

Declaration, Burma chose to become an independent country outside the association on January 4, 1948.

#### Nature of Commonwealth Association

The essential functions of the Commonwealth can be stated simply in two words: consultation and co-operation. As expressed in the opening paragraph of the Commonwealth Declaration, Commonwealth governments consult and co-operate in the common interests of their peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace.

Since the members come from all parts of the world, each with different responsibilities and interests and each pursuing policies it judges to be best suited to its interests, it is hardly surprising that agreement on a common course of action is seldom possible. The Commonwealth is not an international organization like the United Nations or the Organization of American States, with a charter and a structured hierarchy of councils and committees, reaching decisions on political and other international issues by formal resolution and majority votes. Nor does it have a continuing executive structure. In 1965, the Commonwealth Secretariat was established to assist Commonwealth governments in ensuring conditions for the frank exchange of opinions in a friendly, informal and intimate atmosphere. The Secretariat was given the following functions: to facilitate and promote consultation both bilaterally and multilaterally among members; to prepare and circulate factual papers on international questions of common concern to all Commonwealth governments; to act as a focal point and a link for various specialized Commonwealth agencies; to undertake studies on various subjects in the economic, social and cultural fields; and to service Commonwealth meetings.

Members have complete freedom to belong to any grouping, association or alliance or, of course, to remain non-aligned. Membership carries no obligation to come to the assistance of another member that may be attacked, though naturally Commonwealth countries would be seriously concerned about such a development. At an earlier stage, commerce was an important cohesive factor but, with natural processes of economic growth and the liberalization of trade on a multilateral basis following the Second World War, the Commonwealth preference system became relatively less significant. Commonwealth countries, particularly the more-developed nations, tended to diversify trade toward other areas. The significance of the Commonwealth preference system with regard to trade with Britain was, of course, affected by Britain's entry into the European Community on January 1, 1973.<sup>(5)</sup> On a broader scale, Commonwealth trade links

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- (5) While Britain's entry meant the termination of the Canada/United Kingdom Trade Agreement and the removal of Canadian preferential access to the British market, Canada has not yet altered British preferential access to the Canadian market. Canada, moreover, has renegotiated trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand that retain much of the preferential character.