

Joseph Chamberlain: Speech at the Royal Colonial Institute (1897)

The speech of the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, at the annual dinner of the Royal Colonial Institute on March 31, 1897

[The year 1897 witnessed the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria's assumption of the throne of England in 1837. Unlike the Jubilee of a decade earlier, the tone of abounding self-confidence and imperial self-congratulation evident in 1887 was noticeably absent on this occasion. The darker side of imperialism had been exposed in the aggressive inroads of French, British and German intruders against the native peoples. In West Africa, the British occupied the territory of the Ashanti whose king, Prempeh of Kumasi, was creating difficulties for the extension of British trade. In 1893 had occurred the treacherous attack on King Lobengula and his Matabele warriors by the British South Africa Company in which the King was forced to flee, his people massacred, and his territory occupied. Moreover, Germany's insistence on her 'place in the sun' as well as the rapid advance of the U.S. as an industrial giant seemed to diminish the hitherto dominant role played by Britain in world affairs. The time had come to reassert the idea of empire, and there was no greater champion of that idea than Joseph Chamberlain. The following extract demonstrates the common thread that served to rationalize the continued hold of the leading European powers on territories they had won both by guile and force of arms.]

I have now the honour to propose to you the toast of 'Prosperity to the Royal Colonial Institute.' The institute was founded in 1868, almost exactly a generation ago, and I confess that I admire the faith of its promoters, who, in a time not altogether favourable to their opinions, sowed the seed of Imperial patriotism. [...]

It seems to me that there are three distinct stages in our Imperial history. We began to be, and we ultimately became a great Imperial

power in the eighteenth century, but during the greater part of that time, the colonies were regarded, not only by us, but by every European power that possessed them, as possessions valuable in proportion to the pecuniary advantage which they brought to the mother country, which, under that order of ideas, was not truly a mother at all, but appeared rather in the light of a grasping and absentee landlord desiring to take from his tenants the utmost rents he could exact. The colonies were valued and maintained because it was thought they would be a source of profit—of direct profit—to the mother country. That was the first stage, and when we were rudely awakened by the War of Independence in America from this dream that colonies could be held for our profit alone, the second chapter was entered upon, and public opinion seems then to have drifted to the opposite extreme; and because the colonies were no longer a source of revenue, it seems to have been believed and argued by many people that their separation from us was only a matter of time, and that that separation should be desired and encouraged lest haply they might prove an encumbrance and a source of weakness.

It was while these views were still entertained, while the little Englishmen were in their full career, that this institute was founded to protest against doctrines so injurious to our interests and so derogatory to our honour; and I rejoice that what was then, as it were, 'a voice crying in the wilderness' is now the expressed and determined will of the overwhelming majority of the British people. Partly by the efforts of this institute and similar organizations, partly by the writings of such men as Froude and Seeley [English historians and apostles of imperialist expansion], but mainly by the instinctive good sense and patriotism of the people at large, we have now reached the third stage in our history, and the true conception of our Empire.

What is that conception? As regards the self-governing colonies we no longer talk of them as dependencies. The sense of possession has given place to the sense of kinship. We think and speak of them as part of ourselves, as part of the British Empire, united to us, although they may be dispersed throughout the world, by ties of kindred, of religion, of history, and of language, and joined to us by the seas that formerly seemed to divide us. But the British Empire is not confined to the self-governing colonies and the United Kingdom. It includes a much

greater area, a much more numerous population in tropical climes, where no considerable European settlement is possible, and where the native population must always outnumber the white inhabitants; and in these cases also the same change has come over the Imperial idea. Here also the sense of possession has given place to a different sentiment—the sense of obligation. We feel now that our rule over these territories can only be justified if we can show that it adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people, and I maintain that our rule does, and has, brought security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew these blessings before.

In carrying out this work of civilization we are fulfilling what I believe to be our national mission, and we are finding scope for the exercise of those faculties and qualities which have made of us a great governing race. I do not say that our success has been perfect in every case, I do not say that all our methods have been beyond reproach; but I do say that in almost every instance in which the rule of the Queen has been established and the great Pax Britannica has been enforced, there has come with it greater security to life and property, and a material improvement in the condition of the bulk of the population. No doubt, in the first instance, when those conquests have been made, there has been bloodshed, there has been loss of life among the native populations, loss of still more precious lives among those who have been sent out to bring these countries into some kind of disciplined order, but it must be remembered that that is the condition of the mission we have to fulfil.

There are, of course, among us—there always are among us, I think—a very small minority of men who are ready to be the advocates of the most detestable tyrants, provided their skin is black—men who sympathize with the sorrows of Prempeh and Lobengula, and who denounce as murderers those of their countrymen who have gone forth at the command of the Queen, and who have redeemed districts as large as Europe from the barbarism and the superstition in which they had been steeped for centuries. I remember a picture by Mr (Frederick) Selous [the famous African hunter and explorer] of a philanthropist—an imaginary philanthropist, I will hope—sitting cozily by his fireside and denouncing the methods by which British civilization was promoted. This philanthropist complained of the use of Maxim

guns and other instruments of warfare, and asked why we could not proceed by more conciliatory methods, and why the impis [native soldiers] of Lobengula could not be brought before a magistrate, and fined five shillings and bound over to keep the peace. No doubt there is humorous exaggeration in this picture, but there is gross exaggeration in the frame of mind against which it is directed. You cannot have omelets without breaking eggs; you cannot destroy the practices of barbarism, of slavery, of superstition, which for centuries have desolated the interior of Africa, without the use of force; but if you will fairly contrast the gain to humanity with the price which we are bound to pay for it, I think you may well rejoice in the result of such expeditions as those which have recently been conducted with such signal success in [West and East Africa]; expeditions which may have, and indeed have, cost valuable lives, but as to which we may rest assured that for one life lost a hundred will be gained, and the cause of civilization and the prosperity of the people will in the long run be eminently advanced. But no doubt such a state of things, such a mission as I have described, involves heavy responsibility. [...] and it is a gigantic task that we have undertaken when we have determined to wield the sceptre of empire. Great is the task, great is the responsibility, but great is the honour; and I am convinced that the conscience and spirit of the country will rise to the height of its obligations, and that we shall have the strength to fulfil the mission which our history and our national character have imposed upon us.

[...] It seems to me that the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the greater empires, and the minor kingdoms—those which are non-progressive—seem to be destined to fall into a secondary and subordinate place. But, if Greater Britain remains united, no empire in the world can ever surpass it in area, in population, in wealth, or in the diversity of its resources. [...]