



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING, SINGAPORE - I

A Statement by the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau, in the House of Commons on February 1, 1971.

Mr. Speaker, it is not possible, in the few minutes which the rules permit me, to describe to the House in more than a summary fashion the Singapore conference of Commonwealth heads of government. I should like to convey to the House some of the impressions that I brought away with me. These impressions, I hope, will add to the information already received from Singapore in the form of the conference communiqué and the very full journalistic reports.

The meeting was, as the House is aware, the first regular Commonwealth conference to take place outside of London, and the first at the head-of-government level to be sited in Asia. I think that an Asian location was most fortunate, partly because it was in Asia that momentum was first initiated for the Commonwealth to be transformed from its older, more confining structure into the widely-representative association which it is today, and partly because an Asian site permitted conference delegates to live and work in a newly-independent community in which racial harmony is a necessary fact of life. The world, as we know but so often tend to forget in the immediacy of our own domestic problems, is populated to an overwhelming degree by persons who are desperately poor and whose colonial experience in many instances leads them to question the values and the sincerity of the developed countries. All too often, as well, "rich" and "white" are regarded by them as synonymous. We forget these facts at our peril.

In Singapore it quickly became apparent that the future of the world would not necessarily be determined in accordance with European conceptions. The Commonwealth, viewed from Singapore, presented challenges to the ingenuity and goodwill of its members to find ways of communicating across differences measured, in many instances, by thousands of miles and by centuries of experience, yet without insisting upon adherence to preconceived notions or attitudes. In the result, the value of the Singapore conference might best be described in terms of the comprehension gained by delegates, and not by the persuasion which anyone attempted to exercise.

The conference dealt with a number of important issues, foremost among them the contentious issue of arms sales to the Republic of South Africa. I am relieved, as I am sure are all here, that, following consideration of factors affecting the security of maritime trade-routes, the members agreed to the formation of a committee to study these questions as they relate to the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans in hopes of resolving some of the complex variations and differences of view. I am also pleased that an amended Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, which had been presented earlier to the meeting in its basic form by President Kaunda of Zambia, received the unanimous support of the meeting. Each of these measures confirmed to a large extent the belief by most heads of government that the Commonwealth association is important -- one that is capable of contributing significantly to a better understanding among men of their common ideals and aspirations, their fears and problems, and their increasing interdependence in a technologically complicated world.

The agenda at Singapore permitted wide-ranging discussions of political and economic trends in the world, of the possible consequences of the entry of Britain into the European Economic Community, of a variety of Commonwealth programs, and of the immediate future of the Commonwealth association. Canada disclosed at the meeting that it was prepared to support up to 40 per cent of the financial burden of an expanded Commonwealth fund for technical co-operation. Canada also supported a less rigid format for future conferences -- one which will relieve some of the unnecessary pressures now present in the preparation of an acceptable communiqué, one that should reduce the number of pre-prepared statements and thus permit heads of government to take advantage of the particular nature of the meetings. There was general agreement that these changes are desirable, and that the unprecedented opportunity for so many heads of government to meet regularly and informally should be jealously protected.

It is my view now, as it was prior to Singapore, that Canada could get along without the Commonwealth but it remains my strong view that we could not get along nearly so well. No problems would be solved by the break-up of the association; not one member would find it easier to advance its own interests in its absence. The Commonwealth benefits all members and harms none. It is my firm expectation that with the help of the important Commonwealth Declaration the association will prove to be a major contributor to the enrichment of human relations. Commonwealth members share a common language. Even more important, they share a common idiom. In the result, there is permitted an informality of encounter and a meeting of minds that surely must be the envy of other countries.

The journey to and from Singapore gave me an opportunity to travel briefly in four of the many countries which have issued invitations to visit over the past several years. Three of those countries -- Pakistan, India and Ceylon -- are Commonwealth members and long-time major recipients of Canadian economic assistance. Together with the journalists and photographers who accompanied me, I travelled to several of the more important of our aid projects. Through the pens and cameras of these reporters, Canadians are now more aware of the way in which Canadian funds have assisted persons less fortunate than ourselves. I found, too, that in each of those countries the earlier visits of Canadian Prime Ministers St Laurent and Diefenbaker were well remembered....

The fourth country visited was Indonesia, the giant of Southeast Asia, which Canada has recently named as a country of concentration for our aid program and one of whose outstanding citizens, General Nasution, will soon come to Canada as your guest, Mr. Speaker.

In each of those countries the program provided for discussions with the prime minister or president and between Canadian officials and their counterparts. These face-to-face encounters, and that with the Shah of Iran during an overnight stop in his country, provided an opportunity to learn at first hand of the attitudes and beliefs of world leaders in a way which cannot otherwise adequately be duplicated.

A refuelling stop at Lahr permitted me to meet a good number of our servicemen, their wives and children.

Wherever I went, I am happy and proud to report that the name of Canada was held in warm and sincere respect. The professional dedication of Canadian representatives abroad, be they in the public service or the armed forces, serving in our diplomatic missions or in United Nations or NATO assignments, the quality of our aid programs, the value of our trade and investment relations, the friendly and positive nature of our external policies within and without the United Nations -- these have all accumulated for Canada over the years an enviable reputation. I am happy to report that the resourcefulness and skills of the members of my official party and of the Canadian Armed Forces crew who were responsible for our transportation contributed not only to the effectiveness of my trip but to Canada's good name wherever we went. To them I am grateful and offer my thanks.

I have no doubt that all Canadians will agree that this high national reputation places upon our fortunate country a special obligation to conduct our affairs both internally and externally in a manner in keeping with the desire of all men to live in a world which contributes to human dignity, justice and social progress. To this end, all Canadians must dedicate themselves consciously in order to be rid of racial or regional or linguistic prejudices, for these are belittling to the world, to Canada, and to us as individuals.

In that respect, I should like to quote in conclusion three sentences from the closing remarks of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Chairman of the Singapore Conference. He said:

"In a multitude of ways, this conference has mirrored in miniature some of the irreconcilables the world community faces. They must be made less irreconcilable. It will become too costly and painful for mankind if these conflicts are not tempered by the spirit of common brotherhood."

Canada cannot live apart from the world. Events in far-off places do affect us, as we have seen again and again in our history. If we are able to influence those events for the better, through attendance at important international conferences, and through meetings with heads of friendly states, then it is the duty of Canada to attempt to do so. This duty does not flow from some vague international role to be played by Canada. Canada must act according to how it perceives its aims and interests. It is in our interest that there not be a general racial war in Africa in the near or distant future.

If the Commonwealth conference reduced the chances of such a war, and if the Canadian delegation contributed to the success of that conference, then I submit that the effort was well expended.

S/C