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THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE WORLD TODAY

An address by Mr. L.S. St. Laurent, Prime Minister of Canada, delivered to the Canada Club in London, England, on January 8, 1951.

I am grateful to the Canada Club for providing me with this occasion to make my first speech in the United Kingdom since I became Prime Minister of Canada. The Canada Club is an influential informal link between Canada and Great Britain and I am glad to have the opportunity to express the appreciation we in Ottawa feel for its service to both countries.

I cannot help pausing here to say how valuable these informal links between free countries really are. These free and unofficial associations are, in fact, one of the many tangible evidences of the freedom which we enjoy and which, I fear, is denied to those who live under any form of totalitarian rule.

And freedom everywhere in the world seems to be in jeopardy today. In the present state of the world, the very existence of freedom seems to depend on the freedom-loving nations being prepared to stand together to help each other in its defence.

In the past year or so we have got into the way of speaking of the "cold war" between the free world and the other world behind the so-called "iron curtain". But cold or not so cold, none of the nations in the free world wants any kind of war.

Certainly no nation in the Commonwealth wants war. We have no aggressive designs against any other people; and we have always been ready to co-operate, even with the nations behind the iron curtain for peaceful ends; we would be glad of any honourable arrangement "to live and let live". But we want to live bur~~own~~ lives in our own way; and most of us have been forced to the conclusion that we are not going to be allowed to live our lives in our own way unless we have the strength to defend our fight to do so.

That was why Canada joined with her neighbours in the North Atlantic region to build up our combined defences. We felt the combination of our strength was necessary to deter aggression; that a mutual security pact was essential to ensure peace.

I do not need to remind you that the North Atlantic Treaty was concluded because we in the North Atlantic region felt we could not find the immediate security we had hoped for in the United Nations. But we have never given up hope in the ultimate success of that universal organization. If we can prevent the peace from being broken in the North Atlantic region, that will help to protect the growth and development of the United Nations.

But we have never felt that the pursuit of security through military strength alone was enough. If we are ever to achieve a lasting peace strength must always be accompanied by good-will, by moderation and by constructive efforts for human welfare. The nations of the Commonwealth have repeatedly demonstrated that they can muster considerable strength in war, and we have co-operated effectively to resist aggression in the past. We in Canada have never regarded the Commonwealth as such as an instrument for organizing our common security on the basis of our collective strength; we do not so consider it today. The security of all parts of the Commonwealth obviously depends upon the right kind of relationships with other nations outside the Commonwealth: and very specially on our relationships with the United States.

But we do believe that the Commonwealth has none-the-less a very constructive role in the world today, and I would like to indicate what I consider that role to be. It was this Commonwealth relationship which brought the Prime Ministers of half a dozen independent nations from distant parts of the globe to meet here in London in these first days of 1951; and some examination of that relationship and the relationship of the Commonwealth to the rest of the world seems in order.

The nature of the Commonwealth is a subject on which it is almost impossible to get even like-minded people to agree.

I have a feeling that if I were to ask my colleagues in the government at Ottawa to define the Commonwealth I would get as many definitions as there are members of the Cabinet. I am sure there would be a variety of views even in the Canada Club.

The Commonwealth, you know, is rather like the elephant the blind men in the fable tried to define, except that the Commonwealth is not as integrated as an elephant has to be to survive. On the contrary, the Commonwealth will survive only if we do not try to force too much integration upon it.

I do not need to remind you that the Commonwealth started out as a world-wide empire ruled from Downing Street. Fortunately, it was an empire ruled by men who had the wisdom to realize that unless they progressively surrendered their control to the local authorities in their colonial possessions around the globe the whole association might break up - as other Empires had broken up - in bad blood.

Before 1914 a situation had been reached where the Dominions, as they were then coming to be called, had complete self-government in all their domestic affairs, though they were without direct external relations with other countries, and the major issues of foreign policy for the whole empire were settled exclusively in London, by Ministers responsible exclusively to the Parliament at Westminster.

That relationship was upset by the First Great War, and the British Empire emerged from the war with two apparent alternatives open to it. On the one hand were those who believed the self-governing Dominions could share with the United Kingdom in the formation of a common foreign policy; on the other were those whose view was that self-government must be carried to its logical conclusion, and that each of these self-governing Dominions must be free to develop all the attributes of nationhood. These latter maintained that real nationhood included the right and the obligation of making decisions even on the most vital questions of foreign policy, including peace

or war. My predecessor, Mr. Mackenzie King, was one of the most resolute advocates of this view and in the end the overwhelming majority of Canadians followed his lead.

The issue between these two ideas was settled at the historic Imperial Conference of 1926 and it was settled in favour of the second alternative. Though it was settled in principle in favour of complete nationhood, a great many sincere and earnest people regretted the decision. Certainly up to the beginning of the second world war, vigorous rearguard actions were fought in many of the nations of the Commonwealth against the development of complete national independence for each member state.

To my mind the lesson for the Commonwealth of the Second World War and its aftermath is that so long as a genuine identity of aims, ideals and interests exists among the nations of the Commonwealth they will remain bound together by a community of action in all matters of great moment. And I believe the knowledge that our Commonwealth association depends upon respecting one another's ideals and interests is a wholesome restraint upon the self-regarding policies of any one of the nations of the Commonwealth.

Since the nations of the Commonwealth are scattered all around the globe, it is obvious that they can never achieve a community of purpose unless each nation pursues policies which are not exclusively national or even regional in their appeal, policies which have as their objective the welfare of humanity all over the globe.

There can be no formal bonds to hold the Commonwealth together. Even the position of the Crown has changed, but not our respect for the Crown nor our devotion to the King. The Commonwealth has no formal constitution. Today it has become a free association of free nations which used to be linked together politically, and now are associated because of a common attachment to certain political ideals. All of us in the Commonwealth stand for the maintenance of a large measure of freedom for the individual within the community, for genuine control by the citizens over their governments, and, underlying both these concepts, for the view that nations, large or small, have a right to order their own affairs in their own way, so long as in doing so they do not menace the existence or the freedom of their neighbours.

There are still some people who feel that these ideals are so general that they can be, and, in fact, are shared by most of the free nations which are not in the Commonwealth; and that therefore the Commonwealth as such has ceased to have any real meaning.

With this conclusion I cannot agree, though I certainly agree with the premise. To me the greatest attraction of the Commonwealth is that it is not exclusive in its ideals; that it is founded upon conceptions that could, with advantage to the world, be extended to all other nations.

What is more, the Commonwealth relationship, far from inhibiting co-operation with other nations, has created in all of us a habit of understanding and co-operation which makes it easier for our nations and our governments to work with other nations and other governments, inside or outside the Commonwealth, to further ours and their common interests.

Since it has no central organs of government, there can, of course, be no such thing as a Commonwealth policy as such; though there can be, and most often is, identity of policies among the nations of the Commonwealth.

It follows that there can be no conflict between membership in the Commonwealth and membership in the United Nations or in regional arrangements under the Charter of the United Nations. The nations of the Commonwealth participate in the activities of the United Nations in exactly the same way as any other members of that organization; each of them makes its own decisions in accordance with its own views of what is best to achieve the objectives of the United Nations. We may hope and believe that our Commonwealth relationship predisposes us to take a longer view and to show wider sympathies in making our decisions. It also predisposes us to consult, whenever possible, with our Commonwealth colleagues, and with representatives of other like-minded nations before making our decisions.

The United Nations, unlike the Commonwealth, has a constitution with a charter and with specific and limited obligations solemnly undertaken by its members. The prime purpose of the United Nations is to maintain peace and to provide security for its members. Since these aims are also the fundamental aims of every one of the nations of the Commonwealth I think one would be justified in saying that membership in the Commonwealth tends to fortify our loyalty to the United Nations and to strengthen our support of its fundamental objectives.

There is no incompatibility either between membership in the Commonwealth and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is an alliance restricted to a particular region of the world and formed for the purpose of securing within that region the peace which we felt was not sufficiently secured, under present conditions, by the way in which the United Nations world-wide organization was functioning or rather was being prevented from functioning. Now it so happens that this North Atlantic region includes the area in which the two world wars had their origins. While the nations within that area have a special interest in, and a special obligation to their peoples to work for the preservation of peace in the Atlantic region, there can be no question that the success of our efforts will be of benefit to those nations of the Commonwealth which are not in the North Atlantic alliance, and, indeed, to the whole world.

Other nations of the Commonwealth have special interests and special responsibilities in other regions, and their success in preserving peace and security in those other regions will likewise benefit the whole Commonwealth and also the whole world. And we all hope that in time the world-wide organization of the United Nations may be made to function in such a way as to make all these regional arrangements an unnecessary duplication.

In the years since the close of the Second World War the Commonwealth itself has undergone a profound change. Until the close of the war, the Commonwealth was composed of nations, apart from the United Kingdom, geographically outside Europe but predominantly European in their origins and in the basic character of their institutions. The inclusion within the Commonwealth circle, as absolutely equal partners, of three great Asian nations may well prove to be as important a landmark in the development of the Commonwealth as the recognition of complete self-government was in 1926.

Although the Commonwealth grew out of a colonial empire, this latest development is the complete reversal of colonialism. And it is a change which has not come too soon.

In these post-war years, one of the increasingly obvious aims of world Communism is to stir up strife between Asia and the West and to divert movements for political independence in some Asian countries to the service of Communist world strategy. This is, indeed, one of the most sinister and dangerous aspects of Communist policy at the present time. Wherever throughout the East there are unsatisfactory standards of living or what is deemed to be economic exploitation either from within or from without, combined with stifled longings for material development or fuller political freedom, there the Communists are at work to twist these human needs and aspirations to their own ends.

The Communists everywhere represent every struggle for the benefit of Asian peoples as a struggle for freedom from Western colonialism and exploitation. To this Communist picture, the very existence of the Commonwealth today is in direct contradiction, and the Commonwealth ideal of helpful co-operation between Western and Asian nations is its complete antithesis.

The main struggle, as we see it, in the world today is very different in character. It is a struggle between the new Communist imperialism, directed from Moscow, and the forces of freedom and of civilization both in the East and the West. It is not a struggle between East and West, but between liberty and tyranny. It is as much a part of Communist aims to weaken and divide the independent nations of Asia as it is to weaken and divide the Western nations. That is why all members of the Commonwealth, Western and Asian, share a common peril, and in meeting it rely upon ideals which are common to us all.

In the achievement of freedom and independence for the nations of Asia, the Commonwealth has shown the way. We in the Commonwealth are demonstrating by our actions as well as by our words that we genuinely recognize the equality of all nations, whether Eastern or Western; given an interval of peace, I am convinced we could build a more fruitful relationship between the East and the West than anyone dreamed of under the old dispensation.

I believe, too, there is much we can do through technical assistance, capital development and increased trade and commerce to help the nations of Asia to overcome the handicaps of widespread individual poverty. But in showing our willingness to do so, it will have to be clear that what is intended is genuine and friendly help, not a new form of economic imperialism to replace the old political imperialism. Such assistance, if it is to be fruitful, must be extended in such a way as to increase economic self-reliance and thereby increase co-operation and collaboration between the East and the West.

The United Kingdom Minister for Commonwealth Relations, Mr. Patrick Gordon-Walker has said that the Commonwealth contains within itself "the only real bridge between Asia and the West".

As we look out on the world today this statement is almost literally true. I believe it is of the utmost importance, not only for the Commonwealth but for the world, that this bridge should be preserved and it seems to me that all of us in the Commonwealth, and particularly the Asian nations, can do much to

remove dangerous misunderstandings in the East about the real purposes and policies of the Western nations.

These meetings of Prime Ministers of the Nations of the Commonwealth are giving those of us from the Western countries an opportunity to explain, in a friendly atmosphere, our real aims and the real motives behind our policies and an opportunity to learn from the Prime Ministers of the Asian members of the Commonwealth what their aims and their policies really are; we know our essential aims are similar and we should be able to co-ordinate our honest efforts to secure and achieve those aims in manners that will be mutually beneficial to us all.

We all recognize that there are differences in attitude and experience between the nations of the East and of the West, but differences and variety are more than the spice of life - they are the essence of life itself. Uniformity and rigidity are the marks of the new form of totalitarian dictatorship which is alien to the civilizations alike of the East and of the West.

Within the Commonwealth we do not seek to impose any standard of uniformity. Membership is based upon a conviction of mutual advantage, mutual respect and increasingly, I believe, upon genuine friendship.

While it may be necessary for many years to come to maintain the armed strength of the peace-loving nations to prevent aggression, and even to resist aggression, we shall never have enduring peace and real security in the world until we can achieve something of this mutual respect and understanding among all nations which we are striving to maintain within the Commonwealth. And that, I believe, is the true significance of the Commonwealth - that our association and our partnership does point the way toward the ultimate objective for the whole world - the ultimate goal in which peace and brotherhood will be the ideals of men and nations everywhere.

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