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THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Report to the House of Commons on January 20, 1969, by
Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau concerning the
Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers recently concluded.

This was the sixteenth of these meetings since the Second World War. The 28 members of the Commonwealth represented at the Conference made it the largest by far of any of the Commonwealth meetings held to date. Twenty-four of the 28 states were represented by heads of government - either prime ministers or presidents - and this, according to the calculation of the chairman, was one of the biggest meetings of heads of government anywhere since the 1945 San Francisco Conference.

This is perhaps the greatest strength of the Commonwealth, this opportunity on a regular basis for men of goodwill to sit down together and discuss one with another the problems which affect them and the 850 million people whom they represent. All the other advantages of the Commonwealth relation - the exchanges of people, the trading patterns, the economic assistance and co-operation schemes, the informality of diplomatic representation - assume their tone from the free and frank dialogue which takes place at the prime ministerial meetings.

It is difficult for me as a newcomer to these meetings to compare this latest Conference with those that have preceded it in recent years. My impression is that this meeting was not only successful as Commonwealth meetings go but significantly so. Indeed, this Conference may have marked some kind of watershed for the Commonwealth. For one thing, the Commonwealth is now close to its maximum size, and future meetings will not note the presence of many new members. For another, the scope of the Secretariat seems now to have been defined and its services identified. But most important (and here I rely not simply on my own observations but on the comments of several veteran heads of government), the Commonwealth meeting appears to have attained a new plateau of maturity. Those who anticipated dramatic events at this meeting were incorrect; those who forecast an emotional confrontation over racial issues have been proved wrong. Equally, of course, those who hoped for the emergence of some brilliant answers to vexing questions were disappointed.

What did emerge was a realization by all leaders present that there was great value in open discussion and in an exchange of opinions. It was obvious, for example, that an easy solution for the complex problem of Rhodesia simply did not exist. This being so, no advantage was to be gained from a prolonged and emotionally charged argument alleging breaches of faith or lack

of understanding. Instead, the observations and the admonitions of the several prime ministers and presidents were made and recorded and the meeting moved on to the next item on the agenda. I do not mean to leave the impression that the Rhodesian question was not adequately discussed, or that the Conference did no more than touch it in passing. Quite the contrary. The case of Rhodesia's African neighbours and those who supported them was argued with great vigour and skill; nothing material was omitted in order to avoid hurting the feelings of others; there was no hypocritical attempt to pretend they did not exist. The Rhodesian debate was honest and it was tough, yet at its conclusion something of considerable significance occurred.

After looking at the problem in its exact dimensions, after closing in on its many difficulties, men holding opposite views admitted that the true nature of the difficulties was now better understood than before and they noted in some instances, after listening to the comments of others, that their rigid attitudes were capable of some modification. Of most importance, however, honourable men agreed honourably to disagree.

There is little headline material in this kind of decision; neither is there much domestic political advantage for individual leaders. But to a world burdened almost beyond endurance by incredibly complex problems of immense moment, an agreement to disagree and to search patiently for solutions and areas of agreement is of immeasurable value. Delegates can walk out of meetings in anger, but they cannot remove with them the underlying cause of their annoyance. Organizations can be broken apart by impatient members, but the act of disintegration contributes nothing to the easing of the original tensions.

The Conference revealed in still another way the coming of age of the Commonwealth. For if the African states did not insist that the meeting preoccupy itself exclusively with Rhodesia, neither did the Asian or Caribbean states view the meeting simply as an arena within which to press their own demands for economic assistance. And, in my view, as important as either of these events, none of the white countries attempted to dominate the proceedings on the pretext that their economic development, their political experience or their longer independence gave them any superior wisdom in the solution of new problems. One sensed that at this meeting the participants were equal members; no one pretended to possess all the problems, no one claimed to have all the answers. The 88 contributions to the debates on the five agenda items were remarkably evenly distributed around the conference table.

There is a well-known tradition at Commonwealth Conferences which denies to members the right to discuss, without consent, matters affecting the domestic policies of another member, or matters of solely bilateral interest. It is this rule which prevents the meeting being employed as a forum to the particular advantage, or disadvantage, of any single country. It is this rule as well which encourages the participation in general debate of all 28 member states. There is little doubt that, in the long run, the rule is a wise one. In the short run, it does present a challenge to countries seeking to discuss a problem which, because of its very size, seems to them to be of international, rather than of domestic, implications. At this meeting the Nigerian civil war fell into this category.

The tragedy of Nigeria was mentioned at the Conference by Prime Minister Wilson in his opening remarks on the first day. It was the subject of considerable corridor talk and out-of-conference discussion. Though not on the agenda, it was regarded by most delegations - and not least the Nigerian delegation - as of extreme importance.

On Wednesday of last week, at a gathering of heads of government outside the Conference proper, which I attended, the leader of the Nigerian delegation agreed on behalf of his Government to enter into fresh talks in London with the rebel representatives, without any pre-conditions to be attached to those talks. He agreed as well that it would be in order for other Commonwealth governments to do what they could to urge the Biafrans to engage in talks on this basis. Before we left London, Canadian officials met with Biafran representatives in an attempt to persuade them to do just that. I am deeply disappointed that that attempt was unsuccessful, as were, we understand, the representations of other delegations and of the Secretary-General.

I mentioned a few moments ago that the role and scope of the Commonwealth Secretariat were defined, with more precision than heretofore, at this Conference. The general view as expressed was that the Secretariat has an important role to play, but that the Commonwealth should not become over-structured. If I may repeat what I said in London at the Conference:

"As the Commonwealth grows in number of members, it increases in diversity. The common ingredients, which were once the adhesive of membership, are now outnumbered by the unique institutions and practices of so many of the members. Nor - wisely in my view - have any steps been taken to create some artificial adhesive or binder. There is no charter, no constitution, no headquarters building, no flag, no continuing executive framework. Apart from the Secretariat, which is a fraction of the size one might expect for an organization which encompasses a quarter of the peoples on this earth, there is nothing about the Commonwealth that one can grasp or point to as evidence of a structure.

"Even the use of the word 'organization' creates an impression of a framework which is misleading. The Commonwealth is an organism, not an institution - and this fact gives promise not only of continued growth and vitality, but of flexibility as well."

If this peculiar characteristic of the Commonwealth offers difficulty, as it seems to do, to historians or journalists or persons from non-Commonwealth countries, it is perhaps unfortunate. But surely this unique source of strength should not be surrendered in the name of conformity to accepted institutional practices. The Commonwealth is not a miniature United Nations; the Conference is not a decision-making body. To attempt to convert it would simply underscore differences of opinion; it would force countries to take sides and to vote against one another. There exist international organizations where this has to be done and where it is done; the Commonwealth is not and should not become a replica of them.

The Commonwealth provides an opportunity for men of goodwill to discuss with one another, both in plenary session and in the many bilateral meetings, their problems and their hopes for the future; to learn from the wisdom and experience of others. The Commonwealth Conference is a forum for men who are as different as God has made them. It is a meeting-place where men are able to demonstrate the advantages of dissimilarity, the richness of diversity, the excitement of variety. Is this not what life is all about, to learn, to share, to benefit, and to come to understand?

I think it is. I think Canadians agree with me, for in our own country we exhibit a multiplicity of character, a diversity of climate, of topography, of resources, of customs, of traditions, of peoples, which is a segment of the wide world beyond. We accept almost instinctively the view that, of the many challenges offered by the twentieth century, none is greater than the aspiration of men to live in societies where tolerance and equality are realities. The Commonwealth is a means toward such a goal. To suggest, as some do, that the Commonwealth must be more than a forum for discussion or a clearing-house for economic assistance from the few rich nations to the many poor ones is to miss the vital point of the exercise.

Is Canada any less strong, and less united in understanding, because Canadians and their leaders engage in constant dialogue, because the wealthier provinces accept the principle of tax equalization? I think not.

So, too, in the broader international community of the Commonwealth. Human inequality is a political fact of great potency. The most effective means of reducing the explosive potential of discrimination is to meet other persons as political equals and to assist them toward economic equality. That is what the Commonwealth does. I believe these are useful exercises. For these reasons, I assured the London Conference that Canada firmly supported the Commonwealth principle....

At the close of the Commonwealth Conference, I went to Rome where, after a most cordial interview at the Quirinal Palace with His Excellency the President of the Italian Republic, Mr. Saragat, I was received at the Vatican by Pope Paul VI.

We spoke of peace in the world, the difficulties of maintaining it, for instance in Vietnam and in Nigeria, and of the importance of promoting it more particularly through the respect of human rights and international aid.

In the course of the conversation, I informed the Holy Father that Canada was considering setting up diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The Pope welcomed the idea, stating that the Vatican would be honoured by such relations. But he added that he would leave it to Canada to decide on taking that initiative.

Pope Paul VI spoke very warmly of Canada, the problems and the tremendous possibilities of which he is well acquainted with. Speaking of our fellow-countrymen, the Holy Father said he was convinced (and I quote): "What unites them is stronger and more important than what divides them."

And, speaking of the great cause of peace in the world, he added: "Your country, Mr. Prime Minister, is basically a pacifist country, and we like to think that it will continue, under your leadership, to bring with authority its precious contribution to so vital a cause to the future of humanity."

After this most cordial interview, I also had the pleasure of conversing with the Prime Minister of the Italian Republic, Mr. Mariano Rumor, and several of his ministers.

Together, we reviewed the international situation. We also talked about the relations between Canada and Italy. In this regard, we noted the real progress that has been accomplished in the last few years, and we expressed the hope that this progress will continue....

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