

The British Empire in 1815

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In 1815 the British Empire was not a uniform association:

- No single constitution
- No single religion
- No single language
- No single system of law

The colonies of the empire had very little in common.

The major decisions regarding the Empire were taken by the Colonial Office.

It was not until 1854 that colonial affairs were given a separate government department with its own Secretary of State.

The British government was normally too concerned with domestic politics to play a leading role in colonial affairs.

Sometimes a select committee of MPs or a government inquiry was set up to investigate a major issue.

The government left the day-to-day management of the Empire to the officials in the Colonial Office.

The Colonial Office left responsibility for the routine running of colonies with administrators in the colonies themselves.

The British government in 1815 had a coherent policy only in matters concerning trade. This was mercantilism. A wide range of laws sustained the mercantilist system:

- Navigation Acts (all of a colony's imports and exports carried by British ships).
- British goods were given a monopoly in colonial markets.
- Colonies could only export goods not produced in Britain.
- Protective tariffs used to freeze out foreign goods

The colonies of the British Empire existed for the benefit of the British economy.

The colonies were divided into 2 broad categories:

- Colonies of settlement.
- Dependent or crown colonies.

The colonies of settlement (Canada, West Indies, Cape Colony, Australia) were founded by people of British or European origin.

They were governed by a British-appointed governor, permanent British officials and small powerless local councils.

The dependent colonies had come into existence for a variety of reasons:

- They could act as trading or naval basis.
- They had few European settlers.
- They were ruled by British officials.

The only exception was India, the largest dependent colony of all.

India was ruled by a Governor-General, working in association with the privately-owned East India Company, until 1858.

The other dependencies were scattered around the oceans of the world. They were used variously as naval basis, suppliers of food and raw materials, trading stations.

The Empire served three important functions:

- 1) It conferred great-power status on Britain.
- 2) It provided Britain with reliable sources of food and raw materials and a market for British exports (Britain was unable to feed and employ its population).
- 3) It provided Royal Navy with a large number of naval bases from which it could dominate the sea.

Britain's imperial dominance coincided with her economy's expansion.

This had been made possible not so much by the colonies as by the development of her industries and her banking services, and the accumulation of capital within the domestic economy.

As a consequence of Britain's economic expansion there were important changes within the Empire between 1815 and 1870.

Strange as it may seem, the increase in the extent of the Empire was not the result of a coordinated policy of conquest.

The new territories came under British rule largely because a number of unconnected local circumstances.

In the period up to 1870 the majority of British industrialists and traders had their eyes set on a world rather than an imperial market.

Trade outside the Empire was increasing far more rapidly than trade within the Empire.

The new fields of British investment were in the USA, Latin America and the Far East.

This led to a shift in attitudes towards the future of the Empire.

Questions were raised about the need to maintain the Old Colonial System.

A movement of free traders considered the mercantilist system as out of step with the trend of the times.

It was against this background that significant changes to British imperial rule were brought between 1815 and 1870.

The most important social reform was the abolition of slavery.

The most important political change was the granting of responsible self-government to the settlement colonies.

The most important economic reform was the abandonment of protectionism.