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THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Report to the House of Commons on January 20, 1969, by
Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau concerning the
Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers recently concluded.

This was the sixteenth of these meetings since the Second World War. The 28 members of the Commonwealth represented at the Conference made it the largest by far of any of the Commonwealth meetings held to date. Twenty-four of the 28 states were represented by heads of government - either prime ministers or presidents - and this, according to the calculation of the chairman, was one of the biggest meetings of heads of government anywhere since the 1945 San Francisco Conference.

This is perhaps the greatest strength of the Commonwealth, this opportunity on a regular basis for men of goodwill to sit down together and discuss one with another the problems which affect them and the 850 million people whom they represent. All the other advantages of the Commonwealth relation - the exchanges of people, the trading patterns, the economic assistance and co-operation schemes, the informality of diplomatic representation - assume their tone from the free and frank dialogue which takes place at the prime ministerial meetings.

It is difficult for me as a newcomer to these meetings to compare this latest Conference with those that have preceded it in recent years. My impression is that this meeting was not only successful as Commonwealth meetings go but significantly so. Indeed, this Conference may have marked some kind of watershed for the Commonwealth. For one thing, the Commonwealth is now close to its maximum size, and future meetings will not note the presence of many new members. For another, the scope of the Secretariat seems now to have been defined and its services identified. But most important (and here I rely not simply on my own observations but on the comments of several veteran heads of government), the Commonwealth meeting appears to have attained a new plateau of maturity. Those who anticipated dramatic events at this meeting were incorrect; those who forecast an emotional confrontation over racial issues have been proved wrong. Equally, of course, those who hoped for the emergence of some brilliant answers to vexing questions were disappointed.

What did emerge was a realization by all leaders present that there was great value in open discussion and in an exchange of opinions. It was obvious, for example, that an easy solution for the complex problem of Rhodesia simply did not exist. This being so, no advantage was to be gained from a prolonged and emotionally charged argument alleging breaches of faith or lack