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THE COMMONWEALTH

The Extent of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth, or Commonwealth of Nations, to give it its full title, is a free association of nine sovereign independent states together with their colonies, protectorates, protected states and mandated and trust territories. Including the dependent territories, the Commonwealth covers roughly a quarter of the world's land surface and contains about a quarter of its population.

Independent Commonwealth Countries

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland:

Area: 94,205 square miles
Population: 52 million.

Canada: (Confederation 1867)

Area: 3,845,144 square miles
Population: 16.5 million.

Australia: (Federation 1901)

Area: 2,974,581 square miles
Population: 9.5 million.

New Zealand: (Dominion 1908)

Area: 103,736 square miles
Population: 2,250,000.

South Africa: (Union 1910)

Area: 472,494 square miles
Population: 14 million.

India: (Independence 1947; Republic 1950)

Area: 1,138,814 square miles
Population: 377 million.

Pakistan: (Independence 1947; Republic 1956)

Area: 360,780 square miles
Population: 82 million.

Ceylon: (Independence 1948; Republican status pending)

Area: 25,332 square miles
Population: 8.5 million.

Ghana: (Independence, 1957; formerly known as the Gold Coast)

Area: 91,843 square miles
Population: 4.5 million.

Malaya: (Federation, independence achieved August 31, 1957)

Area: 50,690 square miles
Population: 6,152,099

Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland:
(Established in September 1953. It holds a special position somewhat less than that of a Dominion. Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland remain protectorates; Southern Rhodesia is a self-governing colony with certain qualifications having to do with powers reserved to the United Kingdom. Under existing laws, the constitution cannot be revised until 1962).

Area: 478,010 square miles
Population: 7,260,900

The colonies, protectorates and protected states range from Aden to Zanzibar. Most of them are under the protection of the United Kingdom but some are under that of Australia, of India and of New Zealand. Mandated and trust territories are administered by the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The New Hebrides is an Anglo-French condominium. Canton and Enderbury Islands are an Anglo-American condominium.

The Nature of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth represents the results, in mid-twentieth century, of the expansion of the Anglo-Saxon peoples which began towards the end of the 16th century. This expansion, particularly noteworthy during the 18th century, has continued, at least to the extent of mandated and trusteeship territories, almost to our own day.

The Commonwealth is not a trade or defence organization. It is not a federal union. It is not an institution. It is not a club. It is not a family. What then is it? It is a group of sovereign independent states linked in free association through a common inheritance of certain 19th century liberal political principles of Anglo-Saxon origin; through the use of the Common Law; and through the practice of tolerance, mutual respect and of a pragmatic, rather than a theoretical, approach to political and administrative problems.

Evolution of the Commonwealth

Stage I: 1887 to 1939

The first Colonial Conference was held in London in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee; the second was held in Ottawa in 1894; and the third in London in 1897 to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Thereafter Colonial and Imperial Conferences were held at intervals up to 1937 when they were superseded by Prime Ministers' Meetings.

The contribution made by the various self-governing Dominions, as they were then called, to the common effort in the First World War, caused them, under the leadership of Sir Robert Borden of Canada and Mr. W.M. Hughes of Australia, to seek and to secure representation at the Versailles Peace Conference and separate seats in the infant League of Nations. During the period 1919 to 1931 Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland^{*} and the Irish Free State became fully independent, in fact as well as in name (though appeals to the Privy Council were not abolished in Canada until December 23, 1949 and are still allowed in Australia and New Zealand). Landmarks in this period were:

(a) The signature in 1923 of a bi-lateral treaty between Canada and the United States by a Canadian Minister. The Imperial Conference of the same year unanimously approved the principle, among others, that bi-lateral treaties imposing obligations on one part of the Empire only should be signed by a representative of that part.

(b) The declaration of the Imperial Conference of 1926, which stated that Great Britain and the Dominions were "equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations".

(c) The Statute of Westminster, 1931, which enacted into law the substance of the conclusions of the Imperial Conference of 1926, and of later recommendations. In brief, this Statute established the legislative equality of the Dominion parliaments with the parliament of the United Kingdom.

During this period, the Indian sub-continent had also moved toward limited self-government through the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, through the concept of the Dyarchy, (provincial executives with responsibilities divided according to category between elected and nominated members) and finally through the establishment of provincial self-government in British India (though not in the Princely States) in 1935.

* In 1949, after a brief period of reversion to colonial status as a result of financial stringency engendered by the depression of the 1930's, Newfoundland, following a plebiscite in which the majority of its people favoured union with Canada, became the tenth province of Canada.

Stage II: 1939 to 1950

As a result of the Second World War, the movement toward independence in the then colonial areas of South-East Asia became irresistible. The Labour Government of the United Kingdom under Mr. Clement Attlee acted to enable India to achieve independence on August 15, 1947. Since the Hindu and Muslim groups in India were unable to reach political agreement, independence also resulted in partition and the creation of Pakistan. Ceylon became independent in 1948.

In 1948, India signified its intention of becoming a Republic and at the same time its desire to retain its association with the Commonwealth. At a Prime Ministers' Meeting that year a formula was devised which was acceptable to all members of the Commonwealth. This formula designated the King as the symbol of the free association of the independent member nations of the Commonwealth "and, as such, the Head of the Commonwealth". India became a Republic on January 26, 1950. The head of the Indian State is the President of India (whereas the head of the Canadian State is the Queen, represented by the Governor General); but the Head of the Commonwealth is the Queen and she is so recognized by India. Pakistan became a Republic under similar conditions on March 23, 1956, and Ceylon has announced its intention of doing so.

Thus during the period 1939-1950, the Commonwealth had changed from six (later five) predominantly Anglo-Saxon nations to eight members, predominantly of Asia origin, with a combined population of about 540 millions. The nature of the Commonwealth, in its constitutional arrangements, its racial content, and in its numbers, had been transformed.

Stage III: 1950 Onwards

Since 1950, this transformation has proceeded most slowly, though there were, even then, colonies which would obviously desire independence within the next decade. Now the first two of these, the Gold Coast, or Ghana as it is now to be called, and Malaya, have emerged as independent nations within the Commonwealth.

Self-government has developed rapidly in the Gold Coast. It was only in 1951 that its largely nominated Legislative Council became an Executive Council composed of a majority of elected representatives. By 1954 the Constitution of the Gold Coast had developed to such an extent that it was to all practical purposes a self-governing area. In 1954 and again in 1956 general elections with direct universal suffrage were held. On May 19, 1956, in a plebiscite held under UN auspices, the residents of the Trust Territory of British Togoland voted by a two-thirds majority to join Ghana when it came into existence. On March 6, 1957 both these areas joined the community of free and independent nations under the name of Ghana.

On February 8, 1956, the United Kingdom Government and Malayan representatives in London concluded an agreement providing for the transfer of full sovereignty to the Federation of Malaya by August 31, 1957, if possible. It was agreed that when the time came to transfer external defence to an independent Malaya, a treaty of defence and mutual assistance would be concluded giving the United

Kingdom the right to maintain in the Federation the forces necessary to meet its international obligations in the area. Full facilities would be extended by the Federation to the United Kingdom, Australian and New Zealand forces forming the strategic reserve now in Malaya, and in return the United Kingdom would undertake to assist in Malayan external defence. The agreement became effective as planned, on August 31, 1957.

Within the next ten years, that is by the time when Canada will celebrate its first century of self-government, the following colonial dependencies will probably have emerged into the world community of free and independent nations as members of the Commonwealth: the Federation of Nigeria, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and the West Indies. Their independence and admission to Commonwealth membership will add four nations, with a total population of about 38 millions (the great majority of them Africans) to the present list of independent members. The policy whereby the United Kingdom prepared these territories for self-government has been described as a policy of "creative abdication". It is a policy to be admired, particularly since it brings into the community of free nations new members of an association which, while it may defy definition, has proved of lasting benefit to its associates.

Meanwhile, the colony of Mauritius is attaining a ministerial form of government which is normally the first step towards self-government. In the next decade, important decisions will also have to be taken regarding the future of such colonies or trust territories as Kenya, Tanganyika, the British Cameroons, Malta, Cyprus and Gibraltar.

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17

September 1957