10 Strains of Empire

Down to the last month of 1941 the Second World War had been essentially a European conflict. Other parts of the world – the overseas British Commonwealth and the United States – had given massive support to the allied cause, and without that support eventual victory would have been impossible. On the other side of the medal Britain had found it necessary to mobilise many of her scarce resources in defence of places in Africa which came under German or Italian threat. Yet Europe was still the centre of the war, in the sense that action outside Europe, and action by non-European countries, was designed essentially to produce a European result. In that sense, the Second World War was for the first two years similar in character to the First World War, or even to the Napoleonic War.

When Japan entered the war in December 1941 the whole nature of the war changed, and the British Empire – the most tangible expression of Britain's world power – came under imminent and vital threat. This threat was at first seen in simple terms: the Japanese were attacking British possessions. In truth, the threat was much deeper and more fundamental than that, and the process of Imperial disintegration which Japan played such a large part in bringing about was to continue long after Japan had gone down in utter defeat. To understand the nature of that threat it is necessary to reflect on developments which had been taking place within the Empire over a very long period.

Before 1914 many parts of the British Empire enjoyed more or less complete internal self-government. When war broke out, however, constitutional theory prescribed 'unity of the Crown' – the King could not simultaneously be at war in respect of some of his possessions and at peace in respect of others . . . For practical purposes, the Empire functioned as a unity. In some places, notably South Africa and Ireland, there were serious wartime disturbances; but in general the arrangements functioned remarkably smoothly.

Even in those days it was plain that the future of India was to a very large extent the key to the whole future of the British Empire. Most of India was ultimately controlled by Britain, although day-to-day
administration was in the hands of a specifically Indian Government. Preponderent influence, however, lay with people of British origin. Large tracts of India fell within ‘Native States’ under the authority of autonomous princes with whom the British had treaties. Throughout all India the problems of acute poverty and ignorance were immense. As late as 1941 only 12 per cent of Indians over the age of five were literate. A further problem, which was to become increasingly important as time went on, was the division of Indians into Hindus and Moslems, as well as smaller communities of Christians and Sikhs.

It had long been widely acknowledged that Indians – or at least educated Indians – were entitled to join to a greater extent in the administration of their own country. There had been repeated attempts at the highest levels of government to work towards true racial equality. Few people, if any, contended that India was ready for ‘democracy’ in the British sense of the term, but it was generally felt that no Indian should be disentitled by reason of his ethnic origin from rising to the highest levels of government within his country. Indeed, this notional equality cut two ways, and there had been one or two cases of Indians being elected to the British Parliament. How far the theory conformed with practice is another matter; and Viceroy's with outlooks as different as Lord Ripon and Lord Curzon found their endeavours in that direction more or less frustrated by bitter resistance from Europeans living in the sub-continent. In 1917 the new Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, made a public announcement deeply critical of the ‘indefensible’ and ‘antediluvian’ character of the Indian Government. He came down strongly in favour of future developments towards responsible government for India, which should nevertheless remain an integral part of the British Empire. As an important step in that direction the Government of India Act of 1919 set up a bicameral legislature, most of whose members were elected. The franchise was exceedingly limited, and the authority of the legislature very incomplete; yet the Act provided a foundation upon which development in a democratic direction, within the fabric of the British Empire, might proceed in the future. Yet the year which witnessed this piece of enlightened statesmanship also saw the Amritsar massacre, where troops fired into a vast unarmed crowd, killing 400 and injuring 1200 more. The officer responsible was removed; but admirers contrived an elaborate presentation on his return to Britain. Truly, British rule in India wore two very different faces.

Although the Dominions were for most practical purposes sovereign and independent countries, that independence was established by