

where we have had a decisive influence in the past.

I am not suggesting that Canada should concentrate exclusively on the Commonwealth role or that we should neglect our responsibilities to the United Nations, to NATO or to any other institution with which we are connected and which is important to world peace. But we do have very significant opportunities to assist in the development of the Francophone communities. The nature of our country enables us to play an important role here. All of these things that are of value not only to us but to international understanding should be explored and pursued.

Our role in the Commonwealth remains of central importance to Canada, not because of historic connections alone but because our service to the Commonwealth in the past has built up a trust and a confidence which it would be wrong to weaken or to waste.

In another forum the Prime Minister has sought to excuse his abstention on the ground that he was a "New boy". He may be a new boy with the Commonwealth, but Canada, sir, is not. In any case I have too much respect for the Prime Minister to find him believable in his self-assumed pose as the innocent abroad.

Canada's failure at the Commonwealth conference—the government's failure on behalf of Canada—has at its root, I think, the same attitude of casual non-involvement and non-commitment that also threatens to become the trademark of the government's response to urgent domestic concerns. At a London press conference the Prime Minister brushed aside suggestions that Canada might have an important role to play in certain mediation efforts, by disclaiming any desire to engage in international heroics or to intervene in the domestic affairs of any nation. I am sure that it was not from any tendency toward heroics that the Prime Minister's predecessor helped bring the Commonwealth through an impasse on Rhodesia on a previous occasion, nor from which the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) took the lead in bringing the Commonwealth to its agonizing decision on the South African question. It was, I suggest, at least partly because these questions threatened the existence and integrity, and therefore the usefulness, of the Commonwealth as an institution.

• (2:30 p.m.)

In referring to Nigeria the Prime Minister told us of the assurance the Nigerian federal

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authorities gave him that they were willing to meet Biafran representatives, without there being any previous conditions. The Prime Minister expressed regret that efforts to encourage the Biafrans to meet with the Nigerians at the negotiating table have proved fruitless to date. I could not help observing from press reports that the day after the Prime Minister announced that Nigerian federal authorities had agreed to hold discussions with the Biafrans without there being any previous conditions, that same proposal was clearly and emphatically withdrawn by a spokesman from the Nigerian government. I, too, am disappointed that the effort to bring Biafra and the Nigerian federal government together has proved fruitless. I hope that what has been done indicates on our part a firm intention to keep lines of communication open so that Canada may, even if belatedly, play a leading role in alleviating starvation and bringing a measure of peace to that unfortunate country.

It is noteworthy that the United States has recently begun to take initiatives in this field. The sale of four aircraft to the churches and the review by the United States State Department of that country's entire policy toward Nigeria offer a small but perceptible glimmer of hope that the civilized world will accept some responsibility in ending the conflict and suffering in Biafra. Canada has been lax in accepting any responsibility there. One hopes that the government will take advantage of any initiatives taken by the United States or other countries.

I do not claim to be an historian, but I suspect it will be said that in the last week or two Canada for the first time failed to exercise leadership in the Commonwealth; that, as a result, the Commonwealth has suffered; that its importance as a modern worldwide institution has been weakened; and that Canada's potential influence in the world is less now than it was a few weeks ago. Certainly as a result of this conference our position has not been enhanced, but diminished. Canadians and the entire international community will regret this. Let me add, the world does not stand still for the government of Canada. Opportunities passed up are opportunities lost for alleviating the anxieties and problems facing the world, as well as for supporting existing institutions. Mr. Speaker, events in the world do not wait for the Prime Minister's programmers.

The Prime Minister referred to his Vatican visit, indicating he favours an exchange of diplomatic representatives with the Vatican.