

cannot be sustained. It is really very much a matter of will at the present time, whether or not those of us who are members of the Commonwealth think the institution ought to be preserved. If we think it ought to be preserved, then I think it can be. It is quite possible it could dissolve in apathy but, on the other hand, if we have the will to do so we can preserve it as a very valuable instrument for maintaining and extending world order.

In a transitional period it has a special function. So I would suggest, to begin with, the proposition that we really need to think wishfully on this subject and also to act wishfully. Of course, there is no doubt that, it could blow up at any moment; it is in a precarious state. Almost any day, next week, prominent African members might withdraw from the Commonwealth and begin the process of disintegration. One reason it is in such a precarious state is that it was never more useful than it is at the present time. It has a function because it is seizing its opportunity and is trying to make itself useful and, in particular, not running away from major world problems. I think that is one of the reasons its position is precarious.

I would like to express a somewhat heretical view. It is frequently stated that in the good old days when the Commonwealth consisted of a much more closely knit group we had international meetings much more useful, successful and intimate, and now with this very large table and with people of very different backgrounds the meetings are not so useful. It is said that with this large number of members, and with people of different backgrounds, the meetings are not so useful. It is said that with this large number of members, and with people of different backgrounds, the meetings are not so useful.

I would like to suggest the opposite. I did, as a junior bag carrier, attend a number of the Prime Ministers' meetings in their more Anglo-Saxon days, and I really do think that in those days there was a strong tendency to leave off the agenda the controversial and the very difficult issues, particularly racial issues. They were frequently discussed behind the scenes at the Dorchester Hotel and elsewhere, but at the meetings and particularly at the United Nations these issues were left off the agenda because they might cause embarrassment. I do not think that is the case today. The new members do not permit it. Therefore, there is much more danger of conflict.

Of course, one always approaches the Commonwealth with a certain bias, and perhaps at this time I should confess my own bias. I have always been interested in the institution, but sceptically, I trust. There are various reasons for this.

Some people will say, perhaps, it is because I am a wasp and the Commonwealth is for wasps. I suggest that this is by no means a valid argument any more. It is unfortunate there has been this tradition of believing that the Commonwealth is for people who are descendants of, or whose ancestors came from, the British Isles. The Commonwealth is, after all, a multiracial fraternity, and if you look at the population statistics you will find that a very small proportion of its membership are of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic origin. The Commonwealth is not something that exists for the benefit of the nobler Anglo-Saxons. If such a position is maintained then it has not a chance.

The fact that I am an historian and not a political scientist may have something to do with my bias. The Commonwealth has no validity to the political scientist. If you know any American political scientists you realize how hard it is to convince them that the Commonwealth has any substance at all. But, it is an historical phenomenon and we should think of it as that. It is not a club. It is a curious thing, which is the product of history. It has been produced. It has adapted itself, and it is relevant in the present day.