

## II

# THE TRANSFER OF POWER IN SRI LANKA—A REVIEW OF BRITISH PERSPECTIVES

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The adoption of the main recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission on Sri Lanka's constitutional evolution by the Colonial Office amounted to a crossing of the great constitutional barrier towards self-government in much the same way as the Durham Report had accelerated this process as regards the White Dominions. In both cases while the change was seen to be decisive a considerable period of transition was envisaged in reaching the accepted goal, and self-government was defined in terms of internal affairs and a considerable sphere of imperial interests was assumed. Agitation for the reform of the Donoughmore Constitution emerged virtually from the very inception of the new constitutional structure in 1931. The experience of the years 1931-37 would seem to indicate that while the Ministerial group in Sri Lanka, especially the representatives of the Sinhalese, believed in the inevitability of progress from semi-responsible status to self-government on the model of the White Dominions, the permanent officials at Whitehall could point to the examples of Jamaica, British Guiana and most recently and prominently Malta, where semi-responsible government had led not to responsible government but to political crisis, constitutional breakdown and a reversion, if only temporarily, to colonial status.<sup>1</sup>

A review of the agitation in the 1930's for constitutional reform in Sri Lanka would indicate that there were three main demands: of these the most important was the pressure for the establishment of a Cabinet form of government on the Westminster model in place of the central feature of the Donoughmore system, the novel experiment of Executive Committees. The others were: a demand for the abolition of the dyarchical aspect of the Donoughmore scheme by the elimination of the Officers of State and the transfer of their powers to elected Ministers; and a substantial reduction of the Governor's powers.

When these claims first emerged the Colonial Office took up the position that it was too early to consider changes of so far-reaching a character. When the pressure for reform continued nevertheless they made no serious effort to accommodate

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1. For a discussion of these problems see the author's chapter, "The History and Politics of the Transfer of Power" in ed. K. M. de Silva, *The University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, Vol. III (Colombo, 1973) pp. 489-533. This chapter will be cited hereafter as K. M. de Silva, "The History and Politics of the Transfer of Power".

these demands. Far from countenancing a reduction for the Governor's reserve powers, Whitehall endeavoured to strengthen them. They were equally intransigent on the maintenance of a European element in the higher bureaucracy as an essential prop to the Governor's powers. There was also a very perceptible sensitivity to the anxieties of the minorities and much was made of the fact that the demands of the State Council had not received the endorsement of minority leaders and spokesmen.<sup>2</sup>

This present essay seeks to review the British perspectives and attitudes—those of Whitehall on the one hand and the governor and his (largely British) advisers in Colombo on the other—on the complex issues of the transfer of power in Sri Lanka. In any analysis of the political processes involved in the transfer of power chronology is of crucial importance. The starting point of a clear understanding of events in the transfer of power in Sri Lanka is a realization of the break-through that came in 1937-9 with Sir Andrew Caldecott as Governor of Ceylon and Malcolm MacDonald as Secretary of State. These two men of liberal instincts brought fresh and unorthodox minds to bear on the problems of constitutional reform in the island. The initiative in these was taken by Caldecott whose sustained efforts in the face of many reverses and discouragements enabled a consolidation of this breakthrough in 1942-3.

Within a few months of his arrival in Ceylon as Governor in late 1936, Caldecott after a careful review of the political situation came out in favour of the abolition of the Executive Committee system and its replacement by the orthodox form of Cabinet government. Inherent in this was an acceptance of the need to allocate the administrative duties performed by Officers of State to elected Ministers except in regard to certain special subjects over which the Governor would retain personal control. On all these the Governor's views were in conformity to those of the Ministerial group. On one significant point his considered views were in opposition to theirs: he believed that the advance towards a further stage in semi-responsible government would need to be accompanied, as a temporary measure, by an increase instead of a substantial reduction of the Governor's reserve powers.

On the crucial issue of minority rights he took up the position that "all our political fissures radiate from the vexed question of minority representation", but he firmly rejected communal representation on a mathematical formula of any kind, a line of argument the cogency of which both the Ministerial group and their minority critics could appreciate even if neither group were completely satisfied with it. He advised that a new Committee should be set up in order to create additional seats in the State Council and to ensure the return of more members belonging to the minorities. On this Re-delimitation Committee, as he called it, he placed most of his

2. *ibid.*

3. This extract is from Caldecott's confidential despatch of 28 October 1939 to Malcolm MacDonald, 28 October 1939. It is cited by him in his "personal and most secret" letter of 23 December 1941 to Gent (a senior Colonial Office civil servant) in C.O. 54/980. File 55541/Part I.

hopes for a settlement of the question of minority rights, and he persisted in advocating it for over four years. Curiously, he did not believe that any purpose would be served by the appointment from Whitehall of a Constitutional Commission on the lines of the Donoughmore Commission, to review the political and constitutional problems of the island and to recommend reforms.<sup>4</sup>

Caldecott's views of constitutional reform received Malcolm MacDonald's endorsement in 1938-9; more importantly a series of resolutions embodying Caldecott's proposals were introduced in the State Council in 1939 and were adopted without modification after long discussion. Thus a consensus on constitutional reform had been successfully negotiated by Caldecott in 1939.

The formulation of a constitution on the basis of this consensus was bound to be a time-consuming matter, for the Colonial Office of the 1930's was deliberate and cautious in these matters. Very soon the outbreak of war in Europe began to absorb British energies to the exclusion of questions such as constitutional reform in the colonies. At first however it did not seem as though the war would lead to a postponement of reforms in Sri Lanka since there was considerable agreement, between all parties concerned, on the nature of the reforms to be initiated. When the general elections scheduled for 1940 were put off for two years the reason given officially by Lord Lloyd, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, in a despatch dated 12 June 1940, was the need for time in which to take careful decisions on problems of constitutional reform, the franchise and delimitation of constituencies. This decision was interpreted in Sri Lanka to mean that Whitehall would have these matters under active consideration on data already before it. Even at the end of 1940 the Ministers still believed that reforms would be introduced shortly.

But British policy had begun to change by the beginning of 1940. Caldecott sensed this, though the Ministers were unaware of any change. The first indication that a change of policy was in the offing had come as early as 26 January 1940 when MacDonald, much to Caldecott's surprise, rejected the idea of a Committee of Redelimitation which Caldecott had always treated as crucially important to his reforms proposals. Instead MacDonald suggested that a Governor's Conference of the Board of Ministers and other leaders—presumably minority leaders—be convened to negotiate a settlement of existing differences between the Sinhalese and the minorities. At this stage Caldecott was under increasing pressure from another source—the European community in Sri Lanka, and more especially the planters—to take firm action against trade unionists in the plantation areas. There was a spate of strikes on the plantations, and the planting community, rattled and frightened, were increasingly hostile to all political activity in the island; and with the active support of the European-owned *Times of Ceylon* they sought to exploit the extraordinary situation caused

4. Caldecott to Gent, 23 December 1941, *op. cit.*

5. See, C.O. 54/975 File 55569/6: The Four Point Memorandum of the Ceylon Loyalists, n.d. (but probably early June 1940) sponsored by "J.B.K." and *The Times of Ceylon*; G. P. Bolster, (a British planter in Sri Lanka) to A. T. Lennox-Boyd M.P. 4 June 1940; J. D. Aitken, to Lord Lloyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 June 1940 (on behalf of a committee appointed by the "Comrades of the Great War" on 4 June 1940.) See also, Colonel T. Y. Wright, *Ceylon in My Time, 1889-1949* (Colombo, 1951) pp. 160-169.

by the outbreak of war to embarrass Caldecott by making out to Whitehall that he was not as vigilant as he ought to be to be about potential threats to civil order.<sup>5</sup> Whitehall fortunately could distinguish between reasonable criticism and these hysterical outbursts. But the point is that the European community was not without influence within the island itself. And very soon a political campaign began designed to exploit minority grievances and fears and to thwart the reformers among whom was placed Caldecott himself. On 16 March 1940 the *Times of Ceylon* in a leading article set out the case for a Royal Commission on constitutional reform and this was immediately taken up by the minorities. The Ministers were wary of any such Commission and much more favourable to Caldecott's proposal for a Re-determination Committee. But the fact remained that yet another point of divergence between them and the minorities had emerged and one which was to cloud the whole issue of constitutional progress in Sri Lanka. It afforded a measure of support to those in Whitehall who argued that constitutional reform in Sri Lanka would inevitably exacerbate communal rivalries to the great detriment of the island's war effort.

Britain's energies were now concentrated on the war in Europe and the constitutional problems of a small Asian colony took very low priority in this. The Colonial Office was not represented in Churchill's War Cabinet. And to make matters worse, with Malcolm MacDonald's departure from the Colonial Office on 13 May 1940, there were three short tenures of the Secretaryship of State for the Colonies between that date and 24 November 1942 when Oliver Stanley took over and remained in office till August 1945. All the Secretaries of State during this period were coalition Conservatives (as was Stanley himself): Lord Lloyd, 13 May 1940 to 1 February 1942; Lord Moyne till 23 February 1942, and Viscount Cranborne (the Marquess of Salisbury) till 24 November 1942.

For Caldecott it was no matter for surprise, when on 18 December 1940, Lord Lloyd sent him a confidential despatch stating the impracticability of further examining the constitutional problems of the island till after the war. This was not immediately divulged to the Ministers, much less published. Instead Caldecott played for time in the hope that Whitehall could be persuaded to make a more generous response. Even at this stage the Ministers and other Sinhalese spokesmen felt that the Colonial Office was unnecessarily delaying a decision on a matter on which it possessed all the data. The Governor realised that there was no support for a Constitutional Conference or a Commission from these sources in the colony. What he attempted to do was to get Whitehall to implement the proposals decided upon in 1938-9, and to re-open consideration of his proposal of a Committee of Re-delimitation. (Though MacDonald's rejection of this—something which he had earlier accepted—in January 1940 was a disappointing reverse for Caldecott, he persisted in his advocacy of it) As late as 28 June 1941 he suggested the drafting of an Order-in-Council along the lines set out in his despatches for detailed consideration by the Cabinet. But these arguments and pleas made little impression on Whitehall. Eventually Caldecott made an official announcement—in December 1941—to the State Council that constitutional reform was postponed till after the war, and that the position would be further examined and made the subject of further consultation by means of a Committee or Conference.

This declaration was tantamount to an indefinite postponement of constitutional reform. It was clearly a disappointment for the Board of Ministers but they reacted as was customary with them with a polite note of disagreement and continued to press for a more generous gesture from Britain.

Caldecott now watched the consensus on constitutional reform which he had patiently put together in 1938-9 dissolve in the face of world events and their impact on local politics. At the beginning of 1942 the moderate wing—by far the most influential—of the nationalist movement were no longer bound by the compromise of 1938-9, and had set out Dominion Status as their objective. Within a year the Young Turks who were increasingly influential within the Ceylon National Congress spurned Dominion Status for the more emotionally satisfying concept of independence. It needed all D. S. Senanayake's personal prestige and tenacity of purpose to stand up against this current of opinion, and to insist that the goal of Sri Lanka's constitutional evolution should be Dominion Status, to be attained in association with rather than in opposition to British. Caldecott was not enthusiastic at all about Dominion Status for Ceylon, arguing that "... it is obvious that the implications and obligations of Dominion Status are either not understood or are being deliberately ignored by people who should know better..."<sup>6</sup>

Soon Japan's entry into the war and the string of spectacular successes she achieved initially, began to have their impact on the thinking of both Whitehall and the Board of Ministers. The Governor reported that in the island these developments "thrust every other consideration out of mind, and everybody [had] plenty to do in organizing emergency services and preventing panic..."<sup>7</sup> When in 1942 the headquarters of Mountbatten's South East Asia Command was established at Peradeniya, the island was once again of vital strategic importance, for the destruction of Japanese power, and to a lesser extent she was a vital element in the supply line to the U.S.S.R. via the Persian Gulf. Caldecott drove home the point in his despatches to Whitehall that in this situation a more convincing and forthright statement on constitutional reform than that issued in December 1941 was called for to retain the goodwill and co-operation of the Board of Ministers and to secure the whole-hearted participation of Sri Lanka in the war effort. The pressure from Caldecott and the cogency of his arguments had their effect and the War Cabinet considered it politic to issue a fresh declaration on constitutional reform in the island.

The main point in this new pronouncement made in December 1942 was the declaration that the objectives of constitutional evolution would be the "... fullest possible development of self-governing institutions in Ceylon within the Commonwealth partnership having regard both to the single interest of the island and the larger interests of the Commonwealth on which the island's security and prosperity ultimately depend".<sup>8</sup> This statement was couched in "... far too indefinite and conditional terms..." to have the desired effect. Indeed the Ministers urged that it should not be published in the form in which it was sent to them. They were supported in this

6. Caldecott to Gent, 23 December 1941, *op. cit.*

7. *ibid.*

8. C.O. 54/980. File 55541/5. Secret Cabinet Paper W.P. (43) 129 of 27 March 1943, entitled *The Ceylon Constitution* and presented to the War Cabinet by Oliver Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies, para 4. (Hereafter, Stanley, Secret Cabinet paper on *The Ceylon Constitution*, 27 March 1943).

by Caldecott, and the Commander-in-Chief Sir Geoffrey Layton who took "...a very serious view of what may happen if it is not possible, by some new declaration to meet the desires and aspirations of the more moderate elements in Ceylon. They expect[ed] immediate and progressive loss of co-operation and decrease of war-effort, coupled with the deflection of now moderate opinion towards intransigent nationalism and the demand for the right of secession".<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Caldecott and Layton sent home a very carefully drafted document, setting out a declaration of policy on constitutional reform in Ceylon for Whitehall approval as a substitute for that sent in December 1941. The principles enunciated in this statement were eventually endorsed by Whitehall and published in the island on 26 May 1943, using much the same phraseology contained in the document sent home by Caldecott and Layton.

A comparison of the two declarations, that of December 1942, and that of 26 May 1943 is very revealing. In both no hope is held out of any changes during the war. But the second definitely committed Great Britain to a far-reaching reform after the war. Where the first declaration held out the promise of "the fullest possible development of self-governing institutions within the Commonwealth", the second offered "full responsibility for government under the Crown in all matters of civil administration". The only matters to be reserved would be external relations and defence "while of course, the proposals do not include the right of secession. Thus constitutionally, Ceylon while not attaining full Dominion Status, would be very much in the position now [1943] occupied by Southern Rhodesia".<sup>10</sup>

One of the reasons that impelled Whitehall to resist any precise definition of the goals of constitutional reform along the lines suggested by Caldecott and Layton was the fear of losing minority co-operation in the war effort. To this Caldecott had an effective reply: "It must be realised", he declared "that the minority communities are just as keen to be released from Whitehall apron strings as the majority, and that their disagreement with the latter is solely in regard to the allocation of Council seats and share of Government appointments, &c. i.e. in regard to machinery and not the essential characteristics of the administration which all agree to keep national".<sup>11</sup>

In urging the War Cabinet to give its support to the proposals set out by Caldecott and Layton, Oliver Stanley gave four reasons.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, that it would be difficult to prevent a very serious deterioration in Ceylon's war effort "unless we go as far as this", especially because of "the vital importance of Ceylon both as a strategical base and as the source of essential war materials, rubber in particular". Secondly, the Ministers had worked an admittedly difficult constitution "with great goodwill and perhaps, an unexpected degree of success. It would be a natural thing for them to compare the definite promises made to India, where, with

9. *ibid.*, see also Caldecott "personal and secret" despatches to Stanley, 27 January 1943 and 17 February 1943.

10. Stanley, Secret Cabinet paper on *The Ceylon Constitution*, 27 March 1943, *op. cit.*

11. Caldecott's "personal and secret" despatch to Stanley, 17 February 1943.

12. Stanley, Secret Cabinet paper on *The Ceylon Constitution*, 27 March 1943: *op. cit.*

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all respect to India's war effort, the political element at least has been largely non-co-operative, with the indefinite hopes held out to Ceylon, where the elected members have thrown themselves heart and soul into war production. This comparison may lead to the argument that more can be obtained from His Majesty's Government by making trouble than by methods of co-operation". Thirdly there was the hope that the declaration would encourage Sinhalese politicians to turn their minds to a settlement with the minorities and "to a realistic appreciation of their future relations with India". And finally he pointed out that even under the declaration of December 1942, "when we come after the war to a discussion of this question, we shall have to offer a great deal, if not all, of what is now contained in the Governor's proposed declaration. We shall, however, have lost the goodwill which we should gain by making the declaration now, and proposals which today, it is believed, will stabilise the situation, may by that time fall far short of the majority view".

He set out, as against these, "the very real difficulties which will arise if [these] proposals are accepted". There was, first of all, the crucial issue of minority rights. "The only definite safeguard, for the various minorities lies in the requirement of approval by three-fourths of the State Council. [Stanley] had feared that the discussion of constitutional reform would exacerbate the communal position and that we might risk losing the co-operation of the minorities in the war effort, but [he had] received the expressed assurance of the Commander-in-Chief and the Governor that they do not share this fear...". Secondly, a popular government "will assume for the first time complete financial responsibility just at a time when the post-war financial and economic problems of Ceylon may be most acute". There were, finally, the questions relating to British commercial interests in the island. With regard to this the declaration made "no specific safeguard for British commercial interests in Ceylon. It is difficult to insert this in view of the fact that the promises made to India contain no such provision. Nor is there any definite safeguard for Indian commercial interests; but India would not be without bargaining power for this purpose".

"Although in our judgement all moderate political opinion would in actuality, be satisfied with assurances on the lines which we propose, this does not, of course mean that there will not be such measure of expressed disappointment as is inseparable from any concessions less than what is asked for". So Caldecott on 17 February 1943 in a confidential telegram to Stanley. This assessment of the situation in the island was as sensible as it was accurate. Though the proposals outlined on 26 May 1943 fell short of Dominion Status (which D. S. Senanayake had set forth as the objective he aimed at), and far short of the goal of independence (which the Ceylon National Congress advocated) the Board of Ministers under D. S. Senanayake's leadership preferred to accept this offer as one further stage in the constitutional advancement of the country and as the basis of further negotiations.

The first task that confronted D. S. Senanayake was to formulate a draft constitution on the basis of the conditions laid down in the declaration of 26 May 1943 and the clarification of this given on 11 July 1943.<sup>13</sup> The requirement that such a

13. For this declaration and clarification see, *Sessional Paper XVII of 1943*.

draft constitution needed to win the approval of three-quarters of all the members of the State Council<sup>14</sup> practically ensured that it would have to be nothing less than a national consensus on constitutional reform. One of the undertakings given by Whitehall in 1943 was that a constitution formulated in accordance with the terms of the declaration of 26 May 1943 would be examined by "a suitable commission or conference" once victory over the Axis powers had been achieved.

A final draft of the Minister's constitution was ready by February 1944 and copies were forwarded to Whitehall. The Board of Ministers began to press for an immediate consideration of their scheme on the grounds that urgent local considerations made an early decision a vital necessity.

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Whitehall's response to these pressures led to considerable misunderstanding. Oliver Stanley announced in the House of Commons on 9 July 1944 that a Commission would be appointed to visit Ceylon, to examine not only the draft constitution prepared by the Board of Ministers, but also to afford minority groups the opportunity of expressing their views. The Ministers took objection to the extension of the terms of reference of the proposed Commission to cover consultations with "various interests, including the minority communities, concerned with the subject of constitutional reform in Ceylon". They argued that this amounted to a fundamental departure from the terms of the Declaration of 26 May 1943; and it was urged that the minorities would be sufficiently protected by the stipulation of a three-fourths majority of all the members of the State Council for the adoption of the draft constitution.<sup>15</sup>

The Ministers' protests were of no avail, and the terms of reference of the Commission were not changed when the appointment of the Soulbury Commission was announced on 20 September 1944.

The Ministers resolved upon an official boycott of the Commission. They did not collaborate with the Commission but "left the various groups to give evidence and allowed their own scheme to speak for itself" even though they had ostentatiously "withdrawn" their scheme.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, D. S. Senanayake had decided on his own course of action. First, an official boycott of the Commission. Once the Commission left Ceylon he was anxious to be in London in time for the publication of their report. If the report was favourable he would ask for more, for Dominion Status, in fact, but if it was unsatisfactory he would repudiate it, and refuse to be any longer bound by the Declaration of 1943 which the British Government itself had discarded. In a conciliatory gesture Whitehall readily consented to extend an invitation to D. S. Senanayake to visit London. The latter left for London in early July 1945, but arrived in time to see the shattering electoral defect of the Conservatives.<sup>17</sup>

14. Excluding the Speaker (or any other presiding officer) and the three Officers of State.

15. For further discussion of these issues see, K. M. de Silva, "The History and Politics of the Transfer of Power".

16. *ibid.*

17. On D. S. Senanayake's role in these negotiations, see K. M. de Silva, "The History and Politics of the Transfer of Power".

The defeat of the Conservatives postponed rather than hastened the grant of Dominion Status to Sri Lanka. With the publication of the Soulbury Report (D. S. Senanayake had been given a proof copy if it shortly after his arrival in London) it was clear that the Commission had in fact endorsed the main principles of the Ministers' Draft Constitution. There were adjustments and modifications no doubt but none of any real substance. More importantly the minorities' political campaign during the period of the Soulbury Commission's visit to the island had had little impact on the Commission's thinking.

In the Soulbury Report the limits on Ceylon's external sovereignty laid down in the Minister's draft were elaborated upon in a manner which made them unwor-  
kable in practice. D. S. Senanayake seized on this and made it one of the main themes in his case for the immediate grant of Dominion Status without the intermediate stage envisaged in the Soulbury Report. The case he made seemed convincing enough for he converted G. Hall, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, to his point of view and he succeeded in extracting from the latter an oral promise of the immediate grant of Dominion Status. But Hall was not persuasive enough, and the Cabinet would not agree to this. For the Labour Government the priorities in the dissolution of the empire were India (including Burma) and Palestine, and they would not be diverted from these to the solution of less important problems.

Though D. S. Senanayake returned disappointed that his demand for the immediate grant of Dominion Status had not been conceded, yet the fact that the obstacle at this stage was not the minority problems in Ceylon but the complex issues involved in the transfer of power in the Indian empire gave an entirely new and much more satisfactory perspective to the problems that confronted him. Dominion Status was now in the offing. Moreover, before his return home he had obtained one vital concession—problems relating to citizenship, the Colonial Office agreed, were to be treated as falling within the ambit of the Ceylon government's powers under the new Constitution.

The publication of the Soulbury Report was followed by a White Paper embodying the decisions of the British government on the new constitution for Ceylon, and clarifying the point that though there was to be no immediate grant of Dominion Status, it was merely postponed pending the successful working of the new constitution. All this undoubtedly served to strengthen D. S. Senanayake's position in Sri Lanka. The State Council on 3-9 November 1945 endorsed his motion for the acceptance of the White Paper on Constitutional Reform by 51 votes to 3.

Caldecott had left the island when the final phase in the transfer of power began. His last few months in office had been especially unhappy. D. S. Senanayake believed that Caldecott and his Chief Secretary, Sir Robert Drayton had been responsible for the unilateral extension of the terms of the Commission sent to review the island's constitutional problems in 1944. Drayton scarcely concealed his dismay at what he viewed as the too rapid transition to responsible government. Caldecott himself had his reservations about Dominion Status for Ceylon, but it is doubtful whether he would have actively opposed it.

The new Governor, Sir Henry Monck Mason Moore came to the island from the Colonial Office, with first hand experience of its thinking on the problems of constitutional reform in Ceylon. At any rate his position as Governor was significantly different under the new constitution from Caldecott's under the Donoughmore scheme; his powers were more akin to those of a Governor-General in a self-governing dominion. His primary function was to preside over an awkward period of transition in the island, and at a time when Britain was seeking to accommodate itself to a drastically altered world situation.

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With a Labour government in power Britain had begun the process of post-war surrender of empire. In retrospect it would seem that this was a consequence of weariness and weakness. The Second World War had stimulated an explosive awakening of nationalism in the Asian colonies, in some respects reminiscent of the French Revolution. No quality of statecraft could have stemmed these forces. Nor would British public opinion have tolerated a resort to force to prolong her control over these colonies.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time the surrender of empire in South Asia could be viewed as "appropriate fulfilment", "a meritorious enlargement of the Commonwealth", and not a humiliating defeat comparable with the loss of the thirteen colonies in 1783. The evolution of the old British empire towards autonomy and equality could well be regarded as a process leading inevitably to a Commonwealth reconstructed and modernised but without loss of structural identity.<sup>19</sup> A generation later this would seem to be a disingenuous interpretation of historical necessity. But it was not so in 1947-8.

At that time despite the transfer of power in India British publicists argued that Great Britain would not necessarily quit Asia, that she still had a vital role to play as an imperial power. Once again a world war had been won, and for a brief period the situation seemed superficially to be not very different from what it had been in 1919.

It could be seriously urged in 1947 that: "A new defence arrangement for South Asia will be needed to replace the dying Empire, and to shelter the countries of the region during the experiments on which they are beginning. However anxious they may be to break with their past, one thing in their past they cannot afford to renounce and that is peace; to reform themselves radically and by their own volition, they need to be undisturbed in their own house..."<sup>20</sup>

This passage redolent with trusteeship (at best) and patronage would have struck a responsive chord at the Colonial Office. Nor was this attitude confined to Whitehall. Men like D. S. Senanayake in Ceylon gave public expression to much the same views both before and after the final transfer of power had been effected.

18. G. S. Graham. *Tides of Empire* (Montreal and London, 1972)

19. *Ibid*

20. G. Wint, *The British in Asia* (London, 1947) pp. 162-3. For a variation on this theme see the unsigned article on 'The Dominion of Ceylon' by a correspondent in Colombo in the December 1947 issue (No. 149) of *The Round Table* pp. 455-59.

Indeed questions relating to defence and external affairs were crucial to the completion of the process of transferring power in Ceylon in the years 1946-8.<sup>21</sup> What D. S. Senanayake wanted was Dominion Status earlier than had been implied by the cautious phrases of the British government's statements of policy in 1945-6, in other words, to reach this goal without experience of working the new constitution and without the intervening period envisaged by the Colonial Office in 1945-6. It was in February 1947 that he sent a personal letter to the new Secretary of State Arthur Creech Jones through the island's governor, urging that the matter should be reconsidered. He followed this up by sending Sir Oliver Goonetilleke as his representative to negotiate with the Colonial Office on these questions. When Goonetilleke reached London independence for India had already been resolved by the British Cabinet on 20 February 1947. With the decision on the partition of India, and the grant of independence to Burma the way seemed clear for independence for Ceylon.

During the negotiations the Colonial Office raised three questions: the minority problem; the higher bureaucracy, the Ceylon Civil Service, and the implied guarantee that the Secretary of State would look after their interests and see that they were fairly treated; and finally, questions of defence and external affairs. The first two were easily settled. Indeed the minority question had been settled on the basis of the safeguards incorporated first in the Ministers' draft constitution of 1944 and then embodied with extensions in the new constitution drafted for Ceylon in 1946-7; the second problem did not pose any serious difficulties. Essentially the problem of completing the transfer of power in Ceylon was viewed as a problem of defence and external affairs and on these there was very little difference of opinion between government and opposition in Britain.

O. E. Goonetilleke who handled the negotiations on behalf of Ceylon urged that it was ungracious and unfair to delay the grant of full independence to Ceylon which had played a full part in the war effort through the decision of her political leaders when independence had been granted to India whose leaders had been neutral, and to Burma whose leaders had collaborated with the Japanese.<sup>22</sup> This point was conceded by Creech Jones.

There was also a realisation that an announcement of the immediate grant of Dominion Status was a matter of political survival for D. S. Senanayake and his associates who were soon to face a general election in the island in which a strong challenge from Marxist groups was anticipated. The evidence for this latter consideration was provided by prolonged labour unrest which culminated in a general strike in

21. See, K. M. de Silva, "The History and Politics of the Transfer of Power". See also the three books by Sir Charles Jeffries: *The Transfer of Power* (London, 1960), especially Chap. 8. "Ceylon Crosses the Line", pp. 57-69; *Ceylon: The Path to Independence* (London, 1963); and 'O.E.G.' *A Biography of Sir Oliver Ernest Goonetilleke*, (London, 1969).

22. For these negotiations and Goonetilleke's contribution see, Jeffries, *O.E.G.* Chap. 6, pp. 81-97.

the years 1946-7. These strikes were not without political motivation and one of the demands advanced was a rejection of the Soulbury Constitution to be introduced in 1947.

The transfer of power would be completed with the signing of three agreements on defence, external affairs and the public service, between the two Governments. The first two were immeasurably more important than the third. Ceylonese leaders were conscious of the island's strategic position in the Indian Ocean and her inability to defend herself; and they realised that this strategic weakness was the crucial stumbling block in the final transfer of power. D. S. Senanayake, to make it easier for the British government to contemplate the immediate grant of Dominion Status, was willing to "sign agreements on defence and external affairs". Creech Jones stated in the House of Commons on 18 July 1947 that these agreements between Britain and the Ceylon government which would assume office under the new constitution were a "condition precedent to the grant of fully responsible status within the British Commonwealth". D. S. Senanayake was to point out that there was nothing irrevocable or coercive about these agreements, and that they were based on the mutual interest of the two parties. On these matters of defence and external affairs, there was substantial identity of views between D. S. Senanayake and Whitehall. But these agreements were subjected to severe criticism both within and outside Parliament in Ceylon, especially but not exclusively from Marxist groups.

It would appear that in the final phase of the negotiations Whitehall officials associated in the talks had attempted to raise two other controversial issues. First, a representative of the Board of Trade suggested the inclusion of special provisions dealing with British trade and investments in Ceylon. Secondly, the India Office quite unexpectedly raised the question of safeguards for Indian nationals living in the island when it became a Dominion. Both proposals were firmly rejected by Goonetilleke, and it is evident that there was no support from the Colonial Office for them. Oliver Stanley had outlined the case against the first in 1943,<sup>23</sup> and as for the second, the Colonial Office did not need to be reminded that it was a matter on which Ceylonese politicians were exceptionally sensitive, and none more so than D. S. Senanayake himself.

One last point. Sri Lanka's attainment of independence in 1948 was regarded by the Colonial Office as a "a special case", and its claim to self-government was justified by its "size, its economic strength, its advanced state of social organization. Since 1931 it had in fact had a form of political constitution which placed the main responsibility for the conduct of its affairs on an elected Parliament (sic) and on Ministers answerable to that Parliament. No other colony seemed to be in sight of fulfilling these conditions. If Ceylon was the forerunner, it had a long start".<sup>24</sup> These were the views of Sir Charles Jeffries, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, one of the senior officials deeply involved in the negotiations over Sri Lanka's independence. These were men who, in 1948, believed that despite the transfer of power in South Asia British activity there would not be "a mere afterglow following sunset, ending in night".

23. See, Stanley, Secret Cabinet paper on *The Ceylon Constitution*, 27 March 1943, *op. cit.*

24. Jeffries, *The Transfer of Power*, p. 12.