

No. 53/20 "CONCEPT OF THE COMMONWEALTH"

Text of an address by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mr. L.B. Pearson, recorded for broadcast over the British Broadcasting Corporation, May 29, 1953.

Great occasions should inspire reflection as well as celebration. So, on the eve of the Coronation of Her Majesty, our thoughts turn to the Commonwealth, of which our young and gracious Queen is the head and symbol. In the bewildering and changing conditions of the present day, we need to understand clearly what the Commonwealth is and what it now means, not only to its own peoples but to the whole world.

I, naturally, look at this association through Canadian eyes. We Canadians are a North American people, closely associated with the people of the United States, and fully aware of the extent to which our destiny is linked with theirs. At the same time, we remain deeply attached to the Commonwealth. At this mid-point in the twentieth century, we are convinced that it has a major contribution to make to the establishment of an enduring peace, to the strength and stability of the free world.

There have been great changes during the sixteen years since the coronation of King George VI. The human race, poised perilously on a shrinking globe, has armed itself with weapons of such devastating power that international morality and pacific restraint have become imperative even for mere survival. The shadow of aggressive Communist imperialism has fallen upon us. We must do our best to remove it. The peoples of Asia and Africa have been stirred by nationalist aspirations that will not be denied. We must do our best to understand them.

This last development has profoundly affected the character and the destiny of the Commonwealth. India, Pakistan and Ceylon are now fellow-members, as free, independent nations. More than ever our association has become one of people of every race and colour and creed, working together on the basis of equality. There can be no chosen people, no master race in the Commonwealth association.

My own country, Canada, has also seen tremendous changes during this period. It has grown greatly in industrial power, and it is still expanding and developing in new and exciting fields. But of greater importance even than these outward sinews of our new-found strength, are the inner sources of national unity which have been developed over these years. Both outwardly and inwardly, Canada has, I think, come of age; but she has no desire to leave the Commonwealth family in which she has grown up.

The last war and its aftermath have seen my country accept responsibilities in the international field which we would hardly have contemplated before 1939. We are no longer so much concerned with the assertion of a nationhood which can now take for granted. We are more concerned with the search for ways by which, without jeopardizing what is essential

to our own national freedom, we may share the international responsibilities which all free peoples must accept if liberty is to be maintained and security established.

In this search the United Nations is of paramount importance. With all its faults (which are essentially the faults of its members) it is still the great hope of mankind. But, as we look ahead to the time when the purposes of this universal Charter are translated into reality on a world scale, we recognize the present need for smaller associations of like-minded nations determined to work together in the interests of peace and fuller international co-operation.

One of these associations is NATO, which embodies in a practical way the doctrine of collective security laid down in the United Nations Charter. For Canada, NATO reconciles the facts of our North American geography with the equally important facts of our traditional and special links with the United Kingdom and France, as well as the peoples of Western Europe.

The Commonwealth is another such association, and for us the oldest and most deeply rooted. To Canadians there is no inconsistency between our membership in NATO and our membership in the Commonwealth. On the contrary, they complement and strengthen one another. It is axiomatic that Canada is interested in Anglo-American co-operation; it is equally axiomatic that peace depends in great measure upon the continuance of this within the framework of the co-operation of all free peoples. To such co-operation the Commonwealth makes an essential contribution.

The first and obvious sphere in which Atlantic and Commonwealth interests converge is in the protection of the peace. No nations have made a greater contribution to this vital task than the members of the Commonwealth. Of those, it would be ungenerous not to mention especially the United Kingdom, the heart and centre of our league. The steadfast and sturdy people of this Kingdom have given the world a lesson in indomitable courage in time of war and in facing the problems that have plagued the post-war period.

Another field where the interests of NATO and the Commonwealth converge is that of international trade and economic policy. Here a great responsibility rests upon the United States as well as upon my own country. But the other Commonwealth countries, holding a position of leadership in the sterling area, can do much - and are doing much - to rebuild the foundations of multilateral trade. It is to be hoped that the plans already projected by Commonwealth governments, combined with the leadership which we have the right to expect from the United States, will set us firmly on this road with a minimum of delay. Nothing today is more important to the well-being of free nations, or to their ability to withstand long-range threats to their security, than this form of economic co-operation.

I have already referred to Asian nationalism and the emergence of India, Pakistan and Ceylon as independent states and members of the Commonwealth. Few developments of recent years have so caught the imagination of Canadians. Perhaps this is partly because these countries came on the international scene when Canada was for the first time compelled

by the surge of world events to take a serious interest in Asia. But I think it was mainly because we instinctively felt that a new era was opening for the Commonwealth when these peoples, the inheritors of great civilizations, chose, of their own free will, to remain in this family association of nations which spreads across the globe. Through the Commonwealth Colombo Plan and related programmes of assistance, we can give these newer Commonwealth countries technical and material help. We can do more. We can give them sympathy and understanding and support in their new aspirations. In their turn, they can give us fresh knowledge and appreciation of their way of life from which we of the West may gain much.

This exchange is not, of course, confined to the Commonwealth. Many other Western nations, notably the United States, have close relations with our Asian partners of the Commonwealth; and many non-Commonwealth countries in Asia are actively connected in one way or another with nations of the West. Nevertheless, the Commonwealth is today probably the strongest bridge between free Asia and the West. It is of vital importance to both that it be maintained. Indeed it must be maintained if the new Commonwealth is to survive and develop.

There are dangers ahead. Between the West and the free countries of Asia there are occasionally signs of mutual misunderstanding and even tension. We should resist such tendencies by doing everything we can to give each other an accurate picture of our respective views and purposes; and, on matters in which the countries of a particular area are directly concerned, we should strengthen the practice of frank and continuous consultation which is characteristic of the Commonwealth.

Another danger is that we of the West, through pre-occupation with more immediate ends, might fail to afford the free nations of Asia the support they need to develop their economies and prove to their peoples the value of democratic processes. There are limits to what the West can do under present circumstances when defence needs must have priority. But I suggest, for example, that if we fail to do what we can to help India or Pakistan or Ceylon show free Asia that the democratic way of life is preferable to the Communist, we shall not only weaken Asia, we shall weaken ourselves.

Listening to the four speakers in this series, you will have turned your thoughts to the four corners of the globe. You have heard four different viewpoints; yet, at the same time, you will have noticed that we all speak as members of a single international family. Talks of this kind bring home the most obvious feature of the Commonwealth - its unity in diversity. It is diverse racially and geographically. To some extent it is diverse economically and politically. But in many fields it is capable of significant co-operation and collective action. Furthermore, there is in the Commonwealth always the desire to work together, to see each other's point of view, even when that desire does not express itself in immediate agreement.

This last is no small thing, for, when divisions rack the world, plain friendship between nation and nation is worth more than we often realize.

A somewhat cynical observer once wrote: "The Commonwealth appears.....to be no more than an alumni association....whose independent-spirited, self-willed members, presided over by their former headmaster, recognize no other obligations toward one another than may be prompted by the heart or by considerations of enlightened self-interest." While we may concede a certain half-truth to this analysis, it confuses form with substance, and it passes over too casually the pull of sentiment and custom and enlightened self-interest, which draws us together. Shakespeare put our case better when he wrote: "Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

Of course, we of the Commonwealth enjoy the friendship of many nations outside it, but there is a special, certainly indefinable quality in the Commonwealth relationship. This is derived from our history, from the memory and the present experience - of great struggles honourably shared; even from deep differences and conflicts honourably settled.

There is something else. For all our local differences, the characteristic approach of Commonwealth countries to national and international problems combines liberty with authority and tempers firmness with reason. We still endeavour to govern in the spirit of Magna Carta, and, on maintaining parliamentary institutions which differ little one from another, preserving the rule of law, and respecting the fundamental rights of individuals. Whatever the reasons may be, we in the Commonwealth respect one another, sit down easily together to talk over common problems, and get a great number of important things done in an informal but effective way. Even when we disagree, we usually do so with understanding and without bitterness.

The Commonwealth has adjusted itself pragmatically and gracefully to a long series of changing circumstances. I do not suggest that we should be complacent about this; even the most adaptable species is mortal and there are pitfalls ahead. But if the Commonwealth remains in step with the evolution of our time, I am sure that it can face the future with hope and with confidence.

So, as the Coronation approaches, we can all say: "Long live the Commonwealth. God Save The Queen."

