

Democracy and Independence

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 2 September 1945

When Great Britain issued the February 1922 Declaration, recognizing Egypt's own independence in it, while reserving the four matters that were meant to be resolved through free negotiation, Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Secretary, cabled the Egyptian Prime Minister, the late 'Abd al-Khaliq Sarwat Pasha, congratulating him on the complete independence Egypt had secured.

Egyptians, at the time, genuinely laughed at that same "complete" independence, bounded on every side by four reservations — though their own laughter varied, at the time, between open and hidden, muted and loud, depending on their own particular stance toward the Egyptian government of that era. The opposition, who formed the great majority of the people, laughed loud and wide; supporters of the government, a genuine minority, laughed stifled, suppressed laughter.

What admits of no doubt whatsoever is that Lord Curzon himself smiled as he sent that same message, and that Sarwat Pasha himself smiled as he received it. No one genuinely believed the February Declaration had restored Egypt's own complete independence to her — supporters of that Declaration regarded it as a step toward independence, while its opponents regarded it as sheer mockery of people's intelligence, and both sides, supporters and opponents alike, were correct in what they believed.

The February Declaration did enable Egypt to draft her own constitution, to found her own domestic policy on a democratic order, at least reasonable enough on paper. It enabled Egypt to restore her own Foreign Ministry, establish her own political and consular representation, and send envoys to the major capitals. All of this was genuine progress toward independence — but the February Declaration was, at the very same time, a variety of distraction and pacification for the people, an attempt to soften the force of the national movement, and return Egyptians to a measure of merely temporary calm. If all of this proves anything at all, it proves that the word "independence" belongs among those genuinely elastic words that lengthen and shorten, expand and contract, exactly as circumstances require.

We once had, before the abolition of the Protectorate, and after the February [1922] Declaration, several different varieties of independence: we had "complete" independence, we had "total" independence, we had "genuine" independence, "true" independence, and independence that admits "of no doubt" whatsoever! And we found, for each of these varieties, its own boundaries and definitions, meant to demonstrate it was exactly the independence fulfilling our own hopes, the one raising Egypt's own head high among nations, guaranteeing her the place she deserved under the sun, as people put it in those very days — until the whole matter finally ended with these same words being abandoned, and the conviction taking hold that genuinely dignified peoples are never fooled by mere words, but base their own affairs on tangible, established facts instead.

It appears this same kind of doubt over the meaning of the word "independence," this same hesitation over how it lengthens or shortens, expands or contracts, is not confined to Egypt at all — it is something genuinely widespread across the whole earth, true of every nation alike. Independence, in its own precise sense, is a purely imaginative image a writer might realize within his own self, but can never give any outward example of, one capable of being seen or felt — the very nature of life among communities, exactly like the nature of life among individuals, rests on solidarity and cooperation, on people's own need of one another, on people's own dependence upon one another.

Just as you cannot conceive of a single individual, among the individuals of any given people, who has made himself entirely independent of everyone else, managing his own affairs entirely alone, needing no one, awaiting no one's assistance, while everyone else needs him, and seeks assistance from him — so too can you never conceive of any single people capable of dispensing entirely with connection to others, and dependence upon them, in satisfying its own various needs, and realizing its own countless aims.

The further civilization advances, the more complex it becomes, the more entangled and confused people's own interests grow, the harder it becomes for any citizen to dispense with his own fellow citizens, or for any people to dispense with other peoples. And the further civilization advances, the easier communication becomes, the closer homelands draw to one another, the more the distances of time and space between nations are erased — so that independence grows ever more difficult, ever more genuinely unattainable. Even the briefest glance at world life, just before

this most recent war, throughout it, and after its own conclusion, demonstrates this with a clarity admitting neither doubt nor dispute: war breaks out between Germany and Poland, and France and Great Britain rush into war; then Italy rushes in; then Russia rushes in; then Japan and the United States rush in — until the whole earth becomes a single battlefield, the belligerents mocking those few nations that clung, or claimed to wish to cling, to neutrality.

There was, in truth, no genuinely neutral nation at all — and we would only be toying with our own minds, deceiving ourselves with the kind of deception no child ought to be fooled by, were we to imagine Turkey, for instance, was neutral, or that Spain was neutral. Egypt's own neutrality, meanwhile, was exactly like independence — "complete," "total," "genuine," or "beyond doubt." The truth is, every people on earth was directly affected by the war, taking part in it to a greater or lesser degree, whatever was said of neutrality, and of the position of non-belligerent nations, and all the rest of that same abundant talk we used to read, and build theories and principles upon, while never truly believing it, among ourselves — proceeding with it, rather, exactly as sensible children proceed with their own games, or as skilled actors proceed with their own art upon the stage.

Then the war ends, and the world greets a genuinely uncertain peace — and every people is found thinking of its own independence, preparing itself for what is called self-determination, while disputes flare up anew, or resurface from old, among the great victorious powers themselves, and flare up anew, or resurface from old, between these same great powers and other states, some small, some smaller still. All of these same problems and disputes flare up, of course, around exactly these two things: independence, and self-determination. I do not recall which French writer it was who once said: how often people fight, and strike one another down, simply because they exchange words whose own meanings they never agree upon — had they only agreed on those same meanings, they would have laid down whatever weapons they held, and embraced one another the way lovers embrace, not the way enemies do.

I would like us, then, to examine, by way of example, to what extent it might genuinely be said that Great Britain enjoys precise, genuine independence, beyond any doubt or dispute whatsoever. During the war itself, Great Britain enjoyed no such independence, pure of every taint — she found herself obliged to bring her own policy into line with the policy

of her own allies and supporters, since any deviation from that would have cost her the war. She was not, then, independent with respect to Russia, nor with respect to the United States of America — she was not even independent with respect to Egypt: had Egypt so wished, she could have spoiled matters entirely for Great Britain and her own allies, exposed them to the very danger of defeat. Great Britain found herself with no choice but to conciliate Egypt, treat her gently, appease her with smiles, entice her with promises, and press her own allies to meet Egypt with exactly the same gentleness, charm, and enticement.

Great Britain did indeed triumph, and her own allies triumphed with her, and Great Britain took that same momentous step demonstrating her own independence beyond any doubt — freeing herself of the Conservatives, handing the reins of power to Labour, showing that her own people can want something, and achieve exactly what they want. Yet she still does not, even so, enjoy that same complete, precise independence I have just described, and the proof of this lies in her own genuine alarm when the United States cancelled the Lend-Lease agreement, and in her own present manoeuvring and negotiating, her own conciliation and gentle persuasion, her own warnings and threats, all aimed at securing from the United States something to take the place of that same agreement.

The Conservatives, by the war's own end, had recovered their own old arrogance, and began regarding small nations with real disdain in their own gaze; began forgetting, and pretending to forget, their own captivating promises, and their own gentleness once gentler than the breeze itself; began showing no hesitation whatsoever in teaching the Greeks, the Belgians, and the Italians exactly how order ought to be maintained, and in signalling to others besides that the truly wise, prudent man is the one who knows how to profit from whatever he sees and hears, keeping himself well clear of danger. Then Labour came after them, and words grew gentler, smiles appeared on lips, a certain charm and grace spread across those same lips — but the underlying "facts" never changed.

The coalition policy in Greece, and elsewhere besides, remains firmly in place; Mr. Anthony Eden, the Conservative, congratulates Mr. Bevin, the Socialist, on his own sound judgment in these matters — yet Russia looks toward the Balkans with a gaze full of real ambiguity, and real cunning, while the United States cancels the Lend-Lease agreement, and both Conservatives and Labour alike find themselves recalling that

Great Britain is independent, without doubt; great, without doubt; strong, without doubt — yet remains, for all of that, and precisely because of all of that, obliged to bring her own policy into line with the policy of her own allies, great and small alike.

The wire services carry us, too, what this or that English writer has to say — that Great Britain stands in need of assistance from her own friends within the sterling bloc, throughout this very crisis she now endures, and that she will never forget, in days of prosperity, those who helped her in days of hardship — exactly what she said throughout the war itself. What matters is not whether she has kept, or broken, these same promises — what matters is that she, for all her own greatness and strength, for all the vastness of her own authority, the sheer scale of her own empire, and her own triumph in this great victory, still enjoys an independence that, however immense, remains bounded by her own friends' and allies' assistance in matters of peace, exactly as it was once bounded by their own assistance in matters of war.

Say the same of Russia and America, and say even more of France and China. France is independent, without doubt, but her own independence remains bounded by whatever assistance is granted her toward repairing what the war has ruined of her own affairs, toward restoring a measure of modest prosperity to her own people, and toward enabling her to retain her own empire — and she stands, for all of this, no less in need of her own allies than her own allies are in need of her. Great Britain has no way of retaining her own standing in Europe, except that France assist her in doing so; nor does Russia have any way of retaining her own standing in Europe, except that France assist her in doing so as well.

France, then, stands independent yet needy, exactly as Britain and Russia stand independent yet needy. Nor will the United States ever be able to pursue her own policy in East and West, and spread her own commerce in East and West, except by finding, among her own allies and friends, real assistance toward that end. As for China, her own case proves more significant still: she must satisfy Russia, must satisfy the United States, must satisfy Great Britain, must conciliate France — and remains, all the same, independent, indeed one of the great powers managing the affairs of the entire world, East and West alike!

Leave these great powers aside, then, and you will find other, defeated states whose own independence has been suspended,

temporarily, and other, liberated, victorious nations too, whose own independence borders on the genuinely comic: the Balkan states, for instance, stand independent, no doubt about it — yet Russia occupies some of them, and interferes in their own particular affairs, since it was Russia that liberated them; and Great Britain occupies others among them, and interferes in their own particular affairs too, since it was Great Britain that liberated them. The most amusing thing of all is that the British and Americans fault Russia's own interference in the affairs of Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland, while Russia faults Britain's own interference in the affairs of Greece. The former hold that Russian interference destroys the independence of liberated countries; the latter hold that British interference turns Greek independence into sheer absurdity.

You will find, beyond all of this, other nations that were never liberated at all, since the enemy never occupied or conquered them in the first place — occupied, instead, by the Allies themselves, to carry out their own wartime plans; and once the war had laid down its own burdens, the continuation of that same occupation, for a longer or shorter time, became something genuinely necessary to secure whatever independence these same nations required. Iran, for instance, is independent — yet the Allies must remain within her a while longer, so that her own independence might be established on a genuinely firm foundation.

As for the Arab Near East, her own story proves more genuinely complicated than all of this — and the clear, obvious thing is that the very word "independence" has lost its own meaning, very nearly entirely, and that, whenever we speak of democracy and independence today, we are speaking of two old words that once signified certain meanings, at the beginning of this century, but that the trials of these two wars have stripped of their own meaning, turning them into two words signifying nothing whatsoever, except whatever the statesmen of the great powers wish them to signify.

Democracy, exactly as the British want it, carries a meaning only the British themselves find palatable; as the Americans want it, it carries its own American meaning, exactly as, in Russia, it carries its own Russian meaning. Other nations, meanwhile, have no real choice between one meaning or another — they must simply accept whatever meaning circumstances impose upon them, at the will of the British, the Americans, or the Russians. Should any nation claim to hold its own

particular view of democracy and independence, and wish to realize that same meaning exactly as it conceives it, rather than as one power or another conceives it, it ought to remember that swords have not yet been sheathed, and that the atomic bomb was discovered only weeks ago.

This, then, is the democracy the Second World War has finally arrived at, and this is the independence meant to serve as the very foundation of the new world. Yet it remains every people's own right never to weaken, never to falter, never to despair — for the war has ended, but peace has not yet been settled; the world remains, rather, in a crisis resembling that of a patient whose fever has just broken, but who has not yet recovered his own strength. This same crisis will clear one day; the sick world will recover its own strength one day; humanity's own temperament will grow calm, tomorrow, or the day after — and only then might we genuinely search for the precise meaning truly signified by the word "democracy," and the word "independence."