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COMMONWEALTH DAY, MARCH 10

Statement by the Right
Honourable Joe Clark,
Secretary of State for
External Affairs, in the
House of Commons

OTTAWA

March 10, 1986.

Mr. Speaker, today is Commonwealth Day and it gives me great pleasure to salute this remarkable institution. We are all familiar with the spirit of friendship and tolerance which so distinguishes this association of 49 states, comprising fully one quarter of the world's population. Its specific achievements are many, and we quite naturally think of the Commonwealth as an association where peoples from around the world reach across the great divides of religion, of race, of economic and political philosophies to establish a commonality of purpose which draws on our diversity and is nourished by it.

Canada needs the Commonwealth, and Canadians by temperament are well-suited to playing a leadership role there. A nation's foreign policy is grounded in the needs, interests, aspirations and talents of its people. We in Canada are fortunate to have two official languages and many different cultural and ethnic traditions. We have, against great odds, built a country which is second to none in its respect for the rights of others, and most especially for the right to a life of dignity regardless of race, religion or creed.

It is no coincidence that the Commonwealth mirrors so accurately these fundamental Canadian values. We were there at the founding and we have been active and vigorous participants from the very beginning. More than any other multilateral institution, the Commonwealth has been shaped by Canadian values and reflects the motive forces of Canadian foreign policy.

Mr. Speaker, this country abhors the repugnant system of apartheid. It was John Diefenbaker who led the movement to expel South Africa from the Commonwealth, a dramatic action which focussed the world's attention more clearly than ever before on this ugly blight. And in Nassau last year, it was Canada's Prime Minister who decisively fashioned the Commonwealth Accord on Southern Africa.

Going into Nassau, there were many who feared the South Africa question could damage the meeting, perhaps the Commonwealth itself, beyond all repair. We did not share this pessimism. We have confidence in our traditional foreign policy skills and the ways in which those skills have served Canada and the Commonwealth so well over the years.

In Nassau, we set a timetable for the dismantling of apartheid and the initiation of reforms. We established a Group of Eminent Persons to facilitate dialogue and work for power-sharing arrangements to avert a catastrophe in South Africa. The Group is now in South Africa and Canada is ably represented by Archbishop Edward Scott in its deliberations.

The Commonwealth has been important to the pursuit of other Canadian foreign policy objectives. The transformation of Rhodesia to the new Zimbabwe; the growing acceptance of women as full parties in economic and political life; the effort to move forward on North/South economic issues - - in these and similar areas the Commonwealth has made significant contributions.

The success of the Commonwealth inspired much of the thinking which went into the hosting of the first-ever Summit of Francophone nations last month in Paris. We have great hopes that this forum too will become an instrument for international understanding and human progress.

Canada's foreign policy is conducted through a complex array of bilateral and multilateral associations and institutions. To understand this country and its position in the world we must look at the ways in which we pursue our national goals in concert with our allies and friends around the world. We have a distinct foreign policy because we have a unique set of international relationships; no institution makes a more profound contribution to our own sense of ourselves than the Commonwealth.

Mr. Speaker, Canada has invited Commonwealth leaders to convene in Vancouver in 1987 for their next meeting. The invitation demonstrates our commitment to the Commonwealth; the Vancouver meeting will demonstrate to Canadians the Commonwealth's attachment to and respect for Canada and the principles which guide this country in our activities around the world.