



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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CANADA AND THE COMMONWEALTH

An Address by Mr. A. Ouellet, Parliamentary Secretary to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, March 7, 1971.

The Commonwealth is difficult to define; like many political institutions, it evolved over a long period by the historical process of precedent and convention; it has no written constitution or charter, no continuing executive structure. It is not an international organization like the United Nations, or the Organization of American States, with a structured hierarchy of councils and committees reaching decisions on international political and other issues by formal resolution and majority vote. Also, the Commonwealth is not a military alliance; by virtue of membership, Commonwealth countries assume no obligation to come to the assistance of another member who may suffer attack, though naturally they would be concerned about such a development. The Commonwealth is not a grouping that always acts together to achieve certain economic objectives, though from time to time it may pursue certain goals such as the economic and social development of the poorer members. Commonwealth countries do not have a common tariff or carry on free trade between themselves, though since 1932 some members have given others certain tariff preferences arranged bilaterally. With the passage of time, natural processes of economic growth and development and the postwar liberalization of trade on a multilateral basis, the Commonwealth preference system has become relatively less significant for the more-developed Commonwealth members, though still of major importance for many of the developing members.

Defined in positive terms, and drawing on the recent declaration issued at Singapore, the Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 31 sovereign independent nations, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interests of their peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace. There are members from each of the six continents and from five oceans; the member countries comprise peoples of widely different races, languages, religions and cultures, embracing between a quarter and a third of the world's population. Members have complete freedom to belong to any other grouping, association or alliance or to be non-aligned. They range from poor developing countries to wealthy industrialized nations like Britain, Canada and Australia. With the exception of Britain, they share a common history as former British colonies, which have now become sovereign,