

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 50/27

THE COMMONWEALTH AS A REGIONAL FORCE

A lecture delivered by Mr. R.G. Riddell, Department of External Affairs, on July 9, 1950, at the Mount Holyoke Institute of the United Nations on "Regional Forces in International Relations: East and West."

At this moment the time is not ripe for academic analysis of our political institutions. Questions about the constitutional framework of our society, the balance of political forces in the state, the legal validity of our constitutional procedures, although they remain important, are less immediately relevant. The real and urgent questions about any of our institutions become the practical ones. For the moment we forget to be concerned whether a particular political organism is a republic or a monarchy, whether its constitutional structure is coherent and rational, or illogical and unintelligible to any save the initiated. We ask ourselves only whether it is capable of use; whether it serves the purposes of the community of free peoples in an hour of great need. We ask whether it has breath and life in it, and whether it may be put in motion for common good.

I am sure that it is in this spirit that you will this week approach your study of regional organizations. I would not for a moment deny that an examination of the constitutional structure of these organizations is in the long run of great importance, and it may well be that in seeking an answer to the immediate and practical questions which we are all asking about the usefulness of our institutions, you will be driven back upon the more academic studies to which I have referred. But right now, at this moment in history, it seems to me the questions we must ask about our international institutions are these: What use are they? What are the things we should expect of them, and alternatively, what are the burdens that we should not lay upon them or expect them to bear?

Certainly there are plenty of uses to which they can be put. The magnitude of the task which lies before the western world is now clear beyond a question of doubt. We must find the means of defending ourselves against the persistently aggressive force which is pressing upon the free community everywhere, and which breaks like an angry flood through any weak point in the dikes which contain it. Not only must we defend ourselves, but in so doing we must somehow be certain that all our resources and all our energies and all our ingenuity are not drained off in our defensive effort. The real victory will come only through the progressive strengthening of the community of free nations as a place where individual men and women may enjoy the political and social justice which is denied to them elsewhere. We in North America have reason to be confident that we can reach this dual objective within the boundaries of our own countries, but the task becomes more difficult and the issues more grave when we remember that it is not only we ourselves for whom the choice between freedom and communism must be real, it must be a real choice also for the people of other lands who live on the borders of the communist empire and whose political and economic problems are vastly more complicated, more deep-rooted and more stubborn than our own.

In all the efforts that have been made since the war to construct an international order upon either a universal or a regional basis, these dual objectives have invariably been recognized. The desire for security has been coupled with a desire to remove the source of danger to security. The United Nations is primarily an instrument for collective defence -- perhaps not as effective an instrument as we had originally hoped, but certainly one which in recent weeks has shown remarkable vitality. But, in any case, the United Nations

is more than a security organization. All the chapters of the Charter and all the conferences and meetings which have been held within the United Nations since it came into effect, reveal the fact that every statesman in the world knows in his bones that he and his nation will not be secure from war until by some means or other they have removed the economic and social causes of war. I do not think, therefore, that there is much point in examining now the constitutional structure of the British Commonwealth; in concerning ourselves too much about the logic of a situation in which a king is the head of an association of states which includes a republic; or in worrying too much about the fact that it is quite possible within this system, for the king, who is head of the Commonwealth, to be at one and the same time both at war and at peace. The most recent example of this kind of analysis of the Commonwealth appeared a month ago in an admirable American publication called The Reporter. In the issue of that paper for June 6 there appears a stimulating and amusing article by Mr. J.H. Huizinga entitled "The Commonwealth Cult - What Really Binds Britain and the Dominions?". Mr. Huizinga indulges in the time-honoured exercise of peeling the fruit to see what substance there is in it, and comes to the conclusion that the fruit he is peeling is an onion. When the leaves are all before him on the table, the investigator admits that he is little wiser than when he began and he himself is reduced to tears. But an onion, after all, when it is all together, as it grew in the ground, is something very different from the assortment of leaves of which it is compacted. It has shape, it has texture, it may be identified even in the dark, and moreover it has uses that would make any good cook regret its absence.

Mr. Huizinga, I must confess, used a somewhat more elegant metaphor. Here is what he says:

"It would, then, seem fair to say that the Commonwealth appears in fact to be no more than an alumni association without an executive committee, by-laws, or a programme of concerted action, whose independent-spirited, self-willed members, presided over by their former headmaster, recognize no other obligations toward one another than may be prompted by the heart or by considerations of farsighted self-interest. Apart from the ties of blood linking some members of the association, and the familiarity - which has been known to breed contempt as well as friendship - inherited from the days when they were all at school together, there is only one thing that distinguishes this very heterogeneous gathering of sovereign nations from any other. And that is that they have been remarkably successful in passing themselves off as something they are manifestly not; a political entity whose component parts may claim the right to accord one another tariff preferences regardless of agreements made with outside nations."

I do not propose to argue with Mr. Huizinga about his analysis, and I think we had better leave him to his tears contemplating something which he has reduced to a state where it is obviously not fit for human consumption. When we have finished with his analysis and similar comments which it is quite easy to make about the Commonwealth, we still need to know whether there is some useful, constructive contribution which this association of states can make in solving the urgent problems of the free world.

We must, I think, begin by reminding ourselves that the Commonwealth possesses the validity that comes from uninterrupted growth. It is an organism, and like any healthy organism, it has adapted itself to its environment. The political conditions in which it originated as part of the British Empire, no longer exist, and that Empire could not possibly continue in the form it took a hundred years ago. It is quite misleading to suggest that this development has taken place merely because of a weakening in the imperial power of Great Britain. No matter what had happened to the United Kingdom in the last hundred years, the very process by which the various parts of the old empire grew in population, in industrial strength, in political experience, would have made it impossible to maintain the old order. No matter how powerful Great Britain had remained, the decentralization of its empire could not possibly have been avoided. The fact that that transformation has taken place by organic processes and not by surgery, is good evidence that the association has vitality and meaning in the modern world.

In assessing the significance of the Commonwealth we must remember also that it has emerged as a consequence of one of the greatest political revolutions the world has known. This revolution has not been attended by much violence, although it has taken place in violent times. It has been a gradual process of agreement and adjustment by which a great imperial power, over a period of something less than a century, even at times when it was still enlarging its possessions, divested itself of a major part of its imperial authority, withdrawing its governors, withdrawing its administrators, withdrawing its troops, almost always accepting the force of circumstance without putting its judgment to the test of military strength. The Commonwealth, therefore, is an expression on the part of those states which have emerged as a result of this process of their determination to maintain as much as they can of the constructive and beneficial elements in their former unity. They have made this decision voluntarily and they have been able to do so because they are satisfied that they have now been assured the full measure of their freedom, and that the Commonwealth maintains no vestige of the former imperial domination. They have also gone to considerable trouble to maintain this association though there have been times when it seemed almost simpler to break up the Commonwealth rather than to adjust it to the new circumstances. None of the present members, however, has been prepared to face that possibility, and they have together, by their combined decision, decided to keep it in being.

There are many observers who are perplexed and even distressed because the Commonwealth lacks many of the formal attributes of an ordinary association of states. It has no common legislature, no binding defence agreements, no chiefs of staff committee, no common tariff structure, no central foreign office. We should not, therefore, conclude that because central machinery of the kind I have mentioned does not exist in the Commonwealth, the members of the Commonwealth are opposed to this machinery as such. The real explanation is quite different; it is that everything that it is possible to do, through the Commonwealth, in the conduct of international affairs, can be done, in present circumstances at least, without these institutions. Conversely, it is the opinion of the members of the Commonwealth that the conduct of their own affairs, each in his own area of the world, would be made more difficult if such formal institutions existed. In regard to a formal military alliance, for example, the governments of the Commonwealth have come to the conclusion that their ability and willingness to take common action in appropriate circumstances would not be strengthened by a formal written commitment. At the same time, many of them find it necessary or expedient to enter into military commitments with states outside the Commonwealth, in the particular area where they exist. The freedom to enter into these military associations outside the Commonwealth is of greater importance than any set of precise defence obligations which might be written for the Commonwealth itself. The same kind of answer may be made if it is asked why the Commonwealth does not desire a common legislature, or an executive committee of some kind meeting regularly on matters of common interest. The existing machinery for Commonwealth consultation will carry the governments of the Commonwealth in the direction of common legislation as far as it is possible and necessary to go, and there is no reason to believe that the elaboration of this machinery would increase the usefulness of the Commonwealth as an instrument in world affairs. There is, as a matter of fact, good evidence that the contrary is the case. There is no real common field for legislative action between, let us say, Canada and India, and the effort to combine representatives from these two countries in a Commonwealth legislature could have little real purpose. The same considerations exist in regard to a central judiciary. There is no legal process by which disputes amongst members of the Commonwealth may be referred to a central judicial tribunal. This certainly is not because members of the Commonwealth are unwilling in appropriate circumstances to accept the judgments of the courts in regard to their international obligations. The reason is that what cannot be settled between members of the Commonwealth by ordinary processes of negotiation and adjustment, could not be settled by any Commonwealth court. It is as though one were to suggest that a large family should voluntarily establish a court for its own use. What the members of a family could not agree upon informally, could certainly not be settled by any judicial procedures which they had set up especially for their own uses. We are led by these examples to the conclusion

that there is no good evidence that in present circumstances the strength of the Commonwealth would be increased by the existence of more elaborate central machinery than is now the case.

When we come to consider the practical ways in which Commonwealth action may be effective in the contemporary world, I think we must put first on our list the usefulness of this instrument as a means of clearing the political ground easily and informally amongst the group of nations which make up the association. This applies both to questions which arise within the Commonwealth and also to broader international questions which affect all Commonwealth members. This is possible largely, I think, because of the habits and techniques of consultation which over the years have grown up amongst Commonwealth members. It takes place at all levels. It may sometimes amount to no more than casual conversations amongst official members of delegations at international conferences. It may on other occasions be embodied in a formal meeting of the Foreign Ministers or even Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth countries. I do not think we should underestimate the importance in international affairs of the habits of consultation to which I have referred. If a group of men are sitting about a table discussing some problem in international affairs, their discussions are likely to be much more fruitful if each is confident that they all fully understand the character and quality of their meeting - if each knows what weight to give to each other's expression of views - if each can put ideas forward and withdraw them easily and without embarrassment - if they can on occasion consult each other simply as a group of individuals, detaching themselves for the moment from their national policies in a way which it is often extremely difficult to do in discussions amongst members of various governments or various government services. It is not often realized how much discussion of this nature goes forward amongst Commonwealth members, because for the most part it is completely informal, it is not announced, there is no statement of conclusions. There are not, in fact, many occasions on which it is possible to announce formal conclusions of any great substance. The discussions are, however, no less valuable for this reason. It seems to me that no one attending one of these discussions can help being influenced by them, on no matter what level he may be in his particular service, even though he does not enter into a single commitment of any kind in the course of the meeting. His judgment on the circumstances which are under discussion will almost certainly be influenced by what he has heard about the views of other Commonwealth countries. During the meetings he will, if possible, have tried to define some common area upon which all Commonwealth countries can agree. If that is not possible, he will almost certainly so conduct himself after the meetings that, in the knowledge which he has gained of the position of others he will do as little as possible to complicate that position.

Another area in which it seems to me that the Commonwealth will prove to be a useful instrument in the contemporary world is in regard to the complicated and delicate question of relations between Eastern Asia and the Southwest Pacific on the one hand and North America and Western Europe on the other. I do not think it is possible to overestimate the importance of this relationship. During the 19th Century it was by and large a colonial relationship, either directly, in a political sense, or indirectly in an economic sense. Events of the last 50 years, however, have made the continuance of that colonial relationship impossible, even if anyone wanted to continue it. The peoples of Asia and the Southwest Pacific are starting off on a new course, and no one is sure what direction they will take. They are at the moment for the most part directed by people whose training and experience has been gained in association with the countries of North America and Western Europe. The statesmen, the public servants, the industrial and financial leaders, the scholars and teachers of many of the new democracies of the East, are familiar with our political system and with the political and social values which underlie our civilization. They are, moreover, prepared to maintain these values as best they can, and they are committed to the principle that, if possible, they will establish and develop a democratic society. This will by no means be easy for them and it might even be that the orderly progress towards freedom which they have been making will be

replaced by some unforeseen revolutionary surge of events which will sweep them out of office and out of influence. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the ties between us as individuals and them as individuals which have survived the change in the status of those countries, and which indeed have often been strengthened by that change, should be nurtured and developed.

There is no easy formula for accomplishing this end. If it is possible to bring it about, it will be done in many ways - exchange of students, exchanges of people in professional life and businessmen, as free as possible movement of people back and forth; and it will be accomplished in an even more important way by demonstrating to the people of the new democracies of the Far East that they can secure from this part of the world the technical and economic assistance which they need without the political strings which they learned to abhor in the 19th Century and which have their current reincarnation in a truly destructive and reactionary form in the new imperialism of the Communist empire. In this process, it seems to me that the Commonwealth may be of the greatest importance. There are already in existence all kinds of personal ties of one kind and another which arise out of the Commonwealth association. Sometimes they are ties which arise simply out of common membership in an ancient university or common service on some administrative committee which existed under the old system before the war. There are also methods of procedure which are familiar to people who have worked within the Commonwealth that sometimes make it easier for them to understand one another. And finally, there is the enormously important fact that the constitutional system in all parts of the Commonwealth is approximately the same. By that I mean that the Commonwealth countries adopt the parliamentary system of government, rather than the presidential system. I do not need to explain to this audience the difference between your system of government and ours and the significance of that difference. I am not sure, however, that people in this country always realize how important that difference is and how much it may affect the political thinking and the behaviour of a Minister or alternatively of a Civil Servant when he is on mission for his country. In our efforts to maintain and improve our relationship with the East, I think it is very important that we should keep constantly in mind that in most of the new democracies of the East the system of government is that which is practised throughout the Commonwealth.

Finally, I think we should remember that there have been a number of occasions on which the Commonwealth has demonstrated its ability to take immediate, practical steps in regard to specific situations. I refer only to two of them. One is the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan during the last war. After the fall of France, it became immediately apparent that tremendously expanded air forces would be necessary for the defence of the Western World and that these forces would have to be trained and equipped in areas that were on the one hand beyond the range of German bombers, and on the other hand reasonably accessible to the scene of battle. At this time the Commonwealth alone was engaged in war against Nazi Germany. It was, therefore, decided quickly and with a minimum of red tape to centre in Canada the arrangements for the training of Commonwealth air forces. Airmen came from all over the Commonwealth and were trained on air fields in Canada and were then sent to join their particular units in whatever theatre these units were engaged. I am not concerned at the moment to evaluate the contribution which the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan made to the winning of the war. I cite it now simply as an example of the way in which, even in the absence of elaborate central machinery, the Commonwealth is able when the occasion demands, to act quickly on a specific commitment. The other example to which I wish to refer is the action recently taken by the Commonwealth concerning the economic development of Southeast Asia. This was a plan suggested, principally by the Australian Delegation, at the meeting of Commonwealth countries in Ceylon during January last. It was decided then to give the matter more detailed consideration at a later conference, and during May there was a further meeting of the Commonwealth countries in Sydney at which a decision was reached. In the final set of resolutions of that conference it was recommended that a report should be prepared setting out the need for development, the development programmes of the countries in the area which might be expected to be completed over a period of six years ending June 30, 1957, and the need for external assistance in order to

carry out these programmes. And it was also recommended that a Commonwealth programme of technical assistance should be established immediately to supplement the United Nations programme. In regard to the second of these objectives, it was decided to commence a Commonwealth Technical Assistance scheme which is expected to cost about eight million pounds sterling over a period of three years, and contributions are already being made by Commonwealth countries. I should point out also that in the decisions which were taken at this conference, it was recognized that the Commonwealth countries of Southeast Asia were not the only ones which needed technical assistance, and an invitation has been issued to othersto associate themselves in any programme which is being worked out. I think that both in the short run and in the long run this Commonwealth programme may contribute very materially to the major task of sustaining the standard of living, and with it the democratic way of life, in the new democracies.

Mr. Huizinga, in the quotation which I read from his article on the Commonwealth, referred to it as an alumni association. The important thing about an alumni association is not, after all, how it is organized, or who its vice-presidents are. The essential question is whether, when the college gymnasium catches fire, the alumni who live nearby are sufficiently interested to turn out and man the hoses, and those who live at some distance are sufficiently interested, when the fire is out, to put up the cash for a new roof on the building. As you consider during the week ahead the question of regional organizations, I suggest that you recall that the nations of the Commonwealth, after all, constituted the only group which was engaged continuously in the war against Hitler from its outbreak in 1939 to its conclusion in 1945. I would ask you also to consider the governments other than the United States which, in the crisis which has recently occurred in Korea, responded to the resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations, not only on paper, but actually by moving men or material in response to the emergency. They are not all Commonwealth countries, nor are all the Commonwealth countries included, but the list of Commonwealth countries that have acted positively in this crisis is revealing and significant. If you approach your consideration of the Commonwealth from this point of view, although you may come to the conclusion that it is not really a regional organization at all in any proper sense of that term, you will also conclude that it is one of the genuinely effective instruments which we have at hand for the preservation of peace and in the development of the free world.

S/c
