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SECRET.

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WAR CABINET.

Interpretation of Point III of Atlantic Declaration  
in respect of the British Empire.

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

1. The phrase in Point III of the Atlantic Charter that we "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live" is difficult from the Colonial point of view. It was, of course, used, as is obvious from the context, with the nations of Europe in mind. But in the Colonies we cannot admit a right of unfettered choice to those who, in the words of the League of Nations Covenant, are "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world".
2. The development of local institutions to the fullest practicable extent has been and is our policy. But I am certain that it would be premature to commit ourselves to the belief that this will eventually lead to fully responsible government for every unit within the Empire. There are at least fifty governmental units in the Colonial Empire and, although the number might be reduced by federation, many would still remain too small, while others are strategically too important, for them ever to become completely masters of their destiny. There are others where at present a small minority is alone capable of exercising political power and where, for as far ahead as we can see, the interests of the great majority of the people can only be ensured by the maintenance of our responsibility. Even in Ceylon where responsible government is in fact demanded by the Sinhalese majority, no solution has yet been found to secure the interests of Tamil and other minorities.
3. I am sure, therefore, that we should be careful not to commit ourselves to fully responsible government as the goal for the whole Colonial Empire. As self-government often means the same thing to the popular mind, I should prefer not to mention self-government either and I hope that the first sentence of paragraph 2 in Mr. Amery's draft statement may be omitted. It is not necessary to the argument and we should avoid any implication that the free choice of the peoples of the Empire would necessarily be for self-government.
4. The question arises whether anything should be added to the statement in regard to the Colonial Empire. The point at issue has been raised unofficially in Ceylon though not specifically elsewhere. It cannot however have escaped notice. If nothing is said about the Colonies the statement might be made by the Secretary of State for India in reply to a question. If on the other hand the Colonies are mentioned, it would be more appropriate that it should be made by the Prime Minister.
5. It would be possible to add something on the following lines:-

"The Colonial Empire comprises peoples and territories of many different types and with a wide variety of institutions, which have evolved in accordance with the particular history and circumstances of each case. That evolution must continue on lines that accord with British conceptions of freedom and justice."

M.

2nd September, 1941.