

The Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms (1919)

Background and Reasons:

During **World War I**, Indians gave full support to the British — sending soldiers, money, and resources. In return, they **expected political reforms** and a greater share in the government. At this time, **nationalist movements were growing**, and Britain wanted to keep India peaceful and loyal.

In **August 1917**, **Edwin Montagu**, the Secretary of State for India, made a declaration saying that the British policy would now aim for the “**gradual development of self-governing institutions**” in India. This was known as the **Montagu Declaration**.

The British hoped to **satisfy moderate leaders** and weaken revolutionary groups, while still keeping control in their own hands.

What the Act Introduced (Main Features):

In 1919, the **Government of India Act**, also known as the **Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms**, was passed.

The most important feature was **Dyarchy** (dual government) in the provinces.

- **Transferred subjects** (like education, health, agriculture) were handled by **Indian ministers**.
- **Reserved subjects** (like finance, police, and law) stayed under **British officials**.

This meant Indians had **some responsibility but not real power**.

At the **Central level**, the legislature was expanded, and more Indians could be elected, but the **Governor-General** still had the power to **veto any law**.

Separate electorates for Muslims and other communities were also continued, keeping political divisions alive.

Additional Provisions:

The Act also created a **Public Service Commission** to recruit Indians into government jobs and introduced a **bicameral legislature** — two houses at the centre.

It promised that the system would be **reviewed after 10 years**, which later led to the **Simon Commission (1927)**.

Although it looked like a step toward self-rule, the **British retained full control over finances, administration, and police**, so Indian ministers had little influence.

Indian Reaction:

The Indian response was **largely negative**.

The **Indian National Congress** rejected the reforms, calling them a “**mockery of self-government**.”

Leaders said **Dyarchy** was meaningless because the British still controlled all important

departments.

Even the **Muslim League** was dissatisfied — Muslims had representation, but not real authority.

Gandhi and other nationalists realized that the British were not serious about real change.

As a result, people began to turn away from constitutional methods and **prepared for mass movements** against colonial rule.

Importance and Consequences:

Despite being disappointing, the **Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms** were **historically significant** because they were the **first official recognition** that India should eventually govern itself.

They helped **train Indian politicians** in administration and gave them limited experience in governance.

But because real power stayed with the British, these reforms only increased **frustration and nationalist unity**.

The failure of Dyarchy led directly to the **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)** and stronger calls for **Swaraj (self-rule)**.