

In assessing the significance of the Commonwealth we must remember also that it has emerged as a consequence of one of the greatest political revolutions the world has known. This revolution has not been attended by much violence, although it has taken place in violent times. It has been a gradual process of agreement and adjustment by which a great imperial power, over a period of something less than a century, even at times when it was still enlarging its possessions, divested itself of a major part of its imperial authority, withdrawing its governors, withdrawing its administrators, withdrawing its troops, almost always accepting the force of circumstance without putting its judgment to the test of military strength. The Commonwealth, therefore, is an expression on the part of those states which have emerged as a result of this process of their determination to maintain as much as they can of the constructive and beneficial elements in their former unity. They have made this decision voluntarily and they have been able to do so because they are satisfied that they have now been assured the full measure of their freedom, and that the Commonwealth maintains no vestige of the former imperial domination. They have also gone to considerable trouble to maintain this association though there have been times when it seemed almost simpler to break up the Commonwealth rather than to adjust it to the new circumstances. None of the present members, however, has been prepared to face that possibility, and they have together, by their combined decision, decided to keep it in being.

There are many observers who are perplexed and even distressed because the Commonwealth lacks many of the formal attributes of an ordinary association of states. It has no common legislature, no binding defence agreements, no chiefs of staff committee, no common tariff structure, no central foreign office. We should not, therefore, conclude that because central machinery of the kind I have mentioned does not exist in the Commonwealth, the members of the Commonwealth are opposed to this machinery as such. The real explanation is quite different; it is that everything that it is possible to do, through the Commonwealth, in the conduct of international affairs, can be done, in present circumstances at least, without these institutions. Conversely, it is the opinion of the members of the Commonwealth that the conduct of their own affairs, each in his own area of the world, would be made more difficult if such formal institutions existed. In regard to a formal military alliance, for example, the governments of the Commonwealth have come to the conclusion that their ability and willingness to take common action in appropriate circumstances would not be strengthened by a formal written commitment. At the same time, many of them find it necessary or expedient to enter into military commitments with states outside the Commonwealth, in the particular area where they exist. The freedom to enter into these military associations outside the Commonwealth is of greater importance than any set of precise defence obligations which might be written for the Commonwealth itself. The same kind of answer may be made if it is asked why the Commonwealth does not desire a common legislature, or an executive committee of some kind meeting regularly on matters of common interest. The existing machinery for Commonwealth consultation will carry the governments of the Commonwealth in the direction of common legislation as far as it is possible and necessary to go, and there is no reason to believe that the elaboration of this machinery would increase the usefulness of the Commonwealth as an instrument in world affairs. There is, as a matter of fact, good evidence that the contrary is the case. There is no real common field for legislative action between, let us say, Canada and India, and the effort to combine representatives from these two countries in a Commonwealth legislature could have little real purpose. The same considerations exist in regard to a central judiciary. There is no legal process by which disputes amongst members of the Commonwealth may be referred to a central judicial tribunal. This certainly is not because members of the Commonwealth are unwilling in appropriate circumstances to accept the judgments of the courts in regard to their international obligations. The reason is that what cannot be settled between members of the Commonwealth by ordinary processes of negotiation and adjustment, could not be settled by any Commonwealth court. It is as though one were to suggest that a large family should voluntarily establish a court for its own use. What the members of a family could not agree upon informally, could certainly not be settled by any judicial procedures which they had set up especially for their own uses. We are led by these examples to the conclusion