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BRITISH "BLUE PRINT" FOR BURMA

BY ALICE THORNER

ALTHOUGH ALMOST the whole of Burma has been re-occupied, Britain has made no official declaration of her postwar plans for that country. Last November there appeared under the sponsorship of the Conservative Party's Imperial Affairs Committee a "Blue Print" for Burma, drawn up by a group of lesser-known Conservative Members of Parliament. One month after the publication of the report Mr. Somerset de Chair, the chairman of the "Blue Print" committee, offered in Parliament an amendment to the address from the throne regretting that there was no mention of plans for the administration and future development of Burma. Upon this motion ensued the first Burma debate in Commons in ten years! Although the net result was a polite but firm refusal by the Government to commit itself further at the time, the main purpose of Mr. de Chair's group was achieved. Burma re-entered the focus of British public discussion.

Assume Dominion Status

The "Blue Print" of the Conservative Party assumes that Burma aspires to self-government as a member of the British Commonwealth, and deserves United Kingdom support in this respect. Within this frame of reference the plan calls for following the complete reoccupation of Burma by a reconstruction period of fixed duration — six years is the suggested maximum. During this period authority is to be vested in a British Governor assisted by an appointed Council of representative Burmans. Meanwhile, the handling of Burma affairs in London would be transferred from the India Office to a special department in the Dominions Office. At the close of the period a permanent constitution drawn up with the aid of the Council would be submitted to a broadly elected representative assembly.

The constitution, after its approval, is projected as establishing self-government subject to the conclusion of treaties between the new Burmese Government and the Imperial Government providing for British military, naval and air bases; for reasonable protection of British nationals engaged in industry and trade; and for "the conduct of external relations". The Shans, Chins, Kachins, and Karens of northern and eastern Burma (the Excluded States under the 1935 Constitution) are not to form part of the new Burmese Dominion until such time as they clearly express a desire to join it.

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To facilitate Burma's economic rehabilitation the "Blue Print" presents a radical land policy and a novel method for controlling the return to Burma of British industry and commerce. The suggestion for agricultural reform proposes to take advantage of wartime dislocations and free all farm land from non-cultivating ownership. This means, in large part, from the ownership of the Indian chettyars (a group of money-lenders from Southern India), many of whom fled before the Japanese and will find it difficult to prove their titles upon return to Burma. The "Blue Print" authors estimate that the chettyars would settle for a cash payment of approximately thirty percent of the face value of their investments, and propose that the money to compensate them come from a loan supplied by the Imperial Government and secured on the revenues of Burma. A Land Bank, financed and controlled by the Burmese Government, is recommended as a temporary expedient; cooperative credit is seen as the long-term solution.

In regard to the re-establishment of British commerce and industry, the "Blue Print" would offer full compensation for war losses only to those firms which are willing to return to Burma and resume operations on a satisfactory basis. The administrative headquarters of the companies must be housed in Rangoon and not London, their capital must be arranged in rupees and be saleable on the Rangoon exchange, and they must institute systematic plans of apprenticeship and training of Burmese. It is further proposed that if Burmese investors do not cooperate, the Government of Burma might itself become a partner in industrial enterprise.

Discussion in Parliament and Press

The discussion aroused by the "Blue Print" both in Parliament and in the press centered on three main questions: the political expediency of a formal declaration of British intentions, the nature and timing of self-government for Burma, and goals for the future Burmese economy.

Opening the parliamentary debate on December 12, 1944, Mr. Somerset de Chair urged that His Majesty's Government make an early declaration of its intentions. The present lack of a clear statement, he argued, represented a gap in British political warfare at a time when the Japanese had fanned the flames of Burmese nationalism by granting "independence" to a puppet regime. Mr. Sidney Shepard, secretary of the "Blue Print" committee, seconded Mr. De Chair on

this point with a quotation from a speech made by Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the Governor of Burma, to the East India Association in 1942: "Politically-minded Burmans . . . are wondering just what our intentions toward Burma are. . . . We have everything to gain and nothing to lose by being perfectly explicit as to our intentions." Sir Stanley Reed, also a member of the committee, expressed the fear that a general statement promising self-government "as soon as possible" would be regarded as a breach of faith by the Burmese. He called upon Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State for Burma, "to make his explanation today clear beyond doubt to the Burman that we go back there as liberators to establish him as master in his own country". Arthur Creech-Jones, Parliamentary Secretary to Ernest Bevin and the only Laborite to take part in the Burma debate, also argued for an immediate British statement.

Mr. Amery, in reply, recalled the London visit in 1941 of U Saw, then premier, who hoped to obtain a categorical pledge that as soon as the war was over Burma would be set up as a self-governing Dominion. At that time, Mr. Amery said, he did not feel he could give U Saw a more precise assurance than that Britain would help Burma to attain Dominion status "as speedily and as fully as possible". He still felt, he continued, that the time had not come for a further public commitment. It would be unfortunate, said Mr. Amery, to announce programs "which we might afterwards be forced with some discredit to go back on". However, "it may well be that the time will come — perhaps not in the dim future — when the course of events will be clearer and when an announcement may be not only possible but valuable in assuring good will and cooperation."

Political Temper of Burmese

The writers of the "Blue Print" argued that no less than a substantial degree of independence would be acceptable to the Burmese. They noted that after the passage of the Constitution of 1935, which transferred considerable powers to the Burmese Government, there was nonetheless, in the words of Dorman-Smith, "a general feeling of discontent". Now, they judged, "having drunk this heady wine of nominal independence", the Burmese would be "even more strongly imbued with the spirit of nationalism".

With this estimate of the political temper of the Burmese there was no disagreement. But from both left and right the British press pounced upon the specific proposals of the "Blue Print" as being far too stingy to attract Burmese support or even to fulfill past British pledges. The London *Times* of November 15, recalling the 1935 promise to Burma that separation from India would not prejudice her future constitu-

tional development and Mr. Amery's 1941 statement reaffirming the goal of Dominion status, declared: "In the light of these undertakings Burmese national sentiment . . . will be content with nothing less than the Cripps offer . . .".

Cripps Offer as Criterion

Interestingly enough, both the editors of the leftist *New Statesman and Nation* in the issue of November 18 and Hla Myint, a Burmese writing in the liberal *Manchester Guardian* on December 6, followed the conservative *Times* in using the Cripps offer as a criterion. The "Blue Print", in the view of these journals, amounts to a lesser offer than the Cripps proposals because the imposition of a reconstruction period would delay self-government; and the provisions for defense bases, control of foreign policy, and exclusion of tribal areas would limit self-government in Burma.

Several critics of the "Blue Print" attacked the period of six years suggested for reconstruction as unduly long. Even Mr. De Chair reported to Commons that the Burmese Refugees Association in Simla did not think the period of reconstruction "should be extended beyond any period of years strictly necessary for the re-establishment of orderly administration and the inauguration of essential measures of reconstruction". Mr. Creech-Jones, in this debate, was concerned lest post-dating the independence promise too far ahead might react unfavorably upon Imperial prestige. He said, "The United States will be handling the Philippines and her attempt at speedy political liberation will be proclaimed as the model which should inspire Britain in her relation to Burma."

The provision for rule during this period by a British Governor assisted by an appointed Burmese Council also fared rather badly in the public discussion. Hla Myint in the article already cited wrote that "Informed and unbiased observers both in Britain and in India are agreed in rejecting the 'Blue Print's' proposal to have a reconstruction period under the direct rule of the Governor." The *Economist* of December 18 suggested cautiously that "as much authority as possible should be transferred" to the Council of Burmese. Maurice Collis, former Rangoon Magistrate writing in the *Observer* of December 18, warned that "hope of a happy issue in Burma remains faint unless the British Government, on the reoccupation of Rangoon, makes a very early pronouncement of its immediate intention to reassemble the Burmese Parliament which was in existence at the time of the Japanese invasion." From Burman critics of the "Blue Print", according to the *New Statesman* of December 23, "comes the demand that the Governor during the interim period shall be a Burman".

A lively debate ensued on the question of who should draw up the constitution for an independent Burma. In Commons, Squadron-Leader Donner, a Conservative but not a member of the "Blue Print" group, made the interesting suggestion that the constitutional assembly be dominated by village headmen rather than "Europeanized intelligentsia". Mr. Nicholson, one of the "Blue Print" authors, rose to correct his colleagues' misapprehension that the "Blue Print" called for any constitutional assembly at all. "You would get a much sounder constitution", Nicholson argued, "by the appointment of a representative Council of Burmese to assist the Governor in the work of reconstruction and constitution-making than if the constitution were to be drawn up in the full glare of limelight. . . . We should not hand over responsibility for the constitution of Burma to a constituent assembly for any reason whatever."

Controversial Economic Questions

Controversial questions in the economic field were the future position of the Indian chettyars, the compensation of British interests, and the desirability of further British investment. The sharpest issue which Amery took with any single element of the "Blue Print" was with the proposition that the flight of the majority of the Indians in 1942 left a clean slate upon which the Burmese could begin anew their agricultural ownership and indebtedness records. The Secretary of State for India and Burma pointed out that many of the chettyars had lived in Burma since before 1886, and that many others now in India also wished to return. He went along with the "Blue Print" in agreeing that some scheme for repurchase of land would have to be worked out, but was concerned over the policy toward India. Mr. Amery notwithstanding, the *Economist* saw Indian ownership as an even greater menace than any British interests to Burma's economic independence. Considering the need for bringing Burmese into economic control of their own country, the *Economist* wrote "The biggest single matter is the Indian problem. . . . In many cases the industries and rice-fields of Burma have been subject to a galling remote control from Madras and elsewhere. There will be no economic future for Burma unless this balance is redressed."

The "Blue Print's" scheme for repayment of British firms was opposed by the *New Statesman*: "The demand that this Dominion shall compensate British capitalists for all their losses during the war would infuriate an even milder people than the Burmese." Mr. Shepard in the parliamentary discussion noted that His Majesty's Government has obligated itself, in reply to representations made in August 1942 on behalf of commercial interests in the Far East, to assisting the

colonies in replacing damaged or destroyed properties should their own resources be insufficient. The undertaking was later made specifically applicable to Burma.

The London *Times*, in opposing a return of British capital to Burma, went so far as to contemplate the abandonment of the whole idea of modern industrial development there. The "Blue Print" authors, in the opinion of the *Times*, failed to recognize "the extent of Burmese indifference, if not active hostility, to the restoration of the old economy". The question was raised by the *Times* as to whether the Burmese might not prefer a lower standard to foreign control.

Hla Myint denied that his countrymen would be incapable of large-scale enterprise. The Burmese, according to Hla Myint, are not by nature thriftless, lazy, and averse to trade; rather they are by economic pressure too poor to save, fully or seasonally unemployed, and discriminated against in the selection of commercial agents by European firms. Although he wanted no more of "foreign economic domination", Hla Myint held that the future Burma must have international trade, overseas capital, and foreign technicians. State action, he continued, would be required to ensure that Burma's foreign economic relations serve as an instrument of economic welfare for the Burmese.

Secretary Amery, in discussing the economic aspects, pictured British interests in Burma voluntarily ordering their affairs so as to convince the Burmese people that "capital is given to help them to do what they cannot do for themselves and to bring more wealth into the country than it takes out of the country". British capital, he stated, is prepared to bring Burmese into a greater measure of both financial and administrative partnership and to provide the necessary training.

Rehabilitation Test of Policy

Commenting on the parliamentary debate, the *Economist* raised the question as to whether the "economics of reconstruction" might not prove more significant than the "politics of independence". At any rate, the *Economist* urged, economic rehabilitation should receive priority as the first task of the British in Burma. "By their way of setting about it they can amply prove whether they seriously intend independence." Seen in this light it is perhaps noteworthy that although Amery did not commit Britain to guaranteeing Burma Dominion status within any specified period of time, he did pledge in the name of His Majesty's Government a program of economic reconstruction involving not merely a return to prewar conditions but a rise to a higher level of social existence. "Our objective," he said, "is perfectly clear. It is a prosperous, contented people on a high level of well-being and capable of sustaining as soon as possible the responsibility of conducting their own affairs."