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THE EXPANDING COMMONWEALTH

Statement to the House of Commons on July 17, 1964,
by the Right Honourable L.B. Pearson, Prime Minister
of Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to make a report to the House on the Commonwealth Conference which has recently concluded its work in London....

I was assisted in representing the Government at this Conference by the High Commissioner for Canada in the United Kingdom, an old colleague of ours in this House, and by a small group of officials. I believe ours was the smallest of all the delegations. However, so far as the officials are concerned it made up in quality what it lacked in quantity. I should like to pay a very warm tribute to their hard work, and it was hard work....

There were 18 representatives of Commonwealth governments who sat around the table this time, a considerable increase since the last Commonwealth Conference, and they included many new countries which have emerged to independence since that last Conference was held in London. I doubt, Mr. Speaker, if anything can do more to bring home to one the problems with which the new countries in Africa and Asia are contending than to participate in the kind of meetings that were held in London during the last ten days. I doubt also, Mr. Speaker, if anything can do more to remove doubts about the value the Commonwealth can have -- and I hope and believe will have in the years ahead -- as a link between races and cultures and continents, and as an agency to promote co-operation and understanding among men and nations....

The final communiqué which was made public on the last day of the Conference, very late on Wednesday evening after a communiqué session which began in the morning and went through until nine o'clock in the evening, gives an indication of the nature and scope of the discussions and of the most important points on which agreement was reached and on which views were recorded. No previous meeting, I believe Mr. Speaker, has led to so expansive a statement in a communiqué on so many subjects. I am now talking about Commonwealth prime ministers' meetings; and no previous meeting, I suspect, went through quite so much debate in trying to agree on just what should be said in the communiqué.

There is nothing surprising about either fact. The communiqué is long because the discussions were far-ranging, because the interests of the Commonwealth countries are world-wide and the problems for attention are varied. The long debate over the production of the communiqué was, I think, to be expected, when there were participating 18 countries of extremely different views, and often contending views, on a great many subjects.

No Longer a Compact Association

The Commonwealth today is a far cry from the compact association of a few years ago. However, Mr. Speaker, I think it is a more representative reflection of the world in which we live today and of mankind as a whole than anything we have known in the past. The change in the Commonwealth is perhaps more noticeable because of the character of the increase rather than the extent of the increase. The new members have come from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia and because of the nature of the new membership, as well as its number, the search for a common denominator of agreement on policy and attitudes and like-mindedness, if you wish to put it that way, I suspect, is more difficult than it used to be.

But, to the extent that this can be achieved, the result is more important today, I believe, than it has ever been in the past, more meaningful in terms of the world in which we live. I think everyone who took part in those meetings was deeply impressed, and in some cases surprised, at the extent to which all 18 delegations sought to find value in this association and sought to strengthen it, irrespective of their background and past history - sought to use it for constructive purposes which could help move the world forward toward the resolution of some of its most difficult problems.

Another noteworthy feature is the fact that the expanded membership has not resulted in a dilution of the intimacy of relationship in contact and discussion which one might have expected following this kind of increase. With such a large membership representing such a wide range of interests, viewpoints and indeed, emotions, one might have expected to find a dilution of the informality and the intimacy of the discussions which used to take place at Commonwealth meetings. Fortunately this does not seem to have happened. I think the Conference of last week and this week may go down as one of the vitally important stages in the evolution of Commonwealth affairs. It is too early, of course, to state with confidence that this will be the case; it depends on what the various leaders who met and conferred together are able to do during the weeks, the months and the years ahead to carry out the substantial measure of agreement which was achieved in London. But I believe the potentiality for a great step forward by the new Commonwealth is there.

Relations Between West and East

As the communiqué indicates -- and I am talking now about the first item on the agenda, which is the usual discussion of the state of world affairs generally -- there was general agreement that the reduction of East-West tensions which has occurred has helped to produce solutions to some of the most serious threats to international peace in recent years, and that it at least provides an opportunity to work out some of the problems which remain dangerous and worrisome. At the same time there was general recognition that the competition between the free and the Communist worlds remains a dominant factor in international affairs. Where once this was seen most sharply in the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Western countries, it emerges now in subtler forms, with competition on the continent of Africa for influence among the peoples of the new countries both within and outside the Commonwealth. It emerges, too, in the relentless pressure of aggression and subversion in Southeast Asia.

In the discussion of the situation in Southeast Asia -- and there was very considerable discussion about it -- there was naturally a great deal of thought about the position of Communist China, which is such a tremendous factor in this whole matter. The view was expressed by the leaders of certain Commonwealth countries -- and it was expressed without qualification -- that the policy of the countries of the West, including Canada if you like, in refusing to extend diplomatic recognition to Communist China was unrealistic and unhelpful, and that it did not assist in reaching a solution to the problems of Southeast Asia, which in this view, and I might add in the general view, could not be solved without the participation of the Government of Communist China.

Those who held this view without any qualification stated that the policy that had been adopted by certain governments was sterile and fruitless, and that the sooner that policy was abandoned and the sooner Communist China was admitted to the United Nations, the better it would be for the solution of outstanding international disputes. This did not imply, on the part of those who held the view, any particular sympathy with the form of government in Peking or with the aggressive policy that China has followed; it reflected, rather, the opinion that the Chinese Government should be in the world forum, where it would have to defend its actions and be subject to the pressures of world opinion.

I understand there was a reflection and a report of these discussions carried by a Canadian newspaper, which said that I had said in the discussions that China -- and these were the words used -- ought to have its place in the United Nations. I did speak along those lines, but that particular report does not reflect what I was attempting to put forward at the meeting. I agreed that conditions should be such that the Government of mainland China should be in the United Nations; but I pointed out to those who held this view without qualification that for many years Communist China was an aggressor in Korea, which was an obstacle to this kind of recognition and admission, and at the present time there is another and important obstacle to this recognition and admission -- this formal admission -- to the United Nations in that there are many governments, including our own, that could not accept the extension of Communist rule from mainland China to Formosa without the approval and consent of the people of that island, and until that difficulty in some form was removed it was not going to be easy to recognize the right of a government in Peking to be the Government of China in the United Nations and extend its authority over the island of Formosa.

Malaysia and Indonesia

The meeting of the prime ministers received a very full report from the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, on the difficulty between Malaysia and Indonesia and the efforts his country had made to end the fighting, through discussion with the Government of Indonesia and other governments. In that connection -- and I think this is a very useful paragraph in the communiqué -- the prime ministers expressed not only their hope for an early termination of a totally unnecessary contest forced on Malaysia by a larger country but gave their support to the Prime Minister and the Government and people of Malaysia in their effort to pressure and maintain their own independence against that kind of pressure. This was subscribed to by all 18 members of the Conference. We will

be welcoming the Prime Minister of Malaysia to Canada in a very few days, and I am sure we will then have an opportunity to express to him the admiration we feel for the strength and patience of his Government in face of the very difficult situation which confronts them.

With seven of the 18 Commonwealth countries now on the continent of Africa, it was to be expected that a good deal of attention would be directed to that vast and important part of the globe, as indeed was the case at the last Commonwealth Conference. The main concern of the leaders of the African countries, as expressed at this Conference, was with two things: first, the attainment of independence for those areas in Africa which still remain under colonial régimes; and second, the achievement of racial equality.

Areas of Racial Inequality

The discussion accordingly concentrated on three areas where independence has not been achieved, or where racial equality is not permitted, or both: the Republic of South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, and the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. The African Commonwealth leaders at the Conference argued very strongly -- indeed forcefully -- and very emotionally for the imposition of economic sanctions against the Republic of South Africa in order to bring pressure on its Government to end the policy of apartheid. The communiqué states the reaffirmation, in which all members of the Conference joined, of condemnation by the Commonwealth governments of that policy, a condemnation which was given at the last Commonwealth Conference. However, the communiqué also reflects the doubts of some as to whether a programme of sanctions would be effective and whether, indeed, it might not have adverse results through hardening still further the attitude of the present Government and the white element of South Africa against the racial equality that the African leaders want to see achieved in that country and in Africa as a whole.

As far as our own position, which was put to the Conference, is concerned, we do agree that there should be sanctions in respect of military equipment and supplies. So far as total economic sanctions are concerned, this matter is now before the United Nations. A committee has been set up to investigate the effectiveness of sanctions, and we will certainly wait until we get the report of that committee.

As far as the expulsion, as a form of sanction, of South Africa from the United Nations and from international agencies under the United Nations is concerned, we felt that this was not a very helpful procedure to adopt from the point of view of those who deplore most vigorously the policy of South Africa. We felt it is better to have them in these international agencies, where they can be exposed to public opinion and where their policies can be attacked, than to have them outside of the international agencies, including technical international agencies.

As far as the Portuguese colonies are concerned, the view of the African leaders was clear. They want to see independence for those areas as for the rest of the continent; and in the communiqué there is an expression of regret -- not a very strong expression but a little stronger than it may seem in a diplomatic communiqué covering 18 countries -- that Portugal has not so far recognized the principle of self determination for her territories in Africa.

In its discussion of the situation in Southern Rhodesia, the Conference came to grips in real and immediate form with the problem of race relations. That is a problem which the Conference also had to face in 1961. No more explosive problem can reach the Conference table, and I think it is a tribute to the statesmanship of the African leaders and to the essential moderation expressed by all members of the Conference that the exchange of views on this matter was temperate and constructive, and there could be agreement in a way which reflected itself in the communiqué.

The Canadian delegation, representing a country which is not directly involved in this problem -- and I say "not directly" -- tried to make a contribution which would be objective and helpful in the evolution of our multi-racial community based on racial equality and non-discrimination. A firm stand was taken against racial discrimination and apartheid by the Commonwealth Conference of 1961. At that Conference, Canada played an important and very constructive part. I was glad to pay my tribute to the efforts of the Right Hon. Leader of the Opposition in this matter at that Conference, and I am glad to repeat that tribute at this time.

Challenge of Non-discrimination

I, in my way, tried to follow and reaffirm the position taken then in regard to racial equality. I suggested to the present Conference that we around the table were facing a very important moment of decision which would have far-reaching implications on the future of the Commonwealth, if, at a meeting where the majority of the members were from Asia and Africa, we did not, all of us, in some form meet this challenge of racial equality and non-discrimination. If we could not take a stand; if we could not reaffirm in the communiqué the principles of racial equality and non-discrimination -- if we could not do that, then the Commonwealth was not likely, in the form in which it is now, to go ahead or even to survive. The continuance of racial discrimination and the intensification in many areas of mutual fear between races are both a most disturbing features of the present world situation and a great cause of the difficulty with regard to many remaining unresolved colonial problems. That problem exists in the Commonwealth; it exists outside the Commonwealth.

There has been a good deal of talk about interference or intervention in the affairs of other areas or countries or colonies that were not represented in London; but the British Government, quite rightly I believe -- this is how we came to discuss this matter -- put on the agenda an item, "Progress of dependent territories toward independence". It seemed to us that under that item we should face up frankly to the implications of the subject, and we attempted to do so; I think all delegations did.

Our contribution was to suggest that the Commonwealth might adopt a declaration of racial equality very much along the lines of some of the statements which were made at the 1961 Conference, and that we should reaffirm in our final communiqué the principles for which we stand in the Commonwealth on this matter, principles on which our association must be based in the future if it is to go forward. Then we suggested that from this statement of principles we should go forward to discuss its application to particular problems such as Southern Rhodesia, British Guiana and other areas. The Conference agreed to this suggestion, and the declaration of principles is included in the communiqué.

Southern Rhodesia Problem

We then went on to suggest how these principles should be applied to Southern Rhodesia and British Guiana. The Southern Rhodesian situation is a very dangerous and difficult one. Southern Rhodesia has been self-governing for a good many years in domestic matters. Its Government is responsible to a Legislature which is elected by only a small minority of its population, largely those of European descent. The constitutional responsibility for a change in the situation rests with the Government of the United Kingdom, and all of us at the Conference recognized that the authority and responsibility for leading Southern Rhodesia as well as other colonies to complete independence must continue to rest with Great Britain. There was no difference of opinion on this point. The leaders of the African countries in particular attached great importance to the point that it was Great Britain and not the present Government of Southern Rhodesia which had this power and responsibility.

There have been many suggestions in recent months -- and this was referred to in our discussions -- that the Government of Southern Rhodesia might seek to issue a unilateral declaration of independence without regard to the views of the African parties in that country or the views of the United Kingdom Government. We made it clear in our communiqué that the other governments of the Commonwealth would not be able to recognize the validity of any such unilateral declaration of independence. That was subscribed to unanimously by all governments around the table.

In my own statement at the Conference, I had suggested that it might strengthen the hand of the British Government and might support the moderate elements among Southern Rhodesian voters if all governments at the Conference would let it be publicly known that this was their stand, that many of us feared that unconstitutional action by a minority in Southern Rhodesia would gravely diminish Southern Rhodesia's international status, might lead to economic and political internal difficulties and might also lead to disaster and violence and attempts to organize -- this was mentioned at the Conference as a possible result if something was not done -- a Southern Rhodesian government-in-exile. We felt that such an exacerbation of differences would be a tragedy for all concerned. All the Commonwealth leaders, I repeat, agreed that it would be prudent at this time to take such a stand on this matter and to make it public so there could be no misunderstanding anywhere about the position we would have to adopt if such a desperate and illegal measure were taken.

We also decided to express publicly, and this is in the communiqué, our welcome of the decision of the British Government that for Southern Rhodesia as for other territories, the existence of sufficiently representative institutions would be a condition of the granting of independence to such a territory. Most of us, including myself, expressed the view that an independence conference should be convened which the leader of all parties in Southern Rhodesia should be free to attend (the expression "should be free to attend", which is in the communiqué, is of some significance because some of the leaders are not free to attend anything at the present time) and that the object of this conference would be to seek agreement on the steps by which Southern Rhodesia might proceed to independence within the Commonwealth, we all hope (and I am now quoting from the communiqué) "at the earliest practicable time on the basis of majority

Of course when you mention the word "time" you really get to the heart of the difficulty, because it is a problem not of objective but of timing. I think we all appreciate that rash and premature action in these matters can cause trouble. We have had some experience of that in recent years. But it was the feeling of the Conference (and I shared the feeling after listening to the views expressed) that the greater danger was not speed but delay, and that unless some early progress is made in Southern Rhodesia the African majority might be driven increasingly to despair and to the acts of desperation that despair can engender.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, I was very impressed by the warning given by one of the most moderate African leaders that the continued imprisonment of Mr. J. Nkomo and Rev. N. Sithole and many of their associates would weaken the control that the more responsible African leaders have over their followers and would drive the latter toward increasing extremism. I therefore put forward the suggestion that the Commonwealth Conference should issue a reasoned appeal that the African leaders in Southern Rhodesia be released as a contribution toward the holding of those discussions that must take place soon, and on which the hope for agreed and early achievement of independence must inevitably be based. Most of the other prime ministers associated themselves with this idea, and this appeal is included in the communiqué.

At the same time we called upon all leaders and their supporters of both races to exercise moderation and abstain from violence. In this connection I was very impressed by the emphasis placed by the African representatives at the Conference on the importance of allaying the fears of the white minority in Southern Rhodesia, perhaps by saying something in our communiqué to reassure them about their security, and to let them know that their co-operation would be essential in the development of an independent state. We agreed to the inclusion of this point in the communiqué.

I have gone in some detail into this question of Southern Rhodesia because, as I suggested at the Conference, it is of importance far beyond the interests of its people. What is done about it has now become a symbol, and the stand the Commonwealth leaders decide to take on this matter is likely to be, and I am sure will be, considered a test of the seriousness of the Commonwealth members about a principle which we have all adopted and on which we now stand.

Perhaps I should mention also, Mr. Speaker, that, on behalf of the Government, I stated we would be glad to provide technical facilities or resources to help in the training of Africans from Southern Rhodesia to take on the new responsibilities of administration, if that should be desired and if those concerned wished to make arrangements with the Canadian Government. This can be done out of existing appropriations that will be before Parliament or in some cases have been before Parliament, if Parliament approves of them. It can be done, if necessary, by the transfer of some of these appropriations to Southern Rhodesia. We are already doing a good deal in this regard, but I suggested we might do more.

I have taken a good deal of time, Mr. Speaker, in reporting on this question of race relations because at this Conference it was crucial to the success of the Conference. I think the communiqué represents a considerable achievement in regard to the handling of this very explosive and difficult matter.

It will take time to weigh the value of this achievement, and it is foolish to be final and dogmatic in our conclusions at the present time. The long-term assessment of its importance must depend upon the implementation by those concerned of the principles on which we agreed and on the influence on the thinking and future actions of the governments represented in London.

It is still a convention of the Commonwealth prime ministers' meeting that we do not discuss disputes between Commonwealth countries, although that convention is becoming a little shaky in the light of the experience of the last two Conferences. We faced this convention on the question of relations between India and Pakistan, particularly of course in regard to Kashmir. There is no specific reference to this dispute as such in the communiqué, but we were all conscious at the Conference of the importance within the Commonwealth of this dispute, and what a wonderful thing it would be if the Conference could do something to encourage the settlement of this dispute which has been making relationships between the two largest members of the Commonwealth difficult for some years. At the same time we did not wish to do anything by any formal intervention which would make such a solution more difficult. It is rather apparent that at the moment there is not much an outside nation can do, but the Commonwealth Conference gave the two governments concerned an opportunity to talk about this in London, an opportunity which would be easier to take advantage of, perhaps, than by arranging a special meeting at this time in Pakistan or in India. I think some progress was made in that direction.

British Guiana

The Conference also directed a good deal of attention to two localities small in area but large in problems and in potential dangers, Cyprus and British Guiana. The paragraph in the communiqué on Cyprus includes an appeal to the countries concerned -- and we had in mind particularly the countries most concerned, Greece and Turkey -- to refrain from any action which might undermine the task of the United Nations Peace-keeping Force to which members of the Commonwealth are contributing, or might prejudice the endeavours of the United Nations to find a solution in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. So far as British Guiana is concerned, it is almost a hopelessly confused situation down there, and it is very difficult indeed to see what can be done by the intervention of the Commonwealth to clear up that confusion, remove the danger and bring back some order to that very distracted colony.

It was suggested at the Conference that perhaps the United Nations could move in there and in some way hold the line while elections were being held. But it became clear from the evidence we received that the basic difficulty, and the underlying danger in that difficulty, is the fact that there are two parties in British Guiana organized completely along racial lines, one Indian and one African, and that the leaders of these parties are getting their support entirely from one race or the other. This has aroused emotions, prejudices and fears that can only be removed by some kind of arrangement between the leaders to bring the people together in the way they used to be together before this division occurred. There is no difficulty about independence. The British Government is only too anxious to give this colony independence as soon as any government can assure order. In our communiqué we made an appeal to the leaders of the two parties, that is the leader of the two races, to get together and do something about this.

There was considerable discussion of trade and economic questions, but I do not propose to go into those in any detail. They are referred to at some length in the communiqué, and the substance of the matters dealt with in our discussions has been covered in reports to the House by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade and Commerce at various times during this session. The developing countries attach the very greatest importance, according to their statements and according to their policies, to the United Nations Trade Conference which has been meeting in Geneva. They called attention to the fact that, along with race relations, one of the serious problems and dangers in the world today is the division of nations into the "haves" and "have-nots". We all know that. We have been aware of this for a good many years. However, it was pointed out that this division now sees the "haves" almost entirely synonymous in their view with the whites, and the "have-nots" clearly synonymous with the other races of the world.

This lends sharpness to racial as well as economic tensions. The developing countries were at pains to emphasize that, while they appreciate the technical and financial help, what they appreciate even more, and I think we can sympathize with them in this, is improved terms on trade for their primary products exports and increased access to the major markets by the developing countries for such manufactures as they are able to produce and will presumably increasingly produce in the future.

Now, Mr. Speaker, there are in the communiqué a number of proposals for increasing co-operation in the technical and economic fields inside the Commonwealth. There is the proposal, for instance, for working out a scheme of Commonwealth development projects. We have already some of these under the Colombo Plan. There is, I believe, one project in Pakistan now which has been organized and worked out by three Commonwealth governments. It was thought perhaps we could extend that. A proposal was made by the British Government to that effect.

There was also a proposal for helping new countries by giving administration training to those who will be responsible for administering their governments at a time when there are very few natives who have that experience. At the same time, we realized that a good deal of this is being done now by separate Commonwealth governments. To set up some new, large Commonwealth administration in London might be confusing rather than helpful in this regard.

Then there was a proposal for establishing a Commonwealth foundation to administer a fund for an increasing flow of information and contacts in professional fields. There was a proposal to increase the resources available to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and give it an opportunity to do even better work than it has done in the past. There was a proposal put forward by Canada to establish consultation and to help the developing countries in the field of satellite communications. That was received with great interest and is going to be examined.

There was one other proposal, which appears at the end of the communiqué, which in some respects is the most interesting of all the concrete proposals made. It became quite clear from the beginning of the Conference that there was a strong desire on the part of the newer countries of the Commonwealth, the new African countries, to have some kind of Commonwealth machinery, some kind of Commonwealth institution, a Commonwealth secretariat, established for the service of the Commonwealth as a whole.

Commonwealth Remains Vital

When I say this proposal was in a sense surprising, we remember it is not long since proposals for a secretariat were regarded with fairly general suspicion as a reflection of a tendency toward centralization, which in those early days was interpreted as meaning rule from Downing Street. It is significant, then, to realize that the pressure toward this kind of consultative centralization, if you want to call it that, comes from the newer countries which in many ways are or should be most suspicious of the older members in this regard, but have no fears of any such implications from a proposal of this kind. They are very much aware of its practical value to them in providing a broad range of information which it is difficult for them to obtain with the inadequate diplomatic and government services they now have or perhaps can afford; and so we supported this proposal.

I think the situation has changed a great deal since the early days, and it is something we should try to work out on a genuine Commonwealth basis. Yet, at the same time, this should be done without interfering with the existing channels of communications, without confusing what is already in many respects a very satisfactory method of co-ordination and exchange of information. We must be sure the basis of this new secretariat is sound, and that we are adding an institution of value and not simply an additional agency available for the free play of Parkinson's Law; but we will be glad to take part in the study of a possible basis for such an organization, which will be taking place very shortly.

Mr. Speaker, in recent years fears have been expressed -- and they were certainly expressed on the eve of this Conference -- that the Commonwealth had outlived its real purpose and had become simply an amiable club with no real objective, depending largely on the emotional recollection of past imperial greatness. I believe the recent Conference has shown that those fears are unfounded, and that the sense of the value of the new Commonwealth is felt most precisely and most importantly where one might have thought there would have been the greatest doubt; that is, among the new countries in Africa and Asia. They recognize in the Commonwealth an agency of real value to them, and we must try to keep it that way. They realize that it can provide a bridge between continents and between the races and this, I think, is going to afford a great new role for the Commonwealth in the years ahead. In a world in which the associations of peoples and nations are all to frequently on the basis of a common ideology, a common race, a common language or a common geographical location, there is, I submit, a unique merit in an institution which transcends all of these and brings countries together on a wider basis than the ones I have mentioned, on a basis which is really founded on a common adherence to human rights and free institutions and a desire to settle our problems by consultation, co-operation and agreement.

One of the most impressive political figures it has been my privilege to meet for some years ... was the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who suggested, in what I thought was a very profound statement to the Conference, that it would be well for this new Commonwealth to try to work out a statement of general principles on which it stands and on which it could go forward, not only a statement of principle of racial equality but a statement of general principles, and include in these principles this adherence to free institutions, this respect for basic law and basic rights, as well as respect for racial equality and non-discrimination. In serving these principles

and in providing a forum for an intimate and friendly exchange of views among virtually all races of mankind, the Commonwealth is embarking on a new era in which it could have, and I hope it will have, a value broader and deeper than it has had in the world at any time in the past.

May I conclude, Mr. Speaker, by reading just one short sentence from the communiqué which expressed that point of view. Referring to the Commonwealth, the communiqué says:

"It is, indeed, a cross-section of the world itself; and its citizens have an unparalleled opportunity to prove that, by mutual co-operation, men and women of many different races and national cultures can live in peace and work together for the common good."

s/c