

Commonwealth Conference

pressed 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 most 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 must try to keep it that way. They realize that it can provide a bridge between the continents and between the races and this, I think, is going to afford a great 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—he is one the right hon. Leader of the Opposition knows well—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 and in providing a forum for an intimate and friendly exchange of views among nations and among virtually all races of mankind the commonwealth is embarking on a new era in which it could have, and I hope it will have, a value broader and deeper than it has had in the world at any time in the past.

May I conclude, Mr. Speaker, by reading just one short sentence from the communiqué

[Mr. Pearson.]

which expresses that point of view. Referring to the commonwealth the communiqué says:

It is, indeed, a cross section of the world itself; and its citizens have an unparalleled opportunity to prove that, by mutual co-operation, men and women of many different races and national cultures can live in peace and work together for the common good.

Right Hon. J. G. Diefenbaker (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, my first words must be to express a welcome to the Prime Minister on his return from the conference, a welcome that is most sincere, one that from time to time in the cross fire of political difference is not spoken. I am glad to see him back. I am glad to see him looking so well, although I am sure he needs a holiday after the very trying and onerous responsibilities that rested on him as the representative for our country. I am sure he will now be able to look over some of the things he said just before he departed and will remove from the agenda one of those matters he said must be dealt with before parliament can enjoy a vacation and he too can have that holiday and respite that I am sure the work of the last two weeks demands.

I must say that his recital of the prime ministers' conference does bring to me a nostalgia of other days. The conferences meet. They are all different, but they all have a sameness about them; deeply impressive, most significant, ending with a communiqué which is generally of nebulous uncertainty; a conference which makes no definite decisions as such but which, in that spirit to which the right hon. gentleman referred in his concluding words, brings about within a family relationship decisions which are not decisions in fact but which do represent something of the philosophy of the peoples who are joined together in this difficult to interpret commonwealth relationship.

Indeed, one has but to look over the record of the years. These conferences began during colonial days. The first was held in 1887. Sir John Macdonald was most anxious to have such a conference. It met on the occasion of Queen Victoria's jubilee, and the records of the time show that it was not taken very seriously by the British government of that day. Then there were the subsequent colonial conferences, three or four in number, followed by the imperial conferences, five in number, beginning in 1921, and finally by the prime ministers' conferences, 13 in number, which have taken place since 1944.