

16. The Congress Deputation of 1914

In April 1914, I left for London on a deputation organized under the auspices of the Indian National Congress. At its session held at Karachi in December, 1913, under the presidentship of my late lamented friend Nawab Syed Mohammad Bahadur of Madras, the following resolution was moved from the chair and unanimously carried:-“That the All-India Congress Committee be authorized to arrange for a deputation consisting, as far as possible, of representatives from different provinces, to go to England, to represent Indian views on the following subjects:- (1) Indians in South Africa and other Colonies, (2) Press Act, (3) Reform of the India Council, (4) Separation of Judicial and Executive Functions (5) Other important questions on which Congress has expressed opinion. Accordingly, the different Provincial Congress Committees chose their representatives constituting the deputation. Bengal elected Mr. Bhupendra Nath Basu; Bombay, Mr. Samartha (both, afterwards Members of the Secretary of State’s Council) and Mr. M.A Jinnah; Madras, Rao Bahadur Narsimha Sharma (afterwards a Member of the Governor-General’s Executive Council); and the Punjab, Mr. Lajpat Rai. The choice of Bihar and Orissa Committee fell on me. Some members of the United Provinces (of Agra and Oudh) Committee were desirous that the late Mr. Bishan Narayan Dar (Ex-President of the 1911 session of the National Congress, held in Calcutta) should accept the nomination, but he could not do so owing to ill-health, and so that Committee also elected me as their representative. Thus I had the unique honour of representing the Congress organizations of two “major” provinces.

Though the Congress resolution constituting the deputation referred to four organized in connection with the reform of the Indian Council, a Bill in regard to which the then Secretary of State, Lord Crewe, was expected to introduce in the House of Lords in the spring of 1914. Some of the Indian Members of the Public Service Commission, which had been appointed in the previous year, 1913, were also going to England to complete their work; and Sir Abdur Rahim, who as a Member of that Commission, travelled with us on board the steamer. Mr. Bhupendra Nath Basu and Mr. Lajpat Rai joined us later, and on their arrival the deputation was formally completed under the guidance of Sir William Wedderburn, one of the greatest friends of India amongst our British-fellow subjects. Mr. Bhupendra Nath Basu was chosen as the informal head of the deputation. He was justly regarded pre-eminently suited to lead the deputation not only by reason of his training and temperament to carry on negotiations with the authorities at the India Office, but also because he was believed to be in close touch alike with the officials at the India Office and with some of the leading British statesmen, especially of the Liberal Party. Under Mr. Basu’s guidance the deputation prepared a memorandum on the subject, and

submitted it to the Secretary of State for consideration. At an interview between Lord Crewe and the deputation, at the India Office, Sir William Wedderburn introduced us as delegates of the Congress, and Lord Crewe then discussed with us the provisions of his Bill for more than two hours. His attitude towards Indian aspirations, in the matter of the reconstitution of the India Council seemed to be sympathetic, but the occupant of the Great Moghal's chair did not impress me as a strong man. The result was as might have been expected in the circumstances.

The Bill which Lord Crewe introduced, in the House of Lords, was a typically milk-and-water measure, which could satisfy no one, and which thus provoked determined opposition from all sides. When the deputation had left India the provisions of the Bill had not been published, and Indian opinion on it had not been expressed. And so when the provisions became known, the Indian press at once expressed very great dissatisfaction with its main provisions. Not unnaturally, in the circumstances, even the deputation was divided in opinion. Mr. Lajpat Rai and I saw no ground to support it, but as our chief was in its favour, so for the sake of unanimity we agreed to submit a note to Lord Crewe suggesting radical changes, while giving a formal support to the Bill. This change was, however, very strenuously -----by the Tory party, and strongly deputation -----by the Tory press. In the -----leading article on the Bill. The ----- pressed itself as follows:- The House of Lords returns today to the consideration of the Council of India Bill, ----- venture again to express our hope ----- this mischievous measure will be rejected without even receiving the compliment of reference to a Select Committee. In a letter published in these columns yesterday Mr. Edwin Montagu, who until recently was Under-Secretary for India, did not seek to deny that he is the real author of the Bill. It is common knowledge that during the last eighteen months of his sojourn at India Office, Mr. Montagu was zealously preparing a scheme intended to hamstring the Council of India. Never before in our recollection, has even the most ambitious of Under-Secretaries attempted to carry so sweeping and, we may add, so reprehensible a scheme. The motive was obvious, for we discern it immediately when we turn from the protestations of Mr. Montagu to the more ingenious explanations of Lord Crewe. An earlier Under-Secretary for India once declared that his influence was so circumscribed that he always felt like 'a *peri* at the gate of paradise. Mr. Montagu has made a deft attempt to create a little paradise of his own for himself and his successors. The organs of India object to the Bill because they do not want to send dummy members to a truncated Council which will meet only at the pleasure of the Secretary of State. We endorse their reason, but we lay even stronger stress upon others, one of which is that the native principle in any form should never be applied to the Secretary of State's Council. It would be just as reasonable, ----- as improper, to request India to ----- members to the Viceroy's Council. India

Council of India does not sit in India, ----- forms functions which have no ----- to any system of representative ----- . We are strongly in favour ----- reform of the India Office. ----- necessity for such a reform ----- constantly urged by the Times. The true remedy is, not to accept Montagu's specious plea (for more expeditious methods of handling the enormous masses of trivial detail which now passes through the India Office), but to cut down the dense undergrowth of unnecessary business and superfluous correspondence between India and England". This fairly long extract from the *Times* clearly indicated the attitude of the Tory party.

Not to be outdone by the *Times*, the *Morning Post*-the then redoubtable organ of the British Tory die-hards-in the course of an editorial made the following comments, which are of value and significance, even at the present day, to Indian nationalists:-"The Bill seeks to inoculate the Government of India with yet another's homeopathic dose of democracy. In 1907 the Government appointed two natives on India to the Council, and this practice has continued since that time. The proposal now is to make this new custom statutory and not only so, but to provide that these Indian members shall be chosen on an elective principle. *Now the Government of India is not a popular or responsible Government, and never can be as long as Britain rules India.* The day that India rules itself, that day Britain retires its last official, and its last centurion from the peninsula. India through weakness, division, and anarchy over a long period of time gradually fell under the dominion of a power which had strength, unity, and purpose. But let us not flatter ourselves that the subjection was involuntary, or that our Empire would continue if India had the power and the unity to shake herself free. It, therefore, follows that if we deliver any part of our power into the hands of an Indian race, or interest, we thereby weaken ourselves and hasten the time of our departure. We should make our ideal not to part with our power."

In due course, the Bill came up for a second reading in the House of Lords. There was a large Indian gathering, in the visitors' gallery, of not only the Congress delegation and the many friends of India, but also of many others who did not take any particular interest in Indian affairs. This was due to the fact that Lord Curzon has expected to lead the opposition to the Bill, on behalf of the Tories, and to make a most vigorous onslaught on its provisions. Lord Curzon, who was in his best form made a typically Tory speech in trying to turn the inside out of Lord Crewe's Bill. The Liberal Governments' spokesmen could give but a feeble support to the measure,-except Viscount Morley who put up a spirited defence-and when the votes were taken the 'noes' had it, as we say in India, though in the technical phraseology of the House of Lords the ayes and noes are designated, as the 'contents' and 'non-contents', or - as an Indian wag present in the visitor's gallery put - 'contents' and 'mal-contents'. Anyway, the

Bill was summarily rejected, and none of us felt sorry for it-except perhaps our leader Mr. Basu.

The comments of not only the Tory but even of the Liberal press over the rejection of the Bill were alike edifying and amusing to us, particularly for the reason that they all joined together in decrying Mr. Montagu, who was believed to be the real originator of the scheme embodied in Lord Crewe's Bill. The (now long since extinct) Pall Mall Gazette was ruthless in dealing with Mr. Montagu of whom it said, "The tone of young Mr. Montagu has been markedly misplaced, elaborately impertinent, and full of the clever immaturity which creates anything but confidence. This has been of considerable disservice both to the Government and himself". That Mr. Montagu did great disservice to himself, by reason of his love for Indian, admits of no doubt. Perhaps the soberest and sanest observation appeared at the time in the *Nation*, which was then regarded as the semi-official organ of the Liberal Government. The following extract from its editorial, on the subject, is worth recalling even at this distance of time:—"Lord Curzon has had his way with the Indian Council Bill, which was refused a second reading in the Upper House on Tuesday by 96 to 38. It was a party vote. Behind this merely obstructive attitude, there were, however, real grounds of opposition. They were stated with a curious lack of consistency. Lord Curzon argued that the Bill would ruin the authority of the Council itself, and make the Secretary of State a pure autocrat. It is human nature, we suppose, that no autocrat can tolerate another. On the other hand, Lord Ampthill complained that the Bill would ruin 'the power and prestige of the Viceroy', and that India henceforward would be governed from Whitehall. Both of them agreed in deprecating especially the reduction of the importance of the purely official Anglo-Indian element on the Council. Perhaps the inconsistency is more apparent than real. What both mean at bottom is that in the last resort India ought to be governed, not by a Minister responsible to Parliament but by a bureaucracy whose chief is the Viceroy, and whose organ in London is a Council of veteran officials".

The Indian standpoint on Lord Crewe's Bill found expression in the letter which appeared in the *New Statesman* over the signature of Mr. Lajpat Rai, from which I may quote here the following pertinent observations:—"The Indians did not like the Bill, because it did not go sufficiently far to make their representation adequate and effective. The delegates on the Indian National Congress were prepared to accept it as first instalment of the intended reform, though they never concealed their disappointment at the inadequate representation of independent Indian opinion, and particularly at the proposed method of selection of Indian members. The expressions of adverse opinion in certain Indian newspapers were made use of the Tories in support of their opposition to the Bill, without an honest recognition of the grounds on which these opinions were based. The Indian (as distinguished from the Anglo-Indian) press

disapproved of the Bill because the concessions were so trifling. It failed to recognize that Indian is likely to fare even worse if the reform of the India Office is undertaken by the Tories. There can be no doubt, after the speeches made by the Tory Lords, that they intended to raise the question if, and as soon as, they return to power; and the Indians are not likely to get from them even as much as was conceded by this Bill. The summary rejection of a small measure like this, introduced by a government in power, is bound to make an unfortunate impression in India. I am of the opinion that Indians would do better to agitate for the complete abolition of the Council than for its reform. It is a white elephant maintained at the cost of the Indian tax-payers. It is the strongest fortress of the bureaucracy". The Bill was thus buried "unwept, un-honoured and unsung", and perhaps no one was main the worse for it, for reasons set out is Mr. Lajpat Rai's letter, which expressed the Indian view. After the First World War we had some important changes in the machinery of the government in our country nevertheless the centre of gravity remained where it was. The Secretary of State for Indian still ruled this country practically autocratically and dictated to and dominated over the Government of India. The Secretary of State for India continued to be a power for good or evil in our administration, as he still laid down the lines-from distance of six thousand miles-on which the destinies of India were wielded for better or worse.

