

THE CRISIS OF BRITAIN
AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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BRITAIN'S CRISIS OF EMPIRE

THE CRISIS OF BRITAIN
AND
THE BRITISH EMPIRE

by
R. Palme Dutt

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PREFACE

THIS is a book about Britain's present problems. It is also about the British Empire. There is a reason why the two are treated here in combination in one book—although, to the best of the writer's knowledge, no book about the two together has so far been written by any other author.

There have been plenty of books about post-war Britain, Britain's economic problems, Britain's new legislative or administrative achievements, Britain's Second Elizabethan Age, Britain's political prospects, or the solution for Britain's ills.

There have been plenty of books about the modern developments of the British Empire or Commonwealth or Commonwealth and Empire, the decline of the Empire, the rebirth of the Empire, Empire trade, Empire economic problems, the development of under-developed territories, the colonial peoples' political prospects, or the relations of the Empire and Europe and America and the "Atlantic Community."

But there has been no book (apart from an earlier very short study by the present author) about the crisis of Britain and the British Empire—taken as a unity. Yet it is precisely this unity (a unity characteristically full of contradictions and conflicts) that is the secret of the understanding of Britain's crisis to-day.

The present book is based in part on an earlier short study entitled *Britain's Crisis of Empire*, which was originally published in 1949, passed through several editions, and has been translated and published in over a dozen countries and languages abroad.

The purpose of *Britain's Crisis of Empire* was to examine Britain's crisis against the background of the Empire. At the time when it was published, the prevailing fashion was still to ascribe Britain's difficulties to temporary short-term causes arising from the second world war and post-war disturbances of international equilibrium, and to seek the solution in the various short-term expedients which were being adopted. The

argument of *Britain's Crisis of Empire* sought to show that the roots of the crisis lay deeper than was commonly recognised in the then current statements of most politicians and economists. These roots, it was argued, lay in the decline and break-up of Britain's former world monopoly, and in the still continuing, though weakened, empire basis of the traditional economic, social and political structure of Britain and the countries of Western Europe. The conclusion was drawn that the measures adopted by successive Governments to meet the crisis were not only incapable of solving it, but, through causing heavy and increasing economic and military strain, could only lead to further deterioration.

At the time, in 1949, when this earlier study was published, widespread illusions of "recovery" and "successful solution of the crisis" were still prevalent on the basis of the temporary artificial surplus in the balance of payments during 1949 and 1950. *Britain's Crisis of Empire* received only a limited response in Britain, though it won more attention outside Britain. It was accorded a complete, almost audible, silence in the general press.

However, the method of the ostrich only harms the ostrich: 1951, with the recurrence of the crisis in a sharper form, brought swift disillusion. The subsequent efforts of the Conservative Government have certainly made drastic inroads into the standards of the people and into Britain's productive capacity, in the desperate effort to apply short-term remedies to improve the balance of payments. But they have been unable, from the nature of the interests they represent, to tackle the real problems; and they have continued and even intensified the basic imperialist policies which have served and can only continue to serve to accentuate the crisis. Hence the outcome of their programme may be expected to lead (whatever the temporary "achievements" in diminishing the deficit on the balance of payments) to a further deterioration in Britain's basic economic position.

To-day there is undoubtedly a change in the atmosphere of discussion. There is widespread recognition of the deeper character of the crisis, even though there is still lack of agreement on its definition. To-day, accordingly, it may be hoped that conditions may prove more favourable for the serious consideration of a contribution which endeavours to present a

reasoned diagnosis and a constructive policy for the problems of present-day Britain.

All the events since 1949, it may be claimed, have considerably reinforced the thesis of *Britain's Crisis of Empire* and afforded a wealth of new experience. Britain's position has grown more serious; the dangers are greater; the bankruptcy of the old policies is increasingly evident. The present fuller survey seeks to take into account the new developments, and to suggest in greater detail the lines of a positive and constructive solution.

Certain key sections have been incorporated in revised form from the earlier book; but the bulk of the material is new.

The treatment and analysis of events and developments has been carried up to the summer of 1952, when this book went to press.¹ Many important changes and new developments between July, 1952, and the date of publication of this book may be expected; and some of these may give reason to modify or revise particular judgments. The reader should therefore bear in mind that he is reading a survey of Britain, the Empire and the world scene as visible to an observer in July, 1952. Nevertheless, the possibly presumptuous expectation may be expressed that, whatever the character of the new developments, sharp turns and major events which may profoundly affect the situation between the summer of 1952 and the summer of 1953, these are more likely to reinforce than otherwise the general thesis of this book with regard to the character of the crisis of Britain and the Empire, and the conditions for its solution.

I have called the present book *The Crisis of Britain and the British Empire* (despite the uncomfortable length of such a title, and the justifiable objections to the use of the general and often loosely defined term "crisis"), for a deliberate reason. This reason is to make clear that the book is about Britain and not merely about the British Empire. Experience showed that the previous book was widely regarded as a book about the Empire and the colonial question; and it is well known that no subject is better guaranteed to make an average audience in Britain reach for their hats, a parliamentary

¹ It has been possible to bring some of the statistical figures more up to date in the light of fuller returns and materials which became available, with regard to 1951 and the first half of 1952, while the book was in the press.

chamber empty or a shy book-buying public turn to another shelf. It is therefore essential to explain to readers in Britain, whom this book is above all intended to reach, that its subject is concerned with life and death questions of the future of Britain, of the British people, of British economics and politics, of the British labour movement and the British path to socialism—all of which are inseparably bound up with the question of the Empire and the problems of the peoples of the Empire. Its purpose is to show the path of comradeship of the British people and the peoples of the countries in the present Empire to unite in ending a system of relations which injures both, and to advance to a new basis for the solution of their problems.

Finally, I should like to express gratitude to the many friends and helpers who have assisted to collect and check some of the material for different sections of this book, and to ask their forgiveness for this collective and anonymous acknowledgment, since some of their names could not be given, and selection would be invidious.

July, 1952

R. PALME DUTT

A NOTE ON "EMPIRE" AND "COMMONWEALTH"

IN this book the British Empire is referred to as the British Empire.

During the past quarter of a century the practice has become increasingly prevalent in many quarters, official, semi-official and unofficial, to replace the term "British Empire" by the term "British Commonwealth of Nations" or "Commonwealth of Nations."

The newer formula is sometimes supposed to rest on a distinction between the "Commonwealth" of Britain with the Dominions and the "Empire" proper of the dependent colonial empire. On this basis the attempt is even made to offer the hybrid "Commonwealth and Empire."

Such a distinction, however, has no formal, legal or constitutional basis. In all legislation referring to the "Commonwealth" the reference includes both the Dominions and the subject colonies or protectorates.

Since the older term "Empire," in which Disraeli, Chamberlain and Kipling took pride, became suspect to democratic opinion, a euphemism was sought by the more mealy-mouthed apologists of imperialism.

As the leading authority on Imperial Constitutional Law, Professor W. I. Jennings, joint author of *The Constitutional Laws of the British Empire*, had occasion to explain in a letter to *The Times* on June 6, 1949:

"'Empire' was associated with 'imperialism' which was the deadliest of the political sins. The use of 'Commonwealth' made political conditions slightly less difficult."

There is no distinction in fact between the "British Empire" and the "British Commonwealth of Nations" or "Commonwealth of Nations."

The latest authoritative pronouncement on this matter was made in 1949 by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Attlee, with reference to the London Declaration of the Dominion Premiers' Conference (speaking in the House of Commons on May 2, 1949):

"Terminology, if it is to be useful, keeps step with developments without becoming rigid or doctrinaire. All constitutional developments in the Commonwealth, the British Commonwealth, or the British Empire—I use the three terms deliberately—have been the subject of consultation between His Majesty's Governments, and there has been no agreement to adopt or to exclude the use of any one of these terms, nor any decision on the part of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to do so. . . . Opinions differ in different parts of the British Empire and Commonwealth on this matter, and I think it better to allow people to use the expression they like best."

Mr. Churchill, speaking at Ottawa in January, 1952, made his preference plain. "I do not know," he said, "if I may mention a word I have used all my life, and for which I do not ask pardon," and he went on to refer to "what was once called the Empire." Commenting on this in an editorial on "Dominion and Empire" on January 15, 1952, *The Times* made a revealing historical survey of the "state of flux" in the various pseudonyms attempted, and in conclusion adduced cogent arguments for reverting to the historic "Empire":

"The heterogeneous British Empire came for a time to be divided into three categories, the Mother Country, the Dominions and the Colonies. . . .

"For a time the classification of the King's dominions into the Commonwealth and the Empire, according to whether they governed themselves or were ultimately controlled from Whitehall, was accurate and useful. But the sense of words is always in a state of flux, and in recent years the extension of the word Commonwealth to cover both kinds of state has blurred the edges of meaning. . . .

"It would be more than a pity if the name of Empire were to be driven out."

With this weighty combined support of Mr. Attlee, Mr. Churchill and *The Times*, it is hoped that the usage adopted in the present book may not be judged arbitrary or without warrant.

• For the purposes of the present book the British Empire is described as what it is—the British Empire.

CHAPTER I

BRITAIN'S CRISIS OF EMPIRE

"That England that was wont to conquer others
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself."

SHAKESPEARE.

Not so many years ago every schoolboy used to be taught Kipling's poem of "Big Steamers." To the question "Oh, where are you going to, all you Big Steamers?" the answer came:

"We are going to fetch you your bread and your butter,
Your beef, pork and mutton, eggs, apples and cheese. . . .
We fetch it from Melbourne, Quebec and Vancouver—
Address us at Hobart, Hong Kong and Bombay.'"

To the grateful schoolboy's further query what he could do in return, the answer taught the lesson of sea power and empire as the basis of Britain's existence:

"Then what can I do for you, all you Big Steamers,
Oh, what can I do for your comfort and good?"
'Send out your big warships to watch your big waters,
That no one may stop us from bringing you food.'"

All this echoes a past era. Britain's warships no longer rule the seas. Sea power has passed to the American navy. And the "beef, pork and mutton, eggs, apples and cheese" are in distinctly short supply.

Every inhabitant of Britain is to-day uncomfortably aware that times have changed, that Britain's position in the world is no longer what it was, that the former world monopoly has vanished and the day of empire domination is passing, and that new problems are arising for the existence of the people of these islands.

Nevertheless, the problems of Britain's economic, social and political future are still most commonly discussed in isolation from the Empire. This is about as intelligent as to discuss Othello without the Moor.