

of understanding. Instead, the observations and the admonitions of the several prime ministers and presidents were made and recorded and the meeting moved on to the next item on the agenda. I do not mean to leave the impression that the Rhodesian question was not adequately discussed, or that the Conference did no more than touch it in passing. Quite the contrary. The case of Rhodesia's African neighbours and those who supported them was argued with great vigour and skill; nothing material was omitted in order to avoid hurting the feelings of others; there was no hypocritical attempt to pretend they did not exist. The Rhodesian debate was honest and it was tough, yet at its conclusion something of considerable significance occurred.

After looking at the problem in its exact dimensions, after closing in on its many difficulties, men holding opposite views admitted that the true nature of the difficulties was now better understood than before and they noted in some instances, after listening to the comments of others, that their rigid attitudes were capable of some modification. Of most importance, however, honourable men agreed honourably to disagree.

There is little headline material in this kind of decision; neither is there much domestic political advantage for individual leaders. But to a world burdened almost beyond endurance by incredibly complex problems of immense moment, an agreement to disagree and to search patiently for solutions and areas of agreement is of immeasurable value. Delegates can walk out of meetings in anger, but they cannot remove with them the underlying cause of their annoyance. Organizations can be broken apart by impatient members, but the act of disintegration contributes nothing to the easing of the original tensions.

The Conference revealed in still another way the coming of age of the Commonwealth. For if the African states did not insist that the meeting preoccupy itself exclusively with Rhodesia, neither did the Asian or Caribbean states view the meeting simply as an arena within which to press their own demands for economic assistance. And, in my view, as important as either of these events, none of the white countries attempted to dominate the proceedings on the pretext that their economic development, their political experience or their longer independence gave them any superior wisdom in the solution of new problems. One sensed that at this meeting the participants were equal members; no one pretended to possess all the problems, no one claimed to have all the answers. The 88 contributions to the debates on the five agenda items were remarkably evenly distributed around the conference table.

There is a well-known tradition at Commonwealth Conferences which denies to members the right to discuss, without consent, matters affecting the domestic policies of another member, or matters of solely bilateral interest. It is this rule which prevents the meeting being employed as a forum to the particular advantage, or disadvantage, of any single country. It is this rule as well which encourages the participation in general debate of all 28 member states. There is little doubt that, in the long run, the rule is a wise one. In the short run, it does present a challenge to countries seeking to discuss a problem which, because of its very size, seems to them to be of international, rather than of domestic, implications. At this meeting the Nigerian civil war fell into this category.