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FULL TRANSCRIPT

FULL INDEX

The Imperial Press Conference (1909)

The idea for an Imperial Press Conference originated with [Harry Brittain](#), part of the *Standard's* management staff, and a Conservative MP from 1918 to 1929. While visiting Canada in 1907 as a representative of the Board of Trade, [Brittain](#) was struck by the ignorance of many people in the United Kingdom regarding the Dominions and vice versa. Working on the assumption that the press itself could be a powerful factor in promoting co-operation within the Empire, he devised a plan to bring together its newspaper editors at a conference in Britain.⁷¹ The next two years of his life were devoted to turning the idea into a reality. The first step was to secure the support of leading newspaper magnates. A committee was formed with Lord Burnham as President, [Northcliffe](#) as Treasurer, [Pearson](#) as Chairman, and [Brittain](#) as Secretary. Other well-known press personalities actively involved in making arrangements for the conference included Spender, Gwynne, Robert Donald (editor of the *Daily Chronicle*), and [Harry Lawson](#) MP (who managed *The Daily Telegraph* from 1903, when his father, [Edward Lawson](#), was raised to the peerage as Lord Burnham). Letters were sent to the owners of the Empire's major daily papers to inform them of the conference, and to ask those from larger cities to elect a delegate. There were fifty-four delegates in total. They came from Australia, New Zealand, Canada (including a representative of the French-Canadian press), South Africa (including two representatives of the Afrikaans' press, both of which had fought for Transvaal independence in 1899), India (there were five representatives of the Anglo-Indian press, but only a single spokesman for the 'native' press⁷²), Burma, Ceylon, the Straits Settlements of Malaya, and the West Indies. It was, as W.T. Stead remarked, the first time in the history of the Empire that 'the keepers of the eyes and ears of King Demos had been gathered together from Britain and from Britain's dominions overseas'.⁷³

71 H. [Brittain](#), *Pilgrims and Pioneers* (1946), pp.5, 181-98.

72 Surendranath Banerjee of *The Bengalee*.

73 W.T. Stead, 'The Editors of the Empire at Home', *The Contemporary Review* (July, 1909), p.48.

The visitors were welcomed on 5 June at the Imperial International Exhibition halls in Shepherd's Bush. Six hundred newspapermen from the United Kingdom were present. A moving opening address was delivered by the seasoned platform orator, Lord Rosebery. Begging the forgiveness of the Indian press delegates, Rosebery

directed his remarks mainly to the self-governing parts of the Empire. His closing words bade the guests: 'Welcome home! Welcome home to the home of your language, your liberties and your race. Welcome home to the source of your parliaments, your free institutions and of this immeasurable Empire.'⁷⁴ Spender, who had been responsible for stage-managing the speech, but had failed to silence the appalling noises from a display of fireworks outside, later judged it to have been the 'most extraordinary performance by a public man' he had ever witnessed.⁷⁵ A week later on 11 June, the overseas delegates were welcomed by the government at another banquet at which the Prime Minister, Asquith, acknowledged the significance of their visit, and recognised the special function of the press in promoting imperial unity.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ T.H. Hardman, *A Parliament of the Press. The First Imperial Press Conference, 1909* (1909), pp.12, 15.

⁷⁵ Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, p.227.

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 12/6/1909, p.6.

In between the more serious business of the conference debates, a busy social itinerary was organised for the overseas delegates. There was a military display at Aldershot, and a great demonstration of sea power at Spithead; a garden party was hosted by the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House; a banquet was held by the Corporation of the City of Glasgow; and there were guided tours of the Edinburgh offices of the *Scotsman*, and of the General Post Office by the Postmaster-General. There were also visits to the Daimler works in Coventry, steel works in Sheffield, and cotton mills in Manchester; and outings to Warwick Castle, All Souls and Worcester colleges in Oxford, and Chatsworth House.⁷⁷ It was a demanding schedule, but not without a purpose, for it was meant to give Dominion journalists a more rounded view of British society, and an opportunity of forging relationships with their British counterparts.

⁷⁷ *The Newspaper Press Directory* (1910), pp.6-9.

The centrepiece of the event was a series of debates, modelled upon the colonial conference system. Spender chaired a small sub-committee which decided upon the subjects to be discussed. It was resolved to hold daily meetings at which ministers, ex-ministers and British journalists would discuss key aspects of imperial affairs with the overseas guests.⁷⁸ These meetings deliberately excluded the fiscal question as newspapers of every shade of political opinion were represented. The programme was as follows:

⁷⁸ Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, p.224.

Day 1: *Imperial cable communications*: The Colonial Secretary, Crewe, presiding, with Austen Chamberlain and Sydney Buxton in support.

Day 2: *The navy and imperial defence*: McKenna presiding, with Grey, Cromer, Lyttelton, and Amery present.

Day 3: *Imperial defence*: Balfour presiding, with Haldane and Roberts present, (Emigration was also discussed.)

Day 4: *Literature and journalism*: Lord Morley presiding.

A further debate on naval defence was held on the penultimate day or 26 June, under the chairmanship of Lord Esher, with Beresford and General Sir John French present. The conference's political debates were judged to be of such importance by *The Times* that each one was reported in detail and made the subject of a leading article.

As well as developing a dialogue between British and Dominion journalists, the conference also lobbied for a reduction of cable rates. It was in the years between 1850 and 1870 that submarine cables grew from infancy to maturity.⁷⁹ In 1852, they totalled a mere 46 kilometres; by 1895, they stretched over some 300,000 kilometres. Cables reached North America in 1866, India in 1870, Australia in 1871, South Africa in 1879, and West Africa in 1886. They had a remarkable effect. For instance, when the cable from London to Australia was opened, news that had taken fifty-four days to travel by the fastest ship now took only fifteen to twenty-four hours. Yet since international telegraphy was left to private enterprise for many years, cable rates tended to be very high. Indeed, until 1895 telegrams between Australia and Britain were so expensive that all the Australian newspapers together could only afford to cable a few hundred words a day. In order to reduce the rate, the Australian colonies had to subsidise the relevant company, the Eastern Telegraph, to the tune of £32,400 a year. But it was not until the Pacific Ocean cable was opened to the public in December 1902 that the situation really began to improve. Built by a consortium consisting of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and subsidised heavily by the British government, the new cable forced the Eastern Telegraph to lower its rate to 3s per word. The Pacific's telegrams were also faster, taking an hour instead of a day.

⁷⁹ For a fuller discussion of this subject, see D.R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon. Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945* (Oxford, 1991), Chapters 2-3.

The conference's committee on cable rates and press inter-communication organised a deputation to Asquith. Its case for cheaper cables was premised upon the benefits of closer contact between the distant parts of the Empire.⁸⁰ High cable rates, it was argued, had curtailed the discussion of imperial affairs in the press, and frequently led to misunderstandings between Britain and its colonies. Lower cable rates would permit the colonial press to provide wider and more accurate coverage of events in Britain, as well as facilitating a free exchange of ideas on imperial subjects. They were therefore a necessary foundation of imperial unity.⁸¹ While sympathising with what the deputation had to say, Asquith emphasised that the Canadian and North American cable companies were 'commercial bodies acting on commercial principles'; government could do little more than encourage them to reduce their rates. Needless to say, the suggestion of another state cable, either from Britain to Canada, or across Canada linking the Atlantic and Pacific, was not well received.⁸² Yet the committee had more joy with the cable companies. In response to its representations, the cost of a telegram from Britain to Australia was reduced substantially by the Pacific Cable Board from 1s to 9d a word. Two years later, a much desired cheapening of the trans-Atlantic message rate was secured when it was agreed to transmit messages of non-urgent character at half-rates.⁸³

⁸⁰ Letter from Hudson Berkeley (New South Wales) to the Editor, *The Times*, 6/6/1909, p.17.

⁸¹ *Newspapers of Greater Britain* (1918), pp. 1-3.

⁸² The idea of a state-owned Atlantic cable originated with the Canadian delegates, who were authorised by the Canadian Postmaster-General (Lemieux) to say to Asquith that Canada would pay one half of the cost of such a cable if Great Britain financed the other half. See Hardman, *A Parliament of the Press*, p. 121; P.D. Ross, *Retrospects of a Newspaper Person* (Toronto, 1931), pp. 148—9.

⁸³ The latter was a delayed message rate, the cable companies reserving the right to hold back a cablegram for up to 19 hours. The EPU continued to agitate for a flat rate of 2.5d per word, without deferment, and this was eventually conceded by the Western Union Cable Co. in 1912. *Newspapers of Greater Britain*, pp.36-42.

Immediately after the delegates departed, the Empire Press Union was formed. It was a permanent body charged with the task of carrying on the work of the conference and improving communication between the newspapers of the Empire. Its headquarters were in Fleet Street, and branches were organised throughout the Dominions. The EPU dealt with questions concerning cables, and was responsible for making arrangements for further conferences. During the First World War it also participated in propaganda work, arranging for the correspondents of colonial papers to be admitted to the lobby of the House of Commons, to visit important industrial and military centres in Britain, and to travel to the Western Front.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ *Newspapers of Greater Britain*, pp.8-31.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the South African War, Milner had urged the need for journalists at home to launch a campaign for the better organisation of the British Empire.⁸⁵ How far were his hopes fulfilled? The late-Victorian and Edwardian era saw the arrival of the modern newspaper magnate, buying up and marshalling the press on a grand scale. Northcliffe and Pearson acquired huge stakes in national and provincial newspapers. They were men of abounding energy, with a great zest for life, and a hands-on approach to the management of their papers. In founding the *Daily Mail*, Northcliffe chose to put particular emphasis on the Empire, convinced that it would increase the paper's circulation. Yet despite his abiding interest in politics, and his admiration of Chamberlain, Northcliffe was unable to offer consistent support for tariff reform. His stable of papers pursued an 'erratic middle course' on the fiscal question.⁸⁶ In contrast, Pearson, who had previously shown very little interest in politics, rallied to Chamberlain's banner. In its first two years, the TRL benefited from his ingenuity, imagination and organisational flair, and although the *Daily Express* was by no means a political organ, it devoted a large number of column inches to explaining the case for tariff reform.⁸⁷ Turning to the 'political' press, it is impossible not to be struck by the large number of journalists who identified their careers with the cause of imperial unity, and who wrote extensively on the reconstruction of the Empire. Men like Amery, Garvin, Grigg, Gwynne, Kerr, Kinloch-Cooke, Maxse and Ware shared a profound belief in the importance of the press in forming and directing public opinion. In putting forward their views on empire they displayed great strength of character, often ignoring their proprietors or the party managers in order to criticise existing policy. They were not so much spectators as participators in the drama of imperial politics, and they regarded their papers as instruments of agitation which had a function beyond that of disseminating 'hard' news.

⁸⁵ Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press*, Vol. II, p.8.

⁸⁶ Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People*, p.305.

Throughout these years, the overriding concern of imperial journalists was Britain's relations with the self-governing Dominions. They all agreed that the Empire was evolving into some form of partnership based upon the shared political ideals and institutions of its English-speaking peoples.⁸⁸ So much was apparent from the Imperial Press Conference. For if the event had acted as a great demonstration of imperial kinship and solidarity, it had also fought shy of the problems associated with governing different races and cultures. W.T. Stead, a pioneer of the 'new journalism', was quick to take up this point. Acknowledging how the presence of the Dominion delegates in Britain had helped to 'quicken the sense of the unity of the Empire, so far at least as the white-skinned races are concerned', he complained bitterly of the conference's failure to confront 'the greater and deeper trouble involved in the collision of the white and coloured races of the Empire'.⁸⁹ Similarly, the Secretary of State for India, John Morley, was struck by the 'extraordinarily small attention, almost amounting to nothing' that was given to India by the delegates; an impression confirmed by Lord Esher, who on the final day observed how the term 'Empire' now referred primarily to Great Britain and the white Dominions.⁹⁰ In the next three chapters we shall be examining how this particular concept of empire influenced national political debate about trade, defence and migration.

⁸⁸ Startt, *Journalists for Empire*, pp.207-9.

⁸⁹ Stead, 'The Editors of the Empire', p.55.

⁹⁰ 'Lord Morley at Oxford', *The Times*, 14/6/1909, p.6; *The Annual Register* (1909), pp.131, 149.

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Conclusion

Towards the end of the South African War, [Alfred, 1st Viscount; Lord Alfred Milner] Milner had urged the need for journalists at home to launch a campaign for the better organisation of the British Empire.[85] How far were his hopes fulfilled? The late-Victorian and Edwardian era saw the arrival of the modern newspaper magnate, buying up and marshalling [sic] the press on a grand scale. [Alfred Charles William Harmsworth, 1st Viscount] Northcliffe and [Sir Charles John] Pearson acquired huge stakes in national and provincial newspapers. They were men of abounding energy, with a great zest for life, and a hands-on approach to the management of their papers. In founding the *Daily Mail*, Northcliffe chose to put particular emphasis on the Empire, convinced that it would increase the paper's circulation. Yet despite his abiding interest in politics, and his admiration of [Joseph] Chamberlain, Northcliffe was unable to offer consistent support for tariff reform. His stable of papers pursued an 'erratic middle course' on the fiscal question.[86] In contrast, Pearson, who had previously shown little interest in politics, rallied to Chamberlain's banner. In its first two years, the TRL benefited from his ingenuity, imagination and organisational flair, and although the *Daily Express* was by no means a political organ [questionable assertion], it devoted a large number of column inches to explaining the case for tariff reform.[87] Turning to the 'political' press, it is impossible not to be struck by the large number of journalists who identified their careers with the cause of imperial unity, and who wrote extensively on the reconstruction of the Empire. Men like Amery, Garvin, Grigg, Gwynne, Kerr, Kinloch-Cooke, Maxse and Ware shared a profound belief in the importance of the press in forming and directing public opinion. In putting forward their views on empire they displayed great strength of character, often ignoring their proprietors or the party managers in order to criticize existing policy. They were not so much spectators as participators in the drama of imperial politics, and they regarded their papers as instruments of agitation which had a function beyond that of disseminating 'hard' news.

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89 Stead, 'The Editors of the Empire', p.55.

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END

INDEX

| | |
|---|--|
| 'Welcome home! Welcome home to the home of your language, your liberties and your race. Welcome home to the source of your parliaments, your free institutions and of this immeasurable Empire.', 8 | Britain, 1, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14 |
| Afrikaans' press, 7 | Burma, 7 |
| Amery, 9, 13 | Canada, 6, 10, 11 |
| Anglo-Indian press, 7 | Ceylon, 7 |
| Asquith, 8, 10, 11 | Chamberlain, 9, 13 |
| banquet was held by the Corporation of the City of Glasgow, 8 | committee on cable rates and press inter-communications organised a deputation to Asquith, 10 |
| Blewett, <i>The Peers, the Parties and the People</i> , p.305., 13 | cotton mills in Manchester, 9 |
| Board of Trade, 6 | D.R. Headrick, <i>The Invisible Weapon. Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945</i> (Oxford, 1991), Chapters 2-3., 10 |
| | <i>Daily Express</i> , 13 |
| | <i>Daily Mail</i> , 13 |

- Day 1: *Imperial cable communications*: The Colonial Secretary, Crewe, presiding with Austen Chamberlain and Sydney Buxton in support., 9
- Day 2: *The navy and imperial defence*: McKeena presiding with Grey, Cromer, Lyttelton and Amery present., 9
- Day 3: *Imperial defence*: Balfour presiding, with Haldane and Roberts present, (Emigration was also discussed.), 9
- Day 4: *Literature and journalism*: Lord Morely presiding., 9
- dialogue between British and Dominion journalists, 10
- Dominions, 7, 12, 14
- Edinburgh offices of the Scotsman, 8
- Edward Lawson, 7
- Empire, 1, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14
- Empire Press Union [EPU], 12
- eneral Sir John French, 10
- English-speaking peoples, 14
- Fleet Street, 12
- free institutions, 8
- French-Canadian press, 7
- garden party was hosted by the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House, 8
- Garvin, 13
- General Post Office by the Postmaster-General, 9
- Great Britain, 14
- Grigg, 13
- Gwynne, 7, 13
- H. Brittain, *Pilgrims and Pioneers* (1946), pp.5, 181-98., 7
- Harry Brittain, 6
- Harry Lawson, 7
- High cable rates, 10
- immeasurable Empire, 8
- Imperial International Exhibition halls in Shepherd's Bush, 8
- imperial politics, 13
- Imperial Press Conference, 1, 6, 8, 14
- India, 7, 8, 10, 14
- John Morely, 14
- Kerr, 13
- Kinloch-Cooke, 13
- Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press*, Vol. II, p.8., 13
- language, 8
- Letter from Hudson Berkeley (New South Wales) to the Editor, *The Times*, 6/6/1909, p.17., 11
- liberties, 8
- Lord Alfred Milner, 13
- Lord Burnham, 7
- Lord Esher, 10, 14
- 'Lord Morley at Oxford', *The Times*, 14/6/1909. p.6; *The Annual Register* (1909), pp. 131, 149., 14
- Lord Rosebery, 8
- Lower cable rates, 11
- Maxse, 13
- military display at Aldershot, 8
- Newspapers of Great Britain* (1918), pp. 1-3., 11
- North American cable companies, 11
- Northcliffe, 7, 13
- outings to Warwick Castle, All Souls and Worcester colleges in Oxford, and Chatsworth House, 9
- Pacific Cable Board, 11
- parliaments, 8
- Pearson, 7, 13
- Postmaster-General, 11
- race, 8
- races and cultures, 14
- reduction of cable rates, 10
- Robert Donald, 7
- sea power at Spithead, 8

- South Africa, 7, 10
 Spender, 7, 8, 9
 Spender, Life, *Journalism and Politics*, p.224., 9
 Spender, Life, *Journalism and Politics*, p.227., 8
 Starrt, *Journalists for Empire*, pp.207-9., 14
 Stead, 'The Editors of the Empire', p.55., 14
 steel works in Sheffield, 9
 Straits Settlements of Malaya, 7
 Surendranath Banerjee of *The Bengalee*., 7
 telegram from Britain to Australia, 11
The Daily Telegraph, 7
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Parliament of the Press, p. 121; P.D. Ross, *Retrospects of a Newspaper Person* (Toronto, 1931), pp. 148-9., 11
 The Imperial Press Conference (1909), 1, 6, 14
The Newspaper Press Directory (1910), pp.6-9., 9
The Times, 8, 10, 11, 14
The Times, 12/6/1909, p.6., 8
 Transvaal independence, 7
 United Kingdom, 6, 8
 visits to the Daimler works in Coventry, 9
 W. T. Stead. (Aug. 1, 1893). The Wasted Wealth of King Demos. Review of Reviews., 7
 W.T. Stead, 7, 14
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