

The tragedy of Nigeria was mentioned at the Conference by Prime Minister Wilson in his opening remarks on the first day. It was the subject of considerable corridor talk and out-of-conference discussion. Though not on the agenda, it was regarded by most delegations - and not least the Nigerian delegation - as of extreme importance.

On Wednesday of last week, at a gathering of heads of government outside the Conference proper, which I attended, the leader of the Nigerian delegation agreed on behalf of his Government to enter into fresh talks in London with the rebel representatives, without any pre-conditions to be attached to those talks. He agreed as well that it would be in order for other Commonwealth governments to do what they could to urge the Biafrans to engage in talks on this basis. Before we left London, Canadian officials met with Biafran representatives in an attempt to persuade them to do just that. I am deeply disappointed that that attempt was unsuccessful, as were, we understand, the representations of other delegations and of the Secretary-General.

I mentioned a few moments ago that the role and scope of the Commonwealth Secretariat were defined, with more precision than heretofore, at this Conference. The general view as expressed was that the Secretariat has an important role to play, but that the Commonwealth should not become over-structured. If I may repeat what I said in London at the Conference:

"As the Commonwealth grows in number of members, it increases in diversity. The common ingredients, which were once the adhesive of membership, are now outnumbered by the unique institutions and practices of so many of the members. Nor - wisely in my view - have any steps been taken to create some artificial adhesive or binder. There is no charter, no constitution, no headquarters building, no flag, no continuing executive framework. Apart from the Secretariat, which is a fraction of the size one might expect for an organization which encompasses a quarter of the peoples on this earth, there is nothing about the Commonwealth that one can grasp or point to as evidence of a structure.

"Even the use of the word 'organization' creates an impression of a framework which is misleading. The Commonwealth is an organism, not an institution - and this fact gives promise not only of continued growth and vitality, but of flexibility as well."

If this peculiar characteristic of the Commonwealth offers difficulty, as it seems to do, to historians or journalists or persons from non-Commonwealth countries, it is perhaps unfortunate. But surely this unique source of strength should not be surrendered in the name of conformity to accepted institutional practices. The Commonwealth is not a miniature United Nations; the Conference is not a decision-making body. To attempt to convert it would simply underscore differences of opinion; it would force countries to take sides and to vote against one another. There exist international organizations where this has to be done and where it is done; the Commonwealth is not and should not become a replica of them.