The Cabinet Mission Plan

Cabinet Mission was a high-powered mission sent in February 1946 to India by the Atlee Government (British Prime Minister.) The mission had three British cabinet members – Pethick Lawrence, Stafford Cripps, & and A.V. Alexander. The Cabinet Mission’s aim was to discuss the transfer of power from British to Indian leadership.

What was Cabinet Mission & Who were its members?

Clement Atlee (British Prime Minister) decided to send a mission to India for the transfer of powers from the British Indian government to Indian leaders.

The mission had three members mentioned with their posts in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet Mission Members</th>
<th>Cabinet Mission Members – Designation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pethick Lawrence</td>
<td>Secretary of State for India</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stafford Cripps</td>
<td>President of the Board of Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.V. Alexander</td>
<td>First Lord of Admiralty</td>
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You should know that Lord Wavell was not a member of the Cabinet Mission but was involved.

Objectives of Cabinet Mission

- To obtain an agreement with the Indian leaders as to the framing of a constitution for India.
- To formulate a constitution-making body (the Constituent Assembly of India).
- To establish an Executive Council with the support of the major Indian parties.

Detail Explanation:

The Cabinet Mission Plan was a statement made by the Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, on May 16, 1946, that contained proposals regarding the constitutional future of India in the wake of Indian political parties and representatives not coming to an agreement. The members of the Cabinet Mission were: Lord Penthick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, and A.V Alexander, First Lord of Admiralty.

In September 1945, the new elected Labour government in Britain expressed its intention of creating a Constituent Assembly for India that would frame India’s Constitution; the Cabinet Mission was sent to India in March 1946 to make this happen. The Mission had to deal with a major obstacle: the two main political parties – the Indian National Congress and the Muslim...
League – had fundamental differences over India’s future. While the Muslim League wanted the Muslim majority provinces of India to constitute a separate sovereign state of Pakistan, the Congress wanted a united India. The Mission, at the Shimla Conference, attempted to facilitate an agreement between the Muslim League and the Congress. When this failed, the Mission came out with its own proposals known as the Cabinet Mission Plan. The Plan is around nine pages long - organised around twenty-four points. While some parts of the Plan are written in explanatory prose – unpacking the political context, approach and rationale behind its proposals, other parts of the Plan are written in a quasi-legal style laying down the future steps to be taken that included the form of elections to the Constituent Assembly and its preliminary functioning. The core of the Plan is Point 15 (excerpted below) which lays out the basic form of the future constitution of India.

Point 15 consists of six sub-points that proposed the basic form of the Constitution of India; strikingly, all relate to the federal structure of India. The Plan rejected the Muslim League demand for a separate state of Pakistan and instead called for an Indian Union that consisted of British provinces and the Princely States. While the Plan rejected Pakistan, it proposed a unique federal set-up that it hoped would be acceptable to the Congress Party and the Muslim League: it introduced the concept of grouping/sections; provinces and princely states were free to form groups under the Union, having a legislature and executive, enjoying significant autonomy.

The Plan was initially accepted by the Muslim League and the Congress Party. However, the Congress Party soon rejected the ‘grouping’ part of the plan; specifically, it was concerned about and opposed the grouping of provinces on the basis of religion. The Muslim League was not open to changing any part of the Plan and so any consensus between the Congress and the Muslim League broke down. Further attempts by the Cabinet Mission at reconciliation failed. Nonetheless, the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly began and an interim government, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the Prime minister, was set-up. The Muslim League refused to be part of both; it initiated ‘Direct Action Day’ triggering large-scale violence across the country.

The Plan, also referred to as the ‘State Paper’, had a significant influence over the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly during its initial stages, particularly the debates around Nehru’s Objective Resolution and federalism. The Assembly acknowledged that it was a creation of the Plan; it wanted to, as far as possible, adhere to the Plan’s proposals as means
of maintaining its legal legitimacy and to keep the door open for the Muslim League to join its proceedings. At the same time, the Assembly also asserted that its legitimacy was derived from the people of India and not the Plan.

The Cabinet Mission Plan is critical to scholarly works that engage with various aspects of Indian constitutionalism, law, politics and history, particularly on partition and federalism. Recent work have paid close attention to British perspectives as well: Walter Reid in Keeping the Jewel in the Crown emphasises the British self-interest behind the setting up of the Cabinet Mission: ‘to secure Britain’s defence interests in India and the Indian Ocean Area’. Other scholars have taken to evaluating the Cabinet Mission and its Plan: Granville Austin argues that the Cabinet Mission (‘non-Indians’) should have never attempted to mediate between the Congress and the Muslim league: ‘it was foredoomed to failure’. The Cabinet Mission Plan continues to be relevant to scholars and the general public in understanding and making sense of not only the origins of the Indian Constitution, but also the future of the Indian republic.

**CMP.1**

15. We recommend that the Constitution should take the following basic form:

(1) There should be a Union of India, embracing both British India and the States which should deal with the following subjects: Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Communications; and should have the powers necessary to raise the finances required for the above subjects.

(2) The Union should have an Executive and a Legislature constituted from British Indian and States' representatives. Any question raising a major communal issue in the Legislature should require for its decision a majority of the representatives present and voting of each of the two major communities as well as a majority of all members present and voting.

(3) All subjects other than the Union subjects and all residuary powers should vest in the Provinces.

(4) The States will retain all subjects and powers other than those ceded to the Union.

(5) Provinces should be free to form groups with Executives and Legislatures, and each group could determine the Provincial subjects to be taken in common.
The Constitutions of the Union and of the groups should contain a provision whereby any Province could by majority vote of its Legislative Assembly could call for a reconsideration of the terms of the Constitution after an initial period of ten years and at ten-yearly intervals thereafter.

**Why did the Cabinet Mission fail?**

The main reasons for the failure of the Cabinet Mission are given below:

- The Congress Party wanted a strong centre with minimum powers for the provinces.
- The Muslim League wanted strong political safeguards for the Muslims like parity in the legislatures.
- Since both parties had many ideological differences and could not find common ground, the mission came up with its own set of proposals in May 1946.
- The Dominion of India would be granted independence, without any partition.
- The provinces would be divided into three groups/sections:

  1. Group A: Madras, Central Provinces, UP, Bihar, Bombay and Orissa
  2. Group B: Punjab, Sindh, NWFP and Baluchistan
  3. Group C: Bengal and Assam

- The Muslim-majority provinces were grouped into two groups and the remaining Hindu-majority in one of the groups.
- The central government at Delhi would have powers over the defence, foreign affairs, communications and currency. The rest of the powers would be vested with the provinces.
- A constituent assembly would be set up for writing a new constitution for the country. An interim government would be established until a new government was formed on the basis of the constitution written by the constituent assembly.
- The Congress was not keen on the idea of the groupings of provinces on the basis of Hindu-Muslim majority and vying for control at the centre. It was also against the idea of a weak centre. The Muslim League did not want any changes to the proposals.
- Since the plan was not accepted, a new plan was proposed by the mission in June 1946. This plan proposed the division of India into a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority India later to be renamed Pakistan. A list of princely states was also made that could either join the union or remain independent.
- The Congress Party under Jawaharlal Nehru did not accept the second plan. Instead, it agreed to be part of the constituent assembly.
- The Viceroy invited 14 men to form the interim government. There were 5 from the Congress, 5 from the League, 1 member each representing the Sikh, Parsee, Indian Christian and scheduled caste communities.
- Both the League and the Congress were given the right to nominate 5 members to the Viceroy’s interim council. The Congress nominated Zakir Hussain as one of the
members to which the League objected saying only it represented Indian Muslims and no other party. The Muslim League did not take part in it.

- The Congress leaders entered the viceroy’s interim council and thus Nehru headed the interim government. The new government began the task of framing a constitution for the country.

- Congress-led governments were formed in most provinces including the NWFP. In Bengal and Sind, the League formed the governments.

- Jinnah and the League objected to the new central government. He geared to agitate for Pakistan and urged Muslims to demand Pakistan by any means. He called for ‘Direct Action Day’ on 16 August 1946.

- This call led to widespread communal rioting in the country with 5000 people being killed on the first day in Calcutta. Communal riots spread to many other areas notably Noakhali and Bihar.

- There was a call for the partitioning of the country on account of the riots. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was one of the first Congress leaders to acknowledge the inevitability of the partition as a means to stop the brutal violence.