



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

71/1

A CANADIAN VIEW OF THE COMMONWEALTH

(Excerpts from a Press Conference by Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Ottawa, January 5, 1971.)

I am going to Singapore as the leader of one government to meet the leaders of other governments. We will have many things to discuss having to do with the Commonwealth and the many facets of the Commonwealth and of world problems. There is one issue which perhaps seems to dominate the speculations - the issue of the sale of arms to South Africa, just as a couple of years ago it was the issue of Rhodesia. There is always some issue which seems to be the most exciting one, in the sense that people can speculate on whether it is going to lead to disaster or not. But there are many many other things we are going to be doing in Singapore. There are many many things that the Commonwealth is performing and many more that it can perform.

One item that I suggested be put on the agenda was to use to the utmost this occasion of heads-of-state and heads-of-government meeting from various continents so that they could exchange techniques of improving, shall we say, the Parliamentary democratic system. This to me is very fundamental; it is as important as any other issue. Arms sales to South Africa is very important for some countries who want to proceed with the sales and very important for those who don't want to see it proceeded with. But to me it is just one item on the agenda.

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The value of the Commonwealth as I see it is to be able periodically to sit down at the head-of-state or head-of-government level and to discuss issues which transcend continents, transcend colour, transcend racial origin, economic basis and so on. It is a forum wherein free men try to find ways to progress in a difficult world and to me there is no single issue so important that it is worthwhile breaking up the Commonwealth.

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I was just fascinated at the last Commonwealth meeting by the possibilities of learning from other heads of government the techniques with which they govern their countries, how they meet the challenge of a moving

democracy in a technological age or, in other cases, in societies which are just reaching their economic takeoff. And every time I meet a prime minister or a head of state I am always fascinated to know, for instance, how he holds his cabinet together, how his cabinet works, how he renews the membership, how he assures ethnic or regional representation, how the parliamentary system is prevented from bogging down in the particular countries with the particular sets of parliamentary rules that they have, how the more-developed countries can meet the challenge of an increasing number of questions to be dealt with in a seemingly non-expanding amount of parliamentary time available to them. How parliaments in Commonwealth countries with a federal form of constitution, like Australia, meet the conflicting problems between state and Commonwealth relations or federal and provincial relations. All these questions are absolutely fundamental not only to the techniques of governing but to the coherence of modern societies.

To me, to be meeting for ten days with people who in their countries are faced with similar problems and who are obviously trying to find answers to them, to me, this is too valuable an experience to miss the opportunity of exchanging techniques and exchanging ideas. How do they plan? How do they make the plan applicable? How do they shuffle their cabinets? How do they set the priorities, especially when there are two levels of government? How far in advance do they try to get their legislative timetable set up? How do they ensure the co-operation of the opposition parties? And so on, and so on. To me, this is the stuff that you cannot learn in any text-book; it is the stuff that is not taught in any political science seminar in any university of which I know; it is certainly not put in books.

Governments everywhere are facing the challenge of credibility, of relevancy. Will they be able to meet the tremendous turmoils which are shaking every country? Will representative democracy wither away and be replaced by either authoritarian or totalitarian systems, or, at the other end, by mob rule? You see, these questions are fundamental to all of us. They have much more far-reaching consequences than specific issues of what we will do next year about Rhodesia. These have to do with whether societies will survive in a democratic form or not, and this, I repeat, is something which I have been interested in not only in the Canadian Government, but I never fail to meet an important person in another country who can give me some clues as to how they are solving this relevancy gap and credibility gap.

If the Commonwealth were to be of no other use to me than that, I would think it indeed of great value, provided the people there are willing to not only discuss crisis issues but techniques of government. And I might say that I hope that the press of the world and the media of the world will see this value in the Commonwealth. Because, by looking at meetings of this kind merely as boxing-matches or other forms of competitive games, it is more exciting (You know: "Will it break up, won't it break up, who is going to take the lead, and who is going to save us?"); it is all very exciting, but I repeat, from one meeting to another, it is a completely new boxing-match that excites the people, but what stays on is the curability of democratic governments, and this is the issue that I hope we will be able to learn more about at the Commonwealth meeting.