

# Lord Irwin

Edward Frederick Lindley Wood styled, more commonly known as Lord Irwin, was a senior British Conservative politician of the 1930s and the Viceroy of British India from 3 April 1926 – 18 April 1931.

His tenure saw major events happening during the Independence struggle which in turn solidified his reputation in Britain as one of the most capable Viceroys to govern India.

This article will give details about Lord Irwin within the context of the IAS Exam

## The early life of Lord Irwin

Lord Irving was born on 16 April 1881 at Powderham Castle in Devon

He attended St David's Prep School from September 1892 and Eton College from September. After graduation, he made his first foray into politics when he stood for the 1906 general elections and won by a landslide for the Liberals faction. Later he would serve in the frontlines of World War I in 1917 as a Major.

In May 1920, he accepted the Governor-Generalship of South Africa, but the offer was withdrawn after the South African government announced that it wanted a Cabinet minister or a member of the Royal Family.

When the Conservatives came to power, on 6 November 1924, Lord Irwin was appointed Minister for Agriculture.

## Viceroy of India

In October 1925, Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India, offered Lord Irwin the position of Viceroy of India at the suggestion of King George V. Accepting his new role, he arrived in India on 1 April 1926.

The Government of India Act 1919 had introduced the 'Diarchy' system of administration, which meant power would be shared between the British and Indians at the local level. After 10 years of the implementation of the act, there would be a commission to inquire whether further reforms would be needed. While Lord Irwin was of the opinion that self-rule by the Indians was necessary, he felt that the various factions of the Independence movement would not come to an agreement if they became part of the proposed commission.

Thus it was on his advice that the Simon Commission would consist of only the British but no Indian but he would come to regret bitterly on the decision he made regarding the commission.

Once the composition of the Simon Commission was announced, Indian leaders were outraged and boycotted it out of hand. There were even incidents of violence between the British police and the freedom fighters during which Lala Lajpat Rai lost his life. The Simon Commission made little headway but Lord Irwin was of the opinion that a symbolic gesture would be necessary to bring the Indian leaders to the negotiations table.

With tacit approval from the home government in London, Lord Irwin made a declaration that Britain would be committed to eventual dominion status of India. The 'Irwin Declaration' was opposed by the conservative factions of the British parliament. But it was still thought to be a break in the Anglo-India relations, yet the Delhi Conference on December 29 yielded little result.

Seeing no headway made, Mahatma Gandhi launched the Salt Satyagraha, symbolically marching to the sea in 24 days and breaking the Government's monopoly over salt. For this Lord Irwin had Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders arrested but the resulting heavy handedness turned world opinion against British colonialism in India.

In November 1930, King George V opened the First Round Table Conference in London; no Congress delegates took part because Gandhi was in jail

In January 1931, Mahatma Gandhi was released and at Irwin's invitation, they had eight meetings together.

The fortnight-long discussions resulted in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 5 March 1931, after which the Civil Disobedience Movement and the boycott of British goods were suspended in exchange for a Second Round Table Conference that represented all interests.

## Later life of Lord Irwin and Legacy

Lord Irwin completed his tenure as Viceroy and returned to England in April 1931. He held many responsible posts such as the foreign secretary. He was widely regarded as the architect of appeasement which led to Hitler's Nazi regime ultimately leading to World War II. Though his reputation was damaged as a result, his wartime services earned him an earldom in 1944. He would later be appointed as the ambassador to the United States during which Anglo-American relations would reach its zenith. Failing health forced him to retire during the 1950s.

He died of a heart attack at his estate at Garrowby on 23 December 1959, aged 78.

Despite the mixed outcome that came in his wake as the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin was overall a successful Viceroy; he had charted a clear and balanced course and had not lost the confidence of his home government. He had demonstrated toughness and independence. His successful term as Viceroy ensured that he returned to British politics with significant prestige.