

The Liberals are determined to squander Canada's independence



The editors [at the National Post] have invited me to write about the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of the Statute of Westminster on Dec. 11, 1931, which effectively made Canada and other comparable British Empire jurisdictions autonomous of British laws. The so-called Dominions that were declared to be of equal sovereignty to the United Kingdom were Canada, Australia, what was then known as the Irish Free State and which became the Republic of Ireland, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and South Africa. These were the founding members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, which eventually became just the Commonwealth of Nations. The word "Commonwealth" was first used in this context in a proposal from the prime minister of the Union of South Africa, Field Marshal Jan

Christian Smuts, in 1917, and the comprehensive agitation from most of the governments that were its original members, apart from the Irish, was undoubtedly generated by the more than 1.5 million soldiers and sailors, most of them Canadians and almost all of them volunteers, that were contributed by those countries to the British Empire war effort in the First World War. Ireland, obviously, was different as it was a province of the United Kingdom and sought its independence for cultural and sectarian reasons aggravated by centuries of abrasions between the Irish and the English, both as occupiers and as Irish residents.

The whole process may be seen as the beginning of the dissolution of the British Empire, but as has often been the case in British history, that country and its statesmen managed to portray the process as considered and voluntary devolution cheerfully conferred by the British Parliament with the happy concurrence, if not at the outright instigation of the monarch, at this point George V, King and Emperor. The great British Empire even in my youth coloured much of the map of the world red and included all of South Asia, a broad swath of Africa from Alexandria on the Mediterranean to Cape Town, the huge countries of Canada and Australia, and scores of other places that are now sovereign states. Though there were serious armed struggles for independence in Ireland, South Africa, Palestine, Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus, and prolonged and occasionally violent national strikes and protests in what are now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Britain managed to hand over independence to all the Empire, except Gibraltar, the Cayman Islands, St. Helena and a few other places, with reasonable dignity and in all but a few cases considerable goodwill. It transformed the anti-colonial war of Malaya into the victory of democratic Malayan patriotism over the local communists. Nowhere was Britain stuck in a war remotely as prolonged, violent and politically disruptive at home as the terrible conflicts in Indochina and Algeria in which France was mired for many years.

Even more elegant was Britain's transition from the front rank of the world's powers to the second rank, with the greatest dignity exhibited by any nation that has ever trod that path, covered as it was in the mid-twentieth century by the universally admired Gloriana of the Churchillian war effort that repelled the Nazi assault at the English Channel and in North Africa. Winston Churchill remained a member of the Big Three with Franklin D. Roosevelt and Josef Stalin right to the end of the Second World War, even as power passed inexorably to the two gigantic superpowers, the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R., with three to four times the population of Britain, particularly when the United States became the world's only nuclear military power in July 1945. Even Stalin said at the Tehran conference that "Great Britain's contribution to the war has been so great its Empire deserves to gain from it."

The British version of events, and especially Mr. Churchill's prodigious oratorical talents, gave Britain a more heroic underdog status even than it deserved: the Germans had no capacity to invade the British Isles in adequate strength unless they had virtually exterminated the Royal Air Force and then, from the air, most of the Royal Navy as well. This was not going to happen and particularly not when Roosevelt was re-elected to a third presidential term in 1940 and pledged to sell Britain and Canada anything they wanted in any quantity they wanted with a very extended repayment schedule. (As a member of the British House of Lords I was present when the final repayment on the Lend-Lease Act was approved in 2001, 60 years after that act came into effect.) Many countries have been forced to accept such a descent down the ladder of power and influence among states but none has ever done it with such style as Churchillian Britain, though it was almost the last objective Mr. Churchill would have sought.

Readjustments to the relationship between Great Britain and the semi-autonomous components of the Empire were wrangled over at Imperial prime ministers' conferences during and after

the First World War and finally produced Arthur James Balfour's Declaration of 1926. (This should not be confused with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the same person promised Palestine as a "homeland for the Jews" without compromising the rights of the Arabs, thus effectively selling the same real estate simultaneously to two contesting parties). In 1926, Balfour finally recognized and asserted the jurisdictional equality of the senior states in the Empire apart from India. With Confederation in Canada in 1867, and in Australia in 1901, those countries became autonomous except in some foreign and defence policy and constitutional amendment. This was reinforced, following Smuts' initiative in 1917, in identifying Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand as autonomous powers within the British Empire and signatories in their own right of the Treaty of Versailles which officially concluded the First World War in 1919. This was a conflict in which none of the dominions was under any threat whatsoever but all made an immense contribution and sacrifice for Imperial solidarity and the cause of freedom throughout the world.

For Canada, the immediate consequences of the Statute of Westminster were not obvious (and Australia did not adopt the Statute until 1941). When the Second World War came in September 1939, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were all officially neutral powers until their own parliaments declared war on Germany. Canada mounted an immense war effort, with almost entirely voluntary armed forces of a million men, the greatest war production of the allies except for the Big Three, and the training of the astounding total of 125,000 pilots and aircrew in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Long-serving prime minister W.L. Mackenzie King managed the English-French differences of perception of war aims much more successfully than Robert Borden had in the First World War, and Canada ended the war with the third largest navy and fourth largest air force in the world, and was an undisputed co-founder of the United Nations and four

years later of NATO.

For about 20 years after the Second World War, Canada was a somewhat self-confident country, a political junior partner of Britain and a commercial branch plant of the United States, “a middle power,” as John Diefenbaker told the United Nations in 1960. The Québec problem preoccupied the country for the balance of the 20th century. Since then we have become somewhat aimless and unconvincing in our nationalism, and under the present government and its “Ministry of Global Affairs,” an apparent adherent to a fantasy of a post-national world. But all options are open and it all officially began with the Statute of Westminster 90 years ago.

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