



The Failure of Imperial Federation

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In the history of British political thought, few ideas suffered more rejections than that of imperial federation. In 1884 William Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, dismissed it as ‘chimerical if not little short of nonsensical’; the New Zealand Prime Minister Joseph Ward’s proposal for an ‘Imperial Parliament of Defence’ was rejected by the 1911 Imperial Conference; the 1926 Imperial Conference concluded that ‘nothing was to be gained by attempting to lay down a Constitution for the British Empire’; and a few years later Australia’s Attorney-General John Latham proclaimed ‘Imperial Federation, even if it were desirable, is impracticable.’¹ The string of repeated rejections of imperial federation spanning almost half a century serves, if nothing else, to illustrate the extraordinary staying power of the idea.

Imperial federation described a range of proposals and schemes put forward in order to promote or preserve political unity between Britain and its white, self-governing colonies, most memorably through a joint Imperial Parliament, with the movement lasting from the 1870s into the 1930s. Yet none of these schemes were ever realised. Their proponents were unable to win the broad support needed to implement such a far-reaching change to the governance of the British empire from either the public or the British and colonial governments. There were several reasons for this. It was a poor deal for the colonies, which would make greater financial contributions to imperial defence but receive only a token say in imperial foreign policy in exchange. They also feared federation would diminish their local autonomy. Others who supported greater imperial unity thought imperial federation was a poor way to go about it and that it would backfire, and some felt that a rigidly defined written scheme was contrary to British political tradition.

Nonetheless, simply because none of their schemes were implemented does not mean the idea of imperial federation had no influence on how history unfolded. Even an idea that fails to carry the day in public debate can shape the course of events by shaping the political agenda and forcing opponents to articulate reasons for their opposition and to elaborate alternatives. Even in

¹ Michael Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 69; *Imperial Conference, 1911: Precis of the Proceedings* (London: Darling and Son Limited, 1911), 11, 18; J. G. Latham, *Australia and the British Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929), 15, 119.

failure, advocates of imperial federation played a key role in achieving greater imperial unity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through shaping public opinion and helping to establish the system of Colonial (later Imperial) conferences.

Imperial federation entered the mainstream of British political thought in the late nineteenth century, although precursors existed on the fringes of political discourse, such as a pre-Revolutionary War proposal to send American representatives to Westminster.² The idea of imperial federation lingered on into the early twentieth century as late as the interwar period. An analysis of the frequency of the term in digitised English language books records its appearance in the 1860s, with usage dramatically increasing in the 1880s before falling off in the 1890s. This was followed by a smaller peak around the Boer War, and then a gradual rise in the 1910s likely linked to the role of the Round Table, the leading group campaigning for imperial federation in the early twentieth century, in reviving the idea. Usage of the term began to decline from around 1921 as the prospects of imperial federation dimmed.³

A variety of schemes for imperial federation were put forward, which Ged Martin has grouped into three categories: parliamentary, extra-parliamentary, and super-parliamentary.⁴ Parliamentary proposals involved colonial representation in some form to the existing British Parliament. For instance, the writer J. A. Froude suggested that ‘colonial statesmen might be admitted as life peers [...] into a reformed House of Lords.’⁵ Extra-parliamentary proposals focused on greater coordination between governments through advisory councils or conferences of political leaders. One such was Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin’s scheme, proposed at the 1907 Imperial Conference, for an imperial council with a permanent secretariat as ‘a system of obtaining [...] information and of enabling us to exchange views with the Government of this country or with each other.’⁶ George Parkin, a publicist for the Imperial Federation League (IFL), the leading organisation promoting imperial federation in the 1880s and 1890s, proposed a scheme for a new ‘Supreme Parliament [...] containing in just proportion representatives of all the self-governing communities of the Empire’ that epitomised the super-parliamentary proposals.⁷ It would be responsible for ‘a clearly defined range of purely Imperial concerns’ such as foreign policy and defence, with local affairs relegated to local governments, including in Britain.⁸ According to Duncan Bell, while the majority of schemes were extra-

² Ged Martin, “Empire Federalism and Imperial Parliamentary Union, 1820-1870,” *Historical Journal* 16, no. 1 (1973), 65; Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 33.

³ Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>, accessed on 2 June 2020. The case-insensitive term ‘imperial federation’ was plotted in the digitised English language books (2012) corpus with smoothing of 3.

⁴ Martin, “Empire Federalism,” 66.

⁵ J. A. Froude, *Oceana, or, England and her Colonies* (London: Spottiswoode and Co, 1886), 217.

⁶ *Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference 1907* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1907), 28.

⁷ George Parkin, *Imperial Federation: The Problem of National Unity* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 303.

⁸ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 303.

parliamentary in nature, supra-parliamentary proposals drew the most attention ‘due to their ambition and ability to generate controversy.’⁹

Proposals predominantly focused on federation between Britain and the white, self-governing colonies, such as Canada and Australia, either explicitly excluding or simply ignoring other parts of the empire.¹⁰ In his role as president of the Victorian branch of the IFL, Deakin made the limits of imperial federation clear, stating: ‘our ambition is to be more effectively linked with New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and the Mother Country’ with which ‘we are knitted together already by racial feelings.’¹¹ Deakin was not alone, with Bell pointing out that ‘the vast majority explicitly drew racial limits around [...] Greater Britain.’¹² Indeed, Seymour Cheng, a scholar who compiled the proposals for imperial federation in 1931, observed, ‘most of the schemes for imperial federation [...] have confined themselves to the self-governing dominions.’¹³ S. R. Mehrotra points out that the failure of imperial federation to encompass the entire empire reflected the contemporary idea that it comprised ‘two disparate elements: the one white and self-governing, the other non-white and dependent.’¹⁴ If Britain’s other colonies – such as India, crown jewel of the empire – could not currently be trusted with self-government, how could they be entrusted with a share in the joint government of the empire? Moreover, fair representation in proportion to their population risked giving them a controlling stake in an imperial federation.

The immediate cause behind the rise of the movement for imperial federation was a rumour that Gladstone’s Liberal Government intended ‘to shake off the colonies [...] [and] make separation inevitable’ around 1869-71.¹⁵ Although largely unfounded, the widespread belief in the 1860s that colonial independence was inevitable meant the rumour appeared plausible.¹⁶ A common saying, first expressed by French politician Marquis de Turgot, likened colonies to fruit, which once ripe ‘must fall from the tree which had borne them.’¹⁷ Gladstone himself told the House of Commons that it was ‘the nature of those possessions to grow [...] until they arrive at that stage of progress in which separation from the mother country inevitably takes place.’¹⁸ In response, public opinion galvanised in support of preserving and strengthening the connection

⁹ Bell, *Greater Britain*, 28.

¹⁰ Seymour Cheng, *Schemes for the Federation of the British Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 178, 264.

¹¹ Daniel McKay, *Imperial Pink: Australia, the Idea of Greater Britain and the Imperial Federation Movement, 1868-1919* (Honours thesis, Australian National University, 2015), 72

¹² Bell, *Greater Britain*, 126.

¹³ Cheng, *Schemes*, 264.

¹⁴ S. R. Mehrotra, “Imperial Federation and India, 1868-1917,” *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* 1, no. 1 (1961), 34.

¹⁵ J. A. Froude, quoted in Duncan Hall, *The British Commonwealth of Nations: A Study of its Past and Future Development* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1920), 53.

¹⁶ Bell, *Greater Britain*, 6, 13, 31.

¹⁷ Lionel Curtis, *The Problem of the Commonwealth* (Melbourne: Macmillan and Co., 1916), 46.

¹⁸ Cheng, *Schemes*, 23.

with the colonies. Bell identifies a ‘surge in proposals’ for imperial federation in the 1870s, which ‘turned into a flood’ during the 1880s, with the IFL founded in 1884.¹⁹

Beyond this immediate trigger, several key factors converged around the 1870s to make imperial federation an appealing prospect to many. Britain’s hegemonic status appeared vulnerable in the face of emerging geopolitical rivals, and closer union with the colonies was a way to buttress Britain’s global position.²⁰ According to one advocate, ‘Both Russia and Germany are the European argument for Imperial Federation. The United States provides the Transatlantic argument.’²¹ Meanwhile, advances in communications and transportation technology, most notably steam, electricity and the telegraph, made a political community across vast spaces possible to imagine, dispelling an ‘ancient argument that distance prevents union.’²² Parkin pointed to ‘the growth of the United States’ as a demonstration that a nation’s ‘immense territorial extent [...] need not prevent it becoming [...] a political organism.’²³ These advances coincided with the end of ‘widespread indifference’ from the British public towards the empire. British culture became more overtly imperialistic in the later years of the nineteenth century, with the profile of the empire increasing in literature, education and popular entertainment.²⁴ In addition, the recent Union victory in the American Civil War, alongside the federation of Canada in 1867 and Germany in 1870, increased the concept’s appeal.²⁵

The shared objective of greater imperial unity masked the fact that Britain and the colonies sought to achieve different outcomes from imperial federation. Britain wanted the colonies to contribute financially to the cost of imperial defence, particularly the navy that underpinned Britain’s maritime empire and protected its trade.²⁶ Multiple contemporaries observed the ‘grumbling’ of taxpayers in Britain who complained they were ‘taxed for the benefit of the colonies’, with Parkin pointing out that this was particularly galling as ‘the Australian workman [...] earns the higher wages.’²⁷ British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury raised the issue at the first Colonial Conference in 1887, arguing that ‘each part of the Empire should take a fair and legitimate part in the defence of the whole.’²⁸ A decade later, Chancellor of the Exchequer Michael Hicks Beach told the House of Commons that ‘we cannot go on constantly

¹⁹ Bell, *Greater Britain*, 3.

²⁰ Bell, *Greater Britain*, 26, 40.

²¹ Bell, *Greater Britain*, 38.

²² Cheng, *Schemes*, 221; Bell, *Greater Britain*, 28.

²³ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 33.

²⁴ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2004), 165, 194.

²⁵ Luke Trainor, *British Imperialism and Australian Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

²⁶ Trainor, *British Imperialism*, 33.

²⁷ James Stanley Little, *A World Empire: Being an Essay upon Imperial Federation* (London: Bradstock & Caslake, 1879), 15.

Cheng, *Schemes*, 206.

Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 21.

²⁸ The Round Table, *A Quarterly Review of the Politics of the British Empire: Volume 7* (London: 1917), 223.

increasing [our] enormous naval expenditure' unless the colonies 'bear at least a share of the expenditure that we incur.'²⁹

The colonies sought greater influence over foreign policy, which was almost wholly determined in London.³⁰ Arriving in London as Australia's High Commissioner in 1916, former Prime Minister Andrew Fisher observed that 'If I had stayed in Scotland, I should have been able to heckle my member on questions of Imperial policy and to vote for or against him on that ground. I went to Australia. I have been Prime Minister. But all the time I have had no say whatever about Imperial policy – no say whatever. Now that can't go on. There must be some change.'³¹ Likewise, the Round Table movement presented imperial federation as way to allow 'a British citizen in the Dominions' (a term adopted for the self-governing colonies) to 'acquire the same control of foreign policy as one domiciled in the British Isles.'³²

The fundamental reason that imperial federation, at least in the parliamentary or super-parliamentary sense, never took place was the failure of its advocates to achieve a broad consensus in favour of a particular scheme. In practical terms, implementing such far-reaching changes to how the British empire was governed would need the agreement of the British and colonial governments, as well as broad popular support. However, even advocates of imperial federation were divided among themselves. It was only through what contemporary historian Duncan Hall described as 'a policy of studied vagueness' that organisations like the IFL and Round Table could present the appearance of consensus in their ranks.³³ Philip Kerr, a leading member of the Round Table, privately described their strategy as 'the practical one of omitting everything which is non-essential, and trying to get as great a multitude as possible agreed upon one or two fundamentals.'³⁴ The IFL collapsed in acrimony in 1893 over internal divisions brought into the open when it formulated a specific scheme for consideration by the British government, which rejected it.³⁵ Similarly, the publication of specific proposals by Lionel Curtis in 1916, another leading Round Table member, 'came close to splitting the London group' of the Round Table.³⁶

Although counter-intuitive to the modern observer, colonial nationalism was not an impediment to imperial federation. The development of distinct colonial identities in the late nineteenth century may seem to preclude the possibility of federation, but this reflects a 'teleological view of the past' that portrays colonial history as an inevitable process of national

²⁹ Trainor, *British Imperialism*, 147.

³⁰ John E. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1975), xiv.

³¹ Curtis, *Commonwealth*, 9-10.

³² Curtis, *Commonwealth*, ix.

³³ Hall, *British Commonwealth*, 68.

³⁴ Kendle, *Round Table Movement*, 161.

³⁵ Hall, *British Commonwealth*, 69.

³⁶ Kendle, *Round Table Movement*, 186

realisation.³⁷ The trend towards independent nation-states was not necessarily the future that observers in the nineteenth century imagined or sought to realise. To Parkin, for instance, events suggested that ‘we are passing from a nation epoch to a federation epoch.’³⁸ The federation of colonies on a lesser scale as in Canada or Australia, now seen as the origin of today’s modern nations, did not extinguish the prospect of an overarching imperial federation. This is borne out by the timing of the imperial federation movement, which did not gain steam until after Canadian Confederation in 1867 and was still debated in the decades after Australian Federation took place in 1901. To contemporaries, it was not an either/or proposition. For example, the New South Wales politician William Daley, who briefly acted as Premier in the 1880s, only supported colonial federation ‘through and in Imperial federation.’³⁹ Some contemporaries, like the writer James Stanley Little, even believed that ‘intercolonial confederation’ like that of Canada and Australia ‘would immensely facilitate’ imperial federation, serving as a stepping stone or building block, rather than being an alternative or end in itself.⁴⁰

In a helpful distinction, historian Douglas Cole differentiates between a state – a ‘political body which successfully claims [...] sovereignty’ over a geographic space – and a nation – ‘an aggregate of people’ consciously differentiated from other peoples; an ‘imagined political community’ as theorist Benedict Anderson later put it.⁴¹ By this definition, many contemporaries like historian John Seeley considered Britain and its colonies to be a ‘vast English nation’ even though it did not coincide with a single state.⁴² Parkin took this nationhood for granted, arguing that imperial federation would accomplish ‘not the creation, but the preservation of national unity’ through combining Britain and her colonies into one state.⁴³ Similarly, Froude described the object of imperial federation as ‘to reunite the scattered fragments of the same nation.’⁴⁴ This membership in a British nation was entirely compatible with local colonial identities. Historian Deryck Schreuder observes that colonists ‘celebrated their dual identity’ – perhaps best encapsulated in Deakin’s description of himself as an ‘independent Australian Briton.’⁴⁵ Yet a

³⁷ Neville Meaney, “Britishness and Australia: Some Reflections” in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, eds. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (Great Britain: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 121.

³⁸ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 27.

³⁹ Froude, *Oceana*, 209.

⁴⁰ Little, *A World Empire*, 14.

Trainor, *British Imperialism*, 9, 17.

⁴¹ Douglas Cole, “The Problem of ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Imperialism’ in British Settlement Colonies,” *Journal of British Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1971), 164; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴² Bell, *Greater Britain*, 111.

⁴³ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 14.

⁴⁴ J.A. Froude, “England and Her Colonies,” in *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1877), 172.

⁴⁵ Deryck M. Schreuder, “Empire: Australia and Greater Britain, 1788-1901,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 532; McKay, *Imperial Pink*, 13.

shared sense of political community did not preclude an awareness – and assertion – of distinct local interests.

It was difficult for advocates of imperial federation to win broad support in the colonies because none of the parliamentary or super-parliamentary schemes were an attractive proposition from a colonial perspective. Under the status quo the colonies could free ride on Britain for their defence, while federation entailed a more equal distribution of defence expenditure. As contemporary economist John Hobson observed in 1902, ‘at present they get the protection of the Empire without paying for it; as long as they think they can get adequate protection on such terms, it is impossible to suppose they would enter an arrangement which required them to pay.’⁴⁶ Hobson calculated that in 1899 the self-governing colonies paid for less than one per cent of the cost of naval defence, despite a combined population of almost one-third of Britain’s and revenue of almost half.⁴⁷ Curtis observed, while touring the dominions in 1910, that ‘the majority of people in the Dominions are thoroughly contented’ with this state of affairs.⁴⁸ Worse still, in exchange for contributing more to imperial defence, the colonies would receive no more than a token influence over foreign policy. It was obvious that due to their disparity in population any scheme involving proportional representation would allow Britain to outvote the colonies, even if they combined. This was recognised by proponents: Curtis offered the rather paltry consolation that while ‘for some time the United Kingdom would retain a preponderance of votes in the Imperial Parliament [...] the lapse of a few generations is likely to transfer that position to Canada.’⁴⁹

Some feared that the autonomy and self-government of the colonies would be threatened by imperial federation. Parkin remarked on the ‘suspicion [...] in the minds of some colonists and more Englishmen [...] that any closer union [...] could only be effected by taking away from the colonies some of the self-governing powers which they now possess.’⁵⁰ Likewise, Deakin highlighted the strength of popular feeling in Australia against ‘outside interference in colonial affairs.’⁵¹ Advocates of federation recognised this sensitivity, with Cheng observing that ‘all writers seem to agree that there should be as little interference as possible with the local affairs of the self-governing dominions.’⁵² Nevertheless, it was difficult to see how any parliament – even if it were limited to control of just foreign policy and defence – could practically function without the concomitant power of taxation to fund its responsibilities. Curtis openly acknowledged the fact, presenting it as a necessary trade-off for the colonies: ‘in order to achieve

⁴⁶ John Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1902), 354.

⁴⁷ Hobson, *Imperialism*, 353.

⁴⁸ Kendle, *Round Table Movement*, 93-4.

⁴⁹ Curtis, *Commonwealth*, 217.

⁵⁰ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 55.

⁵¹ Trainor, *British Imperialism*, 67

⁵² Cheng, *Schemes*, 173.

responsible government' in foreign policy and defence they must surrender the 'exclusive right of taxation now enjoyed by each Dominion government in its own jurisdiction.'⁵³

There were various other reasons why schemes for imperial federation were met with hostility. Some supporters of greater imperial unity were against imperial federation because they believed it would backfire. British politician Lord Bury rejected the prospect in 1885 because it 'would inevitably break up the Empire, whereas the existing union was growing stronger from year to year and would so continue if left alone.'⁵⁴ Likewise, former New Zealand Attorney-General John Findlay, a onetime proponent of imperial federation who later recanted, wrote in 1921 that 'it would be disastrous' to the 'spirit of imperial unity.'⁵⁵ The view that federation would undermine imperial unity reflected a strong belief in a British political tradition that prized gradual evolution in its institutions and its virtues of adaptability and flexibility over written, rigidly defined political arrangements. In line with this belief, Sir Charles Lucas, a former Colonial Office civil servant, argued in 1915 that 'any Federation [...] of English People must grow. Any cut-and-dried scheme would be fatal, contrary to English history, contrary to English instincts.'⁵⁶ Others questioned federation on practical grounds, such as Froude, who argued it would be impossible to 'persuade the House of Commons to abdicate half its functions.'⁵⁷ Some colonists rejected the 'Imperial connection' altogether because they believed that the costs outweighed the benefits. For example, New South Wales Labor politician George Black, who was linked to the republican movement, argued it meant 'a share in England's quarrels' while an independent Australia 'would have absolutely no enemies.'⁵⁸

In the end, imperial unity was realised through means more congenial to the political culture of the British world than schemes for imperial federation and which did not threaten colonial autonomy. These means included a system of Colonial (later Imperial) Conferences comprising British and colonial political delegations, financial contributions by the colonies to the cost of the navy, such as that agreed to by the Australasian colonies at the 1887 Colonial Conference, preferential tariffs and the Imperial War Cabinet.⁵⁹ Representing the peak of collaboration between Britain and the colonies, the Imperial War Cabinet was formed during the First World War. It comprised the dominion Prime Ministers (or their representatives) alongside the British War Cabinet and had executive powers, making decisions for the empire on the conduct of the war and foreign policy.⁶⁰ Ironically, as Hall points out, many of these steps were

⁵³ Curtis, *Commonwealth*, 17, 215.

⁵⁴ Cheng, *Schemes*, 242.

⁵⁵ John Findlay, "Problems of the Imperial Conference: The Passing of Colonialism into the Self-contained National Unit," *Imperial Commerce* 2, no. 7 (1921), 21.

⁵⁶ Curtis, *Commonwealth*, 224.

⁵⁷ Froude, *Oceana*, 220.

⁵⁸ Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, 93; McKay, *Imperial Pink*, 82.

⁵⁹ Trainor, *British Imperialism*, 31.

⁶⁰ Kendle, *Round Table Movement*, 214.

‘anticipated in a remarkable way’ by the scheme put forward by the IFL – and rejected by the British government – in 1893.⁶¹

Although none of the schemes for imperial federation were ever implemented, even in failure the idea of imperial federation exerted a significant influence on the course of events. The ultimate aim of the movement was achieved: preserving and strengthening the connection between Britain and the colonies. Advocates of imperial federation played a key role in establishing the system of conferences, with the first Colonial Conference in 1887 organised at the behest of the IFL, and in shaping public opinion by tirelessly advocating for greater imperial unity.⁶² Contemporary historians in the early twentieth century did not doubt the influence of the imperial federation movement. Writing in 1920, Hall commented that while imperial federation ‘ended in failure’ it ‘has played a part [...] in the making of the mind of the present generation’ and ‘in the development of the institutions of the Empire.’⁶³ Just over a decade later, Cheng ascribed ‘the present unity of the Empire’ in part to the movement, which helped ‘bring about, directly or indirectly, many important constitutional developments.’⁶⁴

The maintenance of imperial unity from the late nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century may seem a futile achievement to the modern observer – a delaying of the inevitable – given the eventual dissolution of the British empire in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, advocates of imperial federation feared the separation and independence of the colonies from Britain as early as the 1870s. When compared to the counterfactual they feared, their achievement is far more striking.

⁶¹ Hall, *British Commonwealth*, 69.

⁶² Bell, *Greater Britain*, 15.

⁶³ Hall, *British Commonwealth*, 7.

⁶⁴ Cheng, *Schemes*, 7.

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