

Singapore Conference

The meeting of Commonwealth heads of government in Singapore in January illustrated both the strength and the limitations of the Commonwealth relation. From the Canadian viewpoint, the conference was reasonably successful. Fears entertained beforehand that the meeting might witness the disintegration of the association over the emotionally-charged issue of projected British arms sales to South Africa were not realized. Suggestions before the conference that Britain should be expelled from the Commonwealth, or that several members led by the East Africans might walk out, similarly came to nothing. Instead, Commonwealth leaders took full advantage of the unique opportunity afforded them by such meetings, for face-to-face consultation on major issues of common interest to many or all of them -- in this case, a current political issue that for some had assumed crisis proportions. Together with the Secretary-General, the leaders of the 31 delegations met, without advisers, for two full working days. They discussed the arms-sale issue in all its ramifications, probing the divergent positions, attempting to view the problem as a whole and in the broadest perspective.

The issue was not resolved at Singapore. Nor does it now seem likely to be resolved by the device adopted there as a means of pursuing efforts to find a solution -- the establishment of a study group of eight Commonwealth members. This body, including Canada, was to examine all factors affecting the security of trade-routes in the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans, and to report through the Secretary-General to member governments. The group had not held its first meeting when Britain, late in February, announced its intention to proceed with the sale to South Africa of seven *Wasp* helicopters, in fulfilment of what it considered legal obligations under agreements dating from 1955 about the naval base at Simonstown. This British decision, it should be noted, was in conformity with the position maintained by Prime Minister Heath during the Singapore discussions, where he insisted on the British Government's freedom to adopt and implement policies which it judged to be in Britain's best interests. Nevertheless, the British Government's announcement has been followed by the withdrawal of Nigeria, India and Malaysia from the study group; and it now appears that the body will never meet.

Has the Commonwealth then failed a critical test on this issue? To conclude thus would, I believe, reflect a serious misconception of what the organization is about, and a lack of realism about its capacities. It is not, and does not aspire to be, a policy-making assembly for its membership. It does not seek to impose upon them unanimity of approach to international issues. But in an association embracing such diversity, what is achieved should not be underrated.

However much some member governments may have wished to see Britain persuaded at Singapore to abandon its intention to sell arms to South Africa, they were able, without having achieved that keenly-sought objective, to conclude the gathering in amity. Despite the intensity of feeling on the arms-sale issue, it was accepted by all Commonwealth leaders at Singapore that, in the final analysis, the British Government must be the judge of what course Britain might best follow. It is equally true, of course, that other Commonwealth governments are free to determine their own responses.