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CANADA AND THE COMMONWEALTH

An Address by Mr. A. Ouellet, Parliamentary Secretary to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, March 7, 1971.

The Commonwealth is difficult to define; like many political institutions, it evolved over a long period by the historical process of precedent and convention; it has no written constitution or charter, no continuing executive structure. It is not an international organization like the United Nations, or the Organization of American States, with a structured hierarchy of councils and committees reaching decisions on international political and other issues by formal resolution and majority vote. Also, the Commonwealth is not a military alliance; by virtue of membership, Commonwealth countries assume no obligation to come to the assistance of another member who may suffer attack, though naturally they would be concerned about such a development. The Commonwealth is not a grouping that always acts together to achieve certain economic objectives, though from time to time it may pursue certain goals such as the economic and social development of the poorer members. Commonwealth countries do not have a common tariff or carry on free trade between themselves, though since 1932 some members have given others certain tariff preferences arranged bilaterally. With the passage of time, natural processes of economic growth and development and the postwar liberalization of trade on a multilateral basis, the Commonwealth preference system has become relatively less significant for the more-developed Commonwealth members, though still of major importance for many of the developing members.

Defined in positive terms, and drawing on the recent declaration issued at Singapore, the Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 31 sovereign independent nations, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interests of their peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace. There are members from each of the six continents and from five oceans; the member countries comprise peoples of widely different races, languages, religions and cultures, embracing between a quarter and a third of the world's population. Members have complete freedom to belong to any other grouping, association or alliance or to be non-aligned. They range from poor developing countries to wealthy industrialized nations like Britain, Canada and Australia. With the exception of Britain, they share a common history as former British colonies, which have now become sovereign,

independent nations. At the government level, they still share a common language -- English, though most of them are multilingual plural societies, embracing more than one cultural group. Their administrative systems are broadly similar, owing much to their having been former British colonies, though generally administrative practices and procedures have been adapted to meet local requirements or the peculiar circumstances of their history and culture. Throughout much of the Commonwealth, legal systems are still extensively based on the British common law, though here again there are variations to meet particular circumstances as, for example, in Quebec, where the Civil Code is derived from the French legal system. Also, in many parts of the Commonwealth, particularly among the newer members in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, education still owes much to British influence and tradition, though here again the pattern is changing rapidly.

But perhaps even more important than shared colonial experiences, a common language, similar systems of government administration, law, and education is the strong tradition of consultation and co-operation derived from historical experience, which amounts to a sense of neighbourliness. Indeed, one authority has described the Commonwealth as a "unique experiment in international living". Two thousand years ago, one young Jew asked another: "Who is my neighbour?" The response, instead of a definition, was the story of the Good Samaritan, and the reformulation of the questions into: "Who was more neighbourly?" Throughout the ages, this question has transformed and inspired new patterns of behaviour and institutions. While neighbourhood itself is merely a fact governed by physical location, good-neighbourliness is a moral and political achievement of the highest order. In the present age of rapidly-developing technology and increasing interdependence, where one's acts today may affect one's neighbour's welfare tomorrow, good-neighbourliness is becoming more and more essential.

Canada's Contribution to the Development of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is not, of course, a static organism; it has developed by a slow evolutionary process, which is still going on. What part has Canada played in the development of this unique association?

In my view, Canada's role in this historical process has been more significant than is generally realized. In the interests of a balanced perspective, I should like to recall for you briefly certain important contributions that Canada has made to this on-going evolutionary process. Because some of these developments occurred more than half-a-century ago, they tend to be overlooked.

Canada's first and major contribution to the evolution of the Commonwealth was achieved over the period 1867-1939 as this country gradually came to assume more and more responsibility for foreign policy and for defence. Out of the pressures, strains, persuasion, and dialogue with Britain up to the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of the First World War, and subsequently in the Twenties and Thirties, Canada succeeded in asserting its independence from the Imperial power by a series of agreements and precedents which in turn became the basis for further political development. This process, worked out over seven decades, had tremendous implications. In a very real sense, it set a pattern for political development between Britain and other

parts of the Empire which produced the modern Commonwealth. What I am saying is that the Commonwealth was largely a British-Canadian invention, though I doubt whether the fathers of Confederation foresaw the full implications of the task to which they set their hands in the 1860s and 1870s. At the end of that period, the relation with Britain was not one of resentment, bitterness and misunderstanding but of friendship, mutual respect, co-operation and mutual assistance. This slow historical process also gave rise to one of the deepest continuing elements in the attitude of Canadians to international affairs: the search for and the cherishing of links with countries and peoples beyond our borders, which makes possible progress towards a civilized world in which governments can co-operate for the benefit of their peoples.

What cause this new relation between Britain and Canada to develop? At bottom was the realization of the Fathers of Confederation that this country was not enough in itself; that there were insufficient people, industries, capital and skills to enable the new nation to make it on its own in economic development or to maintain its independence against an unfriendly neighbour. Particularly was this true in North America, where a far stronger and more numerous nation to the south had just come through the Civil War, and was turning its vigorous attention first to reconstruction and then to westward expansion and to dynamic growth. From the outset, Canadians were conscious of a need to maintain links with Europe and other parts of the world; they began to reach out for contacts and associations beyond their borders, to acquire the money and technology, the skills and the human resources, to enable them to survive and grow. In a very real sense, the Commonwealth was a product of the Canadian desire to have it both ways -- to be independent, and at the same time, for political, economic and defence reasons, prudently to continue links with the motherlands across the Atlantic and with countries in other directions.

To quote from a distinguished Canadian intimately connected with the Commonwealth as Secretary-General, Mr. Arnold Smith: "This deep Canadian instinct to reach out for overseas connections and partnership may have begun as a function of sentimental attachment to parent races and of commercial interest in trading relations with Western Europe, and an instinct for self-protection as a relatively small power sharing a continent with a vastly more populous and powerful neighbour. But it has merged with, and by today, I think, has become indistinguishable from, our sense of realism, our recognition of larger interdependence, and our idealism. It is part of our striving, together with idealists and realists in other parts of the globe, for the establishment of one world, for the development of a community that will be global in scale. One expression of this instinct is the Commonwealth."

There have been other Canadian landmarks in the evolution of the Commonwealth. One was the campaign led by the Winnipeg editor Dafoe during the First World War and after resulting in the decisive rejection of legalistic theories about the unity of the Empire for purposes of foreign policy and defence. This enabled Canada and the other Dominions to assert successfully the claim to independent representation at conferences, beginning with Versailles, and to diplomatic representation in foreign countries.

Another crucial development for the Commonwealth was Mr. Nehru's decision that, having become a republic, India -- a non-white, non-European

nation with little emotional feeling for the British Crown -- wished to remain a Commonwealth member. Canada's contribution was the decision of other prime ministers, in which Mr. St. Laurent and Mr. Pearson played a key part, that an independent Asian republic should be allowed, and indeed encouraged, to remain a member of the Commonwealth when all those involved desired it. Twenty-two years later, a majority of the Commonwealth members are republics (16 out of 31) and at least one other member (Ceylon) has publicly announced its intention to become a republic this year.

Another key stage in Commonwealth evolution was the firm stand taken during the Sixties on the principle of racial equality. First prominent in 1961 at the time of South Africa's withdrawal, the non-racist character of the Commonwealth was explicitly reaffirmed in the communiqué of the 1964 prime ministers' conference and assumes a prominent place in the declaration adopted by the heads of government at the recent meeting in Singapore. Canadian leaders took a leading part on each of these occasions.

Why Commonwealth of Continuing Importance to Canada

In its review of foreign policy, the Government set for itself certain basic national aims. These are described in *Foreign Policy for Canadians* as embracing three essential ideas:

- (1) That Canada will continue secure as an independent political entity;
- (2) that Canada and all Canadians will enjoy enlarging prosperity in the widest possible sense;
- (3) that all Canadians will see in the life they have and the contribution they make to humanity something worth while preserving in identity and purpose.

It seems to me that, in particular, the first and third of these national objectives are directly served through Canada's continued and active participation in the Commonwealth. The movement towards a larger, more cohesive, political-economic community in Western Europe raises the possibility of polarization in other parts of the world, including our own continent. If Canada is to achieve its national objectives, it can best do so in an open world environment. Canada has traditionally looked to links overseas for countervailing forces to offset the attractions of our friendly and powerful southern neighbour. One result, as explained above, was to foster an almost instinctive Canadian tendency to develop and maintain links with friends overseas. Today, ways of thinking developed a century ago still appear relevant to the national goals of maintaining national unity, sovereignty and independence. Friendly contacts and the long tradition of political consultation elaborated within the Commonwealth are still relevant today to the search for peace and security. And, through such institutions as the United Nations, la Francophonie and the Commonwealth, Canadians can contribute both at the level of government and individually to the solution of major international issues such as racial discrimination and race conflict, economic disparities, changing patterns of trade, environmental pollution and population. By so doing, they help in a very direct sense to promote social justice, and to enhance the quality of life, not only for themselves but for less-fortunate peoples elsewhere.

Singapore Conference

The meeting of Commonwealth heads of government in Singapore in January illustrated both the strength and the limitations of the Commonwealth relation. From the Canadian viewpoint, the conference was reasonably successful. Fears entertained beforehand that the meeting might witness the disintegration of the association over the emotionally-charged issue of projected British arms sales to South Africa were not realized. Suggestions before the conference that Britain should be expelled from the Commonwealth, or that several members led by the East Africans might walk out, similarly came to nothing. Instead, Commonwealth leaders took full advantage of the unique opportunity afforded them by such meetings, for face-to-face consultation on major issues of common interest to many or all of them -- in this case, a current political issue that for some had assumed crisis proportions. Together with the Secretary-General, the leaders of the 31 delegations met, without advisers, for two full working days. They discussed the arms-sale issue in all its ramifications, probing the divergent positions, attempting to view the problem as a whole and in the broadest perspective.

The issue was not resolved at Singapore. Nor does it now seem likely to be resolved by the device adopted there as a means of pursuing efforts to find a solution -- the establishment of a study group of eight Commonwealth members. This body, including Canada, was to examine all factors affecting the security of trade-routes in the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans, and to report through the Secretary-General to member governments. The group had not held its first meeting when Britain, late in February, announced its intention to proceed with the sale to South Africa of seven *Wasp* helicopters, in fulfilment of what it considered legal obligations under agreements dating from 1955 about the naval base at Simonstown. This British decision, it should be noted, was in conformity with the position maintained by Prime Minister Heath during the Singapore discussions, where he insisted on the British Government's freedom to adopt and implement policies which it judged to be in Britain's best interests. Nevertheless, the British Government's announcement has been followed by the withdrawal of Nigeria, India and Malaysia from the study group; and it now appears that the body will never meet.

Has the Commonwealth then failed a critical test on this issue? To conclude thus would, I believe, reflect a serious misconception of what the organization is about, and a lack of realism about its capacities. It is not, and does not aspire to be, a policy-making assembly for its membership. It does not seek to impose upon them unanimity of approach to international issues. But in an association embracing such diversity, what is achieved should not be underrated.

However much some member governments may have wished to see Britain persuaded at Singapore to abandon its intention to sell arms to South Africa, they were able, without having achieved that keenly-sought objective, to conclude the gathering in amity. Despite the intensity of feeling on the arms-sale issue, it was accepted by all Commonwealth leaders at Singapore that, in the final analysis, the British Government must be the judge of what course Britain might best follow. It is equally true, of course, that other Commonwealth governments are free to determine their own responses.

Those lengthy discussions at Singapore were valuable too, I confidently believe, in other and broader respects, which transcend organizational considerations. The searching examination at Singapore of the arms-sale question led Commonwealth leaders to look at Southern African problems in broader perspective, and in relation to a longer time-span. The debate there also helped to focus world attention on the explosive situation in the region, which could have such serious consequences for race relations everywhere, and for world peace. If the Singapore meeting thus has contributed, in however modest measure, to the forestalling of a violent confrontation in Southern Africa, another Vietnam or Middle East situation, it will, I suggest, have demonstrated once again the value of the Commonwealth as a vehicle for top-level political consultation.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the Commonwealth in coping with potentially divisive political issues, we should not overlook the solid work carried on without comparable fanfare in its councils. A substantive achievement of the Singapore conference was agreement on a Commonwealth declaration -- the Singapore Declaration -- setting out the principles on which the Commonwealth operates, and listing certain goals and objectives held by member governments and the people they represent. The main objectives set out in the Declaration are:

- (a) Support for the UN; enhancing its ability to remove causes of tension and strengthening its influence for peace in the belief that international peace and order are essential to the security and prosperity of mankind;
- (b) individual liberty; equality of rights for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief, and their right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which they live; the promotion of representative institutions and guarantees for personal freedom under law;
- (c) recognition of racial prejudice and racial discrimination as evils which must be combated; opposition to colonial domination and racial oppression; the fostering of human equality and dignity;
- (d) progressive removal of wide disparities of wealth which create world tension; measures to help overcome poverty, ignorance and disease and to create better living standards; the freest possible flow of trade on fair and equitable terms; the provision of adequate resources for developing countries in a spirit of partnership to help establish conditions which are conducive to sustained investment and growth;
- (e) international co-operation to remove causes of war, promote tolerance, combat injustice and foster development among the world's peoples.

The Declaration is not a charter or constitution. It is a statement of principles and objectives and nothing more. It defines Commonwealth aims in the world of today and provides a useful set of guidelines for the Seventies. It was sponsored by President Kaunda of Zambia with strong support from President

Nyerere of Tanzania, their aim being a document which they could use to help persuade their peoples that the Commonwealth was not British colonialism in another form but a voluntary association of sovereign independent nations operating on certain accepted principles and with certain common objectives.

Yet a third accomplishment in further broadening the scope and extent of effective functional co-operation within the Commonwealth was the agreement to establish on a multilateral basis the existing Commonwealth Program for Technical Co-operation. This will be financed by a multilateral fund to be administered by the Secretariat on behalf of Commonwealth members. Canada announced that it would contribute the lesser of 40 per cent of the total or \$350,000 each year for three years to the expanded technical co-operation program. Depending on the program's success and the support given by other members, we should be prepared to contribute additional funds on condition that the Canadian share of the total program did not exceed 40 per cent. Substantial pledges were also announced by Britain and by Singapore and by a number of other members. During the final day, heads of government also agreed to a modest information program, and approved reasonable expansion of the activities of the Commonwealth Foundation established five years ago to promote contacts and exchanges between professional and technical associations of member countries at the non-governmental level. Modest progress was also registered in the area of education and youth exchanges.

The Singapore conference provided clear evidence that members still find it in their mutual interest to continue the Commonwealth association. In his report to Parliament following the 1969 Commonwealth conference, Prime Minister Trudeau pointed out that the greatest strength of the Commonwealth is the opportunity it provides on a regular basis for men of goodwill to sit down together and to discuss with one another the problems which affect them and the 850 million people whom they represent. Both in plenary session and in the many bilateral meetings, Commonwealth leaders can talk about their problems and their hopes for the future and can learn from the wisdom and experience of others. The heads-of-government conference is a forum for men who are as different as God has made them. It is a meeting-place where people are able to demonstrate the advantages of dissimilarity, the richness of diversity, and the excitement of variety. It provides a means for meeting the aspirations of men in the twentieth century to live in societies where tolerance and equality are realities. Human inequality is a political fact of great potency. The most effective means of reducing the explosive potential of discrimination is to meet other persons as political equals, and to assist them toward economic equality.

On his return from the Singapore conference, the Prime Minister stated in Parliament that: "Canada could get along without the Commonwealth, but it could not get along nearly so well.... 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 a major contributor to the enrichment of human relations."