

17. My Deputy Presidentship Of The Central Assembly (1921)

Until the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms towards the end of 1919, the presidentships of the Central and the Provincial legislatures had been confined, by the Statute, to the heads of the Central and the Provincial Governments. In case of the Imperial Legislative Council it was the Viceroy and the Governor-General, who used to preside over its sessions, while in that of the provincial legislatures the presidential chair used to be occupied by the Governors, or the Lieutenant-Governors, as the case might be. One of the notable and wholesome departures introduced by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms was in this particular matter. Thereafter, the heads of the administration – central and provincial – ceased to have any connection with the legislatures, as their Presidents. It was laid down in the Government of India Act 1919, that for the first four years the President of the Legislative Assembly would be a nominee of the Governor-General and in the case of the provincial legislatures of the Governors; after which period the Presidents would be chosen, by election, by the members of the various legislative bodies, but that the latter would be allowed to elect from the very beginning their Deputy Presidents. Accordingly, when I was returned to the Legislative Assembly, towards the end of 1919, and went up to Delhi in February, 1920, to attend its first session, the Governor General had exercised his right of nominating the first President, and Mr. (afterwards Sir) Frederick Whyte, an ex-Member of the House of Commons, had already arrived at Delhi; but the Deputy President remained to be elected.

On my arrival at Delhi I stayed with (the late) Sir tej Bahadur Sapru, who was at that time the Law Member of the Government of India. He at once suggested to me that I should offer myself as a candidate for election to the Deputy Presidentship. I was wholly unprepared for it, as I had never given the subject any thought, and I asked him to give me time to talk over matters with some other friends. He was insistent, however, that I should be a candidate, and would take no denial. Many members of the Assembly had not arrived at Delhi till then, but I went round and saw those who were there. I found considerable support amongst various groups, especially from amongst the members from the provinces of Bihar and Orissa, Agra and Oudh, and the Punjab. I learnt that the late Sir Deva Prasad Sarvadhikari was likely to be a candidate from Bengal, and Dr. (afterwards Sir) Hari Singh Gour from the Central Provinces and Berar. Madras and Bombay did not feel disposed to run any candidates against me, and so before first day's sitting of the Assembly, the subject of the election had come to be bruited about, and it was understood the contest would lie among the three of us. Government having then in the Assembly a substantially large block of officials, and non-officials nominated by the Governor-General, each

candidate naturally tried his best to secure Government support. Fortunately for me, Sir William Vincent was the Home Member, and he (as a Bihar Civilian) had been known to me for a long time – not only as a Session Judge before whom I had practised, but lately also as a Member of the just then defunct Imperial Legislative Council in which we had crossed swords with each other as official and non-official representatives. I approached him accordingly with a request that the Government should support me with the votes of their entire nominated block. He said he would speak to Lord Chelmsford and do his best, since he thought that my experience of the working of the Central Legislature was very much greater than that of either of my two rivals, who were both quite new, when I had been a non-official representative since 1910, when I had been first elected as a representative of the Bengal Legislative Council in the Imperial Legislative Council. Next day when the election was to come off, he told me that Lord Chelmsford had agreed with him that I should be supported, and that instructions had accordingly been conveyed to all the members of the nominated block – official and non-official – to support my candidature. This naturally gave me a great advantage over my opponents and as the result of the election showed, I was elected by a overwhelming majority of 67 against Sir Deva Prasad Sarvadhikari's 26 and Sir Hari Singh Gour's 28. My majority was thus absolute, being larger than the combined votes polled by my two adversaries.

The announcement by the President of the result of the voting was greeted with great enthusiasm, and I received later numerous congratulations from friends throughout the country. The most striking message I received was from His Excellency Lord Sinha, the then Governor of Bihar and Orissa, which was as follows:- “As Governor of Bihar and Orissa I feel proud that it should have fallen to the lot of a Bihari to have been elected, by a large and substantial majority, the first Deputy President of the Indian Legislative Assembly, than which there can be no more conclusive testimony alike to your deservedly high position in public life and to your popularity. Please accept my hearty congratulations.” My election elicited very favourable comments in the press, of which the following extract from well-known Allahabad daily, the *Leader* may be taken as a sample – “We congratulate Mr. Sinha on his election as the first Deputy President of the Legislative Assembly. He amply deserves this mark of confidence and appreciation on the part of the elected members. To a genial temper and ready wit he combines a political outlook which is essentially non-political. He is one of the best informed of our public men, and is thoroughly fitted for the duties of his new office, with his keen debating powers and large knowledge of public questions.” From the day of my election till I resigned the office at the end of the session – on my appointment as a member of the Government I was the recipient of great kindness at the hand of the President.

Instead of calling upon me to take the presidential chair, only on occasions for short intervals, he arranged that I should occupy it daily for a couple of hours from after the luncheon recess till tea time. This enabled me to acquire a knowledge of the work of the President of a Legislature not merely by watching and seeing, but from practical experience by doing it. The session came to a close in the last week of March, when I returned to Patna to arrange for my trip to England, where I had resolved to spend the whole summer trying to improve my knowledge of parliamentary procedure and practice by attending the House of Commons regularly. It occurred to me that, before leaving Delhi I might entertain the President at a public dinner to mark not only my sense of appreciation of his great personal kindness to me, but also as a demonstration on behalf of the Assembly itself, which greatly admired him both as a social figure and a sympathetic President who took the keenest interest in training politically minded Indians in Parliamentary work.

Accordingly, I invited all the Members of the Assembly, and also of the Council of State, to meet the President at a banquet, at the famous Delhi Hotel – called Maiden's. It was truly the biggest socio-political function held till then at Delhi, as covers were laid for as many as a hundred and ten legislators. An important and delicate social question which caused some difficulty, was whether His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief (which office was then held by the late Lord Rawlinson) could with propriety be invited to a function of this character, inasmuch as the host was merely a non-official though holding the position of the Deputy President. Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru was extremely doubtful of the propriety or expediency of sending an invitation to the Commander-in-Chief, but I took the view that as a Member of the Assembly he occupied exactly the same position as any other member – official or non-official – and that it would be wrong on my part to exclude him on any ground. Accordingly, I issued an invitation, in the ordinary course, to His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief also. I was agreeably surprised to receive from him a personal letter, saying he would be only too happy to come, but that as he would be going straight from the banquet to the station, to catch his train for Peshawar, he would be accompanied by his Aide-de-Camp, and hoped that I would be able to arrange a seat for the latter also. I immediately replied to him that I would gladly invite his Aide-de-Camp as well. The function passed off without a hitch, and was declared in the papers to have been “brilliant and successful”. I proposed the toast of the guest of the evening, and the President's reply was suitable and sympathetic. The party broke up at a late hour of the night. When next I saw Lord Chelmsford, he expressed his great satisfaction at the success of the gathering and added:- “I wish I too, like the Commander-in-Chief, had been a Member of the Assembly, in which case I am sure you would not have overlooked my claims to an invitation.”

I reproduce condensed reports of a few of the many speeches delivered on that occasion, which appeared in the newspapers:- “Mr. Sinha, in proposing the toast detailed the reasons which led to the selection of the President from those with parliamentary experience. With the advent of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms it was considered desirable that at least for the first four years the President of the Assembly should be one with parliamentary experience, so that at the time when parliamentary institutions were being introduced into this country, the Legislative Assembly might be guided by an impartial expert, who should follow the traditions set by the Speaker in the House of Commons. Mr. Whyte came to India with considerable experience of Parliamentary affairs and within the short time that he had been here he had conducted the business with considerable fairness, impartiality and dignity. (Hear, Hear), He as the Deputy President could not sit in judgement upon the President’s work, but the greatest proof of his impartiality was given when the President held up both himself (speaker) and the Hon’ble Mr. Shafi – a government member for disorderly conduct in crossing the floor (Hear, Hear). Those who believed in progress by evolution, would agree that it was not an easy thing for a new comer from Britain to control a big body like the Assembly. But the Hon’ble Mr. Whyte had all along conducted business in commendable way, and that when the history of Indian parliamentary institutions would be written he would occupy a prominent position as the first President who helped India in achieving success on parliamentary lines.

The Hon’ble Mr. Whyte, replying to the toast, said that it was a proud moment when the Secretary of State invited him to undertake the duties of the President of the legislative Assembly and now he felt prouder still. Before coming to India he was a heart-and-soul believer in the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, and after coming here, he had ample evidence to justify him in being a heart-and-soul advocate of them. He wished that he were free from those trammels that were unnecessarily associated with the office of the President, and be at liberty to speak in his own way. Mr. Sinha had referred to a certain episode in the recent transaction of business in the Assembly. He had made, what Mr. Sinha considered an uninvdious distinction between himself (Mr. Sinha) and the Hon’ble Mr. Shafi but they were both sinners. (Laughter). They both had to suffer the consequence of their misdeeds. (Prolonged laughter). However, he must say that if he was proud in accepting the presidentship he was prouder still tonight to meet his colleagues in a great enterprise (Hear, Hear). The Indian Legislature was a great parliamentary assembly entitled to hold its head high among the parliamentary assemblies of the world. The British House of Commons had been called the mother of Parliaments, and a proud title it was. If there were Englishmen present, he would tell them as a Scotsman, that they should warn the mother of Parliaments that her other children had better look to their laurels. He had an unexampled opportunity, better than any other

member of the House, to observe the process at work, a process in which he was proud to take part. "I spent some few years", continued Mr. Whyte, "in the House of Commons, and as one who believes in and loves the House of Commons as a great institution, I say in all sincerity and truth that there had been debates in the Legislative Assembly that were well worthy to stand by the side of the best of the debates in the Imperial Parliament. (Hear, hear) That, gentlemen, is the source of my pride as your President, I wish to thank you for giving me an opportunity of expressing my growing ardent belief in the success of parliamentary institutions in India" (applause).

People in Britain believed that self government, with all its mistakes and drawbacks, was in the long run the most sure and most suitable form of government for adult men and women, and he believed that the British race could not refuse to make the same trial of the same principles wherever they were responsible for the happiness of the people. Mr. Whyte's speech was highly appreciated and continuously applauded.

In responding to the toast of the Council of State, the Right Hon'ble Srinivasa Sastri made the following reply:- "Some of us were shrewd enough to detect all through Mr. Pickford's amusing speech a subdued vein of profound reverence for the Council of State, as is due from the young children towards those who are in authority over them by years, and the wisdom that years invariably bring. Several of us no doubt look down with amusement on the doings of the Legislative Assembly from our own gallery, and what do we observe? A number of people rising one after another in quick succession to catch the Speaker's eye, only one of them to be chosen at last and he too, not like so many of us reading words carefully committed to paper beforehand, but wrangling with one another for receiving their daily allowance of a few rupees. I have seen in the Legislative Assembly a very hard time given to the President by the members. If my Hon. Mr. Muddiman – the President of the Council of State – were asked, he would give us, I am sure, a much better character than the Hon. Mr. Whyte has given to the Assembly. The President of the Assembly has shown many of the qualities which we are accustomed to associate with the eminent Speakers of the House of Commons. But the Hon. Mr. Muddiman does not lag one whit behind the Hon. Mr. Whyte. They have both the quality of being blind when they do not wish to see, of being deaf when they do not wish to hear, of smiling when they snub, and finally of seeming to be really pleased when they are only eminently bored. (laughter) I have often pitied the Hon. Mr. Whyte from my exalted seat. Sometimes I have seen him perplexed, but then in spite of allowing his eyes to be caught by any speaker he is extremely careful to let them fall only on that man whom he wishes to call on to address the House. I have always seen Mr. Whyte, although seemingly perfectly indifferent and reposeful, yet watchful of the varying temper of the House. Under such auspices i have no hesitation in joining with Mr. Pickford in hoping that not only the

Council of State, but the Legislative Assembly, will develop slowly but surely into sister institutions, growing side by side, strengthening and fortifying each other, instead of merely bewildering and weakening each other.”