

## **THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

*From the Roy Milne Memorial Lecture given at Adelaide on 26 June 1950*

In considering whether our sincere support for the United Nations, its Charter and its agencies, renders the British Commonwealth association less significant, it is as well to look back for a moment.

At the end of the First World War the League of Nations was devised as a means for keeping the peace. It failed. There were many reasons for this; one deserves special mention. Whenever the strain came on, as in the case of Abyssinia, the League of Nations failed because, though its paper obligations were vast, its real resources were practically non-existent. It was established upon the basis of contract between independent sovereignties. But the truth is that the only effectiveness which an international contract possesses is either that which arises from the goodwill or sense of honest obligation of the contracting parties, or that which can be physically enforced. And the means of physical enforcement are to be found only in the strength of those parties against whose will the contract has been broken.

I believe that it is clear that in the few years before the second war an almost fatal illusion about the strength of the League of Nations was permeating the democratic mind. At the same time the so-called intellectuals of the world began to insert into the heads of too many people an utterly false dichotomy. 'Are you for power politics?' they said, 'or are you for collective security?' When some realistic person spoke up for armaments behind the Covenant he was promptly told that the talk must be of disarmament, and that those who spoke otherwise were mere war-mongers. Yet the truth was that an unarmed League of Nations was not only impotent against but also in invitation to an armed aggressor.

Once again, at the end of the Second World War, there was and is a powerful world feeling against its repetition and an earnest desire to find some effective instrument of peace. An attempt to forge such an instrument was made at San Francisco. Remembering the powerlessness of the League of Nations in grave affairs, the draftsmen at San Francisco determined that in the new Charter the United Nations should, as one advocate said, be given 'teeth'. Accordingly they inserted Article 43 of the Charter, under which all member of the United Nations undertake to make available to the Security Council, on its call and in accordance with a special agreement or agreements, armed forces and other facilities for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security. This, it will be seen, amounts to no more than a 'contract to make a contract', and in fact no steps have yet been taken under it.\* It remains to be seen whether member nations will in fact stand up to this potential obligation if the circumstances at any given moment render it politically unpalatable. The real difficulty about a provision of this kind, to give armed force to the United Nations, is that the membership is so extensive, and the obligations which may be incurred can therefore vary so greatly in both time and place, that it will be in very many instances difficult or even impossible to arouse effective national support for the international action planned. It is quite true that, with a clear realization of this defect, the Western European powers and the United States of America have more recently shown both imagination and realism by formulating the Atlantic Pact and arranging defensive co-operation in Western Europe.\*\*

\*This must now be read subject to the action taken in Korea

\*\*More recently, we have the South East Asia Treaty Organization

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But, though such arrangements are usually described as 'regional arrangements within the structure of the Charter', they can be much more accurately described as groupings of power by a limited number of nations for mutual defensive purposes.

In brief, they are a recognition of the inadequacy of the machinery provided by the Charter.

Let me turn to another aspect of this vitally important problem.

It is conceded, even by those who are most willing to claim that the Security Council has great achievements to its credit, that it has been heavily crippled by the existence and misuse of the veto; that is, the provision in Article 27 of the Charter which says that decisions of the Security Council on non-procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of seven members, including the concurring votes of the permanent members – one of which is, of course, the Soviet Union. But I feel strongly that, while there is not doubt that this veto power has been abused, it is a blunder to think of this abuse as something which is merely related to an Article in the Charter or which could be simply remedied by an alteration in the language of the Charter. If there were no veto provision in the Charter at all, there would still be one in fact.

Let us suppose that the Security Council met, with a plain provision for a majority decision, whatever the subject might be. And let us suppose that, upon a matter of grave international importance which might lead to war, most of the members of the Security Council were inclined to make a decision and to authorize or institute measures of enforcement in support of it. Would they be disposed to carry the matter to a vote and therefore to action if, say, the Soviet Union were in opposition?

If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then it represents a notable advance. But at the same time it must be pointed out that under such circumstances the forces to be employed would be the national forces of the great powers concerned, and not the international force of the United Nations, for no such force is yet available – or even in distant sight.

I find it very difficult to believe that the great powers (and, after all, the small ones have little to say to this question of enforcement) are as yet within measurable distance of entering into an arrangement under which any one of them may be declared at fault by the others and forced into a course of action contrary to its own will.\*

This of course is basically the reason why the great powers insisted upon the veto provisions as a condition of their participating in the Charter.

We will do better to think of the veto problem as evidence of the continued existence of a strong nationalist state of mind than as some defect in a written document.

It may be that the day will come when all the nations of the world, meeting in a General Assembly of the United Nations, will elect and control a Security Council as an executive; will act upon the decisions of that Council; will accept a body of International Law with that substantial obedience which we now accord to the law in our own lands; will have alleged

\*The withdrawal of Great Britain and France from Egypt in 1956 may be regarded as qualifying this proposition to some extent

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breaches of that law adjudicated upon the permanent Court; and will treat as commonplace the enforcement of the Court's decision by the international policeman.

In that state of the world, aggressive and independent nationalism will have come to an end; national sovereignties will have subsided into world citizenships; and national groupings of whatever kind will be both antiquated and irrelevant.

But that day is not yet, nor, if we are able to be frank with ourselves, can we pretend that we even see it approaching.

It can be said with confidence that in the last few years we have seen powerful nationalistic movements in many countries which were previously content to be dependent or controlled.

Thus, in the brief period that has elapsed since the cessation of fighting we have seen India and Pakistan come into an independent existence, with a great and at times violent upsurge of national and racial feeling; we have seen a similar development in Burma; we in Australia have been the witnesses of a similar movement conducted for the formation of an Indonesian Republic. All over the world there is a stirring among races and peoples.

So far from that stirring representing an agitation to create an international state, to reduce national sovereignty, and to accept the authority of international bodies, it has represented nothing so much as an old-fashioned – though newly expressed – determination to insist upon the prerogative of each race and community to govern its own affairs and, where necessary, to throw off the yoke of the foreigner.

Let us now turn to consider whether the United Nations, representing a lofty idealism on the part of many of its creators, but handicapped and limited as it is by the other matters to which I have referred, reduces in any way the urgent importance of the British Commonwealth to British people.

Perhaps it will aid clarity of thought and expression on this urgent matter if I set out what appear to me to be two convincing reasons why the British Commonwealth must remain our first preoccupation:

(1) I have already discussed the vexed question of the veto on the Security Council and of the striking limitation which it imposes upon either the need or the capacity of the United Nations to maintain substantial international military forces.

The stark result of these considerations can be set down in a few sentences.

History has shown that great wars which threaten mankind are wars which involve great powers. If a great power is once again to assume the role of aggressor, an international law-breaker, resistance to that power must be provided by the strength of some other great power or powers.

As that resistance cannot, by reason of the Charter, be organized or controlled by the Security Council, it must be organized or controlled *outside the Council*. In other words, the matter must go as though there were no United Nations at all. This being so, a strong, well-knit, and

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well-armed British Commonwealth is just as essential today as far-seeing men believed it was in 1938.

(2) The San Francisco Conference deliberately separated the United Nations from the Peace Settlements necessary to liquidate the world war.

If I may quote Dr Evatt's words:

The Charter was designed to create an international organization which could maintain peace in the future; not an organization to finish off the war or to make the Peace Settlements.

This enormously important consideration has been overlooked, not only by some extravagant critics of the United Nations, but also by most of its more extravagant champions. There has been a widespread disposition to say that the United Nations has failed because, for example, in Europe the just settlement of the problems of Germany has not yet really been approached.

I point out that while there are grave defects in the United Nations' conception and structure, the blame for the state of affairs in Europe and in East Asia cannot properly be attached to it.

The extravagant friends of the United Nations have themselves contributed to this misapprehension by their single-minded attempts to concentrate public interest upon the doings of the United Nations as if it were the one instrument for the pacification of the world and as if we therefore owed to it our first thought and presumably our first loyalty.

The simple truth is that if the Peace Settlements are not the function of the United Nations, those Settlements must be negotiated and achieved *outside the United Nations*. This in turn means that the Settlement of Europe must be a matter between the victorious belligerents on the one hand (*all* of them, not some of them!) and the defeated powers on the other.

Once we rid our minds of the rather confused notion that the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations has something to do with the resettlement of Europe, we will see much more vividly the elementary truth that such settlement cannot be achieved with the speed or justice which it merits unless both the United States and the British Commonwealth are able to go into negotiations with the maximum of strength and authority.

It is useless to think that we solve problems by ignoring them. If the British Commonwealth is to be regarded merely as a series of separate even if respectable fragments, then inevitably the settlement of Europe will tend to become a contest between the Soviet Union on the one hand and the United States on the other, with the European powers little more than pawns in the game, and with Great Britain acting more or less precariously as an intermediary.

But if the Commonwealth countries co-operate, then they can not only alter the character of the contest, but can make an immense contribution to European peace.

It is, I believe, essential to the welfare of Europe and therefore of mankind that the British voice in the European Settlement should be both strong and clear. For if the United Kingdom is to speak only for itself, if it is to go to the conference table weakened to that extent, absorbed by the domestic problems of its own economic crisis, it will suffer inevitably from

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what Kipling called 'the webbed and inward-turning eye', and what should be a settlement will tend to become an old-fashioned bilateral contest between the Communist autocracy of Russia and the democratic Capitalism of the United States.

I would not be thought to deprecate in any way the immense interest and the crucial importance of the United States in these matters. That amazing country has twice in our lifetimes come to the rescue of freedom in Europe and therefore has, in relation to Europe, a vital interest and a noble mission. But she is not a European country in the sense that France is, or in the sense that the United Kingdom is. Britain, steeped in European history and politics, wise and experienced over the centuries, can contribute, as perhaps no other power can, to a just settlement.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that there will be a good and lasting European settlement without a vital and powerful contribution from her. If that contribution is to be made, it is quite clear that there must be the maximum integration of Commonwealth effort, so that not only may her internal economic problems be relieved but her strength in the Council Chamber undoubted.

But it is still clear that a closely-knit British Commonwealth, though it will have great strength, cannot for very long stand alone. This simple but cogent truth has been demonstrated in both of the great wars in this century. We must therefore consider what is our greatest practical international problem, that of our relations with the United States. We do badly to think this problem is a simple one. There are those who seem to feel that America's colossal unitary strength makes British Commonwealth corporate strength less important.

'The centre of gravity of democracy', they say, 'has moved West. Let us accordingly rearrange not only our policies but our point of view. Great Britain is vulnerable and economically hard-pressed. Canada is in the American orbit. South Africa is troubled and internally uneasy. The new nations of the Indian sub-continent are moving away from us. We are on the defensive in South-East Asia. Australia and New Zealand are isolated and not rich in numbers. Let us be realistic, think less of our old associations and move as far as possible into the American hemisphere.' That is one view, not without some currency. It is in my opinion a pessimistic and distorted, and, therefore, unreal view.

To me it seems fantastic to suppose that a British Commonwealth which has performed such prodigies twice in the last two generations should be so casually discarded as worn-out or purposeless. It is perhaps not an inappropriate occasion to say that, in the two great testing periods of this century, the British family of nations has demonstrated its strength and its vitality, not its weakness or its decadence.

A second view goes to the other extreme. It has been unconsciously influenced by the subtle and pervasive Communist propaganda about 'American Imperialism'. It says in effect that we should avoid American involvement and retain our character as a third power, independently placed, taking no sides hastily, acting as the honest broker in the disputes between the totalitarian East and the democratic West. This view, which I have encountered in some places, is a form of isolationism which has no relation to modern international life. The truth, as I see it, can be put into a few sentences. We, the British peoples of the world, need the Americans. The Americans need us. America has on two historic occasions learned

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that the peace of the world is not divisible. On two occasions, in a war which many of her people thought no business of theirs, she has become a belligerent and has in the final result weighed down the scales in favour of freedom. It is, therefore, idle to say to any enlightened American that what happens in Europe is no concern of his, or that what happens to Australia or New Zealand is no concern of his. He knows that predominant power means predominant responsibility. He knows that the overthrow of Great Britain would mean domination of Europe by the common enemy and would lead to an American isolation, not merely ominous, but disastrous for the American people. He therefore knows that Great Britain is a bastion of liberty, and Western Europe the frontier in any crucial fight. I do not for one moment believe that any responsible American leader wants to have a weak Great Britain or a weak British Commonwealth. The best support for this view is to be found in the magnificent post-war battle by the United States through Marshall Aid and other means, for the restoration of the other Western democracies and for the drawing of a clear line against Imperialist aggression.

Correspondingly, it is impossible to believe that there is among our own people any jealousy or resentment of America's activities. After all, America has not become our friend and defender simply for love of the countries we inhabit. On the contrary, she knows that, in the most real sense, we are the same kind of people, with the same ideas, with the same ideals, with the same high faith, with the same basic belief that governments exist for the people, that they are the servants and not the masters. It is a tragedy that the world should be divided at all; but if it is, we may at least be comforted by the recollection that it is divided between those who believe in the spirit and significance of man and those who believe in power for its own sake.

It follows from all this that the American and the British people have strong bonds not only of common interest but of common spiritual values. The case for our co-operation is therefore complete. That there is much work to be done before we arrive at a complete mutual understanding nobody can doubt. The special arrangement between the British peoples which found their expression in the Ottawa Agreements may sometimes seem to the American citizen to represent a policy of exclusion and almost of superiority. Yet we know that such arrangements were designed merely to develop our internal strength and give expression to our belief that prosperity within the British family must tend to reflect itself in prosperity for the rest of the world. We, in our turn, must recognize that our British Commonwealth policies should not be pursued in such a fashion as to give rise to a feeling that we regard America as a potential enemy, either economic or military. Enmity between the British Commonwealth and the United States would indeed be disastrous to the freedom of man. While we preserve our British character, therefore, we must be assiduous in the task of establishing not only understanding but co-operation with the United States. We need each other.

This may all be well illustrated by reference to the current movement for Western European unity, in which Great Britain must obviously play so great a part.

When I was last in the United States a little more than eighteen months ago, I encountered a disposition in some quarters to think that Great Britain must make her choice between her own Commonwealth and Western European union. This seemed and seems to me to be a false choice. It seems to assume that the British Dominions have no vital concern with Europe, and that Great Britain herself, therefore, is in the classical position of saying, 'How happy could I be with either, were t'other fair charmer away.' But once it is understood that

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we of the King's Dominions have an interest in Europe, out of which the two great wars of our history have come, it becomes clear that the real task is not to make a choice but to make reconciliation. That Great Britain, now that the old days of keeping the balance of power in Europe have gone, should accept direct and primary European responsibilities is inevitable. The practical task of statesmanship is to see that whatever she does in that sphere should be done not only in consultation with the other British countries but with their co-operation. Provided consultation exists not only on the highest level but with the most complete permanent means of mutual exchange on facts and view, there is no reason why British participation in Western European stability should not be in the widest and best sense of the term 'British' and not merely that of the United Kingdom.

The wider the interest, the wider should be the co-operation; the more vital the interest, the more vital should be the participation of all concerned. I for one am confident that with sensible and sensitive statesmanship the United States, the United Kingdom, and all the British Commonwealth countries will find themselves working together and, if necessary, fighting together to preserve freedom in a world which knows so much about it in theory and in so many places practises it so little.

Let me return, in conclusion, to the nature of the British Commonwealth. It is more than a group of friendly powers. It is more than a series of concerted economic interests. It is and must be a living thing – not a corpse under the knives of constitutional dissectors.

It would be the tragedy of our history if what began as a splendid adventure and grew into a proud brotherhood should end up as a lawyer's exercise. When the Commonwealth ceases to be an inner feeling as well as an external association, virtue will have gone out of it.

In every war the fires of patriotism burn high. After every victory they seem to dwindle and smoulder. Sometimes they seem dead. True sentiment becomes condemned as mere sentimentality, and we become the victims of a curious reluctance to show abroad our love for and our pride in the land of our birth and those other lands to which our fathers of old went with light and liberty. Yet we have much matter for honest pride. When we suddenly realize that a great country like India has at a stroke achieved Parliamentary self-government as a Republic, let us waste no time in melancholy yearnings after the past.

Let us, on the contrary, remember that Parliamentary government, democratic public administration, the rule of law, the justice of right and not of privilege, were our peculiar British gifts to India. That the people of India should have proved apt pupils is no matter for regret; it was, on the contrary, the end purpose of our presence. I would like to be able to say to all the British people of the world, if they cared to listen to so small a voice, that our true brotherhood must be a matter of feeling and not merely a matter of thought; no vain glory, no arrogant sense of power, no jingoism, but an unquenchable sense of common destiny and common duty and common instinct. To many people the British Commonwealth is a curious machine that has worked; looking to the outsider rather like a Heath Robinson invention; but relied upon by mankind twice during this century, to their great deliverance. But what does it mean to you? I think I know what it means to me. May I break through our usual polite reticences and tell you?

To me it means (and here you will find a curious jumble in both time and place) a cottage in the wheat lands of the North-West of the State of Victoria, with the Bible and Henry

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Drummond and Jerome K. Jerome and *The Scottish Chiefs* and Burns on the shelves. It means the cool green waters of the Coln as they glide past the church at Fairford; the long sweep of the Wye Valley above Tintern, with a Wordsworth in my pocket; looking north across the dim Northumbrian moors from the Roman Wall, with the rowan trees on the slope before me, and two thousand years of history behind; old colour and light and soaring stone in York Minster. It means King George and Queen Mary coming to their Jubilee in Westminster Hall as Big Ben chimed out and Lords and Commons bowed, and, as they bowed, saw beyond the form of things to a man and a woman greatly loved. It means Chequers, and, from the crest beyond, that microcosm of history in which you may, with one sweeping glance, see the marks of British trenches, the 'Roman Road to Wendover', the broad Oxford plains, and (by the merest twist) the plumed figure of John Hampden walking through the fields to the church whose spire is just to be seen, at Great Kimble, to address the gentlemen of Buckinghamshire on Shipmoney. It means, at Chequers, Winston Churchill, courage and confidence radiating from him, the authentic note of the British lion in his voice, the listening world marvelling at how such triumph could be built upon such disaster. It means the Royal Mile at Edinburgh, and a toast from kilted clansmen in the Valley of the Tay, and a sudden cold wind as I came one day up from a Yorkshire dale. It means laughter in Lancashire, Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge. It means Australian boys in tired but triumphant groups at Tobruk and Benghazi; Cunningham at Alexandria, with his flashing blue eyes, talking to me of the Australian, Waller; Australian airmen in Canada, in Great Britain, all over the world. It means, at Canberra, at Wellington, at Ottawa, at Cape Town, the men of Parliament meeting as those met at Westminster seven hundred years ago; at Melbourne the lawyers practising the Common Law first forged at Westminster. It means Hammond at Sydney, and Bradman at Lords, and McCabe at Trent Bridge, with the ghosts of Grace and Trumble looking on. It means a tang in the air; a touch of salt on the lips; a little pulse that beats and shall beat; a decent pride; the sense of a continuing city. It means the past ever rising in its strength to forge the future.

Is all this madness? Should I have said, as clever, modern men are wont to do, that the British Commonwealth means an integral association of free and equal nations, whose mutual rights and obligations you will find set out in the Balfour Formula, and the Statute of Westminster and later documents? Or should I have watered it down, as some would have us do and define it in terms of friendship, or alliance, or pact, as if we were discussing an Anglo-Portuguese treaty?

A plague take such notions. Unless the Commonwealth is to British people all over the world a spirit, a proud memory, a confident prayer, courage for the future, it is nothing.

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles  
And see the great Achilles, whom we know.  
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.