

**Jaroslav Valkoun**

A Committee or a Conference?

## **A Committee or a Conference?<sup>1</sup>**

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In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of the overseas territories connected to Britain had accomplished considerable political, economic and social development. As their importance rose, even their ambitions for greater autonomy grew bigger: in their view, the autonomy should consist of constitutional change in relations with the mother country and of greater involvement in imperial foreign policies. This process was due to the weakness of the system of imperial conferences as an institution: none of its resolutions could be enforced, as the Conference did not dispose of any legislative or executive powers. At the same time, the system was negatively affected by the complex international situation and issues linked to the joint imperial defence.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the last three Colonial and Imperial Conferences meant only bitter disappointment to their “reformers”: New Zealand’s Prime Ministers Richard Seddon (1902) and Sir Joseph Ward (1911) and their Australian counterpart Alfred Deakin (1907).<sup>3</sup> Despite all its shortcomings the system of Imperial Conferences contributed to institutional and constitutional development of the Empire and was also instrumental in the Empire’s transformation into the British Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup>

In the period leading to the First World War, three main basic subject areas on defence matters were affecting the relations between Dominions and

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<sup>2</sup> I. R. HANCOCK, *The 1911 Imperial Conference*, in: *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 12, Is. 47, 1966, p. 357.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. DAFOE, *Laurier: A Study in Canadian Politics*, Toronto 1922, pp. 57–58.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. G. DEWEY, *The Dominion and Diplomacy: The Canadian Contribution*, Vol. 1, London 1929, p. 147.

the mother country. In the first place, it was important to find an answer to the question whether in case of war the Dominions were to secure their own defence first and help Britain only afterwards, or first help the mother country and thus prevent its potential defeat, which could lead to their standing alone in the conflict. The second issue concerned the imperial defence, in which the Dominions' nationalism clashed both with the isolationism of the non-English speaking populations in Canada and South Africa and with the requirements of the Admiralty and the Committee of Imperial Defence. The third complication was caused by disparity between the British defence commitments and Great Britain's actual resources.<sup>5</sup>

In the last years of peace, the international situation was changing abruptly, one crisis lead to another; however, due to the rigid attitude of the British Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith the British Empire's institutional machinery was not able to react adequately. Frequent critical comments of opponents of the imperial conferences saying that between two regular sessions the system was undesirably inactive, started to grow in intensity after the "achievements" of the 1911 conference.<sup>6</sup> As the Conference participants could not reach an agreement on proceeding with some necessary reforms, several issues of foreign and defence policy remained unsolved.<sup>7</sup> However, it became generally acknowledged that the arrears of defence and foreign affairs should be automatically handed over to the Committee of Imperial Defence, which was to find an adequate solution. Moreover, some governmental officials started to openly give priority to the Committee over the Conference system. The Committee was taken for a more flexible body, as it was able to meet more often than the Conferences; at the same time it was directly influenced by the British

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<sup>5</sup> D. C. WATT, *Imperial Defence Policy and Imperial Foreign Policy, 1911–1939 – A Neglected Paradox?*, in: *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, Vol. 1, Is. 1, 1963, p. 267.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. D. HALL, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations*, London 1971, p. 103; W. K. HANCOCK, *Australia*, London 1966, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> H. H. ASQUITH, *The Genesis of the War*, London 1923, pp. 120–121.

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Prime Minister, which could lead to undue pressure on its members' decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

In the years 1911–1914, the imperial defence was under the authority under two bodies: the Imperial General Staff and the Committee of Imperial Defence. Both authorities had advisory roles and their meetings were open to representatives of the Dominions, although the Committee's member structure was not fixed.<sup>9</sup> The 1911 discussions on foreign policy at the Committee of Imperial Defence had great impact on the Dominions' autonomy. The co-operation on the imperial foreign policy issues, however, was not as effective as in defence matters.<sup>10</sup>

In 1911, the powerful Round Table Movement's plans failed, when they did not succeed in pushing through Ward's proposals.<sup>11</sup> Despite that, the Movement did not get embittered and did not abruptly stop their efforts in the Empire's reorganization. They also intensified their efforts to strengthen the common defence and foreign policies, as the movement felt threatened by the growing power of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany.<sup>12</sup> It was not only Lionel Curtis, Leopold Amery and other members of the Round Table Movement, but also Dominions' politicians who realized the importance of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and they therefore strove to make it develop into a full scope imperial institution.<sup>13</sup> Similarly as in 1907, it was the position of Canada which seemed to be crucial. Lionel Curtis therefore focused on the new Canadian Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Laird Borden, who had taken his

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<sup>8</sup> J. E. KENDLE, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences 1887–1911: A Study in Imperial Organizations*, London 1967, pp. 185–186.

<sup>9</sup> G. P. de T. GLAZEBROOK, *A History of Canadian External Relations*, London 1959, p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> R. JEBB, *The Britannic Question: A Survey of Alternatives*, London 1913, pp. 43–45; DEWEY, pp. 294–295.

<sup>11</sup> To the problems cf. VALKOUN, *The Attempts to Reform the System of Imperial Conferences in the Years 1907–1911*, in: Prague Papers on the History of International Relations, No. 1, 2013, pp. 144–157.

<sup>12</sup> J. E. KENDLE, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union*, Toronto 1975, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> KENDLE, *The Colonial*, p. 198.

office in October 1911. Sir Robert's vision when entering the office was that as a front executive representative he should: 1) give honest and true speeches, 2) be dignified, honourable and determined, 3) keep a clear and sharp mind, sympathy towards peaceful Britons, friendship towards Americans and 4) never forget he was a Canadian.<sup>14</sup> Unlike his predecessor Wilfrid Laurier, Borden didn't hold isolationist views and he founded his attitudes in relation to the mother country on three basic interconnected factors: 1) Canadian autonomy, 2) a greater degree of responsibility, and 3) greater involvement in imperial foreign policy decision-making.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1911, Curtis sent Borden a copy of his "Green Memorandum", asking him to read it soon; he believed that the future wellbeing of the Empire depended on Canadian steps. In March 1912, he even approached Borden with an appeal to prefer the Committee over the Imperial Conference system as the continual communication channel among overseas governments and the British cabinet.<sup>16</sup> Curtis was also endorsed by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, who raised an appeal on March 20, 1912, in the House of Commons that the Committee should be granted a more important status in the relations between Dominions and the mother country, before the position of the Self-governing Colonies could be settled once for all.<sup>17</sup> Curtis planned to use Borden's visit in London, where the Canadian Prime Minister was going to discuss the naval and defence issues with his British counterpart, the Admiralty and the Foreign Office;<sup>18</sup> during

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<sup>14</sup> W. L. COURTNEY – J. E. COURTNEY, *Pillars of the Empire: Studies & Impressions*, London [1918], p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> BORDEN, R. L., *Splendid Record of the Borden Government Naval Policy Clearly Defined*, Ottawa 1913, pp. 18–23; F. H. SOWARD, *Sir Robert Borden and Canada's External Policy, 1911–1920*, in: Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association/Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1941, pp. 65–82.

<sup>16</sup> KENDLE, *The Colonial*, pp. 199–200.

<sup>17</sup> United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Debates* (further only PD), *House of Commons* (further only HoC), 5<sup>th</sup> Series, Vol. 35, 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1912, c. 1946.

<sup>18</sup> Borden's discussions in detail cf. R. L. BORDEN, *Bill relatif aux forces navales de l'empire: discours prononcé par le Très Hon. R.L. Borden, le 5 décembre 1912*, [Ottawa 1912]; *Canada*

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his several meetings he had arranged with the members of the Round Table Movement, he was supposed to convince him to prefer the Committee over the Imperial Conferences.<sup>19</sup> Borden travelled to England knowing that he was having a proverbial ace in his hand: the Canadian contribution to the imperial naval defence.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Round Table Movement was considerably active throughout 1912, not all of its members approved of the activities. For instance, the Toronto section of the Round Table Movement did not share Curtis's enthusiasm, as they believed it was useless to push forward something that was going to solve itself in the foreseeable future anyway.<sup>21</sup> Leopold Amery, on the other hand, held the view that instead of broadening the authority and functions of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the Round Table Movement should rather focus on closing the discussions on the reorganization of the British Colonial Office at the next Imperial Conference planned for 1915. Amery in particular promoted the shift of the Dominion agenda from the existing department into a newly created British Imperial Office; after that, the Colonial Office would only manage the affairs of the Crown Colonies. Local Ministries for Colonial Affairs were to be set in Dominions, which would deal with the defence and foreign policies in co-operation with the Committee of Imperial Defence and the Foreign Office.<sup>22</sup> Amery's plans were in the long

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*and the Navy: Reasons by the Rt Hon. R. L. Borden, M.P., in Favour of a Canadian Naval Service and Against a Contribution*, Ottawa 1913; G. N. TUCKER, *The Naval Policy of Sir Robert Borden, 1912–14*, in: *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1947, pp. 1–30; D. C. GORDON, *The Admiralty and Dominion Navies, 1902–1914*, in: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1961, pp. 414–417; W. C. B. TUNSTALL, *Imperial Defence, 1897–1914*, in: *The Cambridge History of the British Empire: The Empire-Commonwealth 1870–1919*, Vol. 3, Cambridge 1967, pp. 596–597.

<sup>19</sup> KENDLE, *The Colonial*, p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> R. C. BROWN – R. COOK, *Canada 1896–1921: A Nation Transformed*, Toronto 1974, p. 205.

<sup>21</sup> J. EAYRS, *The Round Table Movement in Canada, 1909–1920*, in: *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1957, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Amery's attitudes in detail University of Cambridge: Churchill College: Churchill Archives Centre (further only CAC), Amery Papers (further only AP), AMEL 1/2/20, *Some Suggestions on Imperial Policy*, November 1912, ff. [1]–14.

run based on the fact that the basic prerequisite of an imperial union was the adoption of the equality principle in the relations between Dominions and the mother country.<sup>23</sup>

In the summer of 1912, during his stay in England, Borden met several times with influential figures under the auspices of the Round Table Movement, which gradually acquired the position of an informal group of experts on imperial matters; the meetings, however, did not inspire any noticeable activity, in which Curtis had considerably hoped.<sup>24</sup> The British government and even the Prime Minister were all the more influenced by the new Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Maurice Hankey, who had continually promoted the idea of an imperial defence co-operation through the Committee.<sup>25</sup> Hankey's imperial vision was founded on creating a "quasi-federal organisation with common economy, common defence and common foreign policies".<sup>26</sup> In late July 1912, Asquith outlined in which way dominions should have a say in the foreign policy. During a discussion on the Committee of Imperial Defence in the House of Commons, he allowed that in consequence to the growing involvement of the Dominions in the Empire's commitments, it was Britain's duty to take their views more into account; according to him, the Committee could become the appropriate "mediator" in the exchange. Asquith also saw the Committee as an "invaluable complement to constitutional ties" with Dominions.<sup>27</sup>

In September 1912, the Round Table Movement published the *Canada and the Navy* article in their *Round Table* periodical and thus launched their

<sup>23</sup> CAC, AP, AMEL 1/2/18, Parliamentary Empire Tour: Meeting of the Imperial Mission Held at the Connaught Rooms, Great Queen St., London, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1914, f. 5.

<sup>24</sup> In England, the Canadian Prime Minister met for instance Viscount Alfred Milner, Lionel Curtis, Sir James Meston and Viscount Waldorf Astor and his spouse. KENDLE, *The Colonial*, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. The National Archives, London, Kew (further only TNA), Cabinet Papers (further only CAB) 17/101, Hankey to Harcourt, 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1912, ff. [1–4]; TNA, CAB 17/101, Hankey to Grey, 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1912, ff. [5–7].

<sup>26</sup> WATT, p. 268.

<sup>27</sup> PD, HoC, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, Vol. 41, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 1912, c. 872; ibidem, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1912, cc. 1386–1387.

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public campaign for replacing the Conference system with the Committee of Imperial Defence, which they considered a “germ” of a *Cabinet of the Empire*. The anonymous author of the article highlighted the importance of Canada and the Commonwealth of Australia and invited them to get more thoroughly involved in forming the imperial foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> There also appeared a view that although the Committee had already taken an important position in the imperial structure, it could still become only a provisory, not permanent forum, for as an advisory body it was not representative and independent enough for the representatives of Dominions, as it was indirectly influenced by the British Foreign Office.<sup>29</sup> At the end of September 1912, Richard Jebb, a well-known supporter of the Conference system and of colonial nationalism, joined the discussion. Jebb firmly rejected visions that the Committee of Imperial Defence would replace the Conference sessions. He also stressed the fact that Imperial Conferences were based on the principle of equality, whilst the substance of the Committee consisted of British predominance over autonomous parts of the Empire. The fact that unlike the Conference, the Committee was summoned based on a decision of the British Prime Minister, was in his eyes a symbol of London government’s dominance.<sup>30</sup>

The subsequent discussion in the autumn of 1912 on the pages of *The Times* made clear some minor doubts ensuing from the relationship between the Committee of Imperial Defence and the system of Imperial Conferences. In November, upon Asquith’s approval, Hankey was working on an assignment by the Secretary of State for the Colonies Lewis Vernon Harcourt, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Harcourt, drawing a memorandum on the future activities and position of the Committee of Imperial Defence. On November 25, 1912, Hankey presented the memorandum to the cabinet and suggested the Committee should be extended by another two sub-committees which would comply with the calls

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Canada and the Navy*, in: *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, Is. 8, 1913, pp. 634–637; KENDLE, *The Colonial*, p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> H. D’EGVILLE, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union*, London 1913, p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> KENDLE, *The Colonial*, pp. 207–209.



of Dominions for more frequent and more factual discussions on defence and foreign issues.<sup>31</sup> Before the British government took a final decision on Hankey's memorandum, Borden gave a speech on December 5, 1912, at a debate on Canadian naval policy in the Canadian House of Commons, in which he made scathing comments on how during his London talks he had received a promise of unprecedented importance from the British representatives to get the advisory vote in the decision-making on imperial foreign policy issues. Borden also stressed the important fact that the Committee would not adopt any important decision without a representative of Canada having a say in it.<sup>32</sup>

The London government used Borden's public statement and sent out a telegram to other overseas autonomous governments on December 10, 1912, offering them a possibility to take part in the decision-making of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the same level as the Canadians. Harcourt suggested that from now on a Minister from each Dominion could take part in the talks, assuming the position of a regular (permanent) member of the Committee. Compared to previous practice, the co-responsibility level of Dominions in the decision-making on imperial matters was increased; the Dominion representatives were not in the role of mere technical advisors any longer. The British Secretary of State for Colonies also stressed that the Committee remained a wholly advisory body which would under no circumstance become a decisive political authority; this prerogative was reserved exclusively for the British government. During the Committee discussions, the Dominion representatives had free access to the British Prime Minister as well as the Colonial and Foreign Secretaries when a need for complex information on any issue of imperial policy presented itself.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. CAC, Hankey Papers (further only HP), HNKY, 7/8, Future Work of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1911, f. [1]–11; TNA, CAB 17/101, Hankey to Harcourt, Representation of the Dominions on the Committee of Imperial Defence, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1912, f. [11].

<sup>32</sup> Canada, *PD, HoC*, 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1912, pp. 676–693, in: R. M. DAWSON (Ed.), *The Development of Dominion Status, 1900–1936*, London 1965, pp. 161–165.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. The Secretary of State [Harcourt] to the Governor-General of Australia, the Governor-



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Harcourt's telegram was received favourably by the members of the Round Table Movement,<sup>34</sup> none of the four Dominion governments to whom it was addressed, however, shared that enthusiasm. The South Africans doubted the practicality of the idea, if the control over foreign policy were to remain the prerogative of the British cabinet. The Australian Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, preferred to meet with higher frequency within the system of Imperial Conferences to a permanent membership in the Committee of Imperial Defence. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, William Massey, also expressed a certain "aversion" to the permanent representation at the Committee, which was unsuitable for him just regarded the long distance his country, and the representatives of Newfoundland answered on a similar tone. The refusing attitude of the others was disappointing for Hankey and the Round Table Movement; it was a final confirmation that the Committee was not going to become an advisory body of the Empire any time soon. Newfoundland, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa had accepted the fact that it was the mother country who took decisions on foreign policy, Canada and Australia went on aspiring on greater influence on imperial policy and only differed in the manner of achieving the goal. Borden preferred the Committee to the Imperial Conferences, whilst Fisher had adopted the opposite attitude.<sup>35</sup>

The Dominions' lukewarm attitude toward the Committee was also evident in the fact that until the outbreak of the First World War, they seldom attended its sessions<sup>36</sup>. It wasn't until June 1914 that Borden sent Sir George

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General of the Union of South Africa, and the Governors of New Zealand and Newfoundland, Downing Street, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1912, in: Cd. 6560, *Dominions No. 13: Despatch from the Secretary of State for the Colonies As to the Representation of the Self-governing Dominions on the Committee of Imperial Defence*, London 1913, No. 1, pp. 2–3; Cd. 6863, *Dominions No. 14: Report for 1912–13 Relating to the Self-governing Dominions: Prepared in the Dominions Department of the Colonial Office*, London 1913, pp. 9–10.

<sup>34</sup> *Policy and Sea Power*, in: *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, Is. 10, 1913, pp. 197–231.

<sup>35</sup> KENDLE, *The Colonial*, pp. 213–214.

<sup>36</sup> It was for instance the case for Sir James Allen (New Zealand), Sir Edward Morris (Newfoundland) and others. M. P. A. HANKEY, *Diplomacy by Conference: Studies in Public Affairs, 1920–1946*, London 1946, p. 90.

Perley as a Minister without portfolio and a High Commissioner to London in order to represent Canada as a permanent and regular member at the Committee talks. The Dominions, however, did not ignore the defence affairs and went on using their own defence committees as a “channel of communication” for their dealings with the Committee of Imperial Defence, whose nature and importance was to change substantially after the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>37</sup>

In the years 1912–1914, no significant debates<sup>38</sup> arose on the transformation of the Conference system. Only in December 1912, the Australian Governor-General, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Denman, made a request for a partial imperial conference to take place in January or February 1913 in Australia. Denman founded his wish on a surprising argument that for Australian ministers it was inconvenient to have to travel overseas in 1913. Harcourt was initially surprised by the date of the suggested meeting, but afterwards he rejected Denman’s request, for most of the other Dominion representatives were not available at the beginning of 1913 for a visit in Australia. Instead, he offered a personal consultation in London in case there were urgent matters to discuss.<sup>39</sup>

Before 1914, the system of Imperial Conferences had evolved into an institution with clear composition, regular meetings and routine procedures. In the years 1887–1911, all Conferences had served to a large extent as opinion fighting arena, where supporters of federalism encountered its opponents.<sup>40</sup> It

<sup>37</sup> Cf. F. A. JOHNSON, *Defence by Committee: The British Committee of Imperial Defence 1885–1959*, London 1960, p. 124; A. B. KEITH, *War Government of the British Dominions*, Oxford 1921, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Constitutional discussions between Richard Jebb and Leopold Amery were going on, whether it was more appropriate to use the term “Alliance” or “Union”. CAC, AP, AMEL 1/2/18, Alliance or Union, January/February 1914, ff. [1]–16.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. The Governor-General [Denman] to the Secretary of State [Harcourt], 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1912, in: Cd. 7347, *Dominions No. 15: Correspondence Relating to the Representation of the Self-governing Dominions on the Committee of Imperial Defence*, London 1914, No. 2, p. 6; The Secretary of State [Harcourt] to the Governor-General [Denman], 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1913, in: *ibidem*, No. 5, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> W. C. B. TUNSTALL, *The Development of the Imperial Conference, 1887–1914*, in: The

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was also quite common that the participation of Dominion Prime Ministers at the Conference meetings and their attitudes there weakened their position on their domestic political scenes to such an extent that it sometimes led to their political fall. Moreover, upon a change in a Prime Minister's Office, the continuity of supported issues was broken and therefore everything had to start from scratch. British Colonial Office still contained the Secretariat of the Imperial Conference, although its independence was never pushed through. The official way of communication still remained as outdated as before, i. e. using cablegrams and telegrams from the British Secretary of State for Colonies to the Governors or Governors-General and the British Prime Minister; the same system worked both ways. If Dominions wanted to communicate with a third country, they had to use this clumsy mechanism based on a system of British mediators, which was lengthy and inefficient and led to a whole range of bizarre misunderstandings. This system was inevitably a drawback at the moment the war broke out and when the speed of information exchange meant a strategic edge. A change only came after the implementation of the principle of permanent cabinet consultations in 1917.<sup>41</sup>

### Abstract

This contribution is focused on the analysis of position of the Committee of Imperial Defence and the system of Imperial Conferences in inter-imperial relations in the years 1911–1914. After the Imperial Conference of 1911 rejected the reform proposals, some members of the Round Table Movement and British and Dominion representatives started the campaign for replacing the Conference system with the Committee of Imperial Defence. The Dominion refusing attitude was a final confirmation that the Committee was not going to become an advisory body of the British Empire any time soon, and that the Conference system remained unreformed.

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Cambridge History of the British Empire: The Empire-Commonwealth 1870–1919, Vol. 3, Cambridge 1967, p. 436.

<sup>41</sup> HALL, pp. 103–105.

**Keywords**

Imperial Conferences, Round Table Movement, Inter-Imperial Relations, British Empire, Committee of Imperial Defence