



Statements and Speeches

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THE COMMONWEALTH

An Address by Mr. Marcel Cadieux, Canadian Ambassador to the United States, to the International Relations Club, Seattle, September 20, 1973.

A journalist covering the recent meeting of Commonwealth heads of government in Ottawa complained to Her Majesty the Queen that the name of this strange organization — "Commonwealth" — didn't really convey any idea of its nature or purposes. "Well" Her Majesty observed dryly, "we used to have another name for it." It is perhaps because the Commonwealth is a lineal descendant of the British Empire that many people in the world think of it — if, indeed, they think of it at all — as a British club, with some of the anachronistic quaintness that is the charm of so many of the older clubs of London. Certainly the Commonwealth is widely thought of as a British invention — not least, I suspect, by the British themselves. You may wonder, indeed, why a Canadian ambassador should choose to speak on this subject to an American audience. I certainly do not do so with any feeling that there is still a need to dispel the sort of misconception held 20 years ago by a Congressman from Chicago who proposed that the United States "accept" Canada from Britain in return for writing off British war debts!

I do think that the Commonwealth is worth taking a look at as a unique international association, the 32 members of which include the world's second-largest nation, India, and many of the smallest, rich and developed nations as well as poor and growing ones, nations with many systems of government, alliances and perspectives, different interests and problems. One may wonder, indeed, what on earth this heterogeneous collection of independent states located in every continent of the world can possibly have in common.

Historically, of course, the origins of the Commonwealth are in the British Empire, even if the evolution was by no means inevitable or even logical. Other colonies have developed into independent states without continuing any similar association among themselves and with their former rulers, although it is perhaps not too far-fetched to see in the recent encouragement by France of La Francophonie as an international community a realization of the value of such associations. Another unifying factor almost too obvious to be mentioned is, of course, a common language. The recent conference in Ottawa is surely one of the few world meetings to span so wide an

area and represent so many hundreds of millions of the world's people where there was no need for interpreters. To have a common language, together with many common traditions of government, law, education, and culture, does make it possible for Commonwealth leaders to talk together with perhaps a greater degree of genuine understanding than is possible in any other world forum.

I am not about to recommend to you that we scrap the United Nations, NATO, the Organization of American States *et al.*, and leave the running of the world to the Commonwealth. I am trying to show that this association has, for Canada, a very important place in our view of the world, and by no means only for historical or sentimental reasons. The recent conference in Ottawa — the third only ever to have been held outside London, was for us an important event, even if it did not produce historic decisions, ringing declarations, or any of the other results by which we have become accustomed to judge the success of international conferences. As our Prime Minister, Mr. Trudeau, said in his speech of welcome opening the Conference: "The nature of our meeting does not lend itself to the resolution of any crises, or to the solution of any major problem. By looking to the future, however, we should be able to identify those issues which, if left unattended, could develop into crisis proportions."

This is not to say that the Commonwealth has not had its crises, or that it is in any way immune from the rifts and tensions of the world. Given their composition, it would be surprising if Commonwealth meetings did not reflect the differing attitudes of developed industrialized nations and those seeking aid and opportunities to reach the same level of prosperity. Racial tension in Southern Africa has also been an issue that has more than once threatened the very survival of the Commonwealth. In this forum, as in others, the free nations of Africa have passionately urged stronger measures to bring down the white minority regimes of Rhodesia, South Africa, and the African colonies of Portugal, and have been less than satisfied at the response.

If the Commonwealth has been no more able to solve this problem than has any other international body, it has nonetheless provided a forum in which the heads of government can discuss their differing perspectives informally, frankly, and with a solid basis of mutual sympathy and understanding. African leaders may still think that Britain should use force to topple the Smith regime in Rhodesia, that all of us should break off economic relations with South Africa, and that we have a duty to give maximum support to groups seeking to organize armed rebellion against white minority

regimes in Africa. Indeed, they almost certainly do believe all of these things, and discussions on these matters could have left us in no possible doubt of the passionate sincerity with which they hold these opinions. At the same time, it is perhaps easier for them to realize in informal discussions with non-African Commonwealth leaders the very real problems and uncertainties that have led to a more cautious approach by such countries as Britain and Canada, and, however much they may disagree with our policies, they are perhaps less likely, through the very nature of the discussions, to attribute evil motives to us.

African questions were an important subject of discussion at this conference, as in previous ones — happily without the overtones of crisis and confrontation that have sometimes existed in the past, as at the previous Commonwealth heads of government conference in Singapore, where Britain's intention to sell military equipment to South Africa was a major subject of controversy. Another issue that was raised at this conference was that of nuclear testing. As you know, Pacific Commonwealth nations, in particular Australia and New Zealand, have been active in their opposition to the recent series of atmospheric nuclear tests conducted by France, which Canada has also condemned. While not singling out any country by name, the conference did express opposition to all forms of nuclear testing and called for a comprehensive test-ban agreement.

No international conference today would be complete without a discussion of world economic problems, and this conference did not by any means neglect them. For the Commonwealth, of course, one of the important new facts of life is that Britain is now a member of the European Common Market — a fact that has important economic consequences for all other members, and perhaps most of all for developing countries in the Commonwealth. The old system of Commonwealth trade preferences is no longer operative for Britain, and it is not yet clear what arrangements will be possible for developing countries in their trading relations with the Common Market as a whole.

Given the composition of the Commonwealth, it is no surprise that problems of aid and development were an important item in the economic discussions. There was also considerable attention given to the problems of international trade in the context of the needs of developing countries. These problems range from the efforts now being made to establish a system of preferences, under the GATT, for the products of developing countries, to the much more complicated question of fair and stable prices for primary agricultural products, such as coffee, sugar and cotton, on which so many of the developing countries depend for their foreign-exchange earnings.

I shall not go on to list all the problems that were considered at the conference; they are the problems of the world, and I fear they remain unsolved even after being given a week of such high-level examination in Ottawa. As I said earlier, quoting our Prime Minister, it is not really the function of these conferences to solve problems so much as to make the participants aware, not only of the problems but of the views and perspectives — and, indeed, of the degrees of importance given them — presented by their colleagues from every corner of the globe. Ideally, no doubt, this development of mutual comprehension would be one of the results of the annual sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, but I do not think that this has been the experience of many attending these sessions in New York. How could it be, in an organization of 123 members of differing languages, traditions and conceptions of the world?

For Canada, the Commonwealth is important for a number of reasons. It is, of course, a part of our history — and if our British friends claim the credit for its invention I think we can claim with equal truth that the Commonwealth evolved from the unique process of amicable decolonization that brought Canada to peaceful independence. It is also, in a very real sense, one of our primary windows on the world. It is an illogical organization, with no constitution, no primary function, and no defined world role. Perhaps for that very reason it can bring together statesmen from every part of the world — not to agree, not to solve world problems, not to create a new world order, but simply to exchange views and understand each other better.

For Canada, and perhaps also for most of the other countries making up the Commonwealth that neither are nor aspire to be great powers, this is perhaps sufficient reason to value the nebulous Commonwealth association. We all have other associations, deriving from our respective geographical, economic and security imperatives — and membership in the Commonwealth does not preclude them. But, for Canada — in a way that would not be relevant for a great power as super-power, where global interests and perspective are almost taken for granted —, it is important that our image of ourselves should not be too much circumscribed by our geography or even by our immediate economic and political concerns. This has led us not only to value our Commonwealth association but to be active in developing our contacts with Europe, with the Organization of American States, and with our neighbours on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Each of these associations has its own practical value; together, they help develop international awareness and even an international personality for Canada.

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