

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES



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THE EXPANDING COMMONWEALTH

A speech to the House of Commons on May 16, 1960, by Prime Minister Diefenbaker.

... I came back from the London Conference feeling that, bearing in mind the difficult circumstances arising from the situation in South Africa, the Conference was generally useful and successful.

Many observers have, of course, pointed out that the proceedings of the meetings did not result in any perceptible change in the attitude of the South African Government. It was not to be expected, however, that magic improvements could take place in a situation of such tension and complexity. I believe that those who in future will examine and judge this period in Commonwealth history will decide that this meeting did not fail to respond to the stern test to which it was put.

I would be the last to say that everything was achieved that I would have desired. I do not contend that in so far as the communiqué is concerned it can convey the full nature and substance of the deliberations that took place. On occasions in the past I have heard my predecessors ... report on conferences they had attended. In every case it was made perfectly clear that while no decisions were made or can be made in these informal circumstances, there is a oneness of mind that comes about through the exchange of ideas.

There was no disposition on the part of any of the representatives to evade this issue, and there was no lack of frankness in private and informal discussions. I underline the fact that ... only in unanimity can there be a final communiqué issued. Everything that is included therein represents the agreement of all. To bring together the representatives to one quarter of the world's population, belonging to many races and being of many colours, I think it is quite an unusual result that several conclusions were arrived at unanimously which cannot but result in the possibility of change along the lines generally desired.

Despite the profound differences which prevailed and persisted throughout, it was possible for a communiqué to be issued. This was difficult with two inherently conflicting elements to be reconciled. First, it had become essential that a way be found for Commonwealth governments to make clear their intentions on this central question of racial relations. Second, it was desirable that this should be done without violation of the traditional practice of these meetings that the internal affairs of member countries are not the subject of formal discussion. I believe now more certainly than I did when I spoke here on April 27 that any departure from this last principle would mean the end of the Commonwealth as we know it; because, if we ever arrive at the point where we will discuss the internal affairs of other countries and determine the course by a majority, then there will be problems that will arise and it could only mean that several countries in the Commonwealth could not accept the decisions of the majority. I need not go into particulars in that regard; I think a number would come to mind immediately, including the question of migration.

Personally ... I was of those who thought it worthwhile to try to achieve the first objective of enabling the views of Prime Ministers to be expressed without sacrificing the principle of non-interference, which is one of the elements of the Commonwealth association. I took the view that notwithstanding the depth of feeling on this racial issue--my views throughout the years and now are a matter of record--I believe it would be wrong and damaging to the spirit and fabric of the Commonwealth partnership if a majority of the Commonwealth governments, finding themselves allied in condemnation of one or more of their number, were to constitute themselves as a court of judgment. I saw, as I said a moment ago, in that trend an end of the association as we know it. The seed of mutual recrimination would threaten the partnership whose essence has always been tolerance, restraint and free co-operation.

... Strong feelings were held in the informal meetings. Men like the President of Pakistan, the Prime Minister of India, of Malaya and of Ghana accepted this view as essential to the preservation and maintenance of our relationship. There was unanimous acceptance of the principle that internal affairs of free states are not to be the subject of formal discussion, and that any action in that regard would damage the strength and ultimately the preservation of the institution itself.

I cannot reveal ... in the tradition of those meetings, the substance of the talks. There were at times bilateral, at times in small groups, and at other times all the representatives took part in an informal and private exchange of views. For my part, I had two lengthy and private personal conversations with Mr. Louw; I participated in other informal

discussions. I left Mr. Louw in no doubt that in Canada there is no sympathy for policies of racial discrimination, on whatever grounds they may be explained, and that such policies are basically incompatible with the multiracial nature of the Commonwealth association. I made it clear to him that the policy of South Africa was a denial of the principal that human dignity and the worth of the individual, whatever his race and colour, must be respected, and that there could be no doubt as to our views in that connection. Indeed, those views are being generally expressed now.

A few weeks ago there were those who felt that what we required was condemnation by various parliaments. I think the events during the days of the Conference were an answer to that contention. Our views, the views of all of us in other parts of the Commonwealth, or most of the people in other parts of the Commonwealth, were set out only a few days ago by the Archbishop of Canterbury when he said:

"But the tragedy is that so far they (South Africa) have seemed to pay little or no regard to the burdens they are imposing on the hearts and consciences and political principles of those who are their brethren in the Commonwealth, in culture, in Christian faith and in common humanity."

Only in the last 24 hours I have received from the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada the declaration of that Church, which represents the views expressed at the 1958 Lambeth Conference:

"The Conference affirms its belief in the natural dignity and value of every man of whatever colour or race as created in the image of God. In the light of this belief the conference affirms that neither race nor colour is in itself a barrier to any aspect of that life in family and community for which God created all men. It therefore condemns discrimination of any kind on the grounds of race or colour alone."

I would be less than frank if I did not say that I cannot report that there was any indication in Mr. Louw's attitude, representing his Government, that he was moved by the arguments or concerned about the force of international opinion. However, he learned the viewpoint, he recognized that of all those present there, no one, in the informal meetings or elsewhere, could give support to racial discrimination in a multi-racial Commonwealth.

It is clear that the issue of racial conflict will continue to pose a fundamental problem for Commonwealth countries and, indeed, for the world community. My hope is that by this

meeting we have assisted in the process of change. The matter was not on the agenda but it was discussed with clarity and frankness; and above all, by those from whom you would have expected the expression of violent opinions, with a dignity, a restraint and a recognition of the tremendous issues at stake that must give heart to all of us as to the meaning of the Commonwealth as such.

International concern has been demonstrated in the United Nations. In the last few days the Secretary-General, Mr. Hammarskjold, has been holding talks in London with Mr. Louw. Whatever the results may be, I am sure they will be aided in their talks by what took place at the Conference. I hope the people of South Africa can work their way out of the dreadful impasse to which they have been brought. I hope their isolation on the continent of Africa will give them thought and a realization of the situation. It was a great South African, Field Marshal Smuts as he subsequently was, who as long ago as December, 1918, reminded us of this fact:

"There is no doubt that mankind is once more on the move. The very foundations have been shaken and loosened and things are again fluid. The tents have been struck and the great caravan of humanity is once more on the march."

He was pointing to the need of new institutions, new ways of thought, new kinds of international behaviour if the world was to avoid the catastrophe of another war. His words were of prophetic application to his own continent.

It was made very clear in the communiqué that racial equality was of the essence. The communiqué had this to say:

"Whilst reaffirming the traditional practice that Commonwealth Conferences do not discuss the internal affairs of member countries, Ministers availed themselves of Mr. Louw's presence in London to have informal discussions with him about the racial situation in South Africa. During the informal discussions Mr. Louw gave information and answered questions on the Union's policies, and the other Ministers conveyed to him their views on the South African problem. The Ministers emphasized that the Commonwealth itself is a multiracial association and expressed the need to ensure good relations between all member states and people of the Commonwealth."

We know the results of the assertion of racial superiority only a few years ago and the effects that followed from it. It is my hope that the South African Government will heed and heed quickly the appeal that was made to it, not only in the communiqué but in personal conversations.

The Government there has been planning to hold a referendum on the question of changing the present status of South Africa from a monarchy to that of a republic. In that regard it was pointed out that the choice between a monarchy and a republic is entirely the responsibility of the nation concerned. Then there are these significant words. I am not going to interpret them, because they require no interpretation; their significance lies in the fact that they were accepted unanimously by all who were there:

"In the event of South Africa deciding to become a republic and if the desire was subsequently expressed to remain a member of the Commonwealth, the meeting suggested that the South African Government should then ask for the consent of the other Commonwealth Governments either at a meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, or, if this were not practicable, by correspondence."

This established clearly that membership in the Commonwealth is not a formality. These words speak for themselves. They make clear that the Prime Ministers were not prepared to give an advance assurance that South Africa might remain a member of the Commonwealth in the event that a decision was made to adopt the status of a republic. Therefore the important point is that if a change of status does take place as a result of the referendum, the consent of the other Commonwealth Governments will be required as a pre-condition of continued membership. Again I emphasize the fact that this was accepted by all.

The attention given to the South African problem, however, should not be allowed to obscure the deliberation which took place on many other subjects. The nature of those deliberations is fairly reflected in the communiqué, but I am going to make a few general references thereto. The multi-racial nature of the Commonwealth was underlined by the admission of Ghana three years ago at the last meeting, by the participation of the Prime Minister of Malaya this year and by the fact that the Federation of Nigeria, with a population of 35 million, will join the family on the 1st of October and that Sierra Leone and other countries with various colours and races will, it is expected, soon be applying for membership.

What has taken place here is a recognition that there is no automatic membership in the Commonwealth, and I believe it is also suggestive of the possibility that the time is not far distant when acceptance by custom rather than by declaration of certain basic principles, including equality of all races, colours and creeds, will be assured. This view is underlined in various editorials to which I could refer. I draw the attention of the House to the fact that Canada's views were known, but the fact that we had not had a resolution placed

Canada's representative in a position to speak to Mr. Low in a way that did not arouse his antagonism. What happened here is well set out in the London Financial Times:

"If the South African Government carries through its plan for making the country into a republic ... "

Important constitutional matters will arise.
It goes on to say:

"More important even than these constitutional considerations is the simple truth expressed by Mr. Diefenbaker last week that a Commonwealth in which the majority of the population is coloured must unequivocally accept racial equality.

"The seriousness of racial problems varies widely from member country to member country. Not all of them have an untarnished record. Yet the position today is that the truth of Mr. Diefenbaker's proposition is accepted in theory at least everywhere in the Western world except in South Africa.. Refusal to accept it would mean losing the struggle against Communism by default."

And so I might go on in that regard. This was an important step forward, and in that connection it is important internationally. We reviewed the international political situation. As to our views on the summit conference, I shall not now refer to them in view of what has taken place today.

There was universal agreement on the importance of developing a general détente in international relations, the urgent need of concluding a broad agreement to end the testing of nuclear weapons, and the desirability of finding avenues of progress in the field of general disarmament. There was an awareness of the growing importance of China in world affairs; and in particular, in order to ensure the implementation of any international agreement on disarmament, the participation of China was recognized as being of first importance.

The meeting was notable also for the growing recognition it gave to the development of the economic needs of the newly independent countries of Africa. I have mentioned already the fact that Nigeria will become a member. I have also referred to the second constitutional decision which arose from the intention of Ghana to introduce a republican form of constitution by July 1. In connection with the decision regarding Ghana's relation to the Commonwealth, the Government of Ghana applied to continue as a member, thus again illustrating the flexible nature of the Commonwealth relationship which permits member countries to remain in free association despite the differences in their forms of government.

As to the economic needs of the emerging nations of Africa, there was a unanimous recognition that a substantial expansion of economic assistance was necessary in order to assist these countries to achieve self-sustaining growth. The greatest remaining under-developed region of the world is Africa, where no special international economic assistance programme has been established and where the flow of investment and aid funds, in comparison with that to other under-developed countries, is disproportionately small. The Prime Minister of Ghana is seriously concerned about this situation. It was agreed that unless measures are quickly taken in this crucial formative period in the history of these new African nations there may very well develop in those nations doubts as to the goodwill of the developed countries of the West, and they may be tempted to look for sympathy and assistance in other directions.

Mention was made of what the Colombo Plan had done. There is no such type of international assistance as yet available in Africa. Consideration is therefore being given to the possibility of co-operative action among members of the Commonwealth in assisting the economic development of countries in Africa which have recently attained or are approaching independence. This matter will be studied by the various Commonwealth governments, and will be examined at the next meeting of the Commonwealth Economic Consultative Council in London.

On behalf of the Government, Canada indicated willingness, subject to Parliament, to participate in such a programme. I cannot at present, however, indicate the scope of the aid programme which may flow from the decisions of the Conference, or offer any forecast of what will be required from Canada.

Then, in connection with the need for technical assistance for the newly independent countries of both Asia and Africa, the Prime Minister of Malaya drew attention to the fact that his Government required the services of persons with specialized skills and experience in the administrative and technical fields. There was general support that everything should be done to foster and encourage exchanges of specialized personnel, and that the question should be taken into consideration by the Commonwealth Economic Consultative Council.

A further subject--and this was one that will become of increasing importance ... was the constitutional development of the Commonwealth. Up to the present time it has been possible to preserve the intimate character of the Prime Minister's meetings. The essence of these meetings is that they are conducted, as I said, in an informal way. No resolutions are moved; no votes are taken. Progress is made by agreement after discussion. However, as the membership of the Commonwealth grows new problems as to how these meetings will be conducted will arise.

One has only to note that at the present rate of accession to the Commonwealth, within a very few years the present membership of 11 will be expanded to 16 or 18. How shall such a wide membership be reconciled with the maintenance of frank, intimate and profitable discussion? What about the size of the gathering? What about the size of the nations? There will be tremendous and fantastic disparities in population, importance and size, India with a population of 450 million and Sierra Leone with 2 million.

The various Commonwealth governments will have to give consideration to such questions as membership, weight by population, the rotation of membership as in the Security Council, regional groupings of nations within the Commonwealth, and representation of such groups. These are some of the problems which will have to receive consideration. I am not indicating any view with regard to them. These are some of the problems that will now have to be examined in the light of the tremendous expansion that is taking place and the number of nations which are joining us.

To those who say there is nothing in the Commonwealth relationship, may I say that it is of interest to note that in all the years the Commonwealth has been in its present form only one nation which attained independence, namely Burma, did not apply for membership. In other words, these nations representing various colours have of their own volition decided to remain with the institution and become active and effective members.

... One other matter I want to refer to is the question of trade. Western Europe represents a very important market for all Commonwealth countries. With the exception of the United Kingdom most of them, like Canada, are important suppliers to Western Europe of agricultural products. It was therefore recognized that it would be a matter of much concern if our competitive access to these markets was impaired in any way by the agricultural policies which may be followed by the European Economic Community. This Community can have a tremendous influence in the direction of world trade, and this is significant for the primary producing countries of the Commonwealth. It was urged that both The Six and The Seven should pursue trade policies that are consistent with their obligations under GATT. In this way Western Europe would be contributing to the general economic well-being of the world, and particularly of the under-developed countries.

Some concern was expressed about the possibility that the plans to create a successor organization for the OEEC might lead to exclusive or restrictive arrangements which would not take into account the interests of countries outside Europe. I explained that while Canada expected to be a full member of the revised organization, we attached great importance to ensuring that its efforts should be directed toward improving multilateral trading conditions and that we did not regard this as in any way an exclusive organization which would be harmful

to the interests of other Commonwealth members. I believe the members of the Commonwealth share our concern that the economic division in Western Europe should not lead or be permitted to lead to political division. It was also recognized, as I saw it, that the United Kingdom should continue to maintain the closest co-operation with the rest of the Commonwealth in developing its own policies with regard to trade with Western Europe.

Now ... to those who have predicted that the Commonwealth was on a slippery slope, I am convinced that it came out of the Conference stronger than ever. It is impossible to convey to the Members of this House the spirit that was apparent in the desire to assure the maintenance of unity without the sacrifice of principle on the part of any of the members. Each of the representatives, in a spirit of understanding, was conscious of and concerned with the welfare of all other members. While re-emphasizing the cardinal principle of the Commonwealth, non-interference in domestic affairs, the multiracial nature and the need for recognition of equality of all races and peoples were recognized. In the informal meetings it was made clear and definite so that no one could misunderstand it.

I mentioned this earlier in another way, and I repeat it. While the Commonwealth has no constitution, the membership and variety in population of the peoples that compose its membership demand the recognition of equality, and I believe the final communiqué made it clear that the recognition of these principles has been achieved in spirit.

As I return I am convinced of one thing. While there were those who were critical of the stand which was being taken, I think, in the light of what has occurred, the course followed was one that has assured the maintenance of the basic principles, and also made possible in the future the achievement of equality and the denial of discrimination. The ominous danger of Commonwealth fission was prevented without the sacrifice of any vital principles by the Prime Ministers and representatives of the various countries. The course of reason, restraint and diplomacy was followed rather than that of judicial action. The various Prime Ministers who felt most strongly against fanatical racialism maintained a self-control and a dignity in the presentation of their arguments which had its effect. I think it may be fairly said that an advance was made in the interracial and multi-racial relationships of the many peoples of the Commonwealth; and while collective action was asked by some before we met, it was asked by none by the time we separated.