



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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A MAJOR TEST FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

A statement in the House of Commons on March 17, 1961, by Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker.

.... My primary purpose in rising today is to bring before the House something of the events of the last two weeks. The meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers began in London on March 8 and, as the House knows, I was accompanied there by the Minister of Justice and the Secretary of State, and was assisted during the Conference by the High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Hon. George Drew.

The Prime Ministers' Conference is a most unusual convocation. We sit around a small table with practically all the races of man and five of the leading religions, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Mohammedan, represented there. While during the discussions there are always disagreements in detail, there is that feeling that came to me as I visited the Commonwealth countries in Asia and Australia and New Zealand some years ago, a feeling that defies explanation or understanding. It is just impossible to believe that any of the members of the Commonwealth could ever be at war with one another.

Disturbing Elements

We met in an international setting not as dark as in May 1960, when the last meeting was held, but there are disturbing elements. While the Soviet campaign of vilification against Washington has subsided, and this is encouraging, there has been no sign of restraint in other ways by the Soviet leaders. They have relentlessly pursued Communist aims in countries as far apart as Congo and Laos. I am not going to deal today with the Congo, except to say that there the United Nations is on trial, and if it does not succeed in restoring law and order in that country the hopes and aspirations of mankind with respect to that institution may very well be diminished.

While all of us know the situation in Laos, those who live in Asia regard it as fraught with terrible danger.

The Soviets have maintained with increasing vigour their assault on the United Nations and also on the Secretary General. Notwithstanding smiles toward Washington, there is much evidence that the Soviet Union is not preparing genuinely for a period of calm and conciliation.

Everywhere over that Conference came the shadow of Communist China, the leaders of which country show an even greater thirst for domination and influence in the uncommitted world than does the Soviet Union. The Prime Ministers were acutely conscious of these uncertainties and dangers. We dealt at some length with the current international situation, and I will deal with that on another occasion.

Momentous Change

What I intend to do today is mainly to emphasize the momentous change that took place in the future relationship of the Union of South Africa with the Commonwealth. Some may say this is being emotional, but my mind goes back to February 1917, when for the first time I had an idea of what this Commonwealth might be. The expression was not in general use at that time, although it had been originally used some 25 years prior to that date. I saw the King going to open Parliament in the darkest days of the war escorted by three or four troops of Boer cavalry, all of whom had served against Britain only a matter of 14 or 15 years before. All of us saw, too, the contribution made by the Union of South Africa in two World Wars.

Even before the meeting it was very clear that this would be the focus of general attention. I do not think it is an overstatement to say that in the long history of these Commonwealth or Empire meetings -- we have had ten since the war -- no issue so severely strained or tested the flexible bonds of the Commonwealth association as did the one which faced this Conference.

You will recall that South Africa first raised the question of its future relationship with the Commonwealth at the meeting of the Prime Ministers in May, 1960. The Foreign Minister of that Union gave notice of the intention of his country to hold a referendum on the question of whether South Africa should adopt a republican form of government. At the same time he asked for advance approval of its continuance of membership, or readmission to the Commonwealth. At that time we gave to this problem a two-fold reaction; the Prime Ministers affirmed that the choice between a monarchy and a republic was entirely a matter for South Africa to decide, but they also agreed unanimously, and I intend to read this because it represented a change in the Commonwealth relationship which had previously existed --

"In the event of South Africa deciding to become a republic and if the desire was subsequently expressed to remain a member of the Commonwealth, the meeting suggested that the South African Government should then ask for the consent of the other

Commonwealth governments, either at a meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers or, if this were not practicable, by correspondence."

Not Automatic

On October 5, 1960, South Africa's choice was made by a referendum which resulted in a majority favouring the adoption of a republic. Subsequently, the Government of that country announced that a republican constitution would be proclaimed on May 31. I felt and still feel that we had made it clear last May that there was no automaticity about the application of a country which was a member of the Commonwealth and which changed its form of government to that of a republic; and that until the legislative processes had been completed the decision had not finally been made.

That view did not command general support. I should point out here that the first reading of the bill to set up a republic was given in the South African House of Representatives on January 23, that second reading was given on February 9 and that then the bill was referred to a select joint committee of both Houses, the committee to report to Parliament on March 24. Hence the matter is still before the Parliament of South Africa.

What in effect was being asked was advance approval prior to the final legislative decision being made; something that was denied last May. The wording of the communiqué in May 1960 reflected the general view of the Prime Ministers that a positive act of concurrence was required on the part of each of the other member governments if South Africa's request for consent to remain a member of the Commonwealth was to be granted. It was agreed by the Foreign Minister of South Africa that all governments would have to consent; at least that was the statement he made in May last. It was argued that, even in the face of the wording of the communiqué last May, it was still a virtual formality for countries applying for continuance of membership to remain as members. I think it was the consensus of a majority if not all of the Prime Ministers that more than a formality was involved.

South African Case

Dr. Verwoerd, the Prime Minister, relied throughout on the argument that the constitutional issue should be dealt with separately, and that on the basis of the precedents there should be no question of South Africa's right to continuing membership. The discussion took a long time. All agreed that South Africa's constitutional change was not in itself an obstacle to continuing membership, but the view was strongly held that the question of membership could not be divorced from the international implications of the Union Government's racial policies. Apartheid has become the world's symbol of discrimination; and in the eyes of the Prime Ministers present, other than Dr. Verwoerd, to give unqualified consent to South Africa's application would be to condone the policies of apartheid.

That was the core of the issue which engaged our attention for three days. It was, I have been told, a discussion without parallel in the annals of the Commonwealth association. It is a great organization where men -- and a woman this time, the Prime Minister of Ceylon -- with strong convictions, can sit down together and yet not speak to one another at any time with bitterness, virulence or in the manner described in some of the articles written by persons who must have secured their information from sources not present at the meeting.

Principled Compassion

I said, and I repeat, that it was a time for the exercise of the utmost compassion, and I have no apology to offer for that. That does not mean an acceptance of what is wrong; and I have found through life that if you follow that course you do not too often have to look back on events and say: "If only I had acted otherwise". Compassion does not mean sacrifice of principle. It is based on a seriousness of purpose and a desire for accommodation. Though viewpoints were diametrically opposed, there was a determination to explore every possibility of a solution. If that attitude had not been followed the meeting might well have ended in an angry outburst of mutual recrimination.

Last night at the hour of 11.30 there were gathered in London the Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth -- and South Africa is still a member of the Commonwealth -- and you could not have detected there the tremendous effect of what had taken place a few hours earlier.

We tried to do whatever was humanly possible to avoid a break without making a sacrifice of basic principles. South Africa sought consent on the ground that continued membership was a virtual formality. I took the position that if we were to accept South Africa's request unconditionally our action would be taken as approval, or at least condonation, of racial policies which are repugnant to and unequivocally abhorred and condemned by Canadians as a whole. Speaking for Canada -- and I do not have to say that this attitude represents no recent conversion -- I pointed out that we were opposed to racial discrimination, and made it clear that I could not approve any formula or solution which did not maintain beyond any doubt that non-discrimination in respect of race and colour is an essential principle of the Commonwealth association.

This was not a stand which was taken then and not before; I have followed that course over the years. All but the Prime Minister of South Africa were in agreement that no expression of consent to South Africa's continuing membership was possible without an expression of the strongest views on their part regarding apartheid.

I shall not go into detail in this connection. We spent a long time on this. The general attitude we took was to

criticize strongly and deplore the racial policy of the Union Government and the anxiety which we felt it was arousing in the hearts and minds of millions of people throughout the world. We expressed our deep concern about its impact on the relations among the member countries of the Commonwealth and on the cohesion of the Commonwealth itself as a multiracial association. I took the stand then, and I have taken it before, that the United Nations answers to these principles, and that the Commonwealth cannot do less.

The Prime Minister of South Africa stressed strongly the positive aspect of the Union Government's policy. He deplored the accusations of racial discrimination and contended that the other Prime Ministers did not understand the situation as they should. As I have already said, there was a patient and exhaustive search for a formula which would encompass frank criticism of apartheid. Somebody said: "We do not want compromise". Well, the countries which feel discrimination most strongly, and which were the most outspoken critics, showed a desire and readiness at all times to come to agreement without sacrifice of principle, and I say in no bitter sense that there was no corresponding readiness on the part of Prime Minister Verwoerd. When I say that, I do not want Hon. Members to conclude that he was lacking in forbearance. He is a wonderful personality; he is a kindly burgher. In the face of strong and sometimes provocative criticism he maintained throughout an impressive courtesy and calm.

Gulf Unbridgeable

Was there ever a prospect of a constructive outcome? There might have been. There was a time when discussions seemed to give promise of a mutually acceptable solution. Dr. Verwoerd seemed ready then to acquiesce in a formula which would have been coupled with a declaration of principle by the cumulative conscience of the other Prime Ministers. That formula might have been accepted. But as discussion proceeded the basis of the compromise dissolved and it was impossible to find language capable of bridging the gulf. Again I say this; it is a lesson to those in this House who sometimes speak about what they would do if they were there. Those who belonged to non-white races showed an attitude of endeavouring to bring about some compromise.

When that hope ended, criticism continued. With some evident regret and without any advance notice -- although he read from a document which I observed was somewhat dog-eared -- Dr. Verwoerd formally withdrew South Africa's request to continue membership. In the tense drama of that moment little remained to be said. The true depth of the cleavage between him and the things he represented and the other members of the Commonwealth was revealed, stretching to the breaking point the will to bridge it.

Traditional Ties Remain

As I said a moment ago, South Africa remains a member of the Commonwealth until May 31. Dr. Verwoerd made it clear that traditional ties with the Commonwealth countries will continue. It is difficult to convey the picture of only a matter of 12 or 15 hours ago, when we were together as guests of the Queen and when such a change came about with so little apparent ill feeling.

Was the result unavoidable? I think it was. Over the years I have contended that in a multiracial association it had to become clear beyond doubt that, if the Commonwealth is to be a force for good, as it should be, there must be a measure of general agreement that discrimination in respect of race and colour shall not take place. I do not think we can compromise that principle if we believe that the Commonwealth has a mission for all mankind. It would lose its power to meet challenges and opportunities in the future. I am more convinced than ever as to the power of this institution touching every part of the world.

I am not going to deal today with the conclusions of disarmament, but I think the discussions on that subject brought about a new relationship among the members of the Commonwealth; but not an institutionalization, or anything that would interfere with the sovereignty of any of us. The influence of India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana, Nigeria and Malaya joined with the other members of the Commonwealth on a subject that has divided the United Nations and on which there has not been that progress that the Secretary of State for External Affairs would have hoped for, represents a major step, as indicated in the appendix on disarmament, toward a realization that only through action now can we save mankind from ultimate self-destruction.

Effect on Commonwealth

The question naturally arises, has the Commonwealth been weakened? Dr. Verwoerd says it is the beginning of disintegration. There are some who view with apprehension the shifting composition of the association. It is a strange thing, but out goes Verwoerd and in comes Archbishop Makarios to represent Cyprus. Sierra Leone was accepted, and other countries will be making application to join within the next year or so. The close intimacy of the days when the present Leader of the Opposition was Secretary of State for External Affairs, with a few members gathered about, is ended.

There are those who see South Africa's decision as the forerunner of further withdrawals as a result of campaigns of criticism related to national policy. In that connection I should point out this. All of us agreed that no national policy of any country should be examined or considered without the consent of that country. Dr. Verwoerd himself undertook the explanation of the policies of his country.

I do not minimize the risks inherent in the emerging trends. The task before the Commonwealth is to reduce the risks by building firmly on new foundations. What has happened might be epitomized thus. We have declared that non-discrimination on the basis of race and colour is the foundation stone of a multi-racial association composed of representatives from all parts of the world. No foundation could be broader or more solidly based than the fundamental principle which, though unwritten, has emerged from this meeting.

I have advocated in the past and I continue to advocate a declaration of principles. When I spoke in the House on May 16 last, I referred to the possibility that the time might not be far distant when acceptance by custom rather than by the declaration of certain basic principles, including the equality of all mankind irrespective of race, colour and creed, would be assured. No document was signed on this occasion, but that does not diminish the importance of what happened. I reiterate that we accepted the basic principle and established it as a Commonwealth custom for the future. This is the bedrock of the modern Commonwealth, the assurance as I see it of a stronger Commonwealth in the future.

Mood of Africans

You will have noted that shortly before the meeting began the Chief Minister of Tanganyika, Mr. Julius Nyerere, published an arresting statement in which it was said that in so far as Tanganyika was concerned there would be no question of applying for membership in the Commonwealth if discrimination were condoned. That statement and others by African leaders in territories shortly to achieve independence foreshadowed the course and the promise of the future.

There will be some who will say, and they will speak with great energy, that we should have pressed for the expulsion of South Africa. I remind those who speak in that vein that Ghana, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Malaya and Ceylon did not follow that course. I think the fact that this break had to come and that South Africa should have withdrawn its application was the best course that could be followed. It provided a clearer opportunity of registering the principle of non-discrimination; for the Prime Ministers would not have been satisfied with less.

As the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom said yesterday in the British House of Commons, I regret that South Africa made this choice instead of adopting the attitude of a reasonable acceptance of a primary fact in the world in which we live.

I have seen the Commonwealth in a different light than ever before. We took the course that anyone who recognizes the fact that Communism marches on the application of discrimination, wherever it is practised, must take. I shall detour a moment to tell Hon. Members that, in the midst of the argument the day before yesterday, Dr. Nkrumah handed me a clipping regarding the denial of admission of two negroes to a hotel in the city of Edmonton. I do not think I have to make any further observation in that connection....

S/C