

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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THE COMMONWEALTH AS A REGIONAL FORCE

A lecture delivered by Mr. R.G. Riddell, Department of External Affairs, on July 9, 1950, at the Mount Holyoke Institute of the United Nations on "Regional Forces in International Relations: East and West."

At this moment the time is not ripe for academic analysis of our political institutions. Questions about the constitutional framework of our society, the balance of political forces in the state, the legal validity of our constitutional procedures, although they remain important, are less immediately relevant. The real and urgent questions about any of our institutions become the practical ones. For the moment we forget to be concerned whether a particular political organism is a republic or a monarchy, whether its constitutional structure is coherent and rational, or illogical and unintelligible to any save the initiated. We ask ourselves only whether it is capable of use; whether it serves the purposes of the community of free peoples in an hour of great need. We ask whether it has breath and life in it, and whether it may be put in motion for common good.

I am sure that it is in this spirit that you will this week approach your study of regional organizations. I would not for a moment deny that an examination of the constitutional structure of these organizations is in the long run of great importance, and it may well be that in seeking an answer to the immediate and practical questions which we are all asking about the usefulness of our institutions, you will be driven back upon the more academic studies to which I have referred. But right now, at this moment in history, it seems to me the questions we must ask about our international institutions are these: What use are they? What are the things we should expect of them, and alternatively, what are the burdens that we should not lay upon them or expect them to bear?

Certainly there are plenty of uses to which they can be put. The magnitude of the task which lies before the western world is now clear beyond a question of doubt. We must find the means of defending ourselves against the persistently aggressive force which is pressing upon the free community everywhere, and which breaks like an angry flood through any weak point in the dikes which contain it. Not only must we defend ourselves, but in so doing we must somehow be certain that all our resources and all our energies and all our ingenuity are not drained off in our defensive effort. The real victory will come only through the progressive strengthening of the community of free nations as a place where individual men and women may enjoy the political and social justice which is denied to them elsewhere. We in North America have reason to be confident that we can reach this dual objective within the boundaries of our own countries, but the task becomes more difficult and the issues more grave when we remember that it is not only we ourselves for whom the choice between freedom and communism must be real, it must be a real choice also for the people of other lands who live on the borders of the communist empire and whose political and economic problems are vastly more complicated, more deep-rooted and more stubborn than our own.

In all the efforts that have been made since the war to construct an international order upon either a universal or a regional basis, these dual objectives have invariably been recognized. The desire for security has been coupled with a desire to remove the source of danger to security. The United Nations is primarily an instrument for collective defence -- perhaps not as effective an instrument as we had originally hoped, but certainly one which in recent weeks has shown remarkable vitality. But, in any case, the United Nations