

*Statement on Commonwealth Conference*

hurting the feelings of others; there was no hypocritical attempt to pretend they did not exist. The Rhodesian debate was honest and it was tough, yet at its conclusion something of considerable significance occurred.

• (2:10 p.m.)

After looking at the problem in its exact dimensions, after closing in on its many difficulties, men holding opposite views admitted that the true nature of the difficulties was now better understood than before and they noted in some instance, after listening to the comments of others that their rigid attitudes were capable of some modification. Of most importance, however, honourable men agreed honourably to disagree.

There is little headline material in this kind of decision; neither is there much domestic political advantage for individual leaders. But to a world burdened almost beyond endurance by incredibly complex problems of immense moment, an agreement to disagree and to search patiently for solutions and areas of agreement is of immeasurable value. Delegates can walk out of meetings in anger, but they cannot remove with them the underlying cause of their annoyance. Organizations can be broken apart by impatient members, but the act of disintegration contributes nothing to the easing of the original tensions.

The conference revealed in still another way the coming of age of the Commonwealth. For if the African states did not insist that the meeting preoccupy itself exclusively with Rhodesia, neither did the Asian or Caribbean states view the meeting simply as an arena within which to press their own demands for economic assistance. And, in my view, as important as either of these events, none of the white countries attempted to dominate the proceedings on the pretext that their economic development, their political experience or their longer independence gave them any superior wisdom in the solution of new problems. One sensed that at this meeting the participants were equal members; no one pretended to possess all the problems, no one claimed to have all the answers. The 88 contributions to the debates on the five agenda items were remarkably evenly distributed around the conference table.

There is a well known tradition at Commonwealth conferences, Mr. Speaker, which denies to members the right to discuss, without consent, matters affecting the domestic policies of another member, or matters of solely bilateral interest. It is this rule which prevents the meeting being employed as a

[Mr. Trudeau.]

forum to the particular advantage, or disadvantage, of any single country. It is this rule as well which encourages the participation in general debate of all 28 member states. There is little doubt that in the long run the rule is a wise one. In the short run, it does present a challenge to countries seeking to discuss a problem which, because of its very size, seems to them to be of international, rather than of domestic, implications. At this meeting the Nigerian civil war fell into this category.

The tragedy of Nigeria was mentioned at the conference by Prime Minister Wilson in his opening remarks on the first day. It was the subject of considerable corridor talk and out-of-conference discussions. Though not on the agenda, it was regarded by most delegations—and not least the Nigerian delegation—as of extreme importance.

On Wednesday of last week, at a gathering of heads of government outside of the conference proper, which I attended, the leader of the Nigerian delegation agreed on behalf of his government to enter into fresh talks in London with the rebel representatives, without any pre-conditions to be attached to those talks. He agreed as well that it would be in order for other Commonwealth governments to do what they could to urge the Biafrans to engage in talks on this basis. Before we left London, Canadian officials met with Biafran representatives in an attempt to convince them to do just that. I am deeply disappointed that that attempt was unsuccessful, as were, we understand, the representations of other delegations and of the Secretary General.

I mentioned a few moments ago, Mr. Speaker, that the role and scope of the Commonwealth secretariat were defined with more precision than heretofore, at this conference. The general view as expressed was that the secretariat has an important role to play, but that the Commonwealth should not become over-structured. If I may repeat what I said in London at the conference.

As the Commonwealth grows in number of members it increases in diversity. The common ingredients, which were once the adhesive of membership, are now outnumbered by the unique institutions and practices of so many of the members. Nor, wisely in my view, have any steps been taken to create some artificial adhesive or binder. There is no charter, no constitution, no headquarters building, no flag, no continuing executive framework. Apart from the secretariat, which is a fraction of the size one might expect for an organization which encompasses a quarter of the peoples on this earth, there is nothing about the Commonwealth that one can grasp or point to as evidence of a structure.