

Commonwealth Remains Vital

When I say this proposal was in a sense surprising, we remember it is not long since proposals for a secretariat were regarded with fairly general suspicion as a reflection of a tendency toward centralization, which in those early days was interpreted as meaning rule from Downing Street. It is significant, then, to realize that the pressure toward this kind of conservative centralization, if you want to call it that, comes from the newer countries which in many ways are or should be most suspicious of the older members in this regard, but have no fears of any such implications from a proposal of this kind. They are very much aware of its practical value to them in providing a broad range of information which it is difficult for them to obtain with the inadequate diplomatic and government services they now have or perhaps can afford; and so we supported this proposal.

I think the situation has changed a great deal since the early days and it is something we should try to work out on a genuine Commonwealth basis. Yet, at the same time, this should be done without interfering with the existing channels of communications, without confusing what is already in place. It respects a very satisfactory method of co-ordination and exchange of information. We must be sure the basis of this new secretariat is sound, and that we are adding an institution of value and not simply an additional agency available for the free play of Parkinson's Law; but we will be glad to take part in the study of a possible basis for such an organization, which will be taking place very shortly.

Mr. Speaker, in recent years fears have been expressed — and they were certainly expressed on the eve of this Conference — that the Commonwealth had outlived its real purpose and had become simply an amiable club with no real objective, depending largely on the emotional recollection of past imperial greatness. I believe the recent Conference has shown that those fears are unfounded, and that the sense of the value of the new Commonwealth is felt precisely and most importantly where one might have thought there would have been the greatest doubt; that is, among the new countries in Africa and Asia. They recognize in the Commonwealth an agency of real value to them, and we try to keep it that way. They realize that it can provide a bridge between continents and between the races and this, I think, is going to afford a new role for the Commonwealth in the years ahead. In a world in which the associations of peoples and nations are all too frequently on the basis of a common ideology, a common race, a common language or a common geographical location, there is, I submit, a unique merit in an institution which transcends all of these and brings countries together on a wider basis than the ones I have mentioned, on a basis which is really founded on a common adherence to human rights and free institutions and a desire to settle our problems by consultation, co-operation and agreement.

One of the most impressive political figures it has been my privilege to meet for some years ... was the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who suggested, in what I thought was a very profound statement to the Conference, that it would be well for this new Commonwealth to try to work out a statement of general principles on which it stands and on which it could go forward, not only a statement of principle of racial equality but a statement of general principles, and include in these principles this adherence to free institutions, this respect for basic law and basic rights, as well as respect for racial equality and non-discrimination. In serving these principles