

*Establishment
of Secretariat
a structural
decision*

growth in Commonwealth membership that would lead to a broad multiracial association.

Another essentially structural decision was that taken by heads of government in 1964-65 to establish a Secretariat. This proposal, put forward by the Prime Ministers of Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia, and Ceylon, facilitated increased use of the association, while moving from the original fact and appearance of Anglocentricity to put emphasis on multilateralism and equality. The control of such limited central machinery as the Commonwealth needed was removed by general agreement from the hands of any one national government and placed in those of a Secretary-General, elected by and responsible to all the heads of government collectively, who is supported by a staff recruited from public services and the professions in all parts of the Commonwealth.

Strengthened

The flexibility and informality of the Commonwealth association, which from the beginning have been among its essential and indispensable features, were not weakened by the establishment of a Secretariat, as some had at first feared, but strengthened. This is important. The Commonwealth, in contrast to the United Nations, the Specialized Agencies, and most regional organizations, has no written constitution. Its decisions are taken by consensus — a term for which I have always been careful to avoid giving or allowing a rigid definition. There is no veto, as has been demonstrated, but very general agreement is sought and usually attained. This system works where people recognize — or can be brought to recognize — that their community of interests transcends their differences. The Commonwealth is essentially pragmatic, more like the common law than legislative codes. Its approach, I have sometimes suggested, is more like that of the gardener, seeking to influence and guide living trends and forces, than like that of the engineer or architect, seeking to dominate.

Thus, when the Commonwealth set up a small central agency charged with the opportunity, and responsibility, of helping to make the association as useful as possible to its members, its terms of reference were typically vague and ambiguous. In effect, I and my colleagues were given offices in Marlborough House and the opportunity to see what we could make of it.

We were given virtually no financial resources beyond our pay and a little for travel expenses. But we had ready access

and the opportunity to talk frankly at any level.

If the Commonwealth had been getting along reasonably smoothly until I was elected and asked to organize a Secretariat, political storms followed quickly. Within weeks the Malaysians and the mainly Chinese-speaking peoples of Singapore got a divorce; India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir; and the white minority Government of Rhodesia declared illegal independence from Britain to forestall moves toward majority rule. There have been many subsequent crises. Politically, as in other ways, intra-Commonwealth relations, and the work of the Secretariat, have never been dull.

Toward the end of this article I shall say something of the political uses of the Commonwealth, because, if not the most obvious, they are the most important.

The establishment of the Secretariat undoubtedly reduced the association's vulnerability to the vagaries of individual leaders or to the international popularity or otherwise of the policies, at particular periods, of individual governments. It has helped the Commonwealth to outlive and survive various bilateral and interregional stresses and strains of the past decade. It has been essential to have a focal point for the association that belongs as much to each member as to any other, and that can, in practice, during crises continue to be recognized by all — and listened to by all — without loss of political face. This has been relevant not merely for substantive policies, but even for participation. It mattered, for example, that in 1966 Tanzanian and Ghanaian ministers were able to attend a meeting of Commonwealth ministers in Marlborough House despite their Governments having broken diplomatic relations at the time with Britain. It has mattered that invitations to meetings are issued by the Secretary-General, representing the totality of the association, rather than by the host government of the particular meeting.

That there have at times been stresses and strains is not surprising. The modern Commonwealth is, by the range of its membership, often in the centre of relations and problems between rich and developing countries, between regions and continents and cultures. These involve many of the most difficult and potentially dangerous issues in international affairs. Rich-poor confrontations, continental or regional isolationism, racial discrimination or prejudice could, if we are stupid enough, threaten not merely the cohesion but the existence of the Commonwealth. The real threat would be to the world. Conversely,

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