

Mountbatten and the 'Hurried Scuttle'

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On 20 February 1947, Prime Minister Clement Attlee, addressing the British Parliament, made the historic announcement that 'His Majesty's Government wish to make it clear that it was their definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transference of power to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June 1948. His Majesty's Government is anxious to hand over their responsibilities to a Government which, resting on the sure foundations of the support of the people, is capable of maintaining peace and administering India with justice and efficiency.'¹ For the first time the British had given a definite date for the termination of the Raj. On all other matters the 20 February statement was vague and meant all things to all men. It did not clearly indicate what the British were finally going to do. There were mixed reactions. The British press of the 'Right' was critical of the time limit. *The Times*, *the Daily Telegraph*, *the Manchester Guardian* and *the Spectator*, all criticised the statement for one reason or the other but certainly for the time limit — the allocation of a mere sixteen months — to wind up more than 150 years of the Raj. It was termed as a reckless folly, a self-defeating complication of policy' and a gamble which might lead to disastrous consequences.²

Five days after the issuance of the policy statement, the House of Lords debated that the fixing of an early date would result in confusion and chaos. The speakers from the opposition predicted appalling human misery and civil war, slaughter and bloodshed, chaos and anarchy 'thanks

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1. Z.H. Zaidi, (ed), *Jinnah Papers: Prelude to Pakistan*, (20 February, 1947 2 June 1947), Vol. I, Part I, (Islamabad: 1993), 2.
2. K.K. Aziz, *Britain and Muslim India*, (Lahore: 1987), 176.

