishment of a great standing Council of Advice in relation to the external affairs of the Empire."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it would be going too far to pin Brassey to this statement uncompromisingly, but even if it was meant as a flippant comment, the fact that it was spoken in the presence of Rosebery gave it an unexpected authority and The Times certainly regarded it as official. The next day it came forward with the sober statement that any proposals which interfered with Britain's complete control of foreign policy would be intolerable since that aspect of government had to remain in the hands of those ministers responsible to the "Imperial House of Commons."<sup>5</sup>

1. editor anon., Lord Rosebery's Speeches 1874-1896, (London 1896), pp. 42-57. The speech was fully reported in the Times, 11 October 1888.
2. The Times, 11 October 1888.
3. Imperial Federation, III, November 1888, p.215.
4. Ibid., p.216. See also A.H.Loring and R.J.Beadon (ed.), Lord Brassey, Papers and Addresses: Imperial Federation and Colonisation, (1890-1894), pp.99-105.
5. The Times, 25 October 1888.

An unwanted epitaph to the year was coined by the Prime Minister who, at a banquet given in his honour on 14 November 1888, stated that federation meant the "ten letters which constitute the word "Federation" and it means nothing else."<sup>1</sup> For one thing, as the League's journal noticed, this inexplicable statement was in direct contrast to Salisbury's earlier comments on imperial federation at the Colonial Conference, yet it was the truth and it seemed to crown a year full of disillusionment, erratic leadership, financial desperation and increasing disunity. Above all, the League had survived, but it was only by a course of inaction and there was no telling how far it would be able to resist the growing demands for a federation scheme and the disruption of Vincent's commercial federationists.

Vincent was not alone in advocating the commercial union of the empire by means of some kind of harmonisation of tariffs, but he was certainly the most vigorous campaigner and was only prevented from really effective action by Lord Salisbury's plea for unity. Both within the Tory Party and the Imperial Federation League, Vincent's object was to secure widespread approval for the abrogation of the two commercial treaties of 1862 and 1865 between Britain and Belgium, and Britain and the German Zollverein respectively. Between them, these treaties effectively prevented any kind of limited preferential trade arrangements between the colonies and the mother country and were therefore the natural target of Vincent's activity. Neither the Colonial Office nor parliament showed any signs of a concession to the stimulation of commercial intercourse within the empire in 1888, however, and the decline of protectionist agitation among the Conservatives during that year combined to weaken Vincent's attack.

The following year, 1889, marked the end of an interlude of comparative reticence on the part of the many League branches and individuals who had become impatient with the aridity of League policy, and the dominant feature of the final stage of these troubled years is the manifest restlessness and differences of opinion as to the need for a more active and purposeful strategy. There was a unanimity of opinion as to the

1. Imperial Federation, IV, January 1889, p.6.



distance travelled by the League since 1884, but evidence abounds in the League journal for 1889 of the growing unrest among federationists for a fresh impetus and in many ways a crisis of opinion can be said to have resulted. This year therefore can be regarded as a convenient watershed in the League's history and it can be shown how the organization was first pressured into taking a step which led ultimately to its denouement.

This theme of restlessness within the League did not simply apply to the commercial federationists. It was a reaction which spread throughout the whole movement and did not emanate from any particular school of thought. Lord Brassey, it will be remembered, had already associated himself with a vaguely federal scheme in October 1888 and in March 1889 he confirmed his belief in "a Council of Advice which should represent all parts of the Empire in the department of Foreign Affairs."<sup>1</sup> The League Treasurer's willingness to prophesy must have given a modicum of comfort to those federationists who were toying with the idea of a new departure in League policy. Indeed, during the spring of 1889, as if encouraged by Brassey's prophecy, the League branches in Edinburgh and West Scotland, Hampstead and Hammersmith each protested against the atmosphere of micawberism and urged the central body to take more active measures by formulating a federation scheme around which a new enthusiasm could be generated.<sup>2</sup>

An attempt to jolt the League into action even found its way into parliament on 25 March 1889 when Lord Stratheden and Campbell, a member of the League's General Council, moved in the House of Lords that steps should be taken to arrange another colonial conference at Westminster and that the topic of imperial federation could not be excluded from discussion. Stratheden and Campbell bluntly charged the League with irresolution and called attention to its impotence, adding that it "ought to die" if no further progress was made beyond the achievements of 1887.<sup>3</sup> His speech was

1. Keigley Speech, 8 March 1889, A. Loring and R. Beardon, Papers and Addresses of Lord Brassey, pp. 111-114.

2. Imperial Federation, III, 1889, see issues for May, June and July.

3. Hansard (3), CCCXXXIV, 661.

in effect a summary of the imperial federation movement's growth since 1869, but whose accomplishments were contrasted with the League's recent paralysis in order to demonstrate its inadequacies.

In his capacity as Colonial Secretary, it was appropriate that Knutsford replied to the baron's motion. With a calm perfunctory approach, Knutsford proceeded to dismiss the disgruntled League member's proposal as both inopportune and injurious. In Roseberyite fashion, Knutsford retorted that any proposals which might alter the relations between Britain and the colonies "must come, in the first instance, from the Colonies themselves" and that unless this occurred "it would be useless, nay, even mischievous, for us to formulate in this country schemes for a closer union."<sup>1</sup> It is also clear that he regarded Colonial Federation as the sine qua non of imperial federation and, quite obviously, the Colonial Office viewpoint was sceptical of any interference with the status quo in imperial relations. Not unnaturally, the League's journal reproached the renegade member for pursuing a fruitless line of reasoning and pointed out that no debate had transpired after Knutsford's remarks which therefore reduced the whole episode to a "duologue" which expired of "inanition".<sup>2</sup>

Two other criticisms of League paralysis were reported during the first part of 1889. The Australian, Patchett Martin, urged the League to be more definite in its policy in a letter to the central body in March and the following month Richard Dobell, an early League member and an activist on the Executive Committee of the Canadian League, moved that the parent body should invite the various league branches in the colonies to express their views as to the best means of drawing closer the trade relations of Britain and her colonies.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Association of the Chambers

1. Ibid., 674-675.

2. Imperial Federation, III, May 1889, pp.98-99.

3. Ibid., April and May 1889.



of Commerce also passed a unanimous resolution in favour of imperial federation at this time seemed to add more pressure to the conviction that vague talk about closer union ought to give way to a real consideration of more detailed proposals.

At the fourth Annual General Meeting of the League on 23 May, 1889, however, Rosebery again revealed his talent as a restraining force and the 'progressives' in the movement received little satisfaction from this event. Referring to such enthusiasts, the League President warned them that the League could "produce a great many more plans than were desirable" and he calmly stated that "if a plan is to come at all, it must come in the shape of a Colonial, not a British demand."<sup>1</sup> Without doubt the free trade element in the League hierarchy was determined to avoid the commercial question and Lord Carnarvon's great regret that a common fiscal system of trade could not yet be agreed upon was conveniently ignored by the meeting. The sense of the meeting was simply expressed in the words of an Executive Committee member, H.L.W. Lawson M.P., who concluded the proceedings by observing that the League could do nothing more than to take advantage of every opportunity bearing upon the subject of imperial federation. This was their recipe for inaction.

Advocates of a more forward policy were only temporarily diverted from their goal, however, for the colonial initiative to which Rosebery had alluded was suddenly delivered at the annual banquet of the League in June 1889. At this fiesta, which was well attended and over which Lord Herschell presided in Rosebery's absence, Sir Charles Tupper, the Canadian High Commissioner, not only urged the League to take some decisive step towards making imperial federation more of a working reality, but he ever indicated the direction in which it should move. Tupper's proposal was simple and to the point. He recommended that a great convention representative of the empire should be held in London in order to consider a scheme in detail and he added that the most likely solution to the question lay in "adoption of a fiscal policy mutually beneficial" to all

1. *Ibid.*, June 1889, p.136.

portions of the empire.<sup>1</sup> As High Commissioner, Tupper's initiative naturally acquired an official importance and more than one free trader at the banquet must have suffered indigestion at the thought of swallowing this unsavoury morsel.

In accordance with Rosebery's dictum that the League had to wait for a specifically colonial initiative, restraint could no longer be reasonably defended and, in consequence, a special meeting of the Executive Committee was summoned to consider what action should be taken in the matter. At this stage it might be worth considering Tupper's motives and the reactions to his initiative, especially since he was destined to play such a prominent role in the League after 1889 as an advocate of imperial preference.

By 1889, Tupper was a veteran Canadian diplomatist and a senior member of the Canadian Conservative party which was still led by Sir John Macdonald. According to Tyler, Tupper had a strong forceful character and an unequivocal view of the problem of closer union which meant commercial union based upon preference.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, his thirty-two years in parliamentary life in Canada and the contribution he made to the establishment of the Dominion in 1867 must have equipped him with a wealth of political experience which not only gave him a sanguine view of what could be achieved in imperial politics two decades later, but also made him intolerant of the inertia into which the League had sunk in 1889. Tupper was thus a man excellently fitted for the role of motivator in League councils.

Tupper had, of course, been present at the birth of the League in 1884 and had played a decisive part in the framing of League resolutions and objectives, but he never joined the organization until July 1889 when he became a member of the Executive Committee. Having been acquainted with the League from its infancy, therefore, it was hardly surprising that Tupper should have had strong views on the imperial question and these opinions were comprehensively expressed in two articles which he wrote for

1. Imperial Federation, III, July 1889, p.152.

2. Tyler, op.cit., p.179.



the Nineteenth Century in 1891 and 1892.<sup>1</sup> In these pages Tupper dismissed the idea of colonial contributions to a common imperial defence fund and he was almost as sceptical of parliamentary federation as was his chief, Sir John Macdonald. Given the emphasis in Canadian politics on trade issues, it was understandable that Tupper's chief priority should have been commercial federation based upon preference, but his initiative of 1889 was also another example of the growing importance of specifically economic aspects within the federation movement. Without doubt the initiative was welcomed by a majority of federationists prominent in the League's councils and especially by those, like Vincent and Young, who regarded it as a convenient opportunity to canvass the merits of imperial preference.

Predictably, Rosebery was sceptical of more definite action, but Tupper's proposal also met with unfriendly criticism from an apparently unexpected quarter. Sir John Macdonald politely scolded the Canadian High Commissioner by informing him that his speech had "excited much attention in Canada and a good deal of dissatisfaction in Quebec" and he advised Tupper to "let it be known" that he spoke only his own opinions and not those of the Canadian Government.<sup>2</sup> Tupper's reply was apologetic, but he called attention to the fact that although his bold proposal had been received favourably in England, it had been "completely misunderstood in Canada."<sup>3</sup> In order to consider Tupper's proposal, a special meeting of the League had been held on 18 July 1889 and it was here that the Canadian had emphasized the fact that he did not speak in an official capacity. Macdonald's complaint, although sincere, thus had no real foundation and he subsequently wrote to Tupper that the High Commissioner had "taken the matter too much au sérieux."<sup>4</sup>

1. See "Federating the Empire : A Colonial Plan", Nineteenth Century, Oct. 1891, Vol. XXX, pp. 520 and "How to Federate the Empire : A Reply to Critics," Nineteenth Century, April 1892, Vol. XXX, pp. 525-536.
2. Macdonald to Tupper, 14 August 1889, C. Tupper, Recollections of Sixty Years, (London 1914), pp. 248-249.
3. Tupper to Macdonald, 13 September 1889, *ibid.*, pp. 249-250.
4. Macdonald to Tupper, 29 September 1889, *ibid.*, p. 251.

At the League meeting of 18 July 1889 which discussed Tupper's suggestion, a scathing indictment of the League was a cause of great and sudden concern. The object of this new anxiety was an article which appeared in the July 1889 issue of the Edinburgh Review questioning the League's very existence and containing such venom in its condemnation of imperial federation that it could not be allowed to go unanswered.<sup>1</sup>

Howard Vincent called the General Council's attention to the article and observed that :

it really contains such serious statements, and throws so much ridicule upon the whole League, that I think it is absolutely incumbent upon us to show that we are a living power and are capable to some forward action.<sup>2</sup>

Sir Charles Tupper came stoutly to Vincent's side and urged that unless the League took some practical step it would face continuous tirade of abuse from such quarters of the press, concluding with the pertinent remark that the movement was not simply an annual meeting or an annual banquet, but was designed to make closer union more of a working reality.<sup>3</sup> Rosebery was unperturbed, and with the unquestioning support of Brassey, Colomb and others, his chief task was simply to frame a resolution acceptable to all, which would then be sent to the Prime Minister. However, the League President treated his audience to a demonstration of lucid thinking when he observed that, although the Edinburgh Review represented an additional incentive to action, circumstances already tended to favour an approach to the Government.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it was in this way, as a direct outcome of the Tupper initiative, that the Imperial Federation League was finally jolted into action in 1889.

1. "Imperial Federation", (pub. anonymously), Edinburgh Review, July 1889, Vol. CLXX, pp.247-257.
2. Imperial Federation, III, August 1889, p.174.
3. Ibid., p.174.
4. Ibid., p.175.



The result, however, was anything but triumphant for advocates of a forward policy because Rosebery's official letter to Salisbury on behalf of the League merely asked the Government to consider "the advisability" of summoning another colonial conference.<sup>1</sup> This caution bore the hallmarks of Rosebery's thinking. Clearly, the League President <sup>was</sup> concerned about the embarrassment which would result if Salisbury rejected a League demand for another conference and he therefore preferred to register the movement's pressure for an invitation to the colonies rather than to risk an official refusal of a direct request. The idea of ascertaining the Government's reaction, prior to a formal request, at least had the advantage of avoiding the certain blow to the League's prestige which would have resulted in the event of a refusal on Salisbury's part. On the other hand, this approach to Salisbury was also a relatively safe move for the moderates in the League to take in as much as they knew that the Prime Minister's hands were still tied by his party's reliance in parliament upon the Liberal Unionists. Rosebery's manoeuvre, therefore, had the additional value that it disarmed Tupper's proposal and temporarily countered the movement's critics.

Probably few federationists were genuinely surprised at the Prime Minister's reply. Salisbury stated that although he would be pleased to receive any suggestions from the League, it was not "within the province of Her Majesty's Government" to summon such a conference because it would lead to "misapprehension" and it presupposed the preparation of recommendations upon the question of federation which did not exist.<sup>2</sup> As far as he was concerned, the colonies could consult together on this matter without any assistance from the British Government. On 26 July 1889, a second special meeting of the General Council of the League was summoned to discuss the Prime Minister's discouraging statement, and the reported speeches of this meeting revealed not only the great disappointment with Salisbury's response, but also a wide discrepancy between the rank and file membership and the leadership as to the course to be pursued. Howard Vincent

1. Rosebery to Salisbury, 18 July 1889, Salisbury Papers, Class E, No. 10. The correspondence was also published in full in *Imperial Federation* III, August 1889.

2. Salisbury to Rosebery, 23 July 1889, *ibid.*, No. 11, and *ibid.*, August 1889.

Charles Tupper, Lord Charles Beresford, Kenric Murray of the London Chamber of Commerce, and Lord Brassey were all in favour of arranging a deputation to see the Prime Minister, while Rosebery calmly declared that he found himself alone in support of Lord Salisbury's decision. This was not entirely true because the League President did receive the support of Colomb, Stanley Leighton M.P., and G.W. Rusden, but the disunity was undeniable and Rosebery's role yet again was that of a restraining influence. Both Tupper and Brassey were particularly unequivocal with regard to the League's lack of vigour, and when Rosebery's motion finally succeeded against strong opposition it was clear that no real breakthrough in League policy would be achieved.

The upshot of this affair was that Rosebery gained approval to send Salisbury another letter suggesting that the League would reserve the right to wait on the Prime Minister after the summer and that he could not accept the official view that the colonies could meet together to discuss closer union without any help from the British Government. On the contrary, the letter pointed out that the success of the first Colonial Conference of 1887 had been based upon the firm belief in imperial unity and that if that conviction was well-founded, further steps should be taken to prove its validity. This meant that the imperial government was the proper body to take the initiative. Thus, the League felt perfectly justified in urging on Her Majesty's Government that a subject "so recognised and so pressing, which was excluded from the Conference of 1887, should be considered at a further gathering of the various states of the Empire."<sup>1</sup> For the time being, the matter rested there, but it was obvious that many prominent federationists were totally dissatisfied and especially Vincent and Tupper who regarded imperial preference as the most profitable direction in which to move. However, at least Rosebery had been persuaded, albeit reluctantly, to travel further and faster than he could have wanted, and he had been converted to the basic premise that Britain, not the colonies, should take the leading role in summoning conventions to discuss closer union. Actual schemes were still premature and they had to emanate from the colonies, but the League President had at last associated himself with

1. Rosebery to Salisbury, 30 July 1889, *ibid.*, and *ibid.*, August 1889.



the belief that it was Britain which had to do the spadework to keep alive the aspirations of imperial unity rather than waiting for a specifically colonial initiative.

Yet, if this represented movement, many earnest thinkers within the League must have questioned whether it was movement in the right direction. Having acquired the support of the Executive Committee for what amounted to a restatement of League policy, Rosebery addressed the General Council on 14 November 1889 and successfully promoted his view that the immediate aim of the League should be to secure the establishment of periodical conferences similar to that of 1887.<sup>1</sup> Tyler suggested that he may well have used this as a trick in order to disarm the growing agitation within the League for imperial preference,<sup>2</sup> but it also fitted in well with a previously established mode of behaviour by the League President. Rosebery had in fact abandoned federation for the less heady "method of conference". Although his resolution met with little opposition, it was clearly unpalatable to many federationists who gave it qualified approval. Thus, Sir John Colomb observed that the work of the League did not come to an end with the establishment of periodical conferences, and Howard Vincent emphasized dryly that the public should not be allowed to think that the League had become merely the "Imperial Conference League". H.O. Arnold-Forster even went as far as stating that there was a doubt among the members about him as to the intention to maintain the League's organization and especially the journal.<sup>3</sup> Rosebery protested that there was plenty of work for the League for many years and that he considered the journal to be the most valuable part of that work.

Notwithstanding these critical remarks, Rosebery went ahead with his Mansion House speech on 15 November 1889 and incorporated in it a pronouncement on periodical conferences which was not, however, added to

1. Imperial Federation, IX, December 1889, p.288.

2. Tyler, op.cit., p.183.

3. Imperial Federation, IX, December 1889, p.288.



the League's constitution. This speech which occasioned the inauguration of the City branch of the League was, therefore, an official declaration of intent and a clear departure from the federal objective. Rosebery of course claimed that federation had not been abandoned, it could be evolved through the conference method, but this seemed to relegate the objective to the distant future. As one federationist, Henry Kimber, had pointed out, however, this immediate aim at least 'gave a point where the policy of the League was otherwise pointless'<sup>1</sup>, a remark which was sadly consonant with the bleak fortunes of the movement at the end of 1889.

One final event merited attention in a year when Edward Freeman dismissed imperial federation as "constitutional despotism or regulated anarchy or anything else that was "contradictory".<sup>2</sup> As a result of a dinner given by the General Committee of the League on 6 July 1887, four sub-committees to deal with the Political, Commercial, Defence, and Communications aspect of imperial federation had been established to improve the League's efficiency in dealing with these separate questions. By the end of that year little progress had been made with these new instruments of League efficiency and it was not until November 1889 that the Commercial Committee, chaired by Sir Rawson Rawson, produced its long-awaited report upon economic subjects which merited the attention of a future colonial conference. What was significant about the report was the complete absence of any reference to imperial preference or any fiscal alterations. The Committee grouped such topics together as postal regulations, telegraphic communications, bankruptcy, copyright and patent laws, subjects which were hardly adventurous avenues along which to pursue imperial federation.<sup>3</sup> Once again, the free traders were having their way and it was obvious that the League was not going to take up any new position regarding commercial federation. Rosebery's pronouncement of 1887 that it was impossible for the League to do anything that might strike either directly or indirectly at the

1. *Ibid.*, p.288.

2. Freeman to Bryce, 11 November 1889, Bryce Papers, Ms. 8, ff. 97-94.

3. Report of the Commercial Committee, 13 November 1889, Imperial Federation, *op.cit.*, pp. 286-287.



fiscal system of the mother country was clearly as relevant in 1889 and it was this inability to solve the trade question which ensured that the only progress the League was likely to make would be along the lines of some form of imperial co-operation, as, for example, revised defence arrangements.

The Colonial Conference of 1887, although a worthy achievement in the struggle for imperial unity, cannot obscure the fact that the period 1887-1889 was one of recurring disappointments, increasing disunity, and intense frustration for the champions of imperial federation. All attempts at staging revivals had been thwarted by the restraint imposed by Rosebery, and the efforts to enhance the League's membership and thus place it on a sound financial footing had also failed miserably. Even devoted federationists such as Young, Arnold-Forster and Brassey had expressed doubts about the League's future, and the commercial aspect of closer union, although the subject of continuous discussion both within and without League councils during these years, had proved to be too delicate a topic to permit any fruitful results. At the close of these troubled years it is an exaggeration to claim that the League was moribund as a purposeful organization and that its membership lacked that crusading zeal which had brought it into existence because there was still an abundance of idealism, but it outstripped financial realism and it could not be productive in any case when that idealism outran the economic developments which were required to support it.

To represent 1889 as another watershed in the League's history can be justified mainly as a point of convenience, although it does possess several features which combine to give it an element of uniqueness and thus allow it to be depicted as a breathing-space. It is chiefly from the point of view of awaiting the arrival and outcome of a new approach to Lord Salisbury that the date has any real meaning in terms of the movement's historical development. Given Lord Salisbury's periodic utterances upon the subject of imperial federation and his brief encounters with the League itself, it seems worthwhile to consider the Prime Minister's attitude and relationship to the movement for closer union and the extent to which he accepted the subject as a viable proposition in any of its various guises.



CHAPTER 8Two PersonalitiesLord Salisbury and Imperial Federation

Because imperial federation lacked any really coherent theory and was regarded by all, but the most devoted believers as outside the range of practical politics, it was hardly surprising that most statesmen deemed it unnecessary to comment publicly upon the subject other than to sympathize with the high-sounding sentiments of imperial unity. Because his approach to problems was essentially practical and because he was in office when the fortunes of the Imperial Federation League were in the ascendant, however, Lord Salisbury's position was different. He came into direct contact with the League twice when responding to official League deputations in 1886 and 1891, and he expressed his views both publicly and privately on the subject of imperial federation, although his encouragement was always tied to, and limited by, what he regarded as the requirements of expediency. Salisbury has therefore acquired a reputation for rarely succumbing to the doctrines of his day which made him more amenable to change when he felt it to be both desirable and attainable.

Without question, Salisbury's political thought held many clues to his political activity and helped to shape his views on empire and to determine his response to movements of public opinion. One writer on the younger Salisbury, M. Pinto-Duschinsky, has dubbed him an "empirical Conservative" and claimed that 'there is no reason to suppose that Salisbury's later thought was radically different.'<sup>1</sup> This assessment is supported by Lady Gwendolen Cecil's historically invaluable monograph of her father in which Salisbury's empiricism - his detestation of doctrinaire infallibility and his fundamentally practical approach to problems - is the paramount theme.<sup>2</sup> Evidence in this survey has already demonstrated how far this characteristic was exemplified in Salisbury's attitude towards the fiscal question when he flirted with the idea of retaliation, although the

1. M. Pinto-Duschinsky, *The Political Thought of Lord Salisbury, 1854-1868*, (Lon. 1967), p.12.

2. Lady G. Cecil, *Biographical Studies of the Life and Political Character of Robert, Third Marquis of Salisbury*, (privately circulated).



actual realities of the situation made it politically impossible. If the limits of possibility were basically the limits of the permitted, it was hardly surprising that Salisbury envisaged the progress of closer imperial union to be made more along the lines of defence rather than changing tariff structures. Although lacking detailed knowledge of the War Office and the Admiralty<sup>1</sup>, his political realism recognized the fact that the establishment of a piecemeal working arrangement with the colonies along defence lines was likely to be more fruitful and less controversial than an attempt to modify Britain's tariff policy.

Salisbury's view of imperial union merits investigation not only because he was in a position to influence the League's progress and direction, but also because of the surprising paucity of information connected with the Conservative leader's outlook on imperial federation per se. Hitherto, most writers interested in Salisbury's political career have concentrated their attentions upon his diplomatic achievements, his party political attitudes, his fears of parliamentary reform and his political thought, while only cursory attention has been accorded to his views on the closer union of the empire.<sup>2</sup> Lady Gwendolen Cecil's biography of her father<sup>3</sup> remains the definitive work on the life of Lord Salisbury,

1. Lady G. Cecil, *ibid.*, p.3.

2. J.A.S.Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy* (Lon. Univ. 1964), L.Penson, *Foreign Affairs under the Third Marquis of Salisbury* (Lon.Univ. 1962), and C.J.Lowe, *Salisbury and the Mediterranean* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962) pay only scant attention to his imperial attitudes. The latest study on Salisbury, R.Taylor, *Lord Salisbury*, (Allen Lane 1975) does link his attitude to the world and the empire with his attitude to Ireland, but a fuller treatment of his views on closer imperial union is still necessary.

3. Lady G.Cecil, *The Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, 4 Vols., (1921, 1931 and 1932.

but is also disappointing on his attitudes to closer union, and it is this neglected aspect of Salisbury's political outlook which has resulted in an incomplete assessment and which has even allowed the interpretation of ambivalence and inconsistency to be placed upon them.

Apart from Salisbury's Newport Speech of 1885 and his reception of the first League deputation in the following year, the occasion which evoked his first major public statement on the subject of imperial federation was the Colonial Conference of 1887. Even allowing for the glittering splendour of the occasion which obviously occupied considerable attention, the Conservative leader's speech represented an important landmark in the movement's struggle for acceptability among informed political circles. Salisbury's speech bore the hallmarks of his empiricist approach to problems, but with an added nuance which was redolent of his Hatfield laboratory:

I am not here now to recommend you to indulge in any ambitious schemes of constitution - making. ....That is a matter for the future rather than for the present. These are grand aspirations. ....They are doubtless hazy now, but they are the nebulous matter that in the course of ages - in very much less than ages - will cool down and condense into material from which many practical and business-like resolutions may very likely come. But that is for the future and not for the present. 1

Recognising the fact that Britain could not emulate the German Empire by conducting all her imperial affairs from one centre, Salisbury nevertheless claimed that the creation of a Zollverein, a Customs Union, and a Kriegsverein, a Military Union, might be applicable to British circumstances in the future. For the present, Salisbury was convinced that any attempt to unite the empire along commercial lines was politically impossible and, instead, he called attention to the idea of a union for purposes of mutual defence, which he referred to as "the real and most important business."<sup>2</sup>

1. Parliamentary Papers, LV1, (C 5091), p.6.

2. Ibid., pp.6-7.



Given the unique agreement which committed the Australian colonies to contribute formally to the external defence of the empire in 1887, it appeared that Salisbury's concern for the specifically defensive aspect of closer union was well-founded. Here was the first real attempt to translate the theory of closer union into a working arrangement -what many federationists like Brassey, Colomb and Beresford regarded as a kind of "federation without tears." Salisbury was certainly correct in speaking of the strong and rapid growth of the idea of closer union, but he had also made it clear that the discussion of closer political relations was to be eschewed as premature and likely to lead to dangerous misunderstandings. His realistic appraisal of imperial circumstances in 1887 did not prevent him from displaying occasional impatience with the colonies. Immediately prior to the Colonial Conference, he complained privately to his Colonial Secretary, Sir Henry Holland, of the "outrage of Greater Britain"<sup>1</sup> and noted that they were "the most unreasonable people I have ever heard of or dreamt of."<sup>2</sup> His failure to appreciate the thrust of colonial nationalism and his intolerance of colonial sensitivities, however, was typical of an age when most men either misunderstood or under-estimated the nature and the pace of colonial development. Salisbury's lack of sympathy for colonial priorities was less astounding when it became apparent that many federationists also overlooked them and were also not averse to encroaching upon their recently acquired powers of self-government.

Not unnaturally, the Imperial Federation League viewed Salisbury's assessment of imperial affairs with great optimism. The idea that the Prime Minister would have commented favourably upon the subject and indulged in such detail far exceeded the hopes and expectations of most sober federationists, and they must have regarded it as a real breakthrough in the campaign to foster the consolidation of the empire. With the commercial

1. Salisbury to Holland, 18 April 1887, Salisbury Papers, Class D, Vol. IX., OED = "arrogance")
2. Salisbury to Holland, 27 April 1887, *ibid.*

union school of thought, which began to disrupt the apparent harmony of the League, however, Salisbury could not have had much sympathy. Evidence in the Salisbury Papers shows that he had little respect for uncompromising adherence to Cobdenite orthodoxy, but he was fully aware of the impracticability of attempting to alter Britain's free trade policy. There were too many obstacles. He regarded a rise in food prices as simply out of the question even if the long-term benefits seemed to make it worthwhile. The slightest suggestion of such an opinion would have been fatal to the existence of any political party connected with it and Salisbury's major concern in the years after 1887 was to exclude the question of tariffs from the field of party politics. He recommended keeping the party out of the Fair Trade League<sup>1</sup> and his public advocacy of an Imperial Zollverein as an object of desire was really directed towards the ultimate extension of free trade, not the introduction of protection.<sup>2</sup> As his daughter noted, Salisbury never really stirred himself to consider the value of the theoretical arguments of a case if he believed action to be impossible in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the last resort, Salisbury's hands were tied by his reliance upon the support of the Liberal Unionists whose economic beliefs were firmly wedded to free trade. In the light of these factors, it is not difficult to imagine how far Salisbury's mind dismissed the views of the commercial federationists and the ubiquitous activities of Howard Vincent as both romantic and tactless.

Without doubt, Salisbury considered that the only feasible approach to the problem of closer union was by concentrating upon the defence aspect which seemed to offer attractive possibilities after 1887. Slow but steady progress had been made in this area, although there were still glaring omissions such as the failure to establish some form of co-ordination between the War Office and the Admiralty, and the lack of any complete planning organization for the whole empire. Federationists who regarded defence as the most important approach to closer union were probably guilty of over-simplifying the needs of each colony, but they all appeared to agree that common defence was essential to any scheme of closer union.

1. Salisbury to R. Winn, first Baron St. Oswald, 4 September 1884, *ibid.*, vol. xvi.

2. Lady G. Cecil, *Biographical Studies*, p. 89.

3. Lady G. Cecil, *ibid.*, p. 89.



The co-operation between Britain and the Australian colonies over naval defence in 1887 seemed to point to the fact that if imperial unity meant anything the colonies would simply have to take their share in the defence of the empire. Salisbury certainly seemed to accept the idea of imperial unity, but colonial contributions to imperial defence did not mean colonial participation in the framing of defence policy which federationists regarded as inevitable.

After 1887 Salisbury's attitude towards imperial federation did not show any real signs of increasing affection and in a speech given at a banquet in his honour on 14 November 1888 he confessed that imperial federation meant the "ten letters which constitute the word 'federation' and it means nothing else".<sup>1</sup> The League was astounded at this apparently inexplicable attack by the Prime Minister and, as the journal of the League was quick to point out, these words were a direct contradiction of his own declarations at the Colonial Conference. In fairness to Salisbury, however, he also admitted that he did not condemn the cause of closer union, but that he did not know exactly what the terminology meant. Since federationists themselves differed widely in their views on the subject, more venom was attributed to Salisbury's statement than it possessed and the Prime Minister was released from the League's suspicion a fortnight later when, in another speech at Edinburgh, he argued that the question of the empire was a matter for the future.<sup>2</sup>

In a reported speech of 16 July, 1889, Salisbury appeared to display a much less critical attitude towards imperial federation, but it was nevertheless a cool reappraisal of the possibilities of closer union. The nearest the Prime Minister came to expressing his approval was when he noted that the terminology indicated "a very noble and wholesome sympathy", but that imperial federation was an object "which could be attained" provided the aspirations of its followers were confined to what was "practical and possible".<sup>3</sup> This was a classic example of Salisbury's empiricism. He

1. Imperial Federation, III, January 1889, p.6.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., August, 1889, p.182.

deprecatd the idea that the empire would ever be federated "exactly on the pattern and in the sense in which the United States were federated to one another,"<sup>1</sup> an observation which seemed to indicate that Salisbury had at least tried to define what imperial federation did not mean, but he said nothing about either defence or commerce in the context of imperial affairs.

As far as public speeches were concerned, Salisbury had naturally been consistently cautious when it came to expressing an opinion upon so intangible a subject as imperial federation. Where eminent statesmen were concerned, almost any public statement upon the subject was liable to be either genuinely misunderstood or unscrupulously distorted by critics, and it was in his private correspondence, therefore, that Salisbury was less timid in expressing his real feeling about closer union. During 1889 he wrote to Canon MacColl about the possibility of Home Rule for Ireland being part of a wider measure of imperial federation:

As to Home Rule in your sense - which is Federation - I do not see in it any elements of practicability. Nations do not change their political nature like that, except through blood. It would require a subordination of all ordinary motives, a renunciation of traditions and prepossessions, a far-reaching and disciplined resolve, which is never engendered by mere persuasion, and only comes after conflict and under the pressure of military force. To ask the British nation in its present moral and political condition to execute such a transformation would be like asking the Rector's cob to win the Derby. The forces are not there. 2

Salisbury's most detailed explanation of his views on imperial federation, however, occurred during the course of a letter to Sir Henry Parkes, the former Premier of New South Wales. Parkes was about to launch his great appeal for a federal union of all the Australian colonies and briefly toyed with the idea of combining this with a scheme of imperial federation. Writing to Salisbury in November 1889, Parkes deprecated the idea advanced by many federationists that the colonies might be represented in the imperial parliament and, instead, argued very briefly in favour of "a great

1. Ibid.

2. Salisbury to MacColl, 12 April 1889, G.W.E. Russell, M. MacColl, *Memoir and Correspondence*, (London 1914), p.137.



National Council in which all parts of the Empire should be represented on terms of equality, not only for consultative, but for executive purposes within certain limits."<sup>1</sup> In reply, Salisbury went to great lengths to convey his doubts about the suggestion and in so doing delivered a severe blow to the hopes of many federationists:

I do not at present see my way through the thick entanglement of practical difficulties which separate us from any practical solution of the problem that you have proposed.....there are two difficulties which strike me at the outset, and which seem likely to offer a formidable resistance to the adoption of any practical measure. One of them is a question of human nature. The other arises from racial considerations. The first is that the establishment of any such Imperial Council.....if it is to be clothed with the command of any portion of either our domestic or our foreign policy, involves a considerable sacrifice on the part of England and the independence which she at present possesses. She will have to ask the consent of others before she makes decisions which now she makes of her own authority. Will it be possible ever to obtain from England a consent to this surrender? .....The other difficulty arises out of the numerous races of which this Empire is composed.....I do not think it would be possible now to ignore all the constituents of it that are not of Anglo-Saxon origin. On the other hand, no proposal of federation could...survive discussion which did not recognise the number of population as the basis of equal rights to which all members of the federation would be entitled, but if influence over the Imperial Council is to be shared equally among the vast populations of which the Empire consists it is evident that the guidance of its advisors will fall entirely into Asiatic hands..... These perplexities make me disposed to the belief that the time has not yet come when we can frame any scheme for the federation of the Empire .....it would be an error to compromise the success of any future experiment by a premature decision.<sup>2</sup>

1. Parkes to Salisbury, 2 November 1889, Salisbury Papers, Class E, No. 2., On Parkes's motives, see W.G.McMinn, Sir Henry Parkes As A Federalist, Historical Studies, Australia and N.Z., Vol. 12., 1965, pp.405-416.
2. Salisbury to Parkes, 23 December 1889, ibid., D/393, ff.458-461.

By taking Parkes' proposal at face value, Salisbury's consideration of imperial federation yielded objections which were remarkably reminiscent of the arguments used by Edward Freeman. Salisbury was clearly alive to the uniqueness of attempting to change an empire into a federal or quasi-federal state and he pointed to the fact that constitutional changes in Britain during the last quarter of a century had exaggerated rather than diminished the difficulties of persuading it to submit to a loss of independence. On the basis of this letter, Salisbury obviously saw little hope for imperial federation and this must have meant that he did not regard the league with any great importance other than as a body which had effectively worked for public acceptance of the empire. Parkes's reply was equally lengthy, but less convincing. He emphasized that his restyled "Council of the Empire" should not necessarily be extended to admit the Asiatic populations and that the colonies could be "united to the parent state by bonds of leaving them free for the purposes of self-government but giving them a living interest in the progress of the Empire."<sup>1</sup> This was the end of the Parkes-Salisbury correspondence on imperial federation and it represented only a brief interlude in the career of the Australian ex-premier, who quickly abandoned imperial federation in favour of "Australia for the Australians", but it had at least served to bring forward an expression of opinion on the subject from the Prime Minister.

As 1890 opened, Salisbury was no more convinced of the feasibility of imperial federation than he had been when he delivered his Newport speech five years earlier and had referred to the subject as a question of the future. He was probably satisfied with what the Colonial Conference of 1887 had achieved and especially with regard to the new defence arrangements with the Australian colonies which he may have believed to be a step towards that Kriegsverein on which he had laid so much emphasis. Salisbury was doubtless prepared to acquiesce in the idea of future colonial conferences which might yield new arrangements in connection with defence, when the time was right, but he rejected the League's suggestion of another conference to promote closer union simply because the Government was not prepared to make any recommendations for establishing closer union within the empire. This was understandable as a matter of propriety and, in any

1. Parkes to Salisbury, 4 February 1890, *ibid.*, Class E, No. 3.



case, Salisbury was also probably aware of the likelihood of a further conference venturing into uncharted territories which he was keen to avoid. In particular, Colonial consultation in matters of foreign policy was a topical subject with federationists and the question of an imperial Zollverein was sure to be mooted at a further conference. As many Canadians began to talk in terms of some sort of reciprocity arrangements in trade between Britain and Canada in the late 'eighties and the early 'nineties', it began to look as if the next step forward for federationists would lay in this direction. In 1891, Colonel George Denison, a leading member of the League in Canada, pressed Salisbury to contemplate a modification of Britain's tariff structure which would permit reciprocal trading agreements between Canada and Britain, but the Prime Minister remained unmoved. With characteristic realism, Salisbury replied that the main difficulty lay in the great aversion of the British people for the imposition of any duties upon basic foodstuffs and he noted rather ominously that they had never realised that the maintenance of the empire might depend entirely upon fiscal legislation. In conclusion, he reminded Denison that the constituencies did not give much thought to such matters as imperial unity when "stomach taxes" were involved, but finished on a melodramatic note when he observed that there was "a movement of opinion in this country and I hope it may be rapid enough to meet the necessities of our time."<sup>1</sup>

Before he went out of office in 1892, Salisbury did come into direct contact with the League again during the summer of 1891 when he received that organization's last official deputation. Without hesitation and in conformity with his earlier attitude of 1889, Salisbury thwarted the League's modest ambition of arranging another colonial conference and thus tempted the movement to over-react by formulating an unwanted scheme which brought about the League's eclipse from public life.

Salisbury could not really be faulted in his attitude towards imperial federation. As a practical politician and an eminent statesman he was fully conscious of the relationship between trade and defence and the aim of closer union, but he was necessarily limited in his responses to the

1. Salisbury to Denison, 21 March 1891, *ibid.*, Q/7/423.

attraction of the cause by the harsh realities of political life. He was clearly frustrated by the general acceptance of free trade as a sacred principle of life and he was realistic enough to recognise the popularity of imperial unity, but beyond this he was not prepared to venture. Salisbury consistently regarded closer union as a futuristic phenomenon and was therefore more disposed to monitor the process than to assist it. His great speech at the Colonial Conference was exaggerated by federationists who had expected less from him and his rather vague association with the cause lasted longer in their memories than his subsequent statements on the subject. The Colonial Conference was perhaps the most obvious index of change in the development of imperial relations during the 'eighties and Salisbury was prepared to accept it at its face value, which did not include the possibility of foreseeable organic union.



### Lord Rosebery and Imperial Federation

As Chairman and then President of the Imperial Federation League from June 1886 until August 1892, when he became Foreign Secretary in Gladstone's fourth and final administration, Lord Rosebery left very little documentary evidence of his views and attitudes towards the progress of the federationists movement, and much of his private correspondence relating both to the League and to the discussion of imperial federation has either been destroyed or lost. Thus, the fate of the Munro-Ferguson correspondence, which must have harboured many of Rosebery's comments upon closer union, is recorded in the Rosebery Papers as having been burned by Rosebery himself in 1916. Any student of Rosebery's attitude towards imperial federation, therefore, is unavoidably driven back to his public speeches and to the invaluable, but easily overworked, insights documented in the journal of the League. Fortunately, however, part of Rosebery's private correspondence with Arthur Loring, the League Secretary, has recently been rescued from obscurity, though it must remain as poor compensation for the correspondence which can never be recovered.<sup>1</sup>

From the available evidence, it is easier to discover what imperial federation did not mean to Rosebery rather than to demonstrate what it did mean to him, and it is even more difficult to account for the enigmatic nature of his leadership during his six years at the helm. Clearly, one fact is outstanding : his early years associated with the organization in 1884 and 1885 can be depicted as years of great enthusiasm for the cause of closer union and they contrast markedly with a mellowing of attitudes brought about by the responsibilities of leadership after 1886. Without suggesting that Rosebery's concept of closer union changed dramatically during the life of the League, it can nevertheless be proved that his early enthusiasm abated and that to many diehards in the organization, like Young and Labilliere, he appeared simply as a restraining influence. Both of these observations were naturally linked to

1. This important discovery was made quite recently by D.H.Simpson, Chief Librarian of the Royal Commonwealth Society, who retrieved the correspondence from the dusty shelves of the former Royal African Society. The material is now listed under Imperial Federation Papers Ms. II at the Royal Commonwealth Society, London.

Rosebery's concept of imperial federation, but they were also tied to his irresolute character and his essentially Whig, aristocratic background, which combined to produce a man with an innate disinclination to embark upon an active career of political leadership, and who struggled against a traditionally Whig sense of duty.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his political career, therefore, Rosebery exhibited an almost disdainful detachment from public affairs which his critics were able to portray as deliberate and purposeful indifference, and his leadership of the Imperial Federation League bore the hallmarks of one who did not take it seriously and who lacked dynamism and urgency.

Yet, in the years immediately preceding Rosebery's occupation of the Foreign Office in 1886, he associated himself with the cause of closer union in such a decisive manner that staunch federationists came to expect a lot more from him than he was either able or willing to offer. His earliest public speech on imperial federation at the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference of 29 July 1884 certainly seemed to indicate that he was a convinced devotee of closer union. In complete contrast to his later concern for caution and moderation, Rosebery's early enthusiasm was characterised by a desire to set the organizational wheels in motion and to deal with imperial federation as an urgent and practical problem. Indeed, Rosebery went even further than admitting "the principle of the necessity of federation."<sup>2</sup> He tentatively suggested the appointment of a committee or royal commission to inquire into the practicability of the federal idea, and he even depicted the House of Lords as a kind of American Senate where colonial delegates might be admitted. Such an empirical approach to the question of closer union placed Rosebery in a rather unique position at the conference of 1884 and lends justification to the assertion that his early view of the empire - its needs and possibilities - was "a dynamic view."<sup>3</sup>

1. D.A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, p.xiv.
2. Report of the Westminster Palace Hotel Conference, (Lon. 1884), p.38.
3. H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists : The ideas and politics of a post-Gladstonian elite*, (O.U.P. 1973), p.162.



Unencumbered with the onerous duties of office, Rosebery's early vision of closer union seems to have been widened, if not created, by his tour of the Australian colonies in 1884 where he was greatly impressed by colonial hospitality and sentiment.<sup>1</sup> His public speech at Adelaide on 18 February 1884 remains as a major landmark of Rosebery's Imperial creed<sup>2</sup> and enabled him to become one of the most popular British figures in the colonies. Yet, despite his obvious interest in the empire during these years, Rosebery never allowed himself to become entangled in the debate as to what imperial federation really meant. In his private correspondence and in parliamentary speeches he never once wrestled with the terminological arguments which obsessed many of the movement's critics and its adherents. At various intervals during his close association with the movement in the 'eighties he did outline what imperial federation meant to him, but his comments were usually confined to gestures of sentiment and, later, to a belief in the colonial conference method of imperial unity. The main purpose of Rosebery's occasional references to imperial federation was to put the matter in its correct perspective, as he saw it. His aim was to popularise the idea of empire and to convey its importance to the British public, but he never accepted the possibility that closer union could be effected rapidly by the implementation of one of the many grandiose schemes which proliferated in the movement during his leadership. Imperial federation could not be rushed, nor could it be imposed by colonial expatriates living in London. On numerous occasions, he reminded federationist gatherings that closer union, when it came, would come from colonial initiatives and not as a result of the direct promptings of the mother country.<sup>3</sup> The conditions which would make such a development propitious could be created at home by popularising the imperial idea and magnifying the virtues of the

1. Referring to his world voyage in December 1884, Rosebery claimed that "I can conscientiously say that no six months of my life have given me equal instruction or profit", Quoted by J.A.Hammerton, Lord Rosebery, Imperialist, (London 1901), p.89.
2. Lord Crewe, Lord Rosebery, (London 1931), vol. 1., pp.185-188.
3. Rosebery was persuaded to countenance League overtures to the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, in 1889 in the hope of arranging another colonial conference, this time to discuss imperial federation, but he did so with great scepticism.

Anglo-Saxon race, but Rosebery's conception of closer union was unquestionably evolutionary. It was something which would come piecemeal into existence from below, not a constitutional revolution from above.

Understandable doubt still clings to the sincerity of Rosebery's enthusiasm for imperial federation ; something which his regular absenteeism from League meetings did little to allay. W.Churchill wrote of his "dream of a glorious and abiding British Empire"<sup>1</sup>, but he was referring to Rosebery's prescient use of the phrase "Commonwealth of Nations" rather than his concern for closer union. In his personal papers, Lord Rendel observed that:

Rosebery has no real scheme for Colonial Federation. Morley has probed him on this to the core, and there is no plan in his mind. He took it up because it seemed to be likely to turn out well, and he ought to know it won't work. 2

As evidence of Rosebery's scant regard for actual schemes of closer union, this statement need not be questioned, but it does go further in probing his sincerity vis-a-vis the vision of imperial federation. About this aspect of the subject, however, there can be little doubt : Rosebery was a confirmed believer in imperial unity and he worked for a closer relationship with the white self-governing empire. His role as the titular head of the Imperial Federation League as he saw it was thus to give it prestige and respectability, and to contain its more adventurous adherents without surrendering to them.

An interesting sidelight on Rosebery's concern for closer union in the early years of the League's existence in 1884 and 1885 was the emphasis which he publicly placed upon the importance of the working classes to the achievement of imperial federation. In a speech addressing the Trades Union Congress on 11 September 1884, Rosebery stressed the value of "the popular

1. W.Churchill, *Great Contemporaries*, (London 1937), p.19.

2. F.E.Hamer (ed), *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel*, (London 1931), p.183.



will" without which imperial federation could not progress and spoke of the need for the subject to become "one of principle and creed" with the working classes before it could become "one of practical politics".<sup>1</sup> This was part of an early effort to harness the support of the Radical masses to the League bandwagon, but it was also part of Rosebery's own ideal to maintain a personal contact with working men whose poverty and hardships he felt he understood. The early crusade failed completely to capture a large working class membership and, as Winston Churchill wrote much later, Rosebery was never able actually to handle them and to express their passions : "he would not stoop; he did not conquer."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout 1885, Rosebery's federationist torches blazed brightly despite the harsh financial realities which threatened the League so soon after its birth. On 10 September 1885 he referred to himself as an advocate of imperial federation, "not in any party sense because it was no party question"<sup>3</sup> and at Paisley on 15 October he made a rare allusion to the relationship between Ireland and the colonies, pointing out that the future, if it involved an Ireland in federal relations with Britain, might also involve "a larger federalism" in which the colonies could share.<sup>4</sup> At a banquet given in his honour by the Scottish Liberals on 13 November 1885, Rosebery stated that closer union was a subject upon which he had often dilated and that it was among the "pet subjects" which he had "at heart".<sup>5</sup>

It was unfortunate that Rosebery obtained the leadership of the League at a time when he was already Foreign Secretary in Gladstone's abortive third ministry and thus unable to devote his full energies to the task. As the "coming man" in Gladstone's eyes, there might be every reason

1. T.F.Coates, Lord Rosebery, His Life and Speeches, (London 1900), Vol.1., p. 433.
2. W.Churchill, op.cit., pp.16-17.
3. T.F.Coates, op.cit., vol.1., p.480.
4. Ibid., vol.1.,p. 482.
5. Ibid., vol.1., p.460.

to suppose that Rosebery began to regard the League leadership as too time-consuming and that the organization had already achieved as much as it could when the first colonial conference met in 1887. At the third annual meeting of the League in the Westminster Palace Hotel on 21 March 1888, the trend of Rosebery's thought on imperial federation was discernible when he defined it as "the closest possible union of the various States ruled by the British Crown, consistently with that free national development which is the birthright of British subjects all over the world - the closest union in sympathy, in external action, in defence." This could mean much or nothing to devout believers in imperial federation. What Rosebery was keen to emphasize was the needlessness of radical constitutional innovation; instead, he claimed that Britain was already part of an Imperial Federation when the most distant parts of the empire were already "closely leagued together for common objects under a supreme head." Accordingly, this did not render the League either impotent or superfluous; the task of the League was to be incessantly vigilant and to hold tightly to what it had gained<sup>1</sup>, but the gap between Rosebery's version of the League's role and that of the diehards in the organization was always widening after the success of 1887.

The issue facing all imperialists was a simple one in the 1880s ; could the "union in sympathy" be further developed into something much more regulated and binding ? Rosebery was concerned that it should be, but he would only act to take advantage of a situation when the circumstances were ripe. Imperial federation, if it had not already arrived, would arrive, as it were, by its own volition. In his famous speech on "Commerce and Empire" at Leeds on 11 October 1888, Rosebery stated his case unequivocally when he warned Britons to make up their minds what relationship, if any, they wanted with the colonies<sup>2</sup> and at a public meeting held under the auspices of the Edinburgh branch of the Imperial Federation League on 31 October 1888, he confessed that his own scheme was "to endeavour so to

1. Imperial Federation, III, (April 1888), Supplement pp. 1-2.

2. ed. anon., Lord Rosebery's Speeches 1874-1896, (London 1896), p.53.



influence public opinion at home and in the colonies that there shall come an imperious demand from the people of this country, both at home and abroad, that this federation should be brought about."<sup>1</sup> Implicit in these speeches designed for public consumption was a simple and clear recipe for inaction. The League President's argument was a circular one : imperial federation could only come about if and when there was a widespread public demand for it at home and in the colonies, but there was no concrete structure presented to the public by which they could recognise the actual shape of closer union and no mention of the method of measuring the "imperious demand". The closest "union in sympathy" could not be achieved until public opinion demanded it, and when they demanded it, it would have arrived.

Such a concept of closer union was much too philosophical and intangible for the more terrestrial demands of the diehards in the League like Young and Labilliere, and even Vincent, whose common approach was to prepare a specific scheme which would create an Imperial Federation. Herein lay the basic difference between Rosebery's concept of closer union and the views of the so-called activists in the League : Rosebery expected it to arrive and they were not prepared to wait.<sup>2</sup>

If Rosebery's view of imperial federation counselled against urgency and hasty action which might compromise the possibilities of closer union, however, there were other considerations which helped to explain his rather unimpressive leadership. Most recent writers of Liberal politics on the two decades before the turn of the century seem to agree consciously or unconsciously with Lord Rendel's observation that Rosebery seemed "torn between personal loyalty and political disaffection."<sup>3</sup> P.Stansky summarised

1. Imperial Federation III, (December 1888), p.245.
2. This explains why Rosebery took care in 1888 to dissociate himself from his earlier suggestions. His idea of colonists sitting in the House of Lords was depicted as an "instalment" and not as a final solution, *ibid.*, III, (December 1888), pp.245-246.
3. F.E.Hamer (ed), *op.cit.*, p.136.

Rosebery's enigmatic character as:

An aristocrat....only diffidently ambitious, a man who needed to be pushed and cajoled, he charmed and pleased his friends and the voters, but never impressed himself firmly on the public mind.<sup>1</sup>

According to Stansky, Rosebery was never able to discover a role to which he could wholeheartedly give himself because of his wealth and position, while D.A.Hamer regarded his career and his abandonment of the responsibilities of leadership as "exemplifying the irrelevance of the whig tradition in the conditions of the late nineteenth century".<sup>2</sup> Anybody who cares to follow the bumpy path of Rosebery's political career in the definitive biographies which exist would find no reason to question these assertions.<sup>3</sup> Rosebery's strengths were his intelligence, his ability to stand head and shoulders above others, his loyalty, and his eloquent tongue, but his weaknesses balanced them. His great wealth and the accident of birth denied him the experiences which every political leader needs in order to understand fully the limits and possibilities of public action. Sheltered and protected from adversity of every kind, Rosebery's hypersensitivity and his inability to cope with the compromises and accommodations which are forced upon every politician and public figure at some time, combined to make him, in Churchill's words, "a survival from a vanished age."<sup>4</sup> He lacked toughness and was easily bruised, but this was at least in part due to his failure to explain clearly his motives for a certain decision or course of action. If Lord Crewe's two volumes on Rosebery's life were disappointing for their failure to recapture this highly complex personality<sup>5</sup>, that of R.Rhodes James has provided adequate compensation. Neither, however, gave much

1. P.Stansky, *Ambitions and Strategies : The Struggle For The Leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1890s*, (OUP 1964), p.xiv.

2. D. A. Hamer, *op.cit.*, p.xiv.

3. See the Marquis of Crewe, *Life of Rosebery*, 2 vols. (London 1931) and R.Rhodes James, *Rosebery*, (London 1963).

4. W.Churchill, *op.cit.*, p.16.

5....such is the claim made by J.Pope-Hennessy, *Lord Crewe : The Likeness of a Liberal*, (London 1955). p.175.



attention to his "pet subject" of closer union, although much has been written about his Liberal Imperialism, and Rhodes James's summary of Rosebery's character explains much about his temptation to withdraw from situations which were not congenial to him.

The death of Rosebery's devoted wife, Hannah, in November 1890 is still generally accepted as the decisive turning-point in his public life. It was a blow from which he never recovered and provided yet another excuse to isolate himself from public attention. Such was the effect upon him that all his private correspondence bore black edgings as a symbol of his grief for years after 1890, but Rhodes James was nevertheless perceptive in pointing out that her death "only illuminated the basic weakness of Rosebery's personality for political life."<sup>1</sup>

In the light of this evidence, Rosebery's strange behaviour as the President of the Imperial Federation League, his frequent absences, his prevarication and his private irritation with the organization is less enigmatic. His refusal to commit himself even in private upon the subject of closer union is more easily understood and the appearance of aloofness is explained by his genuine self-distrust. In short, Rosebery was not the man to lead the League : he could not give it the attention which it required. Yet, he did have achievements as the leader of an organization with a grand vision. He kept the League together, it not united, during the troubled years after 1887 and he insisted upon its political impartiality. Time and again he reminded his fellow federationists and his public audiences of the importance of keeping the subject above party politics, an attitude which matches his approach to Britain's foreign policy in general.

When he finally resigned the presidency of the League in 1892, Rosebery left behind an organization on the brink of dissolution, but it was a body which had been hopelessly divided from its inception eight years earlier. There can be little doubt that he never made the mistake of over-estimating the League's ability to achieve closer union : the circumstances would not permit it. He probably never recognised what many

1. R. Rhodes James, *op.cit.*, p.491.

federationists and their critics regarded as the League's failures simply because he never believed that it would do more than educate public opinion. For Rosebery, the League was merely a vehicle for carrying the message and vision of some futuristic, but undefined imperial greatness; its task was, therefore, not to manufacture schemes, but to discuss, and to popularise the imperial idea in order to create the environment and circumstances which alone could bring about that qualitative change in imperial relations. The new historic situation would grow out of the old one; it was a process which the League could not hasten and this probably explains the disparity between Rosebery's assessment of the organization's value and that of the more active adherents to the cause.

Rosebery's imperialist conception determined the nature of his leadership as much as the weaknesses of his own political personality. Already the victim of much scholarship, no verdict is necessary here. A. Rhodes James has, for example, already observed that Rosebery has been the subject of many varying judgements, each of which have been more subjective than is usually the case when politicians are assessed<sup>1</sup>; perhaps he invited the image of being whatever posterity wanted him to be, but more than anything his career in the League demonstrated just how widely the term "federationist" could be interpreted.

1. R. Rhodes James, *op.cit.*, p.487.



## CHAPTER NINE

### The Final Phase 1890-1893

#### 1890-1891: The Drift Towards Dissolution

As the embodiment of the aspirations of a new age of imperial thought since 1884, the Imperial Federation League had never at any stage been noted for its internal harmony. The diversity of its membership had been a source of strength and pride, of course, but it had also served to cripple the organization as a body pledged to federate the empire and had even rendered it unfit to act in the minds of the more progressive federationists like Labilliere, Young and Vincent. By 1890, the League had reached its nadir in the estimation of many of its more enthusiastic adherents and nearly three years had passed since it had last received public acclaim during the more halcyon days of 1887. As the new year opened in 1890, the League had in fact deserted its earlier rhetoric and seemed to have persuaded itself graciously to pursue less grandiose objectives under Rosebery's leadership. In short, the League appeared to be waiting for events to happen. This strategy admirably suited Rosebery's diffident helmanship, but it failed to satisfy an increasingly discontented number of League branches in Britain which had registered their disapproval of official prevarication in 1889. Impatience was the keynote of a growing number of federationists' activities during and after 1890, and it centred as much upon the question of how fast the movement should go as upon rival conceptions of closer union.

By 1890 an uneasy peace lay over the League, but it became increasingly difficult for Rosebery to maintain. The League's President had occasionally joked about his role as a great restraining factor upon the enthusiasts within the organization, yet this had been the nature of his leadership. During and after 1890, however, the League began to exhibit fissiparous tendencies which had previously been rendered harmless by subordinating the various conflicts of opinion to the advocacy of generalities. Divisions and dissensions within the membership do not fit easily into any convenient classification and those that are used must remain under suspicion, but four tentative schools of thought can be usefully identified:- those who were the 'purists' and possessed faith in

the federal principle with a Federal Parliament of the Empire and co-ordinate spheres of state jurisdiction; those who believed in some form of halfway-house towards federalism such as an Imperial Council or colonial peers sitting in the House of Lords; those who supported an Imperial Zollverein and regarded trade as the best approach to federalism; and, finally, those who pursued imperial federation by means of naval and military defence arrangements. As usual, the reality was more complex and the fragmentary nature of the differences of opinion makes them wholly impossible to identify, but the four groups mentioned do at least provide a framework for analysis.

F.P. de Labilliere was an important representative of the first school of thought, but because of a genuine lack of public understanding and a widespread scepticism among informed public men, the 'purists' in the movement carried little weight. Believers in the idea of some form of looser association than a federal union were more numerous and were concerned, like Lord Lorne, with introducing a federal element into the empire which would represent an entering-wedge, but their approach to the problem lacked attraction because, like the former, it was concerned with the seemingly abstract problem of constitution-making. In retrospect, it was the last two groups which appeared to override the other factions in importance chiefly because they confined their attentions to what were the most practicable and largely controversial issues of the times : the erosion of free trade beliefs<sup>1</sup> and the urgency of new defence arrangements<sup>2</sup>. Supporters of either of these two approaches to closer union felt assured that their path was most closely associated with the realities of contemporary change. Thus, believers in commercial union claimed that free trade no longer suited British interests, and they either argued in favour

1. Howard Vincent, Lord Dunraven, Sir A. Galt and Sir C. Tupper were prominent exponents of a revision of Britain's tariff structure along the lines of imperial preference.

2. Lord Brassey, Sir John Colomb and Lord Charles Beresford were long-serving representatives of the "federation by defence" school of thought.



of preferential trading arrangements per se or ~~for~~ the maintenance of free trade within a limited imperial framework, which was, in fact, not free trade. Those who favoured defence arrangements, on the other hand, claimed priority in an increasingly hostile world and argued equally convincingly that imperial federation through defence was not just desirable, it was an urgent necessity. Both schools of thought, therefore, felt that their claims were consonant with the global changes of the times and this was what gave the divisions within the League an exaggerated bipolarity. The emphases placed upon trade and upon defence found a wider audience than the League membership and it was the simplification of the issues down to their basic ingredients which gave them a public appeal which the 'purists' could never hope to acquire. To talk about a readjustment of Britain's trade and defence policy in an imperial context in the 'nineties was acceptable simply because these were issues which dominated men's minds anyway.

By the start of the new decade, the League's disharmony was, therefore, characterized by a simple division between partisans of preference and the exponents of closer union by defence, supported by advocates of universal free trade. It is certainly a bland generalization to depict this as the only conflict of opinion, of course, and much of the publicity which the commercial union group attracted was due to Howard Vincent's ubiquity and to the fact that this group generally pushed its case much harder than did the union by defence school of thought. However, although they gained the upper hand when it came to advertising their approach in parliament, free trade remained as an insurmountable obstacle during the lifetime of the League.<sup>1</sup>

There was also another dichotomy of thought and this centred upon how fast the League should move towards its declared objective. It was increasingly evident in 1890 that the League had to be seen to be doing

1. The controversial commercial treaties with Belgium and Germany operated until 1897 when they were finally abrogated.

something even if the leadership was dragging its feet over the question of commercial union. Salisbury had replied to Rosebery's reluctant plea for another League deputation to visit the Prime Minister with a view to urging him to take the initiative in arranging another colonial conference, this time to discuss imperial federation, and the venerable peer had accepted the 10 January 1890 as a convenient date.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the Prime Minister's ill-health prevented the deputation from taking place and the Executive Committee of the League resolved to postpone the event until another mutually acceptable date could be arrived at,<sup>2</sup> which was not until 1891. In this way, therefore, official League action was delayed for another year, and it seemed to give added credence to the view that neither Rosebery nor Salisbury were really prepared to take the League seriously enough. Rosebery certainly possessed the ability to persuade the rank and file of the movement that his verbiage was relevant to their interests, but by 1890 Roseberyite commonsense was wearing thin for many federationists.

According to Koebner and Schmidt, the cause of federalism was declining by 1890<sup>3</sup> and the publication of Charles Dilke's "Problems of Greater Britain" in January 1890 would seem to give an authority to this assertion. Dilke's new book offered federationists little cause for hope. He recognised that the League had recently put forward a 'limited programme' based upon the method of conference, but predicted that several of the Australian colonies would not attend, especially since they were chiefly concerned with 'Australian Confederation.'<sup>4</sup> For Dilke, the most useful and pressing subjects for colonial conferences were defence and communications rather than federation. Protection was tabooed in Britain, Lord Rosebery was in favour of Irish Home Rule and this had weakened the League in Victoria where the prevailing sentiments were anti-Irish, and the word

1. Salisbury to Rosebery, 11 December 1889, Rosebery Papers, MS. 64, f.106.
2. See the meeting of 23 Jan. 1890, Imperial Federation, V, Feb. 1890, p.49.
3. R.Koebner and D.Schmidt, Imperialism, (Cambridge 1964), p.190.
4. C.Dilke, Problems of Greater Britain, p.628.



"Imperial" in the phrase "Imperial Federation" harmed the League in New South Wales and Queensland where there existed "a terror" of the word.<sup>1</sup> Dilke also questioned the success of George Parkin, the League's roving missionary who had spent most of the previous year, 1889, travelling throughout the self-governing empire spreading the gospel of federation.<sup>2</sup> Admitting that Parkin had triumphed in Canada and in Victoria, Dilke pointed out that he had totally failed in New South Wales and that his eloquence had generally failed to convince most Australians who regarded imperial federation as "a dream" put forward by "politicians of the past".<sup>3</sup>

As we have already noted, the Irish Home Rule controversy had weakened the federationist movement in Britain and Dilke's assertion that it had also damaged the League in Victoria need not be questioned. However, he also claimed that "the fact that the majority of the Committee of the League are Conservatives,.....has been against the League."<sup>4</sup> This assertion presumably referred to the fact that by 1890 the Conservative party was particularly identified with the cause of 'Imperialism' in its expansionist guise and that the Australian colonists suspected an organization whose professed aim was to federate the empire on the principles of equality of status and co-ordinate spheres of jurisdiction when that body was dominated by representatives of a political party which, they believed, maintained imperial attitudes of the past. In short, Dilke claimed that Conservative party dominance of the League's Executive Committee and of its General Council harmed the organization's overall credibility, at least in Australia.

1. Ibid., pp.634-635.

2. See Sir J. Willison, *Sir George Parkin, A Biography*, (London 1929), G.R. Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, (London 1892) and O.S. Blackton, *Australian Nationality and Nationalism: The Imperial Federationist Interlude, 1885-1901*, *Historical Studies, Aust. and N.Z.*, Vol.7., (Nov. 1955), pp. 1-16.

3. C. Dilke, *op.cit.*, pp.636-638.

4. C. Dilke, *ibid.*, p.635.

As the League's claim had always been that it was a body which eschewed party political questions and that its lofty aspirations cut across traditional party lines, Dilke's assertion that the League was a predominantly Conservative party organization by 1890 raises an important aspect of the League's development. Clearly, at its inception in July 1884, there had been a preponderance of Liberal M.P.s who had actually attended the inaugural proceedings, yet a detailed analysis of the composition of the League's General Committee (renamed General Council in 1888) in May 1886 has shown that the situation was reversed and that there were 49 Conservative M.P.s compared with only 28 Liberal M.P.s by the summer of 1886.<sup>1</sup> In 1933, A. Folsom wrote that imperial federation "tended to become a party issue",<sup>2</sup> while Dr. H.C.G. Matthew claimed in 1973 that the Liberals "showed little interest" in the League.<sup>3</sup> In so far as the Irish question and the growth of fair trade ideas tended to be specific party issues, Folsom's assertion contains more than a grain of truth since these two contemporary controversies did divide the League very much along party lines. However, Dr. Matthew's claim, based upon an inaccurate analysis of the membership of the General Council of the League in 1888, requires modification. Of the eighty-three M.P.s on the League's Council in 1888, fourteen were Gladstonian Liberals, fifty-nine were Conservatives and ten were Liberal Unionists.<sup>4</sup> Since both League presidents, Forster and Rosebery, were Liberals and since the Liberals had dominated the League in 1884, it would be more accurate to argue that by the late 'eighties the Conservatives showed a "greater interest" in the League than the Liberals, perhaps because of the growth of protectionist ideas particularly associated with empire and the recurring Irish controversy.

1. See Imperial Federation, May 1886, pp.143-144.

2. A.Folsom, The Royal Empire Society, p.83.

3. H.C.G.Matthew, The Liberal Imperialists, p.163.

4. Lord Brassey, Papers and Addresses: Imperial Federation and Colonisation, (Lon. 1895), Appendix iii. The Liberals were : J.Bryce, S.Buxton, R.Munro-Ferguson, E.Courley, H.Lawson, A.McArthur, S.Montagu, G.O.Morgan, O.V. Morgan, L.Playfair, Sir J.Simon, S.Smith, W.Summers, and A.Thomas.



According to the membership list of the League Council as published by the journal of the League in January 1890, there were 46 Conservative M.P.s, 15 Gladstonian Liberals and 11 Liberal Unionists.<sup>1</sup> Dilke's assertion of Conservative party dominance in terms of the number of M.P.s who were Council members was, therefore, correct, and the publication of his book really represented another blow to League hopes. Yet, if it is possible to identify the growth of Conservative party influence as the expense of Liberal party views within the League, there is no evidence to suggest that official League policy was altered accordingly. In the two most important areas where party politics were especially involved - Ireland and Protection, or Reciprocity within the Empire - no radical departures in policy were contemplated. Free trade was, as yet, still the guiding force of British economic policy and the League hierarchy had still managed to resist the reformist efforts of Howard Vincent. As far as Ireland was concerned, the League was deliberately reticent, although the issue was frequently broached in many of the schemes put forward as panaceas for closer union. In one respect, however, Dilke's book very nearly did have an important direct impact upon League affairs. As a result of his claim that Rosebery's advocacy of Home Rule damaged League interests in Australia, the League journal confessed in the June edition 1890 that Rosebery had offered to resign the League presidency in favour of a Conservative statesman, but that the Executive Committee of the League had wisely refused his magnanimous suggestion and continued to express "unabated confidence" in his leadership.<sup>2</sup> Little was made of this by the movement's critics perhaps because it was not widely reported, but it highlighted yet again the debilitating effect which the Irish issue continued to have on League affairs especially, as the journal observed, with regard to the "determination not to be wrecked on the shoal of party."<sup>3</sup>

1. Imperial Federation, V, (Jan. 1890), p.31.

2. Ibid., V., (June 1890), p.133.

3. Ibid., p. 133.

The extent to which imperial federation and the Irish question were still knit almost inextricably together in terms of the dynamics of Liberal party politics by 1890 has already been ably emphasized by D.A.Hamer who claimed that federalism was a comprehensive policy which, if concentrated on, would simultaneously take care of a large number of reform questions in which Liberals were interested.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Irish Home Rule, devolution, federalism within the United Kingdom, and imperial federation were often treated by a growing number of Liberals as a convenient way of reviving Liberalism and providing it with a new purpose and a new sense of direction.<sup>2</sup> To this extent, the federal idea was far from declining by 1890. Indeed, contrary to Koebner and Schmidt's observation, the cause of federalism attracted an increasing interest among Liberals in both Scotland and Wales who were excited by the prospect of "an enhanced role.... in a reorganized and strengthened Empire."<sup>3</sup> Rosebery's commitment to Scotland was well-known and the principle of local autonomy was obviously consistent with the wider step towards imperial federation as Rosebery's confidant, Munro-Ferguson, noted when he wrote that subordinate national assemblies were "an Imperial and not just a local matter."<sup>4</sup> However, the increasing pressure within the Liberal party in favour of using the federal principle as a panacea for the party's signal failure to carry through policies of reform made little headway. The growth of federalist utterances by English members who sat for Scottish constituencies, like Herbert Asquith and Hugh Childers, provoked the hostility of their Liberal colleagues in England. Both Morley and Harcourt emerged victorious in their determination not to allow Gladstone to be persuaded to reconsider the merits of the federalist demand when evaluating a new Home Rule policy in 1889-1890, and, to all intents and purposes, "the progress of federalist logic had been

1. D.A.Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, p.264.
2. Lord Bray wrote to Rosebery that, "Imperial Federation seems to me the foundation on which we must build our...edifice," Bray to Rosebery, 20 December 1890, Rosebery Papers, MS. 10044, ff.51-52.
3. Hamer, *op.cit.* p 159
4. Munro-Ferguson to Herbert Gladstone, 18 October 1890, H.Gladstone Papers, Add.Mss.46053., ff.137-139, quoted in M.Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism: The Reconstruction of Liberal Policy in Britain 1885-1894*, (Harvester Press 1975), p.66.



decisively checked" in 1890.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly then, the cause of imperial federation did not receive a fillip as a result of the reconstruction and reassessment of Liberal party policy by 1890, despite the relevance of the federal principle in terms of Irish, Welsh and Scottish Home Rule. The principle of delegation had triumphed over the principle of federation. Yet, there existed a body of opinion within the League which did not hesitate to express the opposite view. In January 1890, Thomas Allnutt Brassey, the son of Lord Brassey and an equally ardent supporter of imperial federation who had become a member of the Executive Committee of the League in February 1889, wrote to Lord Rosebery in order to explain his position as the Liberal candidate for the Epsom division of Surrey:

I have said that I will not stand as a Gladstonian though willing to come forward as an Independent Liberal i.e. I put Federation before everything, and though theoretically a Home Ruler I will not pledge myself to vote for Home Rule apart from Federation...

I am quite prepared to sacrifice my chances in politics to bring the question of Federation to the front.<sup>2</sup>

1. M.Barker, *ibid.*, p.68, See also D.A.Hamer, *op.cit.*, pp.158-160.
2. T.A.Brassey to Rosebery, 19 January 1890, Rosebery Papers, MS.10088., ff. 130-131. Born in 1863, T.A.Brassey inherited the Liberal ideals of his father, and these included an appreciation of the splendour and value of the empire to Britain. He stood unsuccessfully as a Gladstonian Liberal at Epsom, Christchurch and Devonport between 1890-1902 before joining the Conservative party as an advocate of Tariff Reform in 1903. In 1890, he became editor of his father's *Navy Annual* and in 1892 became one of Lord Spencer's private secretaries at the Admiralty which he held until 1894. His father died in 1918 and T.A. Brassey became the second Earl Brassey before he died in 1919, after which the peerage became extinct.

That Brassey was animated by unselfish ideals is evident from this letter, but he also represented a school of thought within the League which regarded the principle of federation as an all-embracing theme ; it would mean more efficient government, it would remedy the problem of House of Lords obstruction of Liberal reforms, it offered a means of solving the Irish question, it would relieve the central legislature from the consideration of all purely domestic issues, and it would bind the empire closer together before it was too late. For Brassey, the application of the federal principle to the United Kingdom was a necessary prelude to imperial federation and therefore Home Rule for Ireland was simply "one factor of the Imperial problem."<sup>1</sup> To some federationists the application of the federal principle both to Britain and to the white-self-governing colonies was thus a device which could solve most of the mother country's outstanding problems, and it had the additional advantage of conforming more accurately to Edward Freeman's terminological stipulations for a federal union.

Apart from the report of the Defence Committee of the League which advocated an "Imperial Council of Defence" composed of representatives of the mother country, the self-governing colonies and India to lay down on broad lines a general scheme of imperial defence,<sup>2</sup> the year 1890 was uneventful in terms of League progress. George Parkin continued his personal campaign to publicise the cause in the north of England and in Scotland, and the Executive Committee of the League met to reconsider the League's financial position and to promote renewed enthusiasm for the idea of an imperial penny postage.<sup>3</sup> A motion to consider how best to employ the services of women in the work of the League was also proposed and accepted, but proved subsequently to be as unsuccessful as the efforts made by Rosebery and Young to harness the active support of the working-classes five years earlier.<sup>4</sup>

1. See F. Partridge, T.A.B. : A Memoir of Thomas Allnutt Brassey, (Lon. 1921) pp. 70-76, and 90.
2. Imperial Federation, V, Jan. 1890, p.24. The report was completed in December 1889.
3. See J. Henniker Heaton, A Penny Post For The Empire, Nineteenth Century, Vol. 27, 1890, pp.906-921.
4. Ibid., V, April 1890, p.94.



The only really notable event of 1890 for dedicated federationists, who rarely found a rewarding context for their urgency, was the fifth Annual General Meeting of the League held at the Westminster Palace Hotel on 22 May 1890. Nobody who assembled in that building was to know it, but this annual gathering to consider the fifth annual report of the Council was to be Rosebery's last appearance at an annual general meeting and can be regarded as the beginning of the end of his association with the League which culminated in his resignation of the presidency in August 1892. With the death of his devoted wife in November 1890, Rosebery withdrew from active public life for the next two years until Gladstone's electoral victory of July 1892 and the formation of his fourth ministry in August 1892 persuaded a reluctant Rosebery to emerge from his self-imposed isolation as Foreign Secretary.

In the June 1890 edition of the League's journal, past failures were forgotten as the monthly periodical referred to the annual report as an "altogether satisfactory document"<sup>1</sup> which it most certainly was not to the more enthusiastic adherents to the cause. On rising to move the adoption of the report, Rosebery confined his remarks to the maturing of plans for a second deputation to meet Lord Salisbury and to an admonition against schemes of imperial federation. According to the President of the League, the decision to approach the Prime Minister with a view to arranging a second colonial conference was still unwise in the light of changing circumstances in Australia where a colonial conference was being held in order to discuss Australian federation.<sup>2</sup> Having stressed the temporary inexpediency of approaching Salisbury, Rosebery then moved on to the familiar question of schemes of closer union which evoked strong words from the Liberal statesman:

1. *Ibid.*, V, June 1890, p.131.

2. Rosebery's remarks, *ibid*, V, June 1890, pp.148-149.

You will look in vain in the report for any scheme of Imperial Federation.....If there were any such scheme I should not be here to move it, because I do not believe that it is on the report of any private society that such a scheme will ever be realised. 1

Such candour was, of course, entirely consistent with Rosebery's conception of closer union and, although he did not say anything that he had not said before, the League President got his message across. Schematisation was futile and Rosebery was not prepared to surrender to any agitation which might favour it.

Coming from a man whom historians have criticised for repeatedly failing to explain himself both publicly and privately, these words were uncharacteristic, yet they unwittingly corresponded with Lord Salisbury's own emphasis upon the "practical difficulties"<sup>2</sup> of most schemes of imperial federation. Rosebery's concern for slow, steady and, above all, practical progress was echoed by both Lord Brassey and George Parkin, but the apparent unity of the general meeting concealed a real divergence of opinion which was ominous for the League's continued existence.

On 27 April 1890, Colonel George Denison arrived in England on behalf of the Imperial Federation League in Canada with the specific purpose of encouraging both the parent League and the British government to support the abrogation of the two commercial treaties with Belgium and the German Zollverein, dating from 1862 and 1865 respectively, which prevented the mother country from developing preferential trading arrangements with the colonies. For those federationists like Vincent, Tupper and Dunraven who advocated a commercial union of the empire as a means of effecting closer union, the existence of these treaties was their bête noire and represented the major obstacle to imperial unity along commercial lines. As we have seen, the destruction of the Belgian and German treaties had been Vincent's

1. Ibid, V, June 1890, p.149.

2. See Salisbury to C.Ransome, 28 April 1890, Salisbury Papers, C/7/402.



chief target both inside and outside parliament for the past three years and thus Denison's mission in 1890 was guaranteed to receive considerable support from many federationists, but it was also certain to raise a good deal of controversy among the persistent free traders within the League's ranks. Canadian federationists, it will be recalled, had a particularly monolithic view of closer union : it meant preferential tariffs throughout the empire to the exclusion of all other nations and this object overshadowed every other approach to imperial federation. Given this precise purpose, Denison, not surprisingly, was requested to say nothing about the commercial question in public speeches at Liverpool and at the Mansion House, London. However, at a stormy meeting of the League Council on 19 May 1890 called to adopt the fifth report for presentation to the annual meeting, Denison was involved in a direct clash of opinion with Sir William Farrer, a Free Trade stalwart, who objected to the policy of promoting imperial preferential tariffs. Denison's persistence was ultimately rewarded when the General Council agreed to insert the clause favouring fiscal rearrangements within the empire in the annual report, but it did not commit the parent League to anything, and the episode did not end there.

The day before the annual meeting of the League took place, Denison was again involved in an argument over the sanctity of free trade when he announced his intention of publicly advocating preferential tariffs within the empire at the meeting. What happened when Denison confessed his plan to a majority of the Executive Committee who were present, is best told in his own words:

The moment I suggested the idea it was at once objected to, everyone present said it would be impossible. I was persistent, and said, "Gentlemen, I have been stopped twice already, but at the Annual Meeting I certainly have the right to speak." They said that Lord Rosebery would be annoyed. I said, "What difference does that make; the more reason he should know how we feel in Canada; there was no use in my coming from Canada, learning Lord Rosebery's views, and then repeating them. I thought he could give his own views better himself." They then said, "that it would be unpleasant for me, that the meeting would express disapproval." I said, "The more reason they should hear my views, and I do not care what they do if they do not throw me

out of an upstairs window," finally saying, "Gentlemen, if I cannot give the message I have undertaken to deliver I shall not speak at all, and will report the whole circumstances to the League in Canada, and let them know that we are not allowed to express our views." This they would not hear of, and agreed that I could say what I liked. 1

According to Denison, his speech "was loudly applauded" and he felt that "a large majority of the meeting" was with him<sup>2</sup>, an assertion which is substantiated by the League journal.<sup>3</sup> No discussion followed Denison's statement, however, and it can only be assumed that no discussion was allowed to develop on such a controversial topic, as Lord Brassey's action seemed to illustrate when he hurriedly changed the subject to imperial defence amidst resounding cheers for Denison's speech.<sup>4</sup>

The Canadian emissary had certainly made an impact upon informed opinion within the League, but the purpose of his mission ensured that his impact would be divisive. According to Denison, Rosebery had not been upset by his candour. Indeed, the League President congratulated him and whispered, "I wish I could speak out as openly".<sup>5</sup> Other visits by Denison to Chamberlain and to Salisbury during 1890 also seemed hopeful for the future. Denison claimed that Chamberlain was sympathetic to the idea of preferential trade within the empire, but that he was not prepared to announce publicly his views because of the existing climate of opinion,<sup>6</sup> while Salisbury listened attentively to the case for imperial preference and declared that:

I am fast coming to the opinion that the real way to consolidate the empire would be by means of a Zollverein and a Kriegsverein. 7

1. G. Denison, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, (Toronto 1909), pp. 142-143.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
3. See *Imperial Federation*, V, June 1890, pp. 149-150.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
5. Denison, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 149.



Clearly, Denison's visit to England confirmed the existence of a broad split within the League between free traders and those who advocated imperial preference - a description which was much more accurate than that depicted by the League journal in 1890.

As a final comment upon this bleak year for League progress, the contribution of contemporary articles on imperial federation merits attention if only because of their hostility to the movement and the idea of closer union. Among the articles which continued to subject the League and the theory of imperial federation to a barrage of criticism, was a particularly hostile article in Macmillan's Magazine entitled "The Whigs and Imperial Federation". Mysteriously signing himself "B.M.", the author condemned the theory of imperial federation as "a sentimental aspiration" and a "contradiction of the past", and concluded that the League would be far better to confine its efforts to the promotion of colonial conferences than pursuing the hopeless aim of reversing the past history of forty years of colonial development.<sup>1</sup> Other periodicals echoed these sentiments when they claimed that both India and Ireland embarrassed the League and that insufficient attention had been paid to colonial priorities and expectations. There was nothing surprising about these criticisms : they had been fired at the movement since its inception in 1869, but a generation later had witnessed little progress towards the solution of these problems and the euphoria generated by the first colonial conference had evaporated by 1890. Significantly, only W.T.Stead's Review of Reviews commented favourably upon the League and regarded 1890 as "a year's good work" which was unconvincing in the light of the criticisms which largely went unanswered.<sup>2</sup>

1. B.M., The Whigs and Imperial Federation, Macmillan's Magazine, LXI, (January 1890), pp.214-220. Other articles which were generally critical of the movement are : J.A.Partridge, "Confederation and Home Rule", Westminster Review, CXXIII, (1890), pp.221-230; "Confederation or Independence," Edinburgh Review, CLXI, (1890), pp.565-592; and A.Allardyce, "A New View of Imperial Federation", Blackwood's Magazine, CXLVII, (1890), pp.709-720.
2. "Progress of Imperial Federation : A Year's Good Work", Review of Reviews, Vol. 1, 1890, p.508.

By the beginning of 1891, Howard Vincent had made little impression in official government circles, and ministers were still a long way from giving more than a polite attention to his recurrent inquiries about the commercial treaties with Belgium and Germany. Having failed to twist Salisbury's arm in respect of Conservative party policy towards imperial preference, Vincent renewed his efforts within the framework of the League and in parliament in 1891. Already, on 4 December 1890, he had secured the approval, albeit reluctant, of the League for at least part of his policy when it was agreed that the organization's Executive Committee should visit the committee of the Board of Trade, which was studying the commercial treaties, in order to urge the abrogation of the Belgian and German treaties.<sup>1</sup> On January 23, 1891 separate deputations from the Agents General for the colonies and the Imperial Federation League met the Trade and Treaties Committee which was chaired by A.J.Mundella, but failed to convince them that free trade should be compromised for the sake of imperial unity. Mundella's chief retort was that the colonies should seriously consider adopting free trade with Britain and abolish all duties if they really wanted closer commercial relations with the mother country. As a theoretical objection, the argument had much to recommend it and Mundella knew very well that the colonies would never entertain the idea of free trade per se as a precondition of negotiations for closer fiscal relations with Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Three days later, on 26 January 1891, Vincent moved the avenue of attack into the House of Commons when he badgered the parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Colonial Office, Baron de Worms, for an extension of the terms of reference of the Treaties Committee in order that the effect of Britain's commercial treaties upon the development of inter-imperial trade might be considered. The parliamentary Under-Secretary was unmoved when he told Vincent that the question of preferential trade between the colonies had already been discussed with the deputations and

1. Imperial Federation, V, December 1890, p.267 and VI, January 1891, p.15.

2. See W. Armytage, A.J.Mundella, 1825-1897, (Lon. 1951).



that it would "hardly be courteous" to comment upon the subject or to extend the terms of reference in view of this and because the report was not yet published.<sup>1</sup> In order to highlight the inadequacies of existing commercial relations between Britain and her colonies, Vincent immediately proceeded to pester Sir James Fergusson, the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, when he asked whether French, German, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish colonies were also debarred by foreign treaties from concluding commercial arrangements with their respective imperial governments. Fergusson's reply that there were several treaties reciprocally guaranteeing most favoured nation privileges in their respective colonies subject to certain reservations, did nothing to help Vincent's cause.<sup>2</sup>

Undaunted by these reverses, Vincent went on vigorously with his agitation in parliament. Assisting another federationist, O.V.Morgan, at Question Time in the House of Commons, Vincent pressed the First Lord of the Treasury, H.H.Smith, himself a League Member to recommend "the appointment of a Royal Commission, or to invite the colonies to consider the practicability of establishing a Customs Union." Morgan's approach was concerned with the idea of repeating the colonial conference of 1887, but with a view to considering a common fiscal arrangement in the interests of imperial trade, which would also "provide the funds necessary for Imperial as distinct from local defence," a resurrection of the Hofmeyer scheme of 1887. As with other League members who had acquired official government positions, Smith was far from enthusiastic when it came to doing something practical for the progress of the cause, and, although he confessed that Vincent and Morgan had raised questions of "very great importance", he emphasized that it would be "indiscreet and improper" to commit himself on such far-reaching issues without the "gravest consideration".<sup>3</sup>

The introduction of the avowedly protectionist McKinley Tariff in the United States in 1890 gave a new impetus to the Fair Trade cause in Britain, and Vincent and his associates resolved to draw the maximum advantage from it. However, if Fair Traders and Preferentialists within the League

1. Hansard, 3, 26 Jan., 1891, 349, 1020.

2. Ibid., 3, 1020-1021.

3. Ibid., 1027-1028.

sought to have the whole question of commercial policy thoroughly discussed in order to convince Free Traders that they now lived in an age of economic nationalism where free trade was anachronistic, it was important for the reformers to show that they had studied the problem and that their conclusions were based upon statistical evidence. Moreover, it was still not clear whether Vincent and his supporters were imperialists first and protectionists second. As we shall see, the fiscal controversy of these years centred as much upon the "big loaf" as upon the practicability of closer union by means of imperial preference. The view that Vincent's cause was prejudiced because it was too closely associated with protection has much to recommend it. Vincent was perfectly well aware that there could be no return to the economic system which Peel had effectively demolished in 1846,<sup>1</sup> but he also believed that the conditions of Sheffield and other manufacturing cities, where industry was hampered by fiscal burdens in their competition with foreigners, demanded economic reprisals and this was where the distinction between Vincent the "imperial preferentialist" and Vincent the "protectionist" became blurred in the public eye. This public confusion was important if it began to associate Vincent's campaign with the possibility of higher prices on foodstuffs, and the fact that a staunch Fair Trader like James Lowther began to make a point of assisting Vincent in the debates in parliament in 1891 must have added to the alarm.<sup>2</sup>

On 3 February 1891, Lowther called for a colonial conference between Britain and the self-governing colonies in order to discuss the "urgent questions" of preferential fiscal arrangements within the empire, but received a polite rebuff from Baron de Worms who reminded him that the question was still being considered by the government.<sup>3</sup> A week later, on 10 February 1891, the Trade and Treaties Committee issued its second report which effectively damned the federationist school embracing imperial preference as the sine qua non of closer union. It argued that the colonies were only prepared to place a higher tariff on the imports of foreign countries and that an imperial customs union was not feasible unless it meant

1. S. Jeyes and F. How, *The Life of Sir Howard Vincent*, p. 216.

2. Lowther was Conservative Member for Kent, Thanet from 1888-1904.

3. *Hansard*, 3, 349, 1622-1623.



placing trade upon a totally free trade basis. Without this, Britain would have to adjust to the predominantly protectionist commercial systems of the colonies, and this meant introducing protectionist duties on all foreign goods and placing duties on both foodstuffs and raw materials which were the chief exports of the colonies. Apart from being a retrograde step, this also meant there was a strong possibility of increased food prices in Britain since most of her trade was not carried on with the empire and it therefore involved a radical restructuring of traditional trading patterns.<sup>1</sup> These implications had already been considered by Lord Salisbury in 1887 and they were a source of continuing debate in parliament throughout 1891, after which they declined in public interest until Joseph Chamberlain revived the old arguments in 1903.

These efforts of Howard Vincent to persuade the House of Commons to take his commercial union campaign seriously foreshadowed a more determined assault on parliamentary attitudes towards British commercial policy in February 1891. One of the favourite arguments of the commercial federationist was that they were well-supported by leading statesmen from the colonies, and a warning of what was to come was communicated by Ronald Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery when he claimed that Sir Gordon Sprigg, ex-Premier of Cape Colony and an ardent federationist of the commercial union school, was "ready to back Hofmeyer's Imperial Defence Scheme through thick and thin."<sup>2</sup> On 12 February 1891, Lord Dunraven moved in the House of Lords that colonial representatives should be invited to London for a conference to consider the advancement of trade within the empire and the formation of a fund for imperial defence. In a lengthy and eloquent speech, Dunraven argued that the conference of 1887 had left much undone and that another conference would not "do any harm",<sup>3</sup> Coming from an advocate of imperial preference, it was strange to hear Dunraven devoting his early words to the question of imperial defence, but it soon became obvious that the venerable peer was resurrecting the Hofmeyer plan of 1887 when he claimed that a fund for imperial defence should be raised by Britain and the self-governing colonies

1. See R.A.Shields, *op.cit.*, pp.273-282.

2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 11 February 1891, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10017, f. 172.

3. Hansard, 3, 350, 434.

and that the money could be obtained "by the imposition of Customs duties."<sup>1</sup> Turning to imperial federation, Dunraven argued at length that commercial federation was "a dream" and by citing the McKinley Tariff as an example of a more hostile world, he urged the House to affirm their support for imperial preference which could be "practically realised" and was not "anything in the nature of Protection."<sup>2</sup>

The Prime Minister's reply was terse and discouraging. Salisbury answered that all questions relating to imperial federation seemed to lend themselves "more readily to peroration than to argument" and he warned the House not to be led astray by allowing itself "to repose upon vague, sonorous generalities."<sup>3</sup> In typical Salisburyite fashion, the Prime Minister treated Dunraven to a display of lucid thinking as he fastened upon the main points of his adversary's arguments and summarily dismissed them as either unwise or untimely. Using the argument that federationists must have a definite question to ask and some definite proposition to lay before the colonies before a conference could be arranged, Salisbury claimed that these conditions were not fulfilled and that a conference was therefore inexpedient. The only glimmer of hope which the Prime Minister's reply seemed to leave for commercial federationists was his remarkable candour about the "principle of retaliation as an essential part of the doctrine of Free Trade", but he confessed that the state of opinion in the country made it "absolutely out of the question."<sup>4</sup> In the face of this merciless criticism, Dunraven withdrew his motion protesting that he had not advocated fiscal retaliation, and that imperial preference was merely a means by which trade within the empire could be encouraged and the empire more strongly united.

1. Ibid., 3, 437.

2. Ibid., 3, 442-443.

3. Ibid., 3, 447-448.

4. Ibid., 3, 451.



Drawing some encouragement from Salisbury's judiciously veiled hint that a change of public opinion would enable him to ventilate the whole question of a fiscal administration in favour of the colonies, a meeting was held in Vincent's home on 13 February 1891 where colonists and interested M.P.s committed to the growth of imperial trade and the promotion of imperial unity agreed to form a strong committee pledged to work for these objectives both in parliament and throughout the country.<sup>1</sup> This was the birth of the United Empire Trade League and it represented the first overt split in the Imperial Federation League, a difference of opinion which was inherent since 1884 and had been increasingly apparent since that date. It is worth noting that shortly after Vincent and Lowther launched the new organization in February and March 1891, the Fair Trade League was dissolved and many protectionists rallied to Vincent's banner, a fact which did not help his cause. However, as one writer has put it:

The form in which imperial unity was most likely to find acceptance in the Colonies would appear to be preferential tariffs; the form in which protection was most likely to find acceptance in Britain was imperial unity. It was easy to conclude that a single organization was needed to advocate both. 2

Tariffs were to serve imperial interests and a vigorous campaign was started by the new new League in the United Kingdom. Among those federationists who joined the new organization were A.Staveley Hill, J.Henniker Heaton, Sir Roper Lethbridge, and Sir Frederick Young, while the list of colonial statesmen included James Service, Samuel Griffith, Cecil Rhodes, J.Hofmeyer and Sir Charles Tupper. With Sir Alexander Galt, Sir Julius Vogel and Sir Gordon Sprigg as the League's vice-presidents, it does not require close analysis to appreciate exactly how serious this new development was for the

1. S.Jeyes and F.How, The Life of Sir Howard Vincent, p.212, Vincent announced the general purposes of the new League in a letter to The Times, 3 March 1891, and the organization's manifesto was reprinted in Imperial Federation, VI, May 1891, pp.113-114.
2. R.H.Brown, The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain, 1881-1895, p.108

Imperial Federation League. As George Rusden, a member of the Executive Committee of the latter organization wrote, it was an "inprudent step" which was only justified "if advocated on the grounds that the League contemplated suicide, and was in search of an heir."<sup>1</sup>

The members of the Imperial Federation League who joined the new organization, however, did not resign from the former League and Vincent clearly opposed the suggestion that the new organization should be regarded as a distinctly separate entity. On 17 February 1891, Vincent's remarkable energies were applied again in the House of Commons where his appeal for a colonial conference to consider the best means of developing imperial trade resulted in a two-hour debate and raised familiar arguments both for and against the idea of a commercial union of the empire. In this debate, Vincent was supported by both Staveley Hill and Lowther, but their efforts were equally matched by those of Lyon Playfair, a federationist free-trader and Gladstonian Liberal, and George Goschen, the Liberal Unionist Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Vincent marshalled his arguments by referring to the subject as "a domestic matter" and proceeded to list the number of colonial statesmen who supported the motion, noting also that "a large number of hon. members on both sides of the House are warm sympathisers with the idea of Imperial Federation, and many are members of the Imperial Federation League."<sup>2</sup> Few federationists doubted the veracity of these remarks, but Vincent went too far when he claimed that "it is not too much to say that commercial federation is the only road to that Imperial Federation of the British race which was so dear to the heart of the late Mr. Forster."<sup>3</sup> Staveley Hill added that the tendency throughout the empire was towards imperial federation and argued that the question of an Imperial Customs Union demanded attention whenever this subject arose, while James Lowther concentrated his attentions upon the 'fetish' of freetrade and the desirability of imperial preference.<sup>4</sup>

1. G. Rusden, *History of Australia*, Vol. III, p.492.

2. *Hansard*, 3, 350, 908.

3. *Ibid.*, 3, 909,

4. *Ibid.*, 3, 917 and 926-927.



Because one of the central aspects of this important debate was the question of the benefits and losses of both Free Trade and Protection, it was not surprising that the commercial federationists' first opponent was a confirmed Free Trader with a distinguished academic reputation in the person of Sir Lyon Playfair.<sup>1</sup> With a detestation of Protection and Fair Trade, which he regarded as "nothing but Protection disguised in a domino",<sup>2</sup> Playfair set about exposing the weaknesses of Vincent's arguments. He criticized his federationist colleague for not being specific about the nature of the subject for which a conference was proposed and he took Lowther to task for what he claimed was alarmist talk about the danger to the integrity of the empire and to the industrial classes if they did not support preferential treatment. Looking at the latest trade statistics, Playfair could find no signs of a decline and observed that the trade returns for 1890 showed a total trade of £684,000,000, which amounted to an increase of £122,000,000 over 1886. Playfair then turned his attentions to the Hofmeyer scheme and had little difficulty banishing it from the sphere of practical politics. He claimed that the scheme was impracticable because of the great variety in which the colonies differed in the mode of levying duties on goods and because of the diversity of trading patterns which existed between them. These disparities meant an unfair distribution of the burden of taxation towards an Imperial Defence Fund, and because the plan involved taxing foreign imports, it was Britain that would find herself contributing an inordinate amount to the fund because she relied the heaviest upon foreign imports. As if these points had not already damned the scheme, Playfair added for good measure that it also involved a tax on the cheap loaf in favour of the colonies.<sup>3</sup>

1. Former Professor of Chemistry at Edinburgh University, Playfair was Liberal M.P. for Edinburgh and St. Andrew's Universities, 1868-1885 and for Leeds South, 1885-1892 when he was given a peerage by Gladstone. Former Postmaster-General in 1873, Deputy-Speaker of the House of Commons 1880-1883, and Vice-President of the Council 1886, Playfair was never a devoted party man. He supported Home Rule and his name appears on the earliest list of members of the Executive Council of the Imperial Federation League in January 1886, although he was not present at the inaugural meetings of the League in July and November 1884. He was, however, a member of the special committee of the League which submitted a scheme of imperial reorganization to Gladstone in 1892.
2. Sir Wemyss Reid, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Lyon Playfair*, (Lon. 1899), pp. 367-368.
3. *Hansard*, 3, op.cit., 920-925.



One hour before midnight, George Goschen occupied the attention of the floor of the House and offered his warmest sympathies to the idea of closer imperial union, but warned Vincent and his colleagues that unless imperial federation was kept separate from "the Protection taint", it would have little influence over the masses. The Chancellor of the Exchequer arrived at what he considered to be the heart of the matter when he questioned whether the country was prepared to pay dearer bread for the consolidation of the empire, and his reference to the protectionists merits attention:

I hope I shall not offend any one by saying that I hope the colonial movement as it is called - that is the movement for closer union with the colonies - will not be prejudiced by any suspicions that its champions have got a kind of sneaking desire to Promote Protection at home. ....I am bound to say that we must endeavour to scent out Protection, if I may say so, because Protectionists lurk in many places where you would scarcely expect to find them. Some of them mingle with the bi-metallists behind their silver robes; others join the Imperial Federationists and wrap themselves round in the folds of the Union Jack. <sup>1</sup>

Goschen's preoccupation with sniffing out the protectionists from the Imperial Federation League publicised yet again the difficulty of attempting to maintain an uneasy alliance between federationist and fair-trader, which might have been feasible if the colonies were prepared to adopt free trade in the interests of imperial unity. As it was, the colonies refused to do so simply because they depended upon tariffs for the major part of their revenue needs, and therefore the idea of imperial free trade meant serious fiscal readjustments because the largest proportion of colonial imports did not come from foreign countries, but from within the empire. This explained why Tupper, Sprigg, Vogel and most other colonial statesmen advocated some kind of imperial preference based upon graded taxation rather than absolute free trade; while British politicians would not contemplate the reintroduction of duties on food and raw materials in order to adjust to colonial habits. This state of affairs simply reflected the fact that the economic conditions of Britain and those of the colonies

1. Ibid., 3, 934-935.



were fundamentally different and neither was prepared to pay the price for closer imperial union along commercial lines.

Having withdrawn his motion in the face of the combined attack of Playfair and Goschen, Vincent returned reinvigorated to move the direction of his attack into the Imperial Federation League. On 19 February 1891, Vincent urged the Executive Committee to allow the League to seek an interview with the Prime Minister in order to persuade him that the time was opportune for "a thorough inquiry by Imperial Conference or Royal Commission into the possibility of establishing a Commercial Federation within the Empire."<sup>1</sup> As a result of a discussion in which Sir John Colomb, Arnold-Forster, Parkin, Rusden and Munro-Ferguson all objected to Vincent's motion, however, an amendment was carried which arranged instead for a meeting of the General Council of the League on 2 March 1891 at which the recent speeches of Salisbury and Goschen could be examined.

Clearly, the debate in the House of Commons in February 1891 had caused the League to review the situation vis-a-vis its policy and actions for the future. Vincent's activities in establishing the United Empire Trade League and his importunity in parliament had certainly weakened the Federation League, and the sight of federationists locked in verbal combat in the House of Commons served to advertise the divisions within League ranks to all and sundry. From the point of view of moving slowly towards some kind of scheme, there was still little hope of finding any common ground upon which a productive discussion could take place, although Munro-Ferguson appeared to think that "a Council representing the Empire like that of the India Office" seemed "more like business" in 1891.<sup>2</sup> According to Munro-Ferguson, Vincent's initiative in introducing imperial federation to the House of Commons "under the guise of Protection" ensured that "things went rather badly" for the federationists and their cause, although the League was "more tolerant of tariffs than in former years."<sup>3</sup> Keeping Rosebery in touch with League events, Munro-Ferguson wrote to the

1. Imperial Federation, VI, March 1891, p.62.

2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 11 February 1891, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10017, ff. 173-174.

3. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 22 February 1891, *ibid*, f.184.

absentee League President that Vincent was "promoting protection" again, but that the meeting of 19 February was "against him". In his regular correspondence with Rosebery, Munro-Ferguson could not hide his dislike of Vincent, as this letter shows:

I went for Vincent, as usual ! saying he would use the League as an engine for his own ends, That I was no member of the Cobden Club and if a strong free trader for British interests I was ready for some sacrifice for Federation, But that no case could be made out for Protection, That the true line to take was that the Colonies would bear a due proportion of Imperial Defence and that the payment of quotas was a matter for Conference.<sup>1</sup>

As a member of the League's Executive Committee, Munro-Ferguson's opinions on Howard Vincent and the kind of fierce rivalry which his correspondence highlights cannot be underestimated. According to Munro-Ferguson, the February debate in the House of Commons had changed the League's priorities in so far as the latest <sup>idea</sup> was to have a conference in 1892 at which he intended to advocate an Imperial Council for Defence "attached to the Colonial Secretary, with the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and the War Secretary added, and the Admiralty."<sup>2</sup>

The General Council meeting of 2 March 1891 was little short of a farce. It showed quite clearly that federationists could not agree among themselves on any suggestion as to what should be done next. Brassey and Munro-Ferguson stressed the importance of the defence question and Vincent urged that the trade question was the vital issue, while Henniker Heaton, Arnold White and Sir Rawson Rawson fell somewhere between these two broad approaches and George Parkin complained that the resolution and amendments were much "too narrow in their scope."<sup>3</sup> Munro-Ferguson had anticipated this chaos when he wrote to Rosebery just before the meeting that:

1. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 22 February, 1891, *ibid.*, ff. 184-187.
2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 22 February 1891, *ibid.*, f. 187.
3. *Imperial Federation*, vi, April 1891, pp.86-87.



We shall have more fun at the Federation Meeting on Monday (2 March). Vincent says my motion is a plagiarism on his and that he will raise the point of order. I shall remind him that he was not the first to ask for a Conference. I will not get into a division, but we will try to commit the League to Federation on the basis of Defence rather than of Protection. 1

After the discussion, no agreement was reached, as we have seen, but Munro-Ferguson claimed that "they all seemed glad to have begun it."<sup>2</sup> Summing up the events of the previous weeks in a letter to the League president, Munro-Ferguson sounded a note of warning about the drift of developments :

We must offer some representation to the Colonies if they pay - and unless they agree to pay some real contribution towards the services we propose for them, we shall sooner or later dissolve the League.....

A very bad impression was being created by Dunraven in the Lords, Lowther in the Commons, and Vincent at our Executive, all trying to confound Federation with Protection. The weakness of their case was shown up by Salisbury and Goschen. But they were going on with the same game and had to be stopped. We had to keep on the right lines. And I suspect very soon we shall have to take a step onwards. 3

Before the League could move forward, however, it had to agree upon a strategy of some sort and this seemed unlikely in view of the uncompromising pressure which the commercial federationists were maintaining in the councils of the League and in parliament.<sup>4</sup> During the heat of the commercial union campaign, Lord Brassey further exemplified the disunity in League ranks in a

1. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 28 February 1891, Rosebery Papers, Ms.10017, ff. 194-195.
2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 2 March 1891, *ibid*, f. 196.
3. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 2 March 1891, *ibid*, ff. 196-197.
4. Dunraven and Vincent were also active in other avenues of expression during 1891. See Lord Dunraven, "Commercial Union Within The Empire", *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXIX, (March 1891), pp.507-522, and H.Vincent, "Inter-British Trade, and its Influence on the Unity of the Empire", *P.R.C.I.*, 12 May 1891, pp.264-303.

speech at the Leeds branch of the League on 13 March 1891 when he announced that the time was ripe for another step forward towards closer union, but that proposals for a Customs Union were premature. Brassey claimed that trade questions presented "the greatest difficulty and gravity in relation to which British statesmen might well hesitate to take a leap in the dark."<sup>1</sup> Turning to imperial defence, however, the League's Treasurer noted that there they had before them "a problem which had reached a more advanced stage, and the consideration of which it was not desirable much longer to postpone."<sup>2</sup> When Brassey stated that he had not come with a federal plan, however, this did not stop him from arguing that the appointment of a Colonial Council to advise the Colonial Secretary was a more limited proposal for which "the time was near at hand, if it had not already come,"<sup>3</sup> and he concluded his speech by moving a resolution in favour of sending a deputation to the Prime Minister in order to urge him to summon "an Imperial Conference for the purpose of considering the possibility of creating an Imperial Council, or of otherwise arranging a scheme of constitutional representation by which the self-governing colonies shall share with the Mother Country in the management of Imperial affairs in general."<sup>4</sup> In reply to a letter from a federationist M.P. on the League's General Council, Ernest Beckett, Lord Salisbury thanked him for his report of the Leeds meeting and their resolution, and expressed his "deepest sympathy with the objects they have in view", but added that the means by which they were to be accomplished would have to be consistent with the political constitution, and that he was pleased to see that federationists did not "conceal from themselves the extent of the difficulties" which still existed.<sup>5</sup>

1. A. Loring and R. Bradon, Lord Brassey: Papers and Addresses, Imperial Federation and Colonisation. (Lon. 1895), pp.143-144.
2. Ibid., p.144.
3. Ibid., p.142.
4. Ibid., p.147.
5. Salisbury to E.W. Beckett, 21 March 1891, Salisbury Papers, C/7/424



Although still absent from public life, it is interesting to note that Lord Rosebery was also fully aware of the plague of uncertainty which was sweeping through the League during the eventful months of 1891. In order to give Arthur Loring, the League Secretary, an exact indication of how his mind stood with regard to the League's position in March 1891, Rosebery sent Loring a confidential letter in which he explained at length his views upon the question of changing the name of the League and the desirability of sending a deputation to Lord Salisbury to persuade him to arrange another colonial conference. Why the League President should suddenly devote his energies to a consideration of the League's name in 1891 remains a mystery, unless he felt that the word "Imperial" hindered the progress of the movement in the colonies, but the correspondence with Loring reveals much that was significant in terms of the League's future strategy and it therefore merits extended coverage:

I see that the League is engaged in discussing various proposals for new conferences. Let me give you the views which suggest themselves to me:-

1. I am thoroughly in favour of changing the title of the League from "Imperial Federation League" to "National Federation League." I cannot see any injury to our trade-mark in the change, and I see a vast amount of practical good. The word "Imperial", rightly or wrongly, is dissociated in the Colonies from the meaning which primarily attaches to it, and represents much that is unpopular. I throw out this suggestion with a very strong conviction of its importance.

2. It is suggested on various grounds to hold another Conference. This is in the teeth of the recent speech by the Prime Minister, who clearly would not agree to summon such a conference even if the League asked for it. That is the first unfavourable circumstance.....

I am well aware of the validity that lies in the argument that we ought to do something. On the other hand, there is not less validity in the consideration that of all questions this, of Federation, is probably the most delicate, the one that should be handled with the most caution and regard to existing circumstances. A false step in advance may do immeasurably more harm than can be retrieved by a series of favourable circumstances. I am therefore apprehensive of taking action in approaching a prime minister, who has so to speak given us by anticipation a negative answer, on behalf of Colonies otherwise engaged, or which have not declared themselves favourable. 1

1. Rosebery to Loring, 13 March 1891, Imperial Federation Papers, R.C.S., MS. II.



The League President also told Loring that he was on the brink of resigning his position because he would be unable to participate in the League's deliberations during 1891, but he felt that it could wait until he returned from his travels abroad. With regard to Rosebery's desire to change the name of the League, the League President seemed to be acting rather late in the day. In the margin of his letter to Loring, he had scribbled the almost illegible suggestion that the word "Britannic" might be a substitute for the term "Imperial", although he found it "somewhat strange", and he suggested that a committee might be appointed to consider the title and the expediency of changing it.<sup>1</sup> The title of the League had been an embarrassing misnomer since its inception in 1884 when Forster had tried to make excuses for it, and it can only be assumed that Rosebery now felt it was time to do something about it, although it was to have ramifications which he could not have anticipated.

Turning to the need for a positive step forward by the League in 1891, Rosebery was emphatically opposed to the idea of approaching Lord Salisbury for another colonial conference mainly because he believed that Canada and the Australian Colonies were pre-occupied with domestic politics and that Cape Colony's advocacy of tariffs was inexpedient. Since the colonies already possessed self-government and had the mother country's military, naval and diplomatic services for nothing, while they also maintained hostile tariffs, Rosebery felt that they had nothing to gain by federation unless the whole question was removed "from the ground of sentiment to the more impregnable position of cash."<sup>2</sup> In short, the League President urged Loring to ensure that if the League were determined to approach Salisbury, they must have something material to offer the colonies.

At the resumed General Council meeting of 13 April 1891, "there was great enthusiasm for action"<sup>3</sup> and the League finally agreed to approach Salisbury to persuade him to summon a conference at which it could be

1. Rosebery to Loring, 13 March 1891, *ibid.*, It is interesting to note that Edward Freeman considered the use of this term to be much more acceptable than that which was popularly used. See E.A. Freeman, *Britannic Confederation: The Physical and Political Basis of National Unity*, *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. 7, July 1891, pp.345-357.
2. Rosebery to Loring, 13 March 1891, *ibid.*
3. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 15 April 1891, *Rosebery Papers*, Ms. 10017, f. 222.



decided how the colonies might "share in the privileges and responsibilities of a united Empire" "under conditions which were consistent with the existing constitution of the United Kingdom and the self-government possessed by the colonies."<sup>1</sup> The motion received unanimous support chiefly because of its vagueness, but there was evidence of disagreement. Munro-Ferguson "got into a bobble...., trying to upset Howard Vincent on Protection", and found himself "in too advanced a position on Imperial Defence",<sup>2</sup> while Sir Lyon Playfair was opposed to a conference on fiscal matters.<sup>3</sup> Ernest Beckett moved the resolution and his remarks indicated quite clearly that Salisbury's letter referring to the Leeds meeting a month earlier had influenced the League's decision to arrange a deputation. James Bryce agreed that the initiative had to come from the United Kingdom, but he was equally convinced that the time was inopportune. In a letter to Rosebery, Bryce criticized the majority of federationists at the meeting as "impracticable" and confessed that he was "less sanguine than before as to inducing the great colonies to come into a scheme."<sup>4</sup>

Loring noted Bryce's efforts to "moderate their ardour", but the Council "were having none of it" and it simply remained for the Executive Committee to appoint a committee to make arrangements for the deputation.<sup>5</sup> The issue of the League's title to which Rosebery had previously referred in a private letter to Loring was conveniently ignored at the meeting of 13 April, but it was suddenly and unexpectedly brought to the notice of the public by J. Henniker Heaton. In a note to Rosebery, Munro-Ferguson warned the League President that Heaton was "going to move the dissolution of the Federation League", although he was to be opposed by the majority of the Executive Committee:

1. Imperial Federation, VI, May 1891, p.111.
2. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 15 April 1891, op.cit. f. 222.
3. Imperial Federation, op.cit., p.111.
4. Bryce to Rosebery, 17 April 1891, Rosebery Papers, Ms.10089, ff.27-28.
5. Loring to Rosebery, (undated) April 1891, Imp. Fed. Papers, op.cit. This letter was written between 17-20 April 1891 in view of Loring's comments, and subsequent letters. T.A.Brassey, Munro-Ferguson, Colomb, G.Loder and General Laurie made up the committee.

We are all busy hunting after a name. Could we possibly drop the word 'Imperial' ?

If you substitute 'National', the minister will all shudder at the thought of the title running National \_\_\_\_\_ League ! 1

On 17 April 1891, Heaton wrote to the Times stating that he had given notice of an amendment to dissolve the League in view of the letter which Rosebery had written concerning the changing of the League's name. For the public information, Heaton claimed that because Rosebery's letter was referred to the Executive Committee his motion was put aside, but he stated that he had given fresh notice of a motion to dissolve the League because he believed that Rosebery's suggestion would not be popular in the colonies and because some more "definite, practicable, and popular policy was needed if imperial federation was to be achieved. According to Heaton, this policy "ought to be indicated in its title "and he suggested "Imperial Union League" as the new organization's title. 2

Arthur Loring reacted immediately by writing to the editor of the Times stating that Rosebery's letter was strictly confidential and that it contained a request that its contents should not be published.<sup>3</sup> Loring defended the League's decision concerning Heaton's amendment and wrote to Rosebery apologising for Heaton's initiative and explaining that he had become "very disagreeable" on account of the publication by the League of "an excellent pamphlet upon the postage question" by Robert Beadon.<sup>4</sup> The League Secretary believed that it was this which had upset Heaton and that the public reference to Rosebery was "simply to do mischief and to annoy". After this embarrassing episode, which could only do irreparable harm to the public image of the League, Loring noted that Heaton had resigned from the organization, and that the League would "struggle through somehow."<sup>5</sup>

1. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 10 April 1891, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10017, ff. 215-216.
2. The Times, 18 April 1891.
3. The Times, 22 April, 1891. See also Imperial Federation, VI, May 1891, p. 113.
4. Loring to Rosebery, (undated) April 1891, op.cit.
5. Loring to Rosebery, *ibid*.



The Heaton affair was yet another symptom of the growing weakness of the League. What gave the episode a special significance was the fact that a League member who had helped the organization since its emergence in 1884 had attempted to dissolve it, and his irresponsibility had revealed to the public that the League President no longer accepted the organization's title. According to Loring, Heaton had "announced his intention of wrecking the League" and the League Secretary was clearly perturbed at what he called "a time of considerable difficulty".<sup>1</sup> Rosebery added to these difficulties in April 1891 when he reaffirmed his decision to resign the presidency which he felt had "nothing to do with the policy of the League"<sup>2</sup>, but he promptly suspended his resignation at Loring's request in order not to "give occasion to its enemies to blaspheme."<sup>3</sup>

In view of the developments of the first four months of 1891, it was hardly surprising that many federationists regarded this year as another turning-point in the League's campaign, although it must have given some League members great cause for concern about the future of their organization. Munro-Ferguson alluded to this concern as "a very general feeling" and his reference to Gladstone's observation that the English people would never permit the House of Commons to be "altered in its character" showed that he regarded it as "one for Imperial Federation",<sup>4</sup> a remark which did not seem to augur very well for the League deputation which was due to meet Lord Salisbury on 17 June 1891.

Received by the Prime Minister at the Foreign Office, the League deputation was led by Lord Brassey and numbered over eighty federationists. Among the distinguished gathering were such veterans of imperial federation as Sir Frederick Young, Sir Daniel Cooper, Sir Charles Clifford, and R.A. Macfie - all of whom had assisted in the labours of the movement since the

1. Loring to Rosebery, 28 April 1891, and 6 May 1891, *ibid.*

2. Rosebery to Loring, 21 April 1891, *ibid.*

3. Loring to Rosebery, 28 April 1891, and Rosebery to Loring, 1 May 1891, *ibid.*

4. Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 26 April 1891, Rosebery Papers, MS. 10017, f. 228.

years 1869-1871, - and about sixteen M.P.s among whom there was Munro-Ferguson, Vincent, and Colomb. As expected, the colonies were represented, but the deputation was a predominantly British group of men which was not a desirable advertisement for the movement.<sup>1</sup>

Brassey stated that the League had "no cut and dried schemes of Imperial Federation" and "no views as a League with reference to a Customs Union or other fiscal measures"<sup>2</sup>, which concealed the fact that many federationists did indeed have definite opinions on these matters. Instead, the League's Treasurer pointed out that five years had elapsed since the last colonial conference and that, although it was premature to discuss the question of colonial participation in the control of Imperial foreign policy, the question of imperial defence was "in a more forward stage" and discussions might be fruitful in this area.<sup>3</sup> Brassey was followed by G.O.Morgan, Sir Daniel Cooper, General Laurie, Sir William Jervois and Sir John Colomb all of whom emphasized the urgency and the practicability of another conference. Salisbury's reply was non-committal, but not discouraging. Predictably, he argued that it was not feasible to summon a conference "unless we are prepared to lay before them for discussion some definite scheme of our own" and he politely scolded Brassey's refusal to contemplate a scheme as "an extravagant modesty".<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Salisbury argued that "we are almost come to the time when schemes should be proposed" and the Prime Minister labelled the League's problem as "an enigma" which required "the labour of many able brains" before a satisfactory solution could be achieved.<sup>5</sup>

As far as Salisbury was concerned, there were two main difficulties which federationists faced : the basic difference in the tariff policy between Britain and the colonies, and the fact that a common foreign policy meant a balance and appraisal of the voting value of the various elements of which the empire was composed and from which the Asiatic dependencies could not

1. Imperial Federation, VI, July 1891, p.160.

2. Ibid., p.161.

3. Ibid., p.161.

4. Ibid., p.162.

5. Ibid., pp. 162-163.



be fairly excluded.<sup>1</sup> In his allusion to the idea of a Zollverein, the Prime Minister held out little hope for those federationists who favoured a commercial union of the empire, but he regarded a Kriegsverein as much more urgent and clearly less controversial than fiscal rearrangements. On the face of it, Salisbury had certainly rejected the League's request for a conference and this represented a serious blow to the hopes of many federationists, but his reference to schemes of imperial reorganization must have been a pleasant surprise to the more enthusiastic adherents of the cause. Whatever Salisbury's speech meant to the League, it was a case of 'back to the drawing board' in order to take stock of the new situation and to rethink their strategy. The Times, however, was quite sure that the League's "prolonged barrenness" was intolerable and it urged the organization to "act upon the hint conveyed to it with pointed courtesy by the Premier and take prompt steps to justify its continued existence."<sup>2</sup>

That several leading federationists agreed with the Times was manifestly evident at the Sixth Annual General Meeting of the League which was held on the day following the deputation to the Prime Minister at the Westminster Palace Hotel. On rising to move the adoption of the Report of the Council for 1890-1891, Brassey referred to Lord Salisbury's remarks as a "challenge" and he felt that the time had come when the League ought to translate its theory into practical legislation. In support of this view, Arnold-Forster, Sir George Bowen and Sir Rawson Rawson all agreed that the moment was ripe for action. Arnold-Forster emphasized the importance of the commercial aspect of a scheme, while Bowen favoured the appointment of a committee to formulate a skeleton outline of the new constitution. Rawson was dubious about regarding Salisbury's response as a "challenge" to the League, but he agreed that the Prime Minister's "invitation" demanded consideration. Only George Rusden of Australia opposed the general feeling for a departure in the League's policy, believing that it was dangerous to formulate any detailed scheme without first allowing for a thorough discussion at a conference.<sup>3</sup> It was at this gathering of the League on 18 June 1891, therefore, that the die was cast and the organization set upon a course of action which led to its demise.

1. *Ibid.*, p.163.

2. *The Times*, 18 June 1891.

3. *Imperial Federation*, VI, July 1891, pp.163-165.

On 19 June 1891, Salisbury was given another opportunity to express his views upon the subject of closer union when he received a deputation from the United Empire Trade League. Led by Vincent and Lowther, the purpose of the deputation was twofold: to free the mother country and the empire from foreign treaty engagements which prevented the development of imperial preferential trading arrangements and to summon a conference to consider the most practicable plan of bringing the various parts of the empire into closer commercial union.<sup>1</sup> With a single-minded determination which had characterised his activities in 1891, Vincent declared that the aims of the Trade League were based not upon the "impracticable theories" of the imperial federationists, but upon "common-sense views" which meant that the true basis of closer union lay in the commercial aspect. Salisbury sympathized with the complaints of the deputation, but he stated quite frankly that the objectionable clauses of the German and Belgian treaties could not be denounced as they were part of an entire agreement which, he noted, contained provisions which were very valuable to Britain. In short, a single disagreeable clause of a treaty could not be abrogated without denouncing the whole of the arrangement.

The Prime Minister went on, as he had done two days earlier, to recommend the deputation to state in detail what their policy was and to address themselves to the implications of imperial preference, the chief one being the extent to which this policy would mean increased food prices.<sup>2</sup> This episode was clearly symptomatic of the cracks which had begun to appear in the edifice of the imperial federation movement during 1891. Vincent was obviously bent upon making the commercial issue a key factor in the forthcoming general election in Britain, and the preferentialists tried to stir up public concern with a vigorous propaganda which involved Vincent in a whirlwind tour across Canada in 1891. The League's journal, Imperial Federation, which Vincent had rather mysteriously attempted to discontinue in May 1891<sup>3</sup>, took him to task for making presumptuous claims that the British people were virtually ready to abandon free trade and take up imperial preference, and it observed that to talk to the Canadians about

1. Ibid., p.155.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.160.



preferential tariffs was preaching to the converted.<sup>1</sup> If Vincent had exaggerated, however, he did appear to have obtained powerful support in Canada where both houses of parliament adopted an address to the Queen requesting the denunciation of the German and Belgian treaties, and he was not without support from several other leading colonial statesmen.<sup>2</sup> What damned the cause, however, was the failure of the preferentialists to capture the imagination of the country; they would never shake off the stigma of increased consumer prices in exchange for closer imperial ties.

One final development merits attention during the year when Edward Freeman denounced imperial federation as a "dark abyss" which had never been "intelligibly defined".<sup>3</sup> At meetings of the General Council of the League on 6 July 1891 and the Executive Committee on 16 July 1891 it was finally resolved that a Special Committee should be appointed to arrive at "definite proposals" by which the object of imperial federation could at last be realised. With a task which the League felt to be a new starting-point in the movement, the Special Committee comprised eleven federationists: Lords Brassey, Reay and Lamington, Sir Daniel Cooper, Sir Charles Tupper, Sir Lyon Playfair, Sir John Colomb, Sir Rawson Rawson, James Bryce, James Rankin, and Hugh Oakeley Arnold-Forster.<sup>4</sup> Conscious of the commercial federationists knocking more loudly at the door of the League, it is particularly significant to note that only Tupper and Arnold-Forster could be considered as staunch representatives of the commercial union school of thought within the Special Committee. Both Bryce and Playfair were Gladstonian Liberal M.P.s while Rankin and Colomb were Conservative M.P.s, and Brassey and Colomb were both pledged to closer union by means of defence arrangements.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the more enthusiastic federationists, like

1. *Ibid.*, September 1891, p.205.

2. C.J.Fuchs, *The Trade Policy of Great Britain and her Colonies*, pp.363-365.

3. E.A.Freeman, *op.cit.*, pp.351 and 354.

4. *Imperial Federation*, VI, August 1891, pp.182-183.

5. See Lord Brassey, *Imperial Federation: An English View*, *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXX, Sept. 1891, pp.480-489, and *Imperial Federation for Naval Defence*, *ibid.*, Jan. 1892, pp.90-100.

Young and Labilliere, and the outspoken commercial union advocates, like Vincent and Staveley-Hill, had been thwarted yet again and the League's policy amounted to one of compromise.

In the light of these tumultuous events, the League was clearly drifting towards dissolution by the end of 1891. Without wishing to see a major political storm in the teacups of Hansard and the Times, it is nevertheless apparent that Vincent and his preferentialist colleagues did have a serious impact upon parliament in 1891, and they did enough to evoke sympathetic comments from Goschen and Salisbury as well as shaking the League to its very foundations. The divisions within the League are evident from Munro-Ferguson's invaluable correspondence to Rosebery, and, as a member of the League's Executive Committee, these glimpses of personal hostility and antagonism among federationists must be taken seriously. Moreover, the formation of the United Empire Trade League shows the sort of regard the commercial federationists had for the Federation League by 1891.

There is a great deal of skill and shrewdness in waiting for the right moment to strike, but the League seemed to over-react in deciding to take Salisbury at his word. The speed with which the League acted in seeking to prove that imperial federation meant something tangible suggests either that they panicked or that a majority of the Executive Committee had simply become impatient. The Prime Minister's comments to the League deputation may have been provocative and the League may have felt that it had to justify its continued existence by producing a federal plan which was open to discussion, but this course of action need not have embodied the seeds of the League's destruction. It all depended how seriously the League took itself to be when it formulated its scheme. The choices open to the League in 1891 were not fundamentally different from those which had been open to it in earlier years, since at no time had it claimed to be the sole architect of schemes for imperial federation. What Lord Brassey and the federationists were attempting to do in 1891-1892 was to keep up the pressure on the government by arriving at a broadly acceptable federal plan as a working hypothesis in order to extract some concessions from Salisbury - which they could then claim as a positive step forward, and thus silence their critics. It was perhaps their misfortune that Gladstone not Salisbury achieved victory at the polls in 1892, and that the League were faced with a Prime Minister who maintained an unswerving devotion to free trade and who had never been regarded as a defender of the colonial connection, let alone closer imperial union.



Crossing The Rubicon

As if unconcerned with the crystallization of the commercial federation movement within the general body of the imperial federation movement, the League referred to the year between July 1890 and June 1891 as more satisfactory in terms of financial vitality than "any previous year."<sup>1</sup> Designed primarily for public consumption, this claim nevertheless illustrated the surprising resilience of the movement which threatened to be torn asunder by rival conceptions of how to effect closer imperial union and whose political organization had been on the brink of financial insolvency as early as 1886. In January 1892, Loring wrote to Rosebery, the League's absentee President, that a reserve fund designed to keep the League afloat for a few more years had been collected and it amounted to £2000.<sup>2</sup> As in the past, however, the League's financial appeals always seemed to land squarely upon the shoulders of a few wealthy federationists instead of attracting monetary contributions from the public, and among the seven generous benefactors of the League's reserve fund were:- S.V.Morgan, P.Ralli, Peter Redpath of Canada, James Rankin M., the indefatigable Sir Daniel Cooper and, inevitably, Lord Brassey.<sup>3</sup>

This apparent financial revival did not, however, compensate for the divisive impact which the fiscal debate had imposed upon the imperial federation movement. At the monthly meeting of the League's Executive Committee on 18 March 1892 great concern was expressed about the public confusion engendered by the establishment of the United Empire Trade League.<sup>4</sup>

1. Imperial Federation, VI, July 1891, p.159.
2. Loring to Rosebery, 26 January 1892, Imperial Federation Papers, Mss II, R.C.S. London.
3. Ibid., The seventh contributor's name is undecipherable, but it could be Professor Montague of Oxford. It is also not clear whether Rosebery contributed to the fund although asked to do so by Loring. The United Kingdom branch of the Imperial Federation League, set up in April 1891 to release the General Council from having to represent the special interests of the United Kingdom as well as the empire at large, reported "very generous financial support" in May 1892 with over four hundred copies of the League's journal taken every month., Imperial Federation, VII, June 1892, p.129.
4. Imperial Federation, VII, April 1892, p.87.

Such was the anxiety among federationists that the League's journal came out with a public statement that the two organizations were "absolutely distinct" and that the "bond of sympathy" which existed between them rested solely upon "the unity of the Empire."<sup>1</sup> As yet another example of the disunity and confusion into which the League had fallen by 1892, the City of London branch confirmed a resolution in favour of commercial union based upon imperial free trade at the League's Executive Committee meeting of 20 May 1892.<sup>2</sup> The parent body thus found it necessary to emphasize publicly that whereas the general aims and methods of the United Empire Trade League were primarily fiscal, its own priorities lay in the political aspect of closer union and it sought to dissociate itself from the interminable wrangles over free trade and protection which frequently diverted public attention from the central issue of imperial federation.

Apart from the issue of League finance and the continuous debate over economic questions concerned with closer union, the event of overriding importance for most federationists and for the future of the League was the report of the Special Committee on "definite proposals" completed on 17 June 1892. Set up in July 1891, the committee pursued its labours for almost exactly a year, inviting suggestions and discussions from all League branches in the empire and from eminent men especially qualified through their experience in public life and their academic ability. During the course of its deliberations early in 1892 an attempt was made to induce Rosebery to comment upon the evolution of a scheme which would serve as a starting-point for debate at another colonial conference. According to Neville Waterfield, Rosebery's close confidant and personal secretary in later years, the League president refused to become involved in the committee's discussions because he had always "held aloof from any scheme" and consequently the matter was one in which "he could not be of any use".<sup>3</sup> Rosebery's official return to political life was occasioned by a great meeting at Edinburgh on 13 May 1892,

1. Ibid., May 1892, p.109.

2. Ibid., June 1892, p.207.

3. Waterfield to Loring, 24 March 1892, Imperial Federation Papers, op.cit. Evidence in letters from Rosebery to Loring dated 13 April 1892 and 5 May 1892 indicates that the League President did comment in some way on the issue, but no record of his observations has been found, *ibid.*



although he had already made at least two public speeches in London concerning London County Council politics in April<sup>1</sup>, but the League President did not resume his duties in the League and he was extremely reluctant to participate in the mounting electoral campaign for the Liberal party in May 1892.

Parliament was prorogued on 28 June 1892 and the ensuing general election resulted in the formation of Gladstone's fourth and final Liberal ministry pledged to Irish Home Rule above all other competing issues. In so far as Ireland was the dominant theme of Gladstone's electoral campaign, the question of federalism was never far beneath the surface of party politics in 1892 and imperial federation was a subject of considerable importance for at least some Liberal candidates<sup>2</sup>, although it remained a difficult task to explain it to a mass electorate unfamiliar with, and uninterested in, the details of the federal issue.

In view of the country's pre-occupation with the general election, the League wisely deferred the date for considering the report of the Special Committee until after the parliamentary recess. Before the League Council could reassemble to receive the report, however, Rosebery resigned as League President in August 1892. In a letter of resignation to the League Secretary, Arthur Loring, on 21 August 1892 Rosebery explained that his acceptance of public office in the new Liberal government as Foreign Secretary demanded that he vacate the presidency of the League, a position which of late he confessed he had filled as "an indifferent attendant"<sup>3</sup>. According to the rules of the League's constitution amended

1. Crewe, Lord Rosebery, Vol.II, pp.384-389.

2. For Munro-Ferguson, both Scottish Home Rule and imperial federation commanded equal attention at the general election. See Munro-Ferguson to Rosebery, 14 April 1892, Rosebery Papers, Ms. 10018, ff.132-133. The League also contacted numerous candidates from both political parties before the elections in order to solicit their support for closer union and to persuade them to raise the question of imperial federation to their constituents. See Imperial Federation, VII, November 1892, pp. 257-259.

3. Rosebery to Loring, 21 August 1892, Imperial Federation Papers, op.cit., The letter was also printed in Imperial Federation, VII, September 1892 p.196.

in 1888, Rosebery's new position as a Cabinet minister was, of course, incompatible with the position of League President, but it did not mean that he had to dissociate himself entirely from the hierarchy of the organization. Loring's reply indicated that Rosebery would automatically become the League's Vice-President, but it is safe to say that Rosebery was not at all interested in the idea.<sup>1</sup> Although his name appeared in the League journal and in League documents as the Vice-President until February 1893 when he asked to be relieved of the vice-presidency, Rosebery's involvement in League activities was never resumed and for all practical purposes his role in the leadership of the League remained as inactive and as passionless as it had been since the death of his wife in 1890.

On 16 November 1892, the League Council at last met to receive the report of the Special Committee appointed fifteen months earlier, an event eagerly awaited by most federationists. Having been issued to members of the General Council and to the press before the League could discuss it officially, the report represented an irrevocable step forward by the League as a major policy statement. The League journal referred to the report as "the most important advance made in the history of the imperial federation movement since the League was established" eight years earlier in 1884,<sup>2</sup> a claim which would have been difficult to deny. At last, federationists had a definite policy, but it soon became obvious that the report was an awkward compromise and that many adherents to the cause were dissatisfied with the scheme.

Having received the help of "some thirty gentlemen" in compiling a lengthy list of suggestions and proposals which appeared to the Special Committee to embody the main principles necessary to a readjustment in the relations between Britain and her colonies, the full report was proudly published in the December issue of the League journal in 1892. Based upon the fundamental premise that imperial unity remained a general desire, the report made a simple distinction between the essentials and the non-essentials of federation since there are obviously certain requirements which are indispensable to the creation of a federal union as distinct from

1. Loring to Roseber, 23 August 1892, op.cit.

2. Imperial Federation, VII, December 1892, p.266.



those which are merely conducive to it. Article 9 of the report summarised the essentials of a united empire:

- (a) That the voice of the Empire in peace, when dealing with Foreign Powers, shall be, as far as possible, the united voice of all its autonomous parts.
- (b) That the defence of the Empire in war shall be the common defence of all its interests and of all its parts, by the united forces and resources of all its members.

With the emphasis clearly placed upon imperial defence, in accordance with the original constitution of the League adopted in 1884, articles 10-28 of the report represented the kernel of the League's demands and also involved it in some very far-reaching constitutional questions.

Articles 10 and 11 committed the League to proposing both a representative body and common property in the means of defence as far as the self-governing colonies were concerned, while article 12 went a step further in emphasizing that it was in the maintenance of imperial sea communications that the community of interests was most absolute. The League then arrived at the heart of the constitutional reform of imperial government when it consented to articles 13-20 which dealt with the making of new arrangements for a Council of the Empire. Initially, it was suggested that when South Africa and Australia were confederated, as Canada already was, and each of these three nations was represented in London by a member of its government, such representatives should be available for consultation with the Cabinet when matters of foreign policy affecting the colonies were under discussion. Concerning the proposed Imperial Council, no attempt was made rigidly to specify the new institution's functions, which, it was felt, would evolve slowly in the future according to changing circumstances. However, the report did address itself to the ~~composition~~ composition of the Council. It was to consist of members appointed by the United Kingdom and the self-governing colonies, but whereas Britain, Canada, the Australian and South African colonies were to be directly represented, India and the Crown colonies would be represented indirectly by the appropriate Secretaries of State, unless a similar method was adopted in some other such manner where and when desirable. Thus, the Council might include, in addition to the representatives of the three great self-governing groups of colonies, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary,

the Colonial Secretary, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Secretaries of State for India and War.

Regarding its functions, the report confined its attentions to what was practical from the standpoint of 1892 and it emerged that the Council would deal primarily with imperial defence and foreign policy. Defence really meant naval defence, but the report was cognisant of the inadequacies of the existing system of imperial defence which had no General Staff to treat naval and military defence from a corporative viewpoint and had never evaluated any combined plan of operation for the defence of the empire based upon mutual co-operation between the War Office and the Admiralty. Referring to the recommendations in article 20 of the report of the Hartington Commission of 1890,<sup>1</sup> the report of the League's Special Committee noted that the Council might utilise the experience of professional advisers and that, as well as meeting to co-ordinate military and naval strategy, it could relate the service Estimates to each other in order to consider the relative importance of any proposed expenditure. The report also stated rather obscurely that the Imperial Council might receive such information relating to matters of foreign policy as would enable it to deal adequately with questions of defence. In matters of defence the Council could supervise the appropriation of any finance provided for the defence of the empire by the common contribution of the United Kingdom and the colonies. The method of raising contributions it was felt would probably, by general consent, be left at the outset to the choice of the individual self-governing colonies, but future developments might reveal a satisfactory means of raising the money according to some uniform principle throughout the empire. It was suggested that the several amounts of revenue allocated to this

1. Set up in 1888 to enquire into naval and military organization in Britain and the empire, the Commission worked for two years to produce its report. See F. Johnson, *Defence by Committee*, (O.U.P. 1960) and N.H. Gibbs, *The Origins of Imperial Defence*, Inaugural Lecture, Oxford, 1955.



purpose should be fixed in the first instance for a term of years by a conference, subject to periodical revisions. Admitting that the question of contributions was a difficult subject, the report noted that the rapid development of the colonies demanded an immediate consideration of the problem, and it stated unequivocally that the colonies would be prepared to take their share in the cost of the general defence of the empire, provided they were given a proper share in the control and expenditure of the common fund. An alternative form of contribution was also suggested whereby the maintenance of colonial naval and military forces at a certain strength, in a proper condition of efficiency, and generally available for mutual protection and support, might be regarded as the equivalent of a direct contribution to the Imperial Exchequer.

In order to ascertain the views of the various self-governing colonies on these proposals, article 29 of the report stated that an Imperial Conference should be summoned ad hoc, but that such a conference should not be formally convoked until the British government felt that the moment was opportune and that a favourable reception of any proposals they might make could be reasonably anticipated. Referring to the need for a complete statement of the necessities of the empire in matters of defence to lay before the conference, it was suggested that a Royal Commission might be necessary to supply the groundwork for a comprehensive statement of imperial defence requirements.

Articles 32-38 constituted what the League regarded as "measures conducive but not essential in federation" which could be implemented after federation had been formally established. Such measures included:- the admission of colonial government securities to the category of investments in which, under British law, trust funds could be placed; the imperial guarantee of local loans raised for imperial purposes, such as strategic cables and railways; the introduction of local examinations for the civil service outside the United Kingdom and the more frequent appointment to governorships of fit people wherever they lived in the empire; the selection from time to time of eminent colonial jurists to sit on the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council; uniformity in certain branches of Statute law, especially in commercial law; and the establishment

of a uniform imperial postage and special arrangements for telegraphic service. Such proposals had, of course, been advocated at various times and with frequent modifications by federationists even before the establishment of the League in 1884, but it is interesting to note that the admission of colonial loans to the category of trust stocks was something which Rosebery had regarded as one of the mother country's "best trumps in the game". Writing to Loring in March 1891, the League President had urged the League not to concede this privilege unless a conference was summoned to discuss closer union. Rosebery believed that Britain had made so many free concessions to the colonies - Crown lands, independent governments, hostile tariffs, and naval and military services - that imperial federation would be unattractive to them if it meant giving up a comfortable position simply to share the mother country's burdens. Far from being an issue of secondary importance, therefore, Rosebery regarded the question of trust funds as one of Britain's last remaining sources of bargaining - power.<sup>1</sup>

It probably came as a shock to many federationists when it was discovered that the only mention of commercial union in the report was extremely vague and that it was partially concealed in articles 36 and 37 at the end of the list of those proposals which were deemed to be conducive, but not essential to federation. The report referred to "the fuller development of inter-Imperial trade and the removal of existing hindrances due to tariff arrangements" and it went on to remark that the sense of the permanence of the political union would naturally induce people to make fiscal arrangements which, under existing circumstances, they were not prepared to adopt.

In conclusion, the report emphasized its authors' conviction of the "very grave importance of the questions involved" and their belief that it would be a matter for great regret if the imperial government should fail to take the earliest fitting opportunity to summon an imperial conference. It also noted that the proposals outlined did not encompass all the numerous

1. Rosebery to Loring, 13 March 1891, Imperial Federation Papers, op.cit.



points of detail which had previously been raised during the course of discussions and it made no claim that the proposals were to be regarded as conclusive. On the contrary, it was intended that an imperial conference would use them as debating points in order to mould an acceptable scheme into shape.<sup>1</sup>

Eschewing all pretentious claims to finality, the League journal nevertheless roundly declared that they had at last defined what imperial federation really meant : it included all the principles laid down in the "working" portion of the report which referred to the essentials of federation. Robert Beadon's editorial comment also indulged in the luxury of congratulating the Special Committee for its far-sightedness in acknowledging the nature of the historically changing relationship of the colonial connection by ensuring that the proposals were in accordance with the spirit and methods of British institutions. According to the journal, the report on "definite proposals" recognised the status gradually being acquired by the Agents-General of the colonies and the embryonic form of colonial contribution to imperial naval defence established at the conference of 1887, so that the proposed political arrangements were merely the logical outcome of developments and trends which were already moving in that direction : they sought to establish the operation of these principles on a constitutional basis.<sup>2</sup> In this light, federationists hoped to present the proposals as indigenous to the working of English constitutional ideas and traditions, and thereby conceal or minimise the extent to which these proposals had far-reaching political implications.

The fact that the League's Special Committee had managed to produce such a comprehensive blueprint as a focal point for discussion was itself

1. Report of the Special Committee of the League, 16 November 1892, Imperial Federation, VII, December 1892, pp.268-270.

2. Ibid., p.266.

no small achievement. Several parts of the report are conspicuous for their studied vagueness, especially those concerning colonial contributions to imperial defence, the question of commercial union, and foreign policy, but the League could not fairly be criticized for these inadequacies when it had made no claim to tackle such problems thoroughly. It is, however, worth noting that the League made no fuss about the thorny question of an abdication of British sovereignty, although it was less certain that the Liberal government would take a similarly facile view of this aspect of the proposals. There was also no telling how far such a collection of proposals would be welcome in the colonies. Many federationists in Britain probably expected some measure of reluctance from the colonies concerning contributions to imperial defence simply because military and naval defence in particular had always been provided by the mother country free of charge, at least until 1887. The shelving of commercial union must have disappointed most Canadians since imperial federation had never meant much more than tariff preference to them, and Sir Charles Tupper was known for his opposition to Canadian contributions to imperial defence when the Canadian Pacific Railway already represented the Dominion's eternal gesture to the defence of the empire.

Since the report was unanimous, it naturally bore Tupper's signature, but there can be little doubt that he was not an enthusiastic signatory.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the report represented a major defeat for the commercial federationists, especially in the light of their tremendous campaign in parliament throughout 1891. Judging from the overwhelming bias towards the defence aspect of imperial federation in the report, it was obvious that Brassey, Colomb and Bryce had achieved their aims. Reluctance to tamper with commercial matters was wise in view of the previous government's refusal to promote the cause of imperial preference.

1. Arthur Loring and Robert Beadon wrote that Tupper did not support the report "in precisely the same spirit or in the same sense as his colleagues." A.H.Loring and R.J.Beadon (ed.), *Lord Brassey, Papers and Addresses: Imperial Federation and Colonisation*, p.221.



and what little reference there was to imperial trade owed its inclusion in the report to Tupper and perhaps Arnold-Forster. Having relegated the commercial aspect of federation to a minor section of the report, however, the General Council of the League was far from being a united body, and, since the Council had not purged itself of its commercial federationists, the approval of the report was not without opposition.

An Executive Committee member, George Rusden, wrote that "only respect for the Chairman, Mr. Edward Stanhope, induced acquiescence which might otherwise have not been accorded."<sup>1</sup> Stanhope addressed the meeting of 16 November 1892 as the President of the League, having replaced Rosebery two months earlier, and referred to the report as "a most gratifying circumstance", although the proposals could only be regarded as "tentative".<sup>2</sup> Messrs. Freeman Murray and Eckett Hill complained at article 29 of the report which conceded that an imperial conference should only be summoned at the behest of the British Government, and Alexander McNeil, the Vice-President of the Canadian League, expressed his regret that commercial matters had not received a more prominent place in the report.<sup>3</sup> According to the League journal, Stanhope deprecated any attempt to alter the report, even for the better,<sup>4</sup> and it was given unanimous approval, although the absence of Tupper, Vincent, Staveley-Hill, Dunraven and nearly all of the other confirmed advocates of commercial union facilitated such a result.<sup>5</sup>

Thus it was that the scheme submitted to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Ripon, on 28 November 1892 proved to be a "halfway-house" towards federation, an arrangement which allowed for the introduction of a federal element into the governing of the empire, rather than the total application

1. G. O. Rusden, *History of Australia*, Vol. III, pp. 493-494.

2. *Imperial Federation*, VII, December 1892, p. 271.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

5. However, Sir Frederick Young was present along with several leading Canadian federationists.

of the federal principle to the empire. Upon receiving a copy of the report, the senior officials in the Colonial Office expressed considerable doubts as to whether it contained a proposal which would justify the summoning of an imperial conference, however, and Ripon was also extremely sceptical.<sup>1</sup> The Colonial Secretary and his permanent officials took the report seriously, but they were not enthusiastic about it and Ripon replied that he awaited expressions of colonial opinion on the matter. Writing to Gladstone about the report in February 1893, Ripon's comments were hardly favourable towards it:

The Imperial Federation League have sent me a Report of a Committee which they appointed some time ago to prepare a scheme for promoting the realisation of their objects. Bryce before he was in office was a member of the Committee, and has signed its report, and Rosebery, as you know, was President of the League and feels a great interest in the question which goes by the name of Imperial Federation. I am myself somewhat of a sceptic on the subject, though honestly desirous to strengthen our Union with the Colonies in all practicable ways. Under all the circumstances it seems to me advisable to send a very civil answer to the League, though maintaining the principle which I believe to be the sound one, that all effective steps in the direction of closer union must be initiated by the Colonies themselves. 2

Ripon's attitude towards the report and concerning imperial federation in general did not augur very well for the fortunes of the League. He had always doubted the practicability of schemes for closer union, especially those which sought to achieve it by means of "political or economic fetters," and he was genuinely perplexed by the fact that a number of his Liberal

1. See C.O. 323/391/23033, quoted in J.E.Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences 1887-1911*, p.16. and R.A.Shields, *The Imperial Federationists and their Cause 1869-1893*, Pennsylvania, Ph.D. Thesis, 1961, pp. 328-336.
2. Ripon to Gladstone, 2 February 1893, Gladstone Papers, Add. Nos.44287, ff.139-140.



friends including Forster, Rosebery and Bryce had been among the leaders of the movement in Britain, while the subject made only a limited appeal to his practical sense. Indeed, Ripon's position on imperial federation had made "little advance" since 1888 when W.T. Stead urged him to write a letter to the Pall Mall Gazette supporting Cecil Rhodes' view of federation; he did not see his way clearly on the matter and until he did he would not speak about it one way or the other.<sup>1</sup>

Before the Prime Minister could turn his attentions to the League's report, however, a lengthy discussion on the history and progress of the imperial federation movement took place at the Royal Colonial Institute which revealed quite clearly how far the League was not unanimous in support of the report and proved, in retrospect, to be ominous for the credibility of the League's proposals. On 10 January 1893, Labilliere read a paper before the Institute entitled "British Federalism: Its Rise and Progress" in which he presented a resume of the history of the movement for closer union and took the League to task for being tempted to produce a scheme by Lord Salisbury which could only "impair its usefulness."<sup>2</sup> The veteran federationist showed remarkable prescience when he warned his colleagues that the League had made a serious tactical blunder in framing a scheme which, if rejected by the Prime Minister and perhaps even by the colonies, would threaten the organization's continued existence. Not only did Labilliere question the wisdom of the League's recent policy, but he also criticized the report for claiming that intercolonial federation was a vital pre-requisite of imperial federation and complained that this proposition "carries us scarcely a step beyond where we are at present."<sup>3</sup> According to Labilliere, intercolonial federation in Australia and South Africa was a question which the people in those areas of the empire had to decide for themselves and it was quite irrelevant to the achievement of imperial federation, which, if it had to wait until the federation of South Africa, might mean a delay for "probably a quarter of a century."<sup>4</sup>

1. L. Wolf, *The Life of the First Marquis of Rippon*, (Lon. 1921), Vol. II, pp. 209-210.
2. P.R.C.I., Vol. 24, 1893-1894, p. 113.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Coming from one of the longest serving adherents to the cause and a founder member of the League, these criticisms were particularly harmful as far as the League's report was concerned, but Labilliere's denunciation of the League also served to highlight the conflict of opinion as to how to approach imperial federation which had dogged the organization since its inception. The divergence of thought was amply illustrated by the comments of those federationists who spoke after Labilliere's remarks. Both Playfair and Bryce reaffirmed their support for the defence aspect of closer union, while R.W.Murray of Cape Colony argued that no federation could exist that was not a commercial federation and Thomas MacFarlane of Canada noted that the programme of the United Empire Trade League carried much more favour with the people of Canada than that of the Imperial Federation League.<sup>1</sup> As if this open display of disagreement and criticism among federationists was not sufficient warning for the League, Lord Rosebery's speech on the occasion of the banquet to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Colonial Institute on 1 March 1893 re-emphasized the doubts which many League stalwarts entertained concerning the organization's report. In proposing the toast of the evening, the former League President alluded to the League's recent decision to ask the Prime Minister to receive a deputation to request that he summon an imperial conference to discuss the League's proposals for closer union, and he observed that the time was inopportune. Rosebery argued that the Australian colonies were absorbed in their own affairs and that Britain was passing through "a grave political crisis" which occupied her full attentions. The Foreign Secretary then warned his audience, which included federationists, that he for one would not like to risk the failure of a second conference by summoning it at such a time.<sup>2</sup>

Rosebery had resigned the vice-presidency of the League on 1 February 1893, perhaps because he was aware of the League Council's intention to submit a request to Gladstone for a deputation, but there is no doubt that he still commanded great respect among federationists, and his personal

1. Ibid., pp.121-128.

2. Ibid., p.226.



opinion of the League's policy in 1893 must have caused many of them to question the wisdom of their decision. After all, as Foreign Secretary, Rosebery was in frequent and close contact with Gladstone, and his warning should have been taken seriously by the League. The League, however, contented itself by noting that Gladstone's decision to receive the League deputation after the introduction of the second Irish Home Rule Bill on 13 April 1893 indicated quite clearly that the Liberal government had satisfied itself that the moment was indeed opportune.<sup>1</sup> Both of these expressions of caution by respected advocates of closer union in the early months of 1893, therefore, went unheeded and the fortunes of the League plummeted as a result of their myopia.

The Prime Minister's observations regarding the League's report served to demonstrate how far the warnings of Labilliere and Rosebery were justified. Underlining the names of Bryce and Playfair on the report of the Special Committee, Gladstone raised a whole series of searching questions concerning the proposals listed by enumerating his queries and scribbling down several points on the face of the report which obviously disturbed him.<sup>2</sup> What stands out about Gladstone's comments on the report above all else is his evident belief that it was inadequate. Although the League was fully aware that the report had left many questions unanswered, mainly because it believed that they demanded the sole attention of an imperial conference, the Prime Minister appears to have felt that the League should have been more specific in its proposals.

Gladstone opened his written assault on the report by asking the following pertinent questions : What was the position of these colonies which did not possess self-government ? On what basis was the burden of imperial defence to be adjusted ? What securities existed for the punctual and steady working of a financial system ? Was the prerogative of

1. Imperial Federation, VIII, April 1893, pp.75-76.
2. Gladstone's comments on the Report of the Special Committee of the Imperial Federation League, 12 April 1893 (indicated on the manuscript), Gladstone Papers, Add. Mss. 44775, ff. 114-125.

peace and war to be devolved upon the Imperial Council ? What were colonial members supposed to do in an emergency situation ? Would colonial members be invested with powers to bind their respective governments or would they have to refer all decisions for the ratification of their home governments ?<sup>1</sup> Clearly, on the basis of these questions alone, the Prime Minister felt that the proposals contained in the report did not constitute the definite scheme which his predecessor had requested.

Among the other questions and remarks which Gladstone noted was his emphasis upon Australian federation. This was the very point which had perturbed Labilliere and it was evident that Gladstone was keen to discover how far intercolonial federation affected imperial federation, a question upon which federationists were divided. The Prime Minister also made clear references to preferential trade, party politics, and the ability of the Imperial Council of Defence to legislate<sup>2</sup>, but he also appeared to question the validity of the assertions stated in articles 7 and 8 of the report which referred to the perfecting of the empire's unity and its defence requirements.<sup>3</sup> Referring to the fact that a definite scheme had been put to him, Gladstone queried how far any great progress had already been made and he seemed to wonder whether there was any real demand for a Defence Union of the Empire. Turning to the principle of common contribution to imperial defence as stated in articles 21-24 of the report, Gladstone asked whether such contributions were to be voluntary or fixed, a question which the League's Special Committee had doubtless hoped would be decided at the proposed imperial conference.<sup>4</sup> Before dealing with the Prime Minister's final remarks about the report, it is also worth noting that he was uncertain as to what relationship the proposed Imperial Council would have with the Crown, the House of Commons, and with each colony respectively.<sup>5</sup>

1. Ibid, f. 118.

2. Ibid, f. 120.

3. Ibid, f. 122.

4. Ibid, f. 123.

5. Ibid, f. 120.



However, it was Gladstone's final comment on the report which, according to one writer on the subject, has been referred to as "the most damning of all".<sup>1</sup> At the bottom of one of his pages of comments on the report, the Prime Minister observed that "public opinion has yet to be exercised and matured"<sup>2</sup>, a remark which seemed to show that he at least was far from impressed with the League's nine-year record of activity and its claim to have educated the public in the importance of closer union. Gladstone may well have been referring to the fact that public opinion was not advanced enough to consider such detailed proposals, and it is likely that he felt public opinion to be sympathetic to the idea of imperial unity for reasons of sentiment and kinship, but not ready to accept and understand the League's reform proposals. The fact that Gladstone himself had little sympathy with the federationist cause may also help to explain why he believed that public opinion both at home and in the colonies was not prepared for a consideration of actual schemes.

Had members of the League known about Gladstone's private observations regarding the report and including the feasibility of imperial federation in general, they would not have wasted their time visiting the Prime Minister on 13 April 1893. What else the federationists did not know was the fact that a member of the League's Special Committee, James Bryce, had already written to the Prime Minister advising him not to call a conference. Writing to Gladstone the day before the League deputation was due to visit him, Bryce argued that the time was "not suitable for any Conference on the question of joint defence and contributions or on the general question of our relations with the Colonies".<sup>3</sup> Doubtless aware of Gladstone's impatience with the federationist cause, Bryce felt compelled to explain and apologise for his own involvement in the movement, and he pointed out that the League's report was "perfectly harmless" and that it committed them to nothing "except a desire to secure a better system of imperial defence."<sup>4</sup>

1. R.A.Shields, *op.cit.*, p.339.

2. *Op.cit.*, f.120.

3. Bryce to Gladstone, 12 April 1893, Bryce Papers, Ms.12, ff.113-116.

4. *Ibid.*, ff. 114-116.

The reasons which the new Chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster advanced for his participation in the League since 1884 were that it was a means of showing sympathy with and interest in the colonies which Bryce was "specially anxious to retain", and that he, along with Rosebery, Reay, Brassey and Playfair, hoped to "prevent it from falling in the hands of the Tories."<sup>1</sup> These reasons were certainly consistent with what Bryce had written to Edward Freeman almost seven years earlier in 1886<sup>2</sup>, but his advice to Gladstone in 1893 can only have served to confirm the Prime Minister's decision not to summon a conference, a decision which he must have already reached judging from his private remarks on the report.

Having refused a request from Howard Vincent to receive a deputation from the United Empire Trade League<sup>3</sup>, Gladstone duly met the Imperial Federation League's deputation on 13 April 1893. Led by Stanhope, the League President and Lord Brassey, the new Vice-President of the League, the assembled gathering of just over one hundred federationists was a distinguished one. Among the company of men who waited upon the Prime Minister at 10, Downing Street were such veterans of the cause as Sir Frederick Young, Sir Charles Nicholson and Sir Daniel Cooper, all of whom had helped to create the imperial federation movement in 1869, and Sir Charles Tupper, Sir John Colomb, Richard Dobell, Harold Finch-Hatton, and Sir Henry Barkly, each of whom had participated in the establishment of the League in 1884. Altogether, about thirty-eight M.P.s attended, among whom Howard Vincent and H.O. Arnold-Forster represented the commercial federationists while James Bryce, Ronald Munro-Ferguson and Sydney Buxton strengthened the 'defence supported by free trade' group.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing that the League did not exist solely for the purpose of obtaining further contributions from the colonies for imperial defence and that the assembly of federationists did not press for an immediate

1. Ibid., f. 113.

2. See Bryce to Freeman, 24 December 1886, *ibid.*, Ms. 9, ff. 259-262.

3. Imperial Federation, VIII, May 1893, p. 104.

4. Ibid., p. 111.



conference, Stanhope, Brassey and Colomb failed to convince the Prime Minister, whose reply was sympathetic, but unequivocal. Gladstone's opposition to the League's request to summon a conference was based upon four main considerations:- that neither he nor his Cabinet would ever be prepared to consider the abandonment of free trade, as hinted at in articles 35 and 37 of the report; that the onus of preparing a statement giving particularity and definiteness to the report's proposed basis of discussion would throw too great a responsibility upon the government; that the League's report was not really the scheme which Lord Salisbury had requested; and that the time was inopportune for holding a conference.<sup>1</sup> What both Labilliere and Rosebery feared, had come about. The Prime Minister had frankly given the proposals a decent burial, as The Times noted<sup>2</sup>, and the League was left with the unenviable and embarrassing task of redefining its policy. Taking stock of the situation reached by April 1893, the League journal stated that the organization could not simply confine itself to the task of educating public opinion at home and in the colonies, as the Prime Minister had hinted to the deputation, but it must continue to seek to influence governments which alone had the power to change imperial unity from a sentiment into a concrete reality.<sup>3</sup>

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the League on 23 June 1893, at which less than half the membership attended, it was evident that the house which had been divided for so long would not remain standing for much longer. Gladstone's rebuff was a hammer-blow from which the League never really recovered. Sir Frederick Young made a futile attempt to salvage something from the wreckage when he resurrected one of his pet schemes to send a Royal Commission around the various colonies in a British man-of-war ship in order to register the opinions of leading colonial statesmen and politicians on imperial federation, but his resolution was rejected. Howard Vincent attempted to persuade the meeting that it should adopt the principles of the United Empire Trade League, but found that nobody was prepared to second his rather pompous resolution. The meeting terminated with a decision to refer the matter of a reassessment of future

1. For a full report of the deputation, see *ibid.*, pp.111-115.

2. *The Times*, 14 April 1893.

3. *Imperial Federation*, VIII, May 1893, pp.98-99.

policy to a small committee which would explore the remaining opportunities open to the League and report to the Executive Committee.<sup>1</sup> The inability of the League to make any real impact upon the policies of successive governments and its failure to find a new direction and purpose in 1893 meant that the prospects of recovery diminished rapidly between April and November 1893, when the organization finally crumbled.

1. *Ibid.*, July 1893, p.159.



### The Demise of the League

An account of the collapse of the League, which brought to an end the campaign for the closer union of the empire based upon the federal principle, must take as its central theme the refusal of the Prime Minister to summon an imperial conference, but an accurate explanation of the demise of the League in 1893 must also include an event which involved Sir Charles Tupper and which occurred as far back as January 1893.

On 10 January 1893, Tupper wrote to the Secretary of the League in Canada, Casimir Dickson, informing him that "the most active members of the Imperial Federation League were mainly interested in levying a large contribution on the revenues of the Colonies for the support of the Army and Navy of Great Britain." Tupper stated that since the Council of the League contained many strong Free Traders who opposed the idea of any form of imperial preference, he was delighted to have been able almost singlehanded to obtain the inclusion of articles 36 and 37 in the report, which lent some attention to the commercial aspect of imperial federation.<sup>1</sup> According to this letter, it appears that Tupper was incensed by a public speech made by George Parkin in Toronto in November 1892 in which he deprecated Canada's failure to contribute towards imperial defence. This speech apparently irritated Tupper, who was known for his opinion that Canada already contributed substantially to imperial defence in virtue of the vast amount of capital spent on the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and he observed sarcastically that the most active members of the League in Britain had "captured Mr. Parkin" and were using him to "create the false impression" that Canada did "nothing to maintain the defence of the Empire."<sup>2</sup>

As a confidential letter, Tupper's remarks were harmless and could have been legitimately dismissed as impulsive, but they unfortunately found their way into the annual general meeting of the League in Canada and the Canadian Press, and elicited a storm of protest among leading federationists in Britain. On 28 March 1893, Lord Reay moved a resolution at an Executive

1. Tupper to Casimir Dickson, 10 January 1893, E.M.Saunders, *The Life and Letters of Sir Charles Tupper*, (Lon. 1916), Vol.II, p.170.

2. *Ibid.*

Committee meeting claiming that Tupper's statement regarding the League's policy towards common contribution to imperial defence was mischievous and that it misrepresented the object which most federationists had in view. Sir John Colomb came stoutly to Reay's aid when he moved a resolution affirming that the Council of the League did not seek to levy a large contribution on colonial revenues for the financing of the British army and navy, but that in order to carry out the resolution upon which the League had been founded in 1884, it did desire that the self-governing colonies of the empire should agree to share in some fair proportion in the administration and cost of its defence.<sup>1</sup> In short, Reay and Colomb argued that "common contribution to imperial defence" was only one of a series of constitutional principles which were fundamental to the federal ideal and on which the League had been based since 1884, but that the organization had not been devoted to this single provision in isolation from the general aim. Colonial contributions to the British army and navy were thus repudiated as irrelevant to closer union and Tupper's claim was denounced as calculated to injure the operations of the League.

After a fruitless correspondence between Stanhope and Tupper, in which neither seemed to understand the other's viewpoint<sup>2</sup>, the whole affair was brought up for serious consideration by the Council of the League on 6 May 1893. Tupper's determination to adhere to every word contained in his letter to Casimire Dickson created such a stir among the members of the League's Special Committee that Brassey deemed it necessary to repair the damage done to the organization's image in Canada by sending an open letter to the Dominion press explaining the League's true policy<sup>3</sup> and he even

1. Imperial Federation, VIII, May 1893, p.111.

2. Evidence in the short series of letters passing between Tupper and Stanhope in May 1893 shows the extent of their confusion and stubbornness. E.M.Saunders, op.cit., Vol.II, pp.171-173.

3. Brassey's letter appeared in The Empire, a Toronto newspaper on 14 April 1893, A.Loring and R.Beadon, ed., Papers and Addresses of Lord Brassey, pp.222-224. The letter was also printed in Imperial Federation, VIII, June 1893, p.135.



stressed the danger of such a misunderstanding to Gladstone when the League deputation met the Prime Minister in April. The misfortune of Tupper's private remarks appearing in public was patently clear. Not only had his comments upset several of his federationist colleagues, but as Canadian High Commissioner and a former member of the League's Special Committee, it was vital that his damaging statement was seen to be answered.

In an atmosphere of concealed animosity, the League Council resolved the unfortunate episode by adopting a compromise resolution reaffirming that Sir Charles Tupper unreservedly accepted the declaration that neither the League nor its most active members were intent on levying a large contribution from colonial revenues to finance the British army and navy. There the matter ended and to modern minds the whole affair may seem a footling one, but the amount of fuss made by some federationists, particularly Reay and Colomb, did have serious repercussions which helped to bring about the League's collapse. Indeed, one account of the dissolution of the League which was written a mere three months after the organization's demise, emphasized that:

the state of things revealed by the discussion that took place on this occasion made it evident to those familiar with the inner working of the League's organization that a crisis had been reached threatening the very existence of the Society. <sup>1</sup>

Evidently, the controversy involving Sir Charles Tupper during the first six months of the year coupled with Gladstone's rejection of League demands in April 1893 produced a crisis of opinion among federationists which they could not turn to good account. Tupper's stand against Reay and Colomb, however, may not have been as perverse as some federationists thought. It is quite clear that the League's Special Committee was dominated by free traders who put the defence aspect of closer union first, and it appears that Sir John Colomb did have an inordinate amount of influence in the framing of the League's report. Evidence in a brief note from

1. R. Beadon, "Why the Imperial Federation League was dissolved", National Review, February 1894, p. 820.

Edward Stanhope, the League President, to Colomb shortly before the League deputation was due to meet Gladstone, shows that he was regarded as one of the chief architects of the report. Stanhope personally urged Colomb, in view of the part he had taken in producing the report, to attend... and speak at the meeting with the Prime Minister,<sup>1</sup> and given the fact that Colomb had always been associated with the idea of increased colonial contributions to imperial defence, this event may help to put Tupper's actions in a more accurate perspective.

Towards the end of July 1893, the committee which had been appointed to consider the League's future recommended that the organization should be dissolved. Consisting of Stanhope, Brassey, Colomb, Reay, Munro-Ferguson, Arnold-Forster, S.V.Morgan and John Rhodes, the committee's advice was approved by Lord Rosebery, who kept himself informed of all its proceedings<sup>2</sup>, and stated that:

having elicited from the heads of the two great parties in the State recognition of the supreme importance of the question involved, the League had brought the matter to a point at which it might be and ought to be left in the hands of the Imperial Government. The proposal for a Conference had approved itself to both the late and the present Prime Minister. All that the League could do towards this end would be to continue to press successive Governments to take a step admitted to be desirable, if not essential, and, having regard to the character of its organization, it was more than doubtful whether such pressure would be likely to be effectual.....  
.....the Committee expressed its opinion that the Imperial Federation League had reached the limits of its effective action. The special report laid before the Prime Minister in April represented the maximum of political principles and opinions attainable, as a homogeneous body, by all the numerous and diverse elements of which the League is composed. 3

1. Stanhope to Colomb, 7 April 1893, H.D'Egville, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union : A Short Record of the Life-work of the late Sir John Colomb*, (Lon. 1913), p.117.
2. A.Loring and R.Beadon, *op.cit.*, p.233.
3. An unbridged version of the report can be found in *Imperial Federation*, VIII, December 1893, p.279.



Throughout the months of August, September and October the committee's report was discussed at several meetings of the Executive Committee and the issue was fully stated in a letter from Stanhope, published in the December 1893 edition of the League Journal, and addressed to all members of the General Council of the League in which federationists were asked to decide whether the organization should carry on or bring its operations to a close. According to this letter, there was still "a body of opinion" in the Executive Committee which supported the idea of persevering with the League,<sup>1</sup> but on 24 November 1893 the League Council adopted a resolution to disband the organization by a majority of one, although it was supported by "a majority of nearly two to one of those who recorded their written opinions."<sup>2</sup>

The actual dissolution of the League was officially recorded as 31 December 1893, but the manner of its sudden demise was certainly attended by some degree of secrecy and concealment. On the face of it, an organization which had been in existence for exactly nine years had been wound up by a bare majority only of those present and voting, but it emerged that nobody in Canada even knew about the final meeting, while no reference was made to the wishes of the affiliated branches of the League throughout the rest of the colonies. According to George Denison, who had become the new President of the League in Canada, rumours of the break-up of the League in Britain had reached him in the Spring of 1893, but he found it difficult to believe. Denison's account of what happened shows quite clearly that the actual decision to dissolve the League was taken by only a handful of federationists who attended the fateful meeting of 24 November 1893:

The meeting was called by a circular dated 17 November, so that there was no possibility for the Canadian members of the Council in England to have attended, even if notices had been sent to them, which was not done.....  
.....the Canadian League were kept in ignorance of the movement until it was accomplished.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p.266.

The dissolution of the League (the report was adopted by a vote of 18 to 17) at a council meeting to which none of the thirty-five Canadian members representing the Canadian Branch were either invited or notified, caused a considerable feeling of dissatisfaction among our members, and was a severe and disheartening blow to all friends of the cause in Canada, the concealment and secrecy of the whole movement being very unsatisfactory to everyone. <sup>1</sup>

It was the propriety, or otherwise, of the dissolution which also concerned George Rusden when he noted that:

the precipitance of the self-destruction was shown by the absolute disregard of affiliated branches in Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Colonists had for years been urged to form branches affiliated to the League; they had complied; and without warning the tie was severed in a day. The parent of 1864 deserted her offspring in 1893. <sup>2</sup>

The manner of the League's sudden demise naturally aroused considerable speculation as to why it should have disappeared in 1893. The official statement printed in the League journal claimed that since the objective of regular imperial conferences, which had been agreed upon since 1889, had not been achieved, there was nothing else for the League to do, but disband. However, only passing reference was made to the undoubted polarisation within the body of the organization between the defence school of thought, invariably buttressed by the free traders, and the so-called commercial federationists. Looking at the evidence of what several federationists, who were involved in the last days of the League, had written it is clear that the collapse of the League in Britain was due to the fact that neither of these two schools of thought could agree upon a fresh start. The League did not disappear because it had reached the limits of effective action: its eclipse was the result of a failure to reconcile two basically divergent approaches to closer union which had been endemic in the imperial federation movement since 1860. By 1893, this fundamental dichotomy of thought had become a crisis.

1. G. Denison, *The Struggle For Imperial Unity*, pp. 197-199 (italics the author's).
2. G. W. Rusden, *History of Australia*, Vol. III., p. 494.



The remedy of dissolution, as Robert Beadon noted, was drastic, but it was deemed essential if the life of the cause was to be saved:

The lines of cleavage, it will be observed, are two-fold. There was the introduction into the League's policy of schemes of commercial union, and there was the virtual elimination from its policy of the great principle upon which it was founded. It was because they recognized that the differences thus openly disclosed were fundamental and irreconcilable that the leaders of the League were forced to the conclusion that its power for good was paralysed, and so recommended its dissolution. <sup>1</sup>

Writing in The Times only three years after the end of the League, Sir John Colomb stated the case simply: some, like himself, held that the object of closer union should be effected for purposes of defence, while others believed that commercial union should be the primary object of the League and defence secondary. Neither party would give way. <sup>2</sup> Many years later, when being interviewed as a veteran of the cause of closer imperial union, Sir Frederick Young endorsed this view of the League's demise. Young admitted that the deadlock which developed inside the parent body was caused by disagreement over the trade question, and he acknowledged the fact that the break-up of the League was "the best way out of the difficulty at the time."<sup>3</sup> The comments of Arthur Loring, the League Secretary for its nine-year existence, also support this view of why the organization finally went into voluntary liquidation in 1893. Writing a mere three weeks after the decisive meeting of 24 November 1893, Loring admitted that the League's dissolution was agreed in order to avoid a public row and that whereas the lack of homogeneity had been immaterial in the earlier stages of the movement, it suddenly became crucial when matters of detail were approached. This was the result of promoting an organization whose membership agreed unanimously upon the idea of imperial unity, but who

1. R. Beadon, op.cit., pp. 820-821.

2. The Times, December 1896.

3. Sir F. Young, A Pioneer of Imperial Federation in Canada, (Lon. 1902), pp. 137-138.

differed on how it was to be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from the comments of several leading federationists that Brassey, Rany, Colomb, Munro-Ferguson, Arnold-Forster, Stanhope, Young and Rosebery constituted the nucleus of the group of League stalwarts who desired dissolution as the policy which would put the organization out of its misery in 1893. As the Australian, George Rusden, noted in his account of the end of the League, what seems to stand out in the whole episode is the fact that leading federationists believed that their destructive activities would somehow enable them to improve upon the moribund League's policy.<sup>2</sup> Even in November 1893, however, certain well-known figures in the movement did rally to the side of maintaining the organization. According to Talbot Baines, who wrote to Lady Parkin on 3 December 1923, he, George Parkin, and Professor Cyril Ransome all opposed the decision to dissolve the League on frequent occasions. All three federationists were members of the League's Executive Committee and each of them opposed the view that the basis of the movement should be made one of imperial preference. Baines' account also mentioned that the resolution in favour of dissolution was only carried "with the aid of several Members of Parliament who happened to be engaged at the House of Commons on some quite different business, but who were held, wrongly as I thought, by the chairman, to be entitled to have their votes counted in their absence."<sup>3</sup> Since Baines wrote thirty years after the end of the League, the accuracy of his memory may perhaps be questioned, but, as we have seen, he was not alone in complaining about the manner of the League's disappearance.

Both George Parkin and Francis Labilliere should be mentioned as representatives of a body of opinion within the League who felt that the organization could have been carried on despite its self-inflicted wound. Labilliere wrote that a small committee should have kept the parent body alive, considering that so many branches continued to thrive in Britain and in the colonies,<sup>4</sup> while Parkin contended that the League might have continued

1. A. Loring's views appeared in an interview entitled "A New Departure in Imperial Federation", Westminster Gazette, 13 December 1893.
2. G.W. Rusden, op.cit., p.495.
3. Sir J. Willison, Sir George Parkin : A Biography, (Lon. 1929), pp.92-94.
4. F. Labilliere, Federal Britain, (Lon. 1894), p.223.



to "furnish a middle ground upon which men of all parties could study and discuss the problems of Empire without the acrimony which usually attends party debate."<sup>1</sup> Given the latter's basic antipathy towards party politics, this suggestion was at least understandable, but it is interesting to note that it was the direct opposite of Arthur Loring's opinion. The League Secretary felt, on the contrary, that because the membership of the Imperial Federation League was non-party in its composition, the campaign for closer imperial unity had never really been brought into the arena of practical politics and that neither of the two major political parties had ever taken the movement seriously.<sup>2</sup> It is true that the League had been divided mainly along party lines whenever Ireland or imperial preference had loomed large on the political scene, but federationists failed to convince the Liberal party that the federal principle was applicable to Irish Home Rule, and they also failed to persuade Lord Salisbury to change Britain's tariff structure vis-a-vis the colonies.

Addressing himself to the demise of the League, Labilliere also pointed to the League's flimsy financial base. That the organization had frequently found itself on the brink of financial insolvency, is a little-known fact in the history of the imperial federation movement. Reference has already been made to Labilliere's opinion that the League relied much too heavily upon a few rich, generous supporters instead of building up a large number of annual subscribers of small sums of money, and, in this context, it is worth noting that the League's seventh and final Annual Report of 6 May 1893 recorded that for the first time the Council regretted "a falling off in the receipts from annual subscriptions".<sup>3</sup> Given this remarkable volte face in the League's financial fortunes which, in 1891-1892, had suddenly seemed rosy, it must be regarded as symptomatic of the organization's declining vitality in general. The Canadian League, it might be noted, was also in dire financial trouble at this time, lacking funds and in considerable debt, but the renewed efforts of George Denison and his federationist colleagues managed to restore the organization to "good working order".<sup>4</sup> In Britain, however, the League's nine-year financial record had, with one exception,

1. Sir J. Willison, op.cit., p.90.

2. Loring's views, Westminster Gazette, 13 December 1893.

3. Imperial Federation, VIII, June 1893, -.136.

4. G. Denison, op.cit., p.197.

never been a success and it might be remembered that as early as August 1886, Lord Brassey had toyed with the idea of proposing a merger with the Royal Colonial Institute in order to utilise that body's ample funds. In the light of these observations regarding the League's fragile pecuniary resources, perhaps the organization displayed a surprising resilience in its ability to survive what proved to be a tempestuous journey between 1884 and 1893, but its financial inadequacies must, nevertheless, be regarded as a contributory factor in its overall decline in 1893.

In the closing stages of the League's life, the only redeeming feature of the period was the support of the Association of Chambers of Commerce, but this tonic for League stalwarts was quickly overshadowed by the formation in the House of Commons of an informal parliamentary grouping known as "The Conference of Colonial Members". Officially founded on 23 August 1893 at a meeting held in Room 14 of the House, and under the chairmanship of Sir John Gorst, the group included several federationists among its members : E. Staveley Hill, Sir George Baden-Powell, Sir Donald Currie and the renegade, J. Henniker-Hector.<sup>1</sup> In the Contemporary Review, J.F. Hogan, the secretary of the new group, stated that the fifteen colonial expatriates and the twelve additional members who were familiar with one or more of the colonies, had come together "for the promotion and discussion of those great questions of imperial policy and practice that, from personal knowledge and practical experience in the colonies, they know to be intimately bound up with the well-being and consolidation of our imperial unity." The appearance of this small band of F.F.s who supported closer union was not so much a rival of the Imperial Federation League and it did not help to destroy the League. Rather, it was yet another symptom of the moribundity of the League, as Hogan was at pains to emphasize when he pointed out that the existence at Westminster of an organised body of colonial members "provided a striking and impressive object lesson in Imperial Federation."<sup>2</sup>

1. For the details of the founding of the new group, see the editorial entitled, "The New Colonial Party in the House of Commons" in Black and White, 2 September 1893, pp.283-284.
2. J.F. Hogan, The Conference of Colonial Members, Contemporary Review, Vol. LXIV, 1893, pp.713-723.



The story of the League reads like one of promise unfulfilled, but there is some justification for the view that it need not have committed suicide in 1893 ; its demise was both curious and abrupt.<sup>1</sup> It could have carried on in a less pretentious guise as a forum for the discussion of questions of closer union, although it would admittedly have been less easily distinguished from the more widely respected Royal Colonial Institute. Whatever the verdict on the League's hazardous career, its official dissolution concluded the first phase in the history of the struggle for imperial unity. The results of twenty-five years of campaigning for closer imperial union had not advanced the cause by any appreciable distance in terms of the feasibility of actually applying the federal principle to the empire, but the League and the movement it represented had contributed substantially to the new value which the British public placed upon the empire.

1. The legality of the decision to disband the League so suddenly and without a concerted effort to register the opinions of all its members was clearly questionable.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Conclusion : Vision and Reality

In 1902, Herman Marcus, an active participant in the Imperial Federation League and the editor of the British Empire Review, wrote that:

It is the fate of all movements in the direction of political change to be seriously misunderstood in exact proportion to the magnitude of their aims and to the comprehensive and far-reaching character of the interests which they are likely to affect. Probably Imperial Federation enjoys a unique pre-eminence in this respect. There can hardly be any other proposal of the same importance around which so many legends have clustered, and upon which such avalanches of misrepresentation have been hurled. <sup>1</sup>

The Imperial Federation League came into existence in 1884 for the specific purpose of securing by federation the permanent unity of the empire, but because the League embraced and combined various schools of thought concerning imperial unity, many of which advocated approaches which, in the last resort, were not federal, it was inevitable that the movement would be misunderstood. Indeed, it is ironic that throughout the history of the imperial federation movement in Britain between 1869 and 1893, the wide spectrum of opinion which it embraced was depicted as a source of strength and vitality when in reality it was the movement's fundamental weakness.

Yet it would be unfair to draw the conclusion from this diversity of goals that the federationist movement was out of touch with reality. It was precisely because those actively engaged in the movement were aware of the fact that they were living in an age during which both extra-imperial and intra-imperial relationships were changing that they sought to influence the direction of the imperial destiny. If the evolution of colonial self-government seemed to point to complete independence from the mother country in

1. H. Marcus, A Sketch of the Imperial Unity Movement, British Empire Series - General - Vol. V., (Lon. 1902), pp.584-613.



the foreseeable future, there was nothing discreditable in attempting to channel this changing relationship into a federal mould which would both preserve self-government and consolidate the union. The 'purists' in the movement, like Young and Labilliere, were animated by a great imperial vision which offered security and prosperity both to Britain and to the colonies in a world of increasing foreign rivalry. In the light of the uncertainty of the age, such a vision had a certain logic and if many federationists were conceited, blinkered, doctrinaire and intolerant, their sense that a turning-point had been reached in the history of the empire was an accurate one.

Unhappily, the obstacles in the way of translating vision into reality were many, large and in the final analysis insurmountable. In purely academic terms, the very theory and vocabulary of imperial federation was subjected to attacks. Exposed to the powerful intellectual artillery of Edward Freeman, the theory was never convincingly defended and the scars from the wounds caused by this encounter never really vanished. As we have seen, Freeman's historical approach to the subject was not without its weaknesses, but they were never properly exposed and the defence of the theory was not taken up by anyone of equal academic stature. Federationists were too divided and perhaps too impressed by the attack to know how to meet it, and their lack of preparation for such a contest meant that what should have been a defence appeared as an apology.

Abroad in the empire, the cause did meet with limited success, but it never captured the passionate commitment of the colonies simply because there was no complete identity of interests between the mother country and her offspring. From the standpoint of defence, the colonies were equally concerned with foreign rivalries and encroachments, but it was difficult to persuade colonial electorates to contribute towards the cost of something which they had always received for nothing, and, in any case, when contributions to imperial defence began, this was still a far cry from a federal union with Britain. Colonial contributions to imperial defence represented a step in the right direction as far as the Brasseys and the Colombs were concerned, but in reality they meant a step towards colonial independence. It was as Rosebery had warned: the question had to be removed from the ground of sentiment to the more convincing position

of material advantage if closer union was to become attractive to the colonies.

This realistic view was no less applicable to the commercial aspect of imperial federation where the dreams of the federationists were also unfulfilled. It was here that the disparity between the interests of Britain and those of the self-governing colonies was particularly glaring. Britain was the leading industrial and commercial nation in the world throughout the nineteenth century, a supremacy which had been built upon free trade, but the colonies were young nations seeking to establish themselves in the world, and, therefore, unable to compete with other, older nations on the same terms. With their futures before them, the colonies relied heavily upon fiscal duties both as a major source of revenue and as a means of protecting their infant industries from the full force of foreign competition, which included Britain. From the colonial standpoint, inter-imperial free trade as a means of cementing the imperial relationship was, therefore, quite out of the question. It involved too many concessions from the colonies. On the other hand, imperial preference, which aroused powerful opposition in the mother country because Britain did not acquire most of her primary products from within the empire, was quite compatible with colonial interests. Those federationists, like Vincent and Tupper, who fought for preferential arrangements underestimated the strength of free trade beliefs in Britain, while those federationists, like Sir John Lubbock and Sir Rawson Rawson, who were ready to accept an imperial  Zollverein  based upon free trade, failed to appreciate colonial necessities in the sphere of economics and trade. Neither Britain nor the self-governing colonies were prepared to make these sacrifices and the general question of tariffs was always a dangerous issue to be associated with as far as British political parties were concerned. Canada, in particular, showed signs of meeting the British halfway by offering reciprocal trading arrangements and the inhibiting commercial agreements with Belgium and Germany were abolished in 1897, but these developments came too late to save the imperial federation movement in Britain.



In terms of the League's actual membership between 1884 and 1893, the movement clearly did not capture the imagination of a sufficient section of the British public. Federationists repeatedly claimed that more people supported the movement in Britain than were actual members of the League, but this support was founded more upon the sentiment of empire than upon a real appreciation and understanding of the federal principle. In a letter written to T.A. Brassey in January 1895, Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, suggested precisely this explanation when he emphasized that Brassey had "enveloped Home Rule too much in Federation for the intelligence of the Surrey elector."<sup>1</sup> The League and the movement it represented never managed to convince the public and a mass electorate that imperial federation was directly relevant to their own interests. It was not the damage wrought by Freeman, but a failure to simplify the idea of closer union which deprived the movement of wider public support. The significance of this interpretation can be fully appreciated by reference to the success of the Primrose League in Britain which had no grandiose aims other than the glorification of empire; its membership exceeded a million by 1891<sup>2</sup>. In contrast to this kind of support, the appeal of the imperial federation movement fell largely on deaf ears, and the finance required to sustain the movement was never placed upon a firm foundation.

Allied to the movement's failure to attract widespread public support is the fact that it was never regarded as a serious, practicable enterprise by politicians of the first rank. It is true that Forster, Rosebery, Stanhope, Kintzford, Stafford Northcote, and Bryce were involved with the movement at different times and with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but only Forster can be described as a dedicated support of an imperial reorganization based upon the federal principle. It is equally significant that when these men acquired office in such capacities as

1. Rosebery to T.A. Brassey, 29 January 1895, Rosebery Papers, Letter Book, Ry.88. Brassey regarded Irish Home Rule and the federal principle in an imperial context as complementary to each other.
2. R. Koebner and H.D. Schmidt, op.cit., p.192. See also A. Borthwick, "The Primrose League", *Nineteenth Century*, vol.20 (1886), pp.33-39, and J. Robb, *The Primrose League 1883-1906*, (N.Y. 1942).

Colonial Secretary, Foreign Secretary or the Secretary of State for War, they did nothing to further the progress of the movement when it was generally expected that they would. Apart from a handful of eminent public men such as these, the movement's activities were usually directed by federationists whose highest claim to notice was that they were of secondary importance. The Brasseys, the Youngs and the Colombs were sincere in their adherence to the cause, but they could not give the movement the necessary glitter and sparkle which seemed to typify, for example, the Royal Colonial Institute, and it is hardly surprising that such less well-known public figures have been forgotten by modern minds.

Among the other weaknesses which helped to reduce the movement's public credibility were Ireland, India and the crown colonies. The Irish question divided the League largely along party lines and it also demonstrated how far federationist thinking on the subject was both muddled and inconsistent. India was less of a problem than Ireland, but federationists were still uncertain as to what relationship India would have to Britain and the white self-governing colonies in a reorganized empire. Like India, the crown colonies were an obvious example of "empire" in the sense that they were directly and totally under British suzerainty, but they also had to be considered in an imperial reorganization. They were important to Gladstone, who questioned their new position in a 'federal empire' in 1893 and, although the League did address itself to the problem of the crown colonies by establishing a special subcommittee to investigate the issues involved, they nevertheless represented another obstacle to the movement's progress and credibility.

In its tireless efforts to influence successive Liberal and Conservative governments, the movement inevitably came up against apathy, cynicism and scorn, but it also encountered the unequivocal hostility of the Colonial Office at various intervals between 1869 and 1893. As the official channel of communication between Britain and the empire, excluding India, it was logical that the imperial federation movement would seek to persuade the permanent staff in the Colonial Office to consider ways and means of making closer union more of a working reality, but the history of



their attempts to do this is a story of repeated rebuffs and failures. The Colonial Office was unmoved and immovable. Government departments are not noted for their acceptance of radical change and the Colonial Office was no exception; it resented outside interference in a sphere of public policy in which it felt itself to be cognisant of all the issues relating to the colonial connection and, above all, responsible through the government to the electorate. There is nothing which suggests that Colonial Office civil servants ever considered federationists other than as irresponsible busybodies who were ignorant of the conditions of life in the colonies and who were unaware of what was actually practicable in terms of constitutional reform.

The Imperial Federation League disappeared in 1893, but in many respects the movement for closer imperial union lived on long after this date, although there was much less talk of the federal principle as an instrument of imperial consolidation. George Danison claimed that the new organization which emerged in 1894 as the Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee had sinister origins in that it had "taken over the office", appropriated the records, lists of members, subscription list etc., and adopted the same trade mark or title cover used for pamphlets" as the League<sup>1</sup>. It was this intrigue which convinced Denison that the small faction of 'union by defence-free trade' federationists who had destroyed the Imperial Federation League were determined to prevent its revival.<sup>2</sup>

1. G.T.Denison, op.cit., p.202.

2. The Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee was primarily concerned with creating a common system of maritime defence. For further details see A.H.Loring, The Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee, 1894-1906, United Empire VI (new series), pp.341-346, and the private papers of H.O.Arnold-Forster, Add Mss. 50356, ff 221-256.

Two years later, on 27 January 1896, the British Empire League was formally inaugurated as a result of the efforts of a small group of federationists led by Sir John Lubbock of the defunct City of London branch of the Imperial Federation League. As the direct descendant of the Imperial Federation League, the British Empire League sought to continue the operations of its forerunner, but tried to avoid the details of federation and the question of actual schemes of closer union. Assisted by the Imperial Federation League of Canada, which had survived the collapse of the movement in Britain in 1893, the new organization was publicly launched by the Duke of Devonshire, Sir John Lubbock, George Denison, Sir Charles Tupper, T.A. Brassey and several other federationists who wanted to reorganise the movement.<sup>1</sup>

With the emergence of these two organizations alongside the United Empire Trade League, it is quite obvious that the different factions of the original League were still dedicated to the same cause of imperial unity, but that they were now free to forge ahead towards it along separate avenues. The movement for closer union thus did not completely disappear in 1893; it was reorganised along more specific lines. This very dissolution, however, gave the year 1893 a particular significance. It was not that the zeitgeist, which had been mainly responsible for the emergence of the imperial federation movement in Britain in the decade after 1865, had begun to point in a different direction by 1893. What had been conclusively demonstrated was that no overall union - whether a Zollverein or a Kriegsverein - was possible in view of the forces working against them.

1. The merging of the Canadian League in the new British Empire League meant that agitation for imperial preference continued within the new organization, although it was not included in the constitution of the new League. For a detailed account of its origins, see G. Denison, *op.cit* pp. 206-224. C. Freeman Murray, *The British Empire League*, *United Empire VI*, pp. 431-439, G. W. Rusden, *op.cit.*, pp. 495-497, and H. Hutchinson, *The Life of Sir John Lubbock*, vol. II., (Lon. 1914), pp. 39-48 are also considerably valuable.



By 1893, the direction and the ultimate nature of the imperial relationship was still uncertain, but, as the next two decades were to prove, from now onwards when men attempted to incorporate closer imperial ties in political forms, only the loosest type of imperial body would be both viable and acceptable, and the way in which closer ties would be effected would be gradual and piecemeal linkage rather than any overall union. In the end, it was the discussions concerning more subsidiary questions like the Pacific Cable and the merchant shipping laws which indicated the direction of the imperial relationship, and because it was a relationship which was changing all the time, the only appropriate institutional relationship for it was the conference, and not a genuine federal organ.

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