

## Morley Minto Reforms, Indian Councils Act 1909

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The Morley-Minto Reforms, as encapsulated in the Indian Councils Act of 1909, marked a watershed moment in British India's political history. These reforms were designed to meet the growing demand for Indian participation in governance while maintaining British control.

The reforms, named after John Morley, Secretary of State for India, and Lord Minto, Viceroy of India, sought to establish a limited form of electoral representation for Indians, paving the way for more structured political engagement.

### Morley Minto Reforms Background

The backdrop to the Morley Minto Reforms was a period of heightened political activity and unrest in India. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of Indian nationalism, with the **Indian National Congress**, founded in 1885, leading the charge for more significant Indian participation in governance.

- **Partition of Bengal:** The partition of Bengal in 1905 sparked widespread protests and a surge in nationalist sentiment, which the Indian National Congress backed. To maintain their rule, the British government recognised the importance of addressing the growing demands for self-government.

- **Shimla Deputation:** In October 1906, a group of Muslim elites known as the Simla Deputation, led by the **Agha Khan**, met with Lord Minto and demanded separate electorates for Muslims and representation above their numerical strength in light of 'the value of the contribution' Muslims were making 'to the defence of the empire'.
- **Gokhale's Visit to England:** Gopal Krishna Gokhale also travelled to England to meet with Secretary of State for India John Morley and present Congress' demands for a self-governing system similar to that of the other British colonies.
- **Finalisation of Reform:** The viceroy, Lord Minto, and the Secretary of State for India, John Morley, agreed that some reforms were needed to appease both the Moderates and the Muslims. They devised a set of measures known as the Morley-Minto (or Minto-Morley) Reforms, which were incorporated into the **Indian Councils Act of 1909**.

## Provisions of Indian Councils Act 1909

The Morley-Minto Reforms introduced several key provisions designed to expand Indian participation in governance. The features of the Indian Councils Act 1909 were as follows:

- **Expansion of Legislative Councils:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 significantly expanded the size of the legislative councils, both central and provincial. The Central Legislative Council now had 60 members, up from 16. The number of members in the provincial legislative councils varied.
- **Composition of Imperial Legislative Council:** According to Sumit Sarkar, of the 69 members of the Imperial Legislative Council, 37 were to be officials, and five were to be nominated from among the 32 non-officials.
  - Of the twenty-seven elected non-officials, eight were set aside for Muslims under separate electorates (where Muslims alone could cast ballots for Muslim candidates), four were set aside for British capitalists, two for landlords, and thirteen were reserved for the general electorate.
- **Introduction of Non-Official Majority:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 maintained the official majority in the Central Legislative Council while allowing the provincial legislative councils to have a **nonofficial majority**. However, since some of these non-officials were nominated but not elected, the overall non-elected majority remained.
- **Indirect Election of Members:** The elected members were to be elected **indirectly**. Local bodies were to elect an electoral college, which would elect members of provincial legislatures, who would then elect members of the central legislature.
- **Increased Indian Representation:** The elective principle was recognised for non-official council membership in India through Morley Minto Reforms. Indians were allowed to vote for various legislative councils, but only on the basis of their class and community.
- **Expansion of Powers:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 expanded the deliberative powers of legislative councils at both levels. Members were able to ask additional questions, move budget resolutions, and so on. Voting on separate budget items was permitted, but the budget as a whole could not be voted on.
- **Indians in Viceroy's Executive Council:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 established (for the first time) the association of Indians with the executive councils of the Viceroy and Governor. **Satyendra Prasad Sinha** was the first Indian to join the Viceroy's Executive Council. He was appointed as a Law Member.

- **Separate Electorates:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 established a system of communal representation for Muslims by accepting the concept of a separate electorate. This meant that Muslim members could only be elected by Muslim voters. Also, the income qualification for Muslim voters was kept lower than that for Hindus.
  - Thus, the Act **legalised communalism** and Lord Minto became known as the **Father of the Communal Electorate**.
- **Representation for Various Groups:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 also allowed for separate representation for presidency corporations, chambers of commerce, universities, and zamindars.

## Morley Minto Reforms Significance

The Morley Minto Reforms (The Indian Councils Act 1909) were crucial in the evolution of British India's governance, marking the first significant step towards Indian representation in legislative councils. The Morley Minto Reforms were significant for the following reasons:

- **Increased Representation:** The reforms marked the first significant step towards involving Indians in the legislative process, laying the groundwork for future demands for self-governance. It was the first time that an Indian was associated with the executive council.
- **Foundation for a Parliamentary System:** The introduction of the electoral principle, although modest, laid the groundwork for a future parliamentary system in India.
- **Rise of Nationalism:** The Minto Morley reforms of 1909 sparked a new wave of Indian nationalism as Indians became more politically conscious. This was especially true for Muslims, who were granted separate electorates as part of the reforms and became more politically active as a result.
- **A platform for Grievance Redressal:** The inclusion of elected Indian members in legislative councils provided a new avenue for Indians to express their grievances and concerns, allowing Indian representatives to critique the executive decisions and suggest improvements.
- **Foundation for Future Reforms:** The Indian Councils Act 1909 set the stage for future constitutional reforms, including the **Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919** and the **Government of India Act 1935**. It represented the beginning of a gradual shift towards more inclusive governance, even though the reforms themselves were limited.

## Morley Minto Reforms Criticisms

The Morley-Minto Reforms, despite being a milestone in the evolution of British India's governance, were widely criticised by various sections due to various reasons. It includes:

- **Rise in Communalism:** The most controversial aspect of the Morley Minto Reforms was the introduction of **separate electorates** for Muslims. This provision was seen as a deliberate attempt by the British to divide and rule by fostering communal divisions. It deepened communal tensions and laid the groundwork for future religious and political conflicts in India.
- **Limited Political Power:** Despite expanding the legislative councils and increasing Indian representation, the reforms did not grant significant powers to the elected members. The councils had **limited authority**, particularly in budgetary and legislative matters, and the British government retained ultimate control.

- **Tokenism Rather than Genuine Reform:** Critics claimed that the Morley Minto Reforms were more concerned with appeasing growing Indian political demands than with making significant changes. The changes were interpreted as an attempt to appease Indian leaders while maintaining British control over the country.
- **Diversion from Broader Issues:** By emphasising communal representation, the Morley Minto Reforms diverted attention away from pressing political and economic issues such as poverty, illiteracy, and social inequalities.

## Morley Minto Reforms Evaluation

The Morley Minto Reforms of 1909 provided no solution to India's political problem. Lord Morley stated unequivocally that colonial self-government (as demanded by the Congress) was not appropriate for India, and he opposed the establishment of a parliamentary or responsible government in India.

- **Divide and Rule Policy:** The 'constitutional' reforms were intended to divide the nationalist ranks by confusing the Moderates and to prevent the growth of Indian unity through the obnoxious instrument of separate electorates. The government aimed at rallying the Moderates and the Muslims against the rising tide of nationalism.
- **Flawed Measures:** Officials and Muslim leaders often spoke of representing the entire community, but in practice, they only appeased a small Muslim elite. The indirect electoral system created a complex, ineffective process. Parliamentary forms were introduced, but without accountability, leading to irresponsible government criticism.
- **Opportunity for Few:** Only a handful, like Gokhale, effectively used council debates to advocate for universal education, criticize repressive policies, and highlight issues such as indentured labour. The **1909 Morley-Minto Reforms** offered little substance, providing 'benevolent despotism' instead of the self-government the people sought.

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