

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.

to soft heads and feeble hands in high places.' Speeches from the government benches were unrealistic and at times incredibly idealistic. The significant thing about this debate was that the speakers on the treasury benches did not answer the questions raised by the opposition, sounded dangerously vague about the future and either had no plans to cope with what might happen — and a great deal happened in fact — or did not want to make them public.³ Winston Churchill was highly critical of the time frame and asked if it was going to be a 'shameful flight' and a 'hurried scuttle', the consequences of which would fall wholly upon the peoples of India.⁴

In India the 20 February announcement received approval, though in somewhat qualified manner, from Nehru and the Congress for obvious reason. Jinnah offered only cautious comments. He termed it as a very important statement which needed careful examination.⁵ Many British officers having long experience of serving in India were sceptical about the terminal date. It was obvious that sixteen months was too short a period for the innumerable political constitutional and administrative issues involved, particularly when the British government had no definite idea of what they would finally do. For the first time the British had placed a certitude about the procedure or form and substance of transfer of power.⁶ The 20th February statement was tentative about almost everything except the date itself.

The confusion was further confounded by Mountbatten when, after the 3 June announcement, he held a press conference on 4 June. Explaining the salient features of the partition plan to the press correspondents, he also announced, to the surprise of everybody that the transfer of power would take place on 15 August compressing the already too short a time limit (sixteen months) to only 73 days. The two most prominent Mountbatten apologists, Ziegler and Hodson, would have us believe that the most startling piece of information provided at the conference was 'delivered casually, almost as if a passing thought' and that the date actually chosen suddenly appeared as if by accident.⁷ Even if

3. *Ibid.*, 176-7.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Z.H. Zaidi, Vol. I, Part II, 1.

6. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, (Lahore: 1995), 243.

7. H.M. Close, *Attlee, Wavell, Mountbatten And The Transfer of Power*, (Islamabad: 1997), 41.

this was true, it is no credit to Mountbatten that he could take decisions of such historic importance at his whim. But there was method in Mountbatten's madness. There is enough recorded evidence available now to answer the question as to why Mountbatten adopted such a seemingly foolish course of action.

Mountbatten called Jinnah a megalomaniac but the epithet fits him (Mountbatten) more appropriately. He was so obsessed with the idea of his greatness in history that he could do anything if he saw the slightest possibility of achieving it. No price was too high. As the last Viceroy he was impatient to achieve glory and go down in history as the man who performed miracle. The sooner he could do it the better, lest things should go awry if more time was allowed. He acted like a man possessed. When he discussed the partition plan with Jinnah and Liaquat, he impressed upon them the need for speed and maintained that previous plans were wrecked by prolonged wrangling and the time wasted in second thoughts.⁸ Mountbatten himself was not used to second thoughts and acted on the spur of the moment. Persuading India to join the Commonwealth consumed more of Mountbatten's time and energy than did other more urgent questions. 'The Commonwealth meant so much to me', he was later to explain, 'and with this emotional background I began to grasp at every straw in the right direction.' In the circumstances, the threat not to join the Commonwealth gave the Congress leaders a lever over Mountbatten which they used to full advantage.⁹ The Congress leaders, specially Nehru and Patel insisted that they would agree to join the Commonwealth only if power was transferred within two months. Mountbatten succumbed to the pressure, whereas V.P. Menon was the broker. Mountbatten admits this in a letter to Menon:

You were the first person I met who entirely agreed with the idea of Dominion Status and you found the solution which I had not thought of, making it acceptable by a very early transfer of power. History must rate that decision very high, and I owe it to your advice.¹⁰

Patel confirmed this when addressing the Indian Constituent Assembly in November 1949. He said, 'I agreed to partition as a last

8. Chaudhri Mohammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan*, (Lahore: 1988), 142.

9. Andrew Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians*, (London: 1994), 91.

10. Mohammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan*, 136.

resort when we should have lost all — I made a further condition that in two months' time power should be transferred'.¹¹

Both the British and the Congress leadership swallowed partition as a bitter pill. They hoped to undo what had been done. Some of the British leaders greeted the birth of Pakistan with the hope that partition would be a short lived affair — an unpleasant interregnum — and one day, in not too distant a future, the Indian Union would be restored. Lord Ismay has, in his *Memoirs*, noted that no one liked the idea of Pakistan, but no one could suggest how it could be avoided. Responsible Congress leadership, too, expressed similar hopes. Naturally for Mountbatten and the Congress it would be the best policy to make Pakistan weak and vulnerable to ensure its early collapse. Latif Ahmed Sherwani, quoting from the *Mountbatten Papers*, tells us that after listening to different view points the viceroy reached the conclusion that a quick decision would also give Pakistan a greater chance to fail on its demerits. The great problem was to reveal the limits of Pakistan so that the Muslim League could revert to a unified India with honour.¹² Mountbatten had his own ideas about how to divide the country and later to unite the two Dominions.

On 10 May, Menon wrote to Patel that Nehru had discussed with Mountbatten the question of postponing the issue of partition till the present Constituent Assembly had framed a constitution, and that Mountbatten had replied to him that "We should not delay the question of partition which is in the best interest of India — because he was sure that the truncated Pakistan if conceded now, was bound to come back later."¹³ Menon commented 'I agree with H E.'s observation, because our slogan should now be divide in order to unite'.¹⁴ Another reason which Mountbatten himself later presented for quitting India in August 1947 rather than on the original date, was that the level of communal violence meant that it was vital to transfer power before catastrophe overtook India altogether.¹⁵ Mountbatten was duly warned by Even Jenkins Governor of the Punjab and others of the critical communal situation in the province.¹⁶

11. *Ibid.*

12. Latif Ahmed Sherwani, *The Partition of India and Mountbatten*, (Karachi: 1986), 32.

13. *Ibid.*, 40-41.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Andrew Roberts, 87.

16. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

On 23 June, Jinnah asked the viceroy to be absolutely ruthless in suppressing disorder in Amritsar and Lahore. He said, 'I don't care whether you kill the Muslims or not. It has not to be stopped.'¹⁷ Nehru went even to the extent of suggesting imposition of martial law in the disturbed areas if the situation got out of control.¹⁸ Abul Kalam Azad drew Lord Mountbatten's attention to another aspect of the question. If the British acted hastily now, independent and impartial observers would naturally conclude that the British wanted to give freedom to India in conditions where Indians could not take full advantage of this development. To press and bring partition against Indian desire would evoke a suspicion that British motives were not pure.¹⁹ Mountbatten did not take action when it was required. When as a consequence of this policy of inaction communal disturbances loomed large, says H. M. Close, he panicked and wanted to divest himself of the viceroyalty at the earliest.²⁰ Close sees the probable answer in two aspects of his character. 'He was extremely vain and also morally shallow. He could present Indian Independence as his personal triumph... as in fact he promptly proceeded to do. But he feared his glory would be spoiled by the disturbances that seemed likely to accompany Independence... His moral shallowness, however allowed him to understand that his responsibility before history would end with the day he laid down his office.... little time would thus be left for trouble beforehand. And trouble afterwards would not be his responsibility nor, he argued, would it be the responsibility of the Britain.'²¹ It is obvious that Mountbatten did not consider the possible effects of this cut and run policy. The motivation lay in purely selfish interest. Azad confirms this impression: 'In trying to explain why Labour Government changed its attitude, I came to the painful conclusion that its action was governed more by consideration of British than Indian interest'.²²

Mountbatten himself explained the fatal compression of time period to transfer power at a dinner party in Karachi to celebrate Pakistan's independence day in a rather strange way. He said that 'the best way to

17. H. V. Hadson, *The Great Divide*, (Karachi: 1993), 337.

18. *Ibid.*, 337.

19. Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, (Lahore: 1989), 206.

20. H.M. Close, 26.

21. *Ibid.*, 41-2.

22. Abdul Kalam Azad, 208-9.

teach a youngster to cycle is to take him to the top of a hill, put him on the seat and push him down the hill. By the time he arrived on the flat ground, he will have learnt how to cycle.²³ But he did not consider the possibility that the youngster could have been reduced to a bundle of broken bones by the time he touched the flat ground! It is arguable that Mountbatten spoke these words in a lighter vein at a dinner. Nevertheless they reveal the working of his mind. One tends to agree with H.M. Close that Mountbatten's characteristic fault was to act without thinking.²⁴

Whatever the reasons, the unfortunate decision had disastrous and deadly consequences for the people of the subcontinent. For obvious reasons Pakistan and the Muslims suffered most. Mountbatten could not possibly be unaware of the magnitude of the tasks involved in partitioning India and setting up two independent states, the inadequacy of the time available and the necessity of accomplishing them in an orderly way, a little, if not well ahead of the actual transfer of power. The advantages of this hurried transfer of power, with the process of partition still incomplete, would accrue wholly to India and disadvantages to Pakistan. India was to inherit the administrative machinery, practically intact. The Headquarters of the armed forces were located at Delhi. The number of Muslim government servants, both civil and military, was small and their disappearance would make little difference to India but it would be impossible to set up federal and provincial administrations in Pakistan. Pakistan would start with enormous handicaps, without an organised administration, without armed forces, without records, without equipment or military stores. It is difficult to imagine conditions more calculated to bring about a breakdown.²⁵ Mountbatten was well aware of all these problems but Pakistan's losses weighed little with him. Alan Campbell-Johnson quotes Mountbatten as saying, 'What are we doing? Administratively it is the difference between putting up a permanent building, a nissen hut or a tent. As for Pakistan is concerned we are putting up a tent. We can do no more.'²⁶ And Mountbatten still had the audacity to proclaim his absolute impartiality. He allowed a surprisingly short period of time to the Boundary Commission. The line drawn and the delay in announcing the Award had serious repercussions and added an

23. Andrew Roberts, 113.

24. H.M. Close, 26.

25. Chaudhri Mohammad Ali, 137.

26. Allen Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, (New York: 1985), 87.

alarmingly large number to the people slaughtered and displaced. The task of the division of assets and military stores could not be accomplished before 14 August. Pakistan did not get her due share and the evacuation of the government employees who had opted for Pakistan continued through October to the end of the year creating serious crisis for the Government of Pakistan.

Uncertainty gripped the people to the very end and Mountbatten kept on aggravating it. It has been aptly remarked that 'power was transferred to two governments, neither of which knew the exact geographical boundaries of their respective states add yet another curious twist to Mountbatten's handling of the partition of India.'²⁷ The proposal to have one common governor-general for two independent states was a corollary of the decision to transfer power within two months. Had the agenda of partition not remained unfinished, this issue would never have been raised. It was an off shoot of the compressed time limit, an unnecessary irritant which engaged Mountbatten's time and energy a crucial juncture when they were urgently needed elsewhere.

If Pakistan and India are enemies even after the passage of half a century, it is mainly due to the Kashmir dispute — a calamity that Mountbatten inflicted on the subcontinent. Mountbatten allowed little time for any meaningful negotiations to succeed and put pressure on Radcliffe to remove all geographical hurdles to make it possible for India to occupy Kashmir against the very logic of partition. Sir Corned Cornfield, Mountbatten's political adviser responsible for the States whom Mountbatten had deliberately not taken on the visit to Srinagar, believed that quiet negotiations might have produced a partition of Kashmir acceptable to both sides.²⁸

By far the greatest tragedy that befell the people of the subcontinent was the holocaust in the Punjab and communal killings in many other parts of the subcontinent. About one million innocent men, women and children were slaughtered on both sides of the border. Jinnah, Nehru, Patel, and Azad are on record, as already indicated, to have requested Mountbatten ruthlessly to suppress communal riots. Mountbatten took no appropriate action to do it. To please the British and American public opinion and to save his own liberal image, Mountbatten deliberately adopted a soft approach to security issues. In his judgement speed of

27. Ayesha Jalal, 293.

28. Andrew Roberts, 106-29.

transfer might avoid the troubles. In practice his decision precipitated them. It was a situation entirely of his own making.²⁹ Auchinleck also expressed the opinion that if the original timetable had been adhered to, it might have been possible to reconstitute the forces without bloodshed.³⁰

Sir George Cunningham, a former governor of NWFP and private secretary to the viceroy, believed the Punjab disturbances were the direct result of Mountbatten's unwisdom in accelerating the date of partition so suddenly. 'I am sure', he said 'that if the Punjab had been given time (say eight or nine months) to sort out there services properly, the terrible massacres of August-September-October would never have happened on anything approaching the scale that they did assume.'³¹ Mountbatten's policy of cut and run was certainly responsible for these massacres.

Mountbatten has been the beneficiary of a myth so assiduously built up that the winding up of the Raj was a great achievement of British statesmanship. It is only recently that historians, British and others, have exploded this myth. Mountbatten, while addressing the Indian constituent Assembly on 15 August 1947, boldly claimed credit for having accomplished an important feat in less than two and a half months, one of the greatest administrative operations in history'.³² On behalf of the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who were slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands, and the refugees who in their millions stumbled fearfully across the Frontiers of two states. The historian has a duty to challenge Mountbatten's contention and ask whether this great operation, was not in fact an ignominious scuttle enabling the British to extricate themselves from the awkward responsibility of presiding over India's communal madness.³³

Evaluating Mountbatten's role and responsibility, Andrew Roberts, a younger generation of British historians has this to say:

The path to have followed in order to avoid such a cataclysm should have been the early division of the Indian and Pakistan armies, their the deployment in the disputed areas, with law and order established by martial law if necessary, followed only then

29. *Ibid.*, 91.

30. *Ibid.*, 124-30

31. Sayeed, *Pakistan the Formative Phase*, (Karachi: 1969), 169.

32. Ayesha Jalal, 293.

33. *Ibid.*

by the announcement of the Boundary Awards. Any population transfer that were then demanded could have been properly supervised and protected. Then — and only then — the country could be partitioned and the two states declared independent. In not following this common sense sequence — indeed, in taking steps in almost the reverse order, with such horrific consequences — Mountbatten deserved to be court-martialled on his return to London.³⁴

34. Andrew Roberts, 112.