India, the Jigsaw Piece that Didn't Fit

by Jens Norrby

It is reasonable to imagine a wave of unease washing over the members of the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi on 18 March 1919. The council had just rushed through the passing of what would be known as the Rowlatt Act, named after the chair of its producing committee, which extended the wartime powers of the police to make use of normally extra-judicial measures to curb civil unrest. Indian soldiers played a decisive role in the British imperial forces, and there was a widespread expectation that India ought to become more self-governing as part of the settlement in the postwar period.

However, the desperation for autonomy among Indian subjects and the unrest of war had given rise to a number of revolts and schemes for sedition. While the British government was quick to accelerate India's path to independence after the German surrender, the Rowlatt Act betrayed its deep distrust of Indian readiness for responsible government and complete disregard for the rights of Indians as political subjects. The brutal repression

with which the demonstrators against the act were curtailed led to the Amritsar Massacre a few weeks later, one of the blackest spots in Anglo-Indian history. The episode revealed the true disdain with which a significant portion of the British administration regarded the Indian people and brought the width of the cleavage between how each side perceived the road to self-governance to the fore.

A Prototype for Global Government

Among historians and pundits, there has long been the assumption that federalism has no place in British political history. Neither England, Britain, the United Kingdom, nor the Imperial administration adopted elements of the double sovereignty that distinguishes the federalist framework, and neither the nostalgic imperial federalists nor the radical proponents of transatlantic unions made their mark on policy. And this is true. Federalist policy, while successful in several parts of the Empire, never entered British political history.

Federalist thinking, however, played a key role in Britain's transition from an imperial power and subsumption into the postwar global order. As a

prototype of post-imperial global order, both simplifying and concretising the challenges facing a democratic international community in governing, federalism garnered the attention of significant sways of the British political class. From the late nineteenth century to the middle of the Second World War, imagined federations inspired conservatives, liberals, socialists, reactionaries, radicals, realists, and idealists to debate and discuss the nature and challenges of possible post-imperial futures.

The key feature of federalism was its global scope. Supranational federalism, encompassing nation-states as its members, was a constitutional design in line with the increasingly global thinking of the time and fitting within a world for which Britons felt a great deal of responsibility. Either as an all-encompassing world federation or as a federated continental union, federalism spoke to a sensibility which acknowledged the relevance of all humanity in maintaining international stability.

In the end, however, even a good prototype is simply a simplification, and even a fascinating theoretical device is no substitute for experience. Nowhere was the failure to grasp the true challenges

of a global political community more apparent than in relation to India. With its vast population, awe-inspiring history, and distant position, India exemplified many of the hardest factors to square with the federalist models of government.

A Challenge to Western Narratives

Democracy, for example, was at the heart of every federalist vision and while imperial federalists argued that suffrage was something to be earned through political maturity and experience, the explicit aim remained a union of equal members. The fact that the population of India was almost tenfold that of England, Scotland, and Wales combined escaped the federalist agenda, and would inevitably lead to any union with a full representation of the Indian people feeling and appearing very different in character from their contemporary Empire. While the theoretical argument seemed self-evident, India embodied the practical challenges of its realisation.

One of the clearest examples of this failure to acknowledge the extent of practicalities involved in a union with India can be found in one of Britain's most prominent federalists, Lionel Curtis. In the years right before the massacre in Amritsar, Curtis

authored a number of papers and letters that together would constitute one of the principal documents on British policy towards India. Published a few years later, his 1920 book *Dyarchy* laid out Curtis' vision for "the place of India in a world Commonwealth based on the principle of responsible government." Curtis wrote this at a time when the federalists were hard at work acknowledging extended jurisdictions and sovereignty for the (white) settler colonies in today's Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Ireland. Some of these colonies had already been granted partial sovereignty, but local administration continued to perceive themselves as neglected and disadvantaged by policies designed in the mother country. In 1926, federalist efforts contributed greatly to these colonies being granted 'Dominion status', a club which would later be joined briefly by India, Pakistan, and Ceylon.

To the modern reader, these two groups of settler colonies on one hand and colonies of indigenous majorities on the other appear strikingly different in their relationship to the principle of 'responsible' government. For settler colonies to adopt mature and responsible government in the eyes of the British seems to suggest the establishment of proper

institutions, hiring of educated and experienced civil servants, and establishing the infrastructure for proper and fair democratic governance. While not a proper settler colony, Ireland shared a similar ethnic and cultural make-up as the British, emphasising the institutional aspects of governmental readiness. Political maturity, as the British understood it in relation to indigenous populations, was as much an issue of cultural appropriation—of adopting British/Western values and customs to become 'civilised'—as it was of governmental proficiency. To the modern reader, the challenges of making Canada and India meet contemporary British demands for political maturity seem not only *quantitatively* different, but also *qualitatively* a challenge of a completely different character. But Curtis viewed things differently.

Curtis addressed the Indian people just the same way he would address his imperial peers in any of the prospective Dominions. Respectful, certainly, but his way of discussing the transition from British rule and how far India had come under British supervision completely disregarded the political anger and resistance that raged against the British in India. Famines, for example, he explained, were an unfortunate consequence of a lack of available

workforce, and removed from British jurisdiction and responsibility. His address neglected the fact that Indian claims to sovereignty were not just based on charges of being neglected or disadvantaged, but oppressed and brutalised.

In a comment to one of Curtis' public letters, an Indian official gave a brief response with eight reasons to why the scheme would be 'quite unsuitable to Indian conditions', the first being that the scheme conflicted 'with all Indian traditions and ideas of Government … and would be unintelligible to the Indian mind.' While most comments were supportive and constructive, the official's remark is a reminder of the disparity of views on India's road to self-governance.

Misjudging Cultural Diversity

In her 2011 book, *Empire and Imperial Ambition*, Mira Matikkala investigates the intricacies of how imperialism was debated in late Victorian Britain and how there was a consistent strategy of omission in relation to the indigenous majority colonies.[285] As the often brutal violence against the indigenous

[285] Mira Matikkala (2011) *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-Imperialism in Late-Victorian Britain*. London: I. B. Tauris. 288 p.

populations of settler colonies was long since overlooked, they were easy to rally behind as projects of exercising British values abroad, and they amassed support from a large swathe of British society. Majority non-white colonies, with stark ethnic hierarchies, were much more divisive, and there were constant efforts to shift public focus towards the Empire's least frictional parts.

Federalists were well-versed in these practices and constantly worked with oppression through omission, ignoring the most contentious consequences of their thoughts. In his work on J. A. Froude, Duncan Bell has argued that contentious aspects of the civilising process were often tackled with temporal reframing. In cases where the cultural differences between the 'uncivilised' subjects and British ideals were striking, imperialist thinkers implied that these groups were so far from political maturity that there seemed no need to discuss the detailed enactment of their civilising process. At the current point in history, it was argued, focus ought to be on good administrative practice and stable government over the foreseeable future. With this strategy, colonial compromise was evaded by postponement.

However, in the Indian case of the 1920s, such postponements would prove increasingly untenable. The civility with which Curtis addressed his Indian counterparts betrayed his failure to grasp the urgency of Indian claims to self-governance and their deep mistrust of British rule. Curtis wrote as part of a long-standing history of the British overestimating the gratitude of colonial subjects for the benefits of colonial rule and underestimating their urge to sever compulsory ties to British administration. Similar dynamics are still at play in cases such as the return of the Koh-i-Noor diamond. Even without judging the validity of the diamond's various ownership claims, it is obvious that Prime Minister David Cameron misinterpreted the Indian position when he visited in 2010. Defending the diamond's placement in the British Museum collections, he stated that if 'you say yes to one you suddenly find that the British Museum would be empty', which did nothing but reveal the British inability to adopt an Indian perspective on the issue. While the stakes of the contention were infinitesimal compared to the themes Curtis pondered 90 years earlier, it revealed a misalignment with the Indian perspective of a similarly jarring nature.

The Commonwealth's response to the Partition demonstrated a parallel misalignment, completely disregarding the horrors brought upon the peoples of India and Pakistan by the British design of the transition to independence. My research and that of others have demonstrated the continued failure of Commonwealth representatives to grasp the intensity of the dispute and the depth of mistrust towards the British. It was another case of colonial dispute where the civility of the British response accentuated rather than smoothed over the gulf between viewpoints.

There is no evidence to suggest that Curtis (or Cameron) was duplicitous in his efforts to improve Indian governance. There is also no denying that the federalists made massive strides to shift political attention towards neglected imperial issues and pave the way for the anachronistic success of the Commonwealth of Nations, arguably one of the foremost institutions in the service of community and dialogue between the global North and South. That said, these interactions are reminders of the challenges in the transition from an imperial to a rules-based and democratic world order.

The Piece that Didn't Fit

Entire libraries have been written on imperialism's complex and paradoxical relationship with India. Scholars such as Theodore Koditschek in his masterful *Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination* have repeatedly identified India as the case that most strikingly defied the scales and hierarchy of the imperialist notion of 'civilisation'.[286] Within the Western conceptualisations of a shared historical trajectory—where industrialised and wealthy countries in Europe and North America were seen as more advanced and leading the way of historical progress for others to follow—India was an undeniable anomaly. It did not sit well at either end of the scale. As was the case when the federalists designed their prototypes for post-imperial government: India was the part that refused to snap into place. A piece of the jigsaw puzzle that did not fit.

The great contribution of federalists in Britain during the late Empire was their realisation of the

[286] Theodore Koditschek. 2011. *Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Visions of a Greater Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 351 p.

proportions of the challenge that faced the imperial world order. Federalist organisations that promoted the dissemination and exchange of views in tandem with federalist language that concretised the challenges of global governance allowed the tradition to attract adherents and play a consequential role in the United Kingdom's transition to the postwar order. India repeatedly manifested the most striking example of the extent of these challenges, and at the times when federalist imagination fell short, the most glaring reminder of the gap between theory and reality.

With its vast population, India challenged Western visions of democratic coexistence, and by sheer numbers, it dwarfed 'the West' and would push it to the sidelines by the logic of fair and equal representation. With its rich history and culture, the colony defied simple narratives of shared teleological progress and destabilised the notion of the global relevance of European markers of historical advancement. Finally, with its removed position from the mother country, it was one of the colonies that continuously stretched infrastructural schemes to their limits, actualising the challenges of uniting people within a framework that stretched across the globe.

As one of the federalist prototypes' most eccentrically shaped parts, refusing to lock into place, India was the recurrent litmus test for post-imperial governance, bringing the scale of the challenge of global political coexistence to the fore. While remaining a central and frequent theme of federalist writing, India's most telling manifestation and systematic presence in the history of British federalism is the omission of its key issues. India was the part of the prototype that the designer rather wished to avoid discussing in detail.

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