

Commonwealth of Nations after 25 years of change

By Arnold Smith

This century's third quarter saw the Commonwealth of Nations develop from an association of six independent countries – all relatively rich and predominantly white – to one of 35 sovereign members. Commonwealth meetings now bring together representatives of a significant cross-section of mankind, and of the problems of mankind. The original West European, North American and Australasian members have been joined by Asians, Africans and island peoples from the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. There are nations of virtually every faith, and at every stage of economic and political development – very poor as well as rich, countries ranging in size from city states to vast multilingual, multicultural federations.

This development has by no means been an automatic by-product of decolonization. The Commonwealth is essentially the deliberate creation of certain leaders of successful national liberation movements. Many nations once ruled by Britain did not, on getting independence, apply for Commonwealth membership – Burma, for example, or Egypt, the Sudan, Iraq, Nepal. Those that asked for membership did so because they saw value for themselves in the development and use of Commonwealth links, and often value for the world as well. As Jawaharlal Nehru put it, an association that brought together for frank discussion but without binding commitments leaders from various parts of the earth could provide “a touch of healing” for a troubled world.

Nehru wanted India to remain in the Commonwealth as a republic. This raised a new question, since, until then, all members had shared the same person as head of state, and some political leaders, as well as many constitutional logicians, considered this feature of a common allegiance indispensable. Ireland had recently decided it must withdraw from the Commonwealth on becoming a republic. Its friends overseas regretted this but did not challenge the Irish logic.

Nehru's wise request precipitated a useful clarification of thought on the whole question. The Statute of Westminster two decades before, and the neutrality of George the Sixth as King of Ireland in the Second World War, had long since made it clear that the Commonwealth was not a bloc, and that membership was not in any sense a derogation from sovereignty but an optional additional attribute of it – as a great New Zealander once put it, “not independence minus but independence plus”. So a sensible way was found of meeting Nehru's request, and it has proved, of course, to be not the beginning of disintegration but a condition of growth.

There are now in the Commonwealth some 20 republics and a few hereditary or elective kingdoms, as well as those members that share with Britain the person of their head of state. All recognize the Queen as the symbol of their free association and as such head of the Commonwealth. This collective symbol is appropriate not merely as a recollection of some shared history – and, if you like, the constructive forgiveness of sins – but because it aptly transcends national sovereignty and points towards wider international co-operation. Moreover, the fact that at the centre of London's political establishment there is a dedicated internationalist has proved of no small import.

If the withdrawal of Ireland in 1949 was unnecessary, that of South Africa in 1962 was forced by a solemn collective decision by Commonwealth members on the basic importance of racial equality and non-discrimination. This decision involved a conscious choice of priorities in world politics and looked forward to the prospect, since realized, of a substantial

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