

Question Marks

Question Marks It would appear that the person of the High Commissioner, Sir Percy Loraine, has made an enemy of clarity and allied himself instead with ambiguity and obscurity. Circumstances—or perhaps his own inclinations—have decreed that he should always be surrounded by question marks. Will he return or not return? Is he being transferred or dismissed? Will his transfer truly take place? Will he go directly from London to Ankara, or will he stop first in Egypt? Will he remain in Egypt for some time, or merely pass through in haste? Will he once again concern himself with Egyptian policy after failing in it more completely than any of his predecessors, or will he finally abandon it and concern himself only with packing his luggage—as the ancients used to say—and departing the Nile Valley to assume the burdens of his new post?

All these questions have surrounded Sir Percy Loraine as a halo surrounds the moon—not merely for weeks or months or even a year, but for a very long time indeed. And before these there had been other questions surrounding him, no less curious and amusing.

As soon as negotiations between the Egyptian Wafd and the British collapsed and Sir Percy Loraine returned to Cairo, questions arose around him and around his policy—questions he himself could not answer, though the Prime Minister eventually answered them on his behalf. Was he sincere in the sympathy he appeared to show Egyptians, their hopes, and their democratic aspirations? Or was he merely deceiving them? Was he genuine in his repeated declarations of neutrality and respect for Egyptian independence? Or was he merely toying with both neutrality and independence? Was he truly eager to preserve order in Egypt, or was he merely playing games with Egypt itself?

Even before that, questions had already surrounded Sir Percy when he first arrived in Egypt to assume his office. British Foreign Office policy at the time had been clear enough: Mr. Dalton had publicly declared that Britain would sign no treaty except with a ministry representing a freely elected parliament. Yet rumors and contradictory stories immediately surrounded Sir Percy's own views and intentions. Later events showed many of these rumors to be false, yet they did not arise from nothing.

People said he favored the ministry then in office; others claimed he wished to rid himself of it. Some insisted he intended to overthrow it violently; others believed he preferred to dispose of it with tact and elegance befitting the gentlemanly manners for which he was famous.

You see, then, that the former High Commissioner does not love clarity, calm, or settled conditions. Rather, he seems to prefer an atmosphere clouded by suspicion, one containing both reassurance and unease, both temptation toward trust and warnings toward caution.

We do not know whether Sir Percy himself consciously cultivated this atmosphere or whether fate simply decreed that he should live amid such strange uncertainty, unlike any High Commissioner before him in Egypt. Nor do we know whether this mysterious atmosphere accompanied him throughout all his political appointments, or whether it was reserved for him behind the veils of destiny until the moment his foot touched Egyptian soil and the clouds of uncertainty descended permanently around him.

But one thing is absolutely certain: this veil of ambiguity did Sir Percy no good. It did not protect him from transfer, nor from failure. He imagined himself subtle and cunning. He believed he would manipulate Egyptians by displaying friendship toward them. In the end he deceived no one but himself and achieved nothing from the Egyptian people.

He believed he could dominate and humiliate Egyptians, obtaining through coercion what he could not gain through consent, all while continuing to present himself as neutral and impartial. Thus he encouraged turmoil and unrest. From al-Dubara Palace he watched the consequences of his clever policies spreading through Egypt and harming both the country and its people.

These policies sought to corrupt minds, shake convictions, weaken resolve, and turn Egyptians away from their rights. Some were approached through seduction and temptation, others through violence and severity, until consciences were bought and blood was shed in more than one place across Egypt.

And all the while Sir Percy remained within al-Dubara Palace, protected by the pretense of neutrality. He heard, saw, approved, and consented. Yet after years had passed he looked around and discovered that all the bribery, all the bloodshed, all the effort expended, all the time wasted, all the neutrality he himself had performed, and all the struggle others had endured—none of it had changed Egypt's position in the slightest.

Thus Percy Loraine's cunning proved as useless as George Lloyd's arrogance. Neither could achieve for Britain what Britain desired from Egypt. At last the British government under MacDonald transferred Sir Percy Loraine, thereby openly acknowledging his failure and fearing the disastrous consequences of his policy.

And now that the British government has admitted Sir Percy's failure and selected a successor, it must also change the policy he pursued—just as an earlier British government admitted the failure of George Lloyd, dismissed him, and abandoned his policy entirely.

This conclusion is perfectly clear and admits neither doubt nor argument. Yet some continue to dispute it because, they say, the English newspapers unanimously insist that changing the High Commissioner does not require changing British policy in Egypt.

These disputants have repeatedly been told that changing Britain's general policy toward Egypt is one thing, while changing the High Commissioner's own methods and conduct is another entirely. Britain will not abolish the Declaration of 28 February. It will not abandon the idea of negotiations leading eventually to a treaty. Nor will it annex Egypt formally to the British Empire or suddenly withdraw without conditions.

Britain changed Lord Allenby, who established this policy, yet preserved the policy itself. Britain replaced George Lloyd, who pursued it through violence, yet preserved the policy. And now Britain replaces Sir Percy Loraine, who pursued it through cunning and manipulation, while once again preserving the broader policy.

Britain's international position in Egypt will not be altered merely because one High Commissioner departs and another arrives. Only two things could truly change that position: either a revolution by Egyptians or by the British themselves overturning the situation entirely, or a treaty satisfying the aspirations of both sides.

Yet behind this broad international policy there exists another, more immediate policy: the daily conduct of the High Commissioner toward the Egyptian government and Egyptian people. This local and practical policy must inevitably change whenever the High Commissioner changes, for it depends upon two things that both require such change: first, the disastrous failure into which Sir Percy was driven and whose effects must now be corrected; second, the personal temperament of the new High Commissioner, whose own character inevitably shapes the daily administration of policy in Egypt.

Say what you will about Britain maintaining its overall policy toward Egypt, or about Britain's supposed commitment to neutrality. None of this proves very much. Since the declaration of independence, Britain has always claimed neutrality in Egyptian affairs. Was not the Declaration of 28 February itself presented as a declaration of neutrality?

Yet everyone knows the nature of this neutrality: neutrality on paper, loudly proclaimed, yet never preventing British intervention in Egyptian affairs whenever Britain found intervention useful or desirable.

Thus the High Commissioner's policy in Egypt will certainly change. But what are we to make of these persistent reports insisting that Sir Percy Loraine, despite his transfer and the appointment of a successor, will return to Egypt either to complete his term or finish some final mission?

These reports merely reinforce the atmosphere of obscurity and uncertainty that has always surrounded Sir Percy Loraine's presence in Egypt.

Most likely this ambiguity will continue to surround him until he finally departs for Ankara, presents his credentials, and fully assumes the burdens of his new office. Only then will the ties be severed—not merely between Sir Percy himself and Egypt, for those ties are already broken, but between Egypt and the illusions still entertained by his supporters.

But suppose the High Commissioner truly does return to Cairo. What exactly could he accomplish there? What mission remains unfinished? What period remains incomplete? Would he return in order to prepare a healthier atmosphere for his successor, undoing with his own hands the corruption he himself helped create during these years?

Or would he return in order to conclude the treaty which he and the Prime Minister once dreamed of imposing upon Egypt? Or perhaps he would return because Egypt now stands on the threshold of grave events and Britain desires strong representation there until the new High Commissioner arrives at year's end?

All these possibilities may be true—or none of them may be true. But they all indicate one thing only: Sir Percy Loraine cannot live in Egypt, or even near Egypt, without being surrounded by questions and question marks.

Whatever the case, Egyptians will pay no more attention to his remaining among them for several additional months than they paid to his remaining among them for several years. Nor will Egyptians be deceived by his continued presence now any more than they were deceived before.

Egyptians have learned how to withstand his cunning and manipulation, how to endure the hardships imposed upon them, and they will know equally well how to withstand him if he returns. They will continue defending their rights, their dignity, their independence, and their principles if his brief return threatens any of these things in the slightest degree.

Let Sir Percy remain in London, go to Ankara, or return to Cairo—it changes nothing essential. The undeniable truth remains that his policy has failed and that Britain must replace it with another.