



Statements and Speeches

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(Corrected version)

A DEMONSTRATION OF BEAUTIFUL EQUALITY — COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING IN OTTAWA

An Address by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, to the Commonwealth Association of Architects, Ottawa, November 5, 1973.

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Over the past 20 years, to use extravagant language such as excellent, or extraordinarily successful, to describe a Commonwealth heads of government conference would have invited accusations of being, at best, diplomatic to a fault or, at worst, dishonest. However, this conference was excellent. And this was not because it was held in Canada or because the Canadian Prime Minister or the Canadian delegation dominated the proceedings. It was partly because no one person or issue dominated the proceedings. As Prime Minister Trudeau said at the time: "I think there is what I would almost describe as a beautiful equality. The people who get the most done are those who make the brightest interventions and on one subject it might be one country and on another it might be another." All leaders had their say, and it would be invidious to pick out star performers.

A most striking aspect of this past heads of government conference was the change from the meeting held in Singapore in 1971. That meeting, as you may recall, had been marked by acrimonious and protracted debate, chiefly over the question of the sale of arms to South Africa. As that debate developed, so did the risk of a Commonwealth polarized in large part along racial lines into antagonistic camps.

In contrast, the Ottawa meeting was relaxed. It allowed easy and frank exchange of views. It was an atmosphere in which *rapprochement* and understanding between the leaders had an opportunity to develop — and this, more than specific agenda items, is one of the primary objectives of a heads of government meeting.

But how was this change brought about? The answer lies partly in careful preparation — in applying the lessons of past conferences to the framing of new ground-rules. The decision to exclude all but the most immediate advisers from the heads of government discussions had a very beneficial effect. There was no gallery

for anyone to play to. It enabled the heads of government to have more direct, frank and spontaneous communication with one another.

Another primary reason for the success of the conference was that finally it seems to have been accepted that the modern Commonwealth does not revolve around Britain, even though that country, which was once the imperial power, will always have a special place that cannot be filled by any other country. However, while this new maturity of the Commonwealth has been recognized at the top, there is still a task to be accomplished in persuading political figures, officials and editorialists in the member countries not to identify their relations with Britain with their relations with the Commonwealth.

As the Ottawa conference developed, Britain became accepted more and more as an equal member. This meant that the heads of government were able to deal with real problems and not the old emotional battles that had so often prevented them from getting a constructive grip on substantive issues.

There was some talk before the conference and at the time that the vacant space at the hub of the Commonwealth might be occupied by Canada. I think it was clear at the conference not only that Canada does not seek such a role but that such a position would be wholly contrary to our conception of the Commonwealth as a body of equals. There is, after all, nothing like it anywhere in the world. At the United Nations there is an institutional distinction between the great powers and the others. There is no other precedent in the world for so many heads of state to gather together periodically to discuss informally and directly their common problems and objectives. When I addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September, I made the point that too often the formal voting process leads to barren and abrasive confrontation. I suggested that consensus – the technique increasingly used at Commonwealth heads of government meetings – was frequently a more effective method.

I have not discussed the many other features of the Commonwealth that make it such a flexible and valuable instrument. I am sure that the growing achievements of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, the Commonwealth Foundation, those of co-operation in youth and education and so many other fields are well known to you. And it is for this reason that I have concentrated in these brief remarks on the new maturity of the

heads of government meetings. This maturity was important not just for the successful outcome of the last meeting but important for the future of our unique association.

Another feature that is indispensable to the value of the Commonwealth is the successful combination of governmental with non-governmental activities. Organizations such as yours are very much a reason why the Commonwealth is such a going concern today.

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