CHAPTER XVII

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS,
SOVEREIGNTY AND THE CABINET

Two advantages of a symbolic treatment. During recent years the public’s knowledge of the nature of international agreements has been vastly extended by the displays and debates before the League of Nations and U.N.O.; and by this time most people have come to have an appreciation of the underlying realities of diplomacy. But the knowledge got in this way is intuitive and difficult to put into words; and on that account, difficult to communicate to others. We might hope, therefore, that the use of a symbolism would at least help to make explicit what people already know intuitively. If the symbolism were no more than a new mode of expression, finding readier terms for what we already know, it might still be worth getting.

Also since the end of the First World War there have been innumerable investigations by lawyers and historians on international relations, and a vast mass of factual information has been compiled. The difficulty about this information is that it lacks a general theoretic scheme to hold it together and in terms of which it could be interpreted; and for this reason again it seems worth while to see if anything can be achieved by a formal approach; it may help to explain the existing information and show what additional information ought to be collected.

International conferences and their procedure. In the theory we give we shall disregard international organizations, which sometimes reach their decisions by a simple majority or a two-thirds majority, and concentrate on the case of international conferences. At an international conference agreement is reached only by a unanimous decision. Any country that dissented from the terms would be altogether unlikely to ratify them. We may take it, therefore, that the requirement in our committee is that there should be unanimity.

We may also assume that steps have been taken before the conference to find the amount of common ground between the nations. There may have been an exchange of notes, or exploratory discussions between the diplomats, which have revealed a desire on
the part of the nations concerned to arrive at a common agreement on some particular issue. For this purpose the nations have met round the conference table.

During the conference, if we go by the usual practice, no hard-and-fast procedure will be in use to decide the order in which proposals will be discussed. It will rather be a matter of the countries bargaining among themselves, by twos and threes, and so on, in the search for some proposal that would be acceptable to all. And the chairman will be happy to place before the meeting any proposal that seems likely to get unanimous agreement.

If, in spite of repeated attempts, no proposal seems likely to be adopted, the chairman may put forward the proposal that appears to command more support than any other. Rejection of it may be taken as the signal that no agreement is possible, and that the search for a solution should, meantime, be abandoned.

That is the factual information we have about international conferences. We also know that international discussion is the stage for power politics; that behind the scenes there are promises and threats; and that 'horses are traded', or bargains struck, which do not call for mention in the conference room. The general effect is that the lesser nations swim in the wake of certain great powers, some attached to one and some attached to another; and the ostensible reaction of any small nation will be that of the great power to which it is attached.*

It will, therefore, be a close enough approximation to reality if we suppose that we have, say, four great powers A, B, C and D round the conference table, trying to sift the various proposals that have been put forward and to agree to accept one of them.

The requirement of unanimity ensures that all of the major powers 'benefit' from any change made. The proposal that the conference should be held may have been made for any of a variety

* For example, E. H. Carr in discussing the League Assembly quotes as a true description of the facts the remark of Signor Grandi that he 'never saw a dispute of any importance settled otherwise than by an agreement between the Great Powers' (The Twenty Years Crisis, p. 133). Pitman B. Potter, in the same connexion, ventures the opinion that 'the present situation—formal equality with actual inequality according to actual power and influence—is the best for all concerned' (An Introduction to the Study of International Organisation, p. 393). And Martin Wright, after considering a number of specific instances of international settlement, says 'The method throughout was the same: the Great Powers acting as a directorate' (Royal Institute of International Affairs pamphlet, Power Politics, p. 60).