

THE EVER CHANGING COMMONWEALTH

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When I was a schoolboy, I read, learned, and inwardly digested a British history which ended, forty years before, in 1867. This created in me an idea (still prevalent in many minds) that history is something written about the past. It has taken a concentrated adult experience to teach me that history is always in the making, that Winston Churchill probably made more history than he has ever written and that, in fact, we have in the last forty years lived with more revolutions than the world produced in its previous three hundred years.

What we call the British Empire, with pride and without apology forty years ago, has had its full share of changing history. Its changes, as I will seek to show, have been much more than those of name. With the decline of the Imperial idea (a topic to which I shall return) 'Colonialism' has come under attack. This process has, for me, some curious aspects. I would have thought it clear, in the case Great Britain at least, that the establishment of a Colonial Empire was one of its great contributions in the nineteenth century to the material expansion of the world. The growth through Colonialism to self-government, a self-government carrying with it the great and peculiar British elements of responsible government and the supremacy of the law, makes an inspiring record. In short, though it might be the fashion to accuse Colonialism of being disreputable, it must be conceded by at least half a dozen new nations that it has had most legitimate children.

It may be, of course, that the word 'colonialism' is today used as describing European domination of non-European countries of people against their will. To the extent that this is a definition of the term, no British person will argue about it, since the development of self-government in accordance with the will of the Colonial peoples has always been our ultimate goal. However, I offer a mild warning against a too-ready acceptance of slogans. As one who was born in the Colony of Victoria and who has lived to be the Prime Minister of the Australian Commonwealth, I feel no urge to denounce our 'colonial' days or to express pious regret for the British peoples having been, between them all, a great Imperial Power.

So far this reads like a sort of sentimental prologue. I now want to put and endeavour to answer three questions.

- (1) What was the nature of the 'old' Commonwealth?
- (2) What is the nature of the present Commonwealth?
- (3) What of the future?

My readers may, on the threshold, challenge the use of the expression 'old' Commonwealth. 'Why,' they may say, 'the expression "Commonwealth" came into use only thirty years ago in the Balfour formula. Surely in the face of history, here is still something new.'

But even a brief consideration will show that the Balfour Commonwealth has, in a few years, changed in such vital particulars that it is now outmoded and must be described as 'old'. The 1926 formula, when it defined the status of the Dominions as that of 'autonomous communities', 'in now way subordinate one to another', also used three expressions of great cohesive significance. They were – 'within the British Empire', 'a common allegiance to the Crown', and 'British Commonwealth of Nations'.

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To put it another way, the formula, having established to the satisfaction of the individual British nations that their juristic independence was unchallenged and unchallengeable, went on, in the spirit of sturdy realism, to dwell on the matters which held those independent nations together. What did these uniting phrases mean? Clearly they did not mean that the British Empire had come to an end; they meant that, at the hard core of that Empire, there was a group of self-governing nations, freely associated but structurally bonded together by a common allegiance to a common Crown. In brief, the whole design possessed an integral character. It was not envisaged as a loose and friendly but purely functional association. The notion of the Crown and a common allegiance ran through it like a rod of steel, creating unity out of diversity. The Sovereign was the head of each member State for all purposes, internal and external. In a sentence, the then 'new' Commonwealth of the 1926 formula was a 'Crown' Commonwealth, through and through.

Whether it was wise to try to reduce the tacit and instinctive to explicit terms is a matter for debate. I know that the creation of a formula is now regarded as the essence of statesmanship. Yet the whole historical genius of our race is against it. The draftsmen of the Code Napoleon were intellectually at the poles from the creators of the English Common Law.

One of the great current difficulties of creating a happy, mutual understanding between the British and the other great Powers arises from the fact that our intellectual tradition is inductive – trial, error, trial, success, a precedent – so that we sometimes appear to the onlooker to have no principles; while deductive minds elsewhere sometimes seem to us to be so occupied by pure syllogisms that common sense and human values seem to disappear. Perhaps it was because of our instinctive reluctance to write things down that the Balfour formula, which seemed in the first enthusiasm to solve everything, ended up by leaving most things unsolved.

If, for example, there was one common Crown to which a common allegiance was owed, and the Crown made peace or war, could there be, in a British war, a neutral British nation? I never could see it myself, though the opposite view was not uncommonly held by highly competent authorities. I always found the idea of neutrality quite puzzling. Could the Crown be at one and the same time at peace and at war with one foreign nation? Could the British Commonwealth survive the stresses and strains of completely independent Dominion foreign policies?

To take the matter further, could you have utter and unqualified independence in a world in which the interdependence of friendly powers is their only guarantee for the future? How far did independence extend under the Balfour formula? If the member-States of the British Commonwealth were to be equal in all things, did not this mean that each might legislate for the succession of the Crown differently, so that the Crown would cease to be 'common' and what had been a common allegiance to it divided and destroyed? In the result, the answers to those questions have to an extent been avoided by those later developments which, as I will endeavour to show, have outmoded the 'old' Commonwealth in a few brief decades.

We now have a Commonwealth divided in structure though still associated in function. It demands study and understanding. Some of the changes have arisen by formula, others by the far-reaching wear and tear of modern circumstances. One of the great psychological factors has been that the word 'Empire' has, in itself, lost its respectability. There is still an Empire,

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but one must not speak about it. This strange fact represents one of the remarkable paradoxes of our times. For the truth is that the Communist Powers, while practising aggressive Imperialism on the grand scale and with astonishing success, have in non-Communist and free countries succeeded in making peaceful Imperialism disreputable. But the greatest changes that have occurred to produce the new Commonwealth have been in the structural significance of the Crown, which means, in effect, the structural existence of the Commonwealth.

What do I mean by the 'structural' significance of the Crown, a significance of such overwhelming importance between 1926 and the Indian Republic formula of 1948? I will illustrate it by reference to my own country. The Crown was and, I am happy to say, is an essential ingredient in Australian Government and life. Our Acts of Parliament are made by 'The Queen's Most Excellent Majesty, the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Australia'; the Governor-General is the Queen's personal representative; the Queen's writs issue from our Courts; I am Her Majesty's Prime Minister of Australia; Dr Evatt is the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition.

Up to 1948, this was true in every member nation of the Commonwealth. It was a Crown Commonwealth. The Sovereign was the head of the State for all purposes, external and internal; the great 'common' element of unity. The subjecthood of the individual citizen, whether Indian, Canadian, or Australian, did not connote subservience or any derogation from liberty, but was, in fact, a proud guarantee that individual liberties to choose, speak, share in Government, would be sustained by a common membership of a great association of free peoples, all of the 'the King's men'. True, we were also held together by common interests, in some cases by common race, in many cases by a common intellectual and spiritual inheritance. But all these things we had and have in common with some great nations outside the Commonwealth. It was the Crown, our relation to it, our high feelings about it, its legal significance going so far beyond the mere techniques of the law, which gave its special character to the British Commonwealth which Balfour and his associates set out to define thirty years ago.

The year 1948 saw a momentous change. India became a republic, but remained a member of the Commonwealth. The Crown ceased to have significance inside India; for external purposes India recognized the King as 'the head of the Commonwealth'. Clearly the 'new' Commonwealth had emerged. Superficially, it may look like the old one, but in reality we no longer have a Commonwealth fully integrated on the basis of the Crown. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that we have now a Crown Commonwealth within a total Commonwealth. The relations between Australia and Great Britain, for example, and between Australians and Her Majesty the Queen are precisely the same as they ever were.

But the relations between India or Pakistan and the United Kingdom are different, for the Crown has, for local purposes in those countries, disappeared. That the Queen remains the head of the Commonwealth is no doubt important. But a new name for a new office doesn't assure the continuance of the significance of the Crown. On the contrary, it draws sharp attention to the fact that there is a world of difference between Australia's relationship to the Throne and that of India.

During these last few years, other things have occurred to hasten this fundamental change. I would, for example, find it an astonishing thought that Australia or New Zealand should put forward and practise a policy of neutrality. Yet, my friend Mr Nehru, speaking with his

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unique knowledge of his own people and out of his great personal eminence, has made it quite clear that for India neutrality has become almost an article of faith.

There is no great point in all this, except that the new Commonwealth is internally anomalous. What we have to do is not to dwell on the anomalies, but to make the whole association work for the good of all.

It may, in other words, be retorted that much of what I have written relates to rather academic matters of history; and that the real business is the continuance of a working partnership between the member nations of the Commonwealth. In substance, I agree with this; but it is not useful to ignore the fact that you cannot convert a structural association into a merely functional one without creating new tasks and developing a new approach.

I will content myself with indicating a few of the working problems which I believe are emerging in the new Commonwealth.

Take Defence. It is already an open secret that when conferences of the Prime Ministers occur, defence talks do not take place in full session, but are confined to those nations which in fact regard their defence problems as joint and not merely several. In the past, for example, Pakistan has participated, but India has not. The time may come when the field of Commonwealth defence talks may become narrower, but it is surely clear that the fullest mutual confidence in such discussions can be achieved only where it is thought that there will be some assurance of active co-operation in the event of war. Realities are already being met.

Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand have common plans and have made common contributions to the defence of Malaya. The S.E.A.T.O. arrangements are backed by Pakistan but not by India. In short, defence arrangements already cease to have an over-all Commonwealth character, and are coming to be selective and regional.

Similarly with trade. Australia and New Zealand have been stalwart champions of what used to be called 'Imperial preference'. But there is no reason to suppose our traditional policies on those matters are supported by any of the new member nations of the Commonwealth. In these circumstances, we may not see another 'Ottawa' conference, nor can we reasonably expect to have any new multilateral arrangements operating only inside the Commonwealth. Trade agreements will inevitably be made bilaterally, the general limitations upon any treaties arrived at being found in such broad international agreements as G.A.T.T. instead of in some document or principle peculiar to the British Commonwealth.

In short, it is hard to think of any great matter of international policy which will lend itself instantly, as in the old days, to joint discussion among all the British countries designed to produce a single joint conclusion. The looser our arrangements among ourselves, the less likely we are to arrive at joint policies.

Apart from old and lively friendships and an honourable joint tradition, it may well be that the contacts between Commonwealth countries will more and more come to depend upon periodical meetings of Prime Ministers without agenda, bilateral trade talks, and periodical meetings of Finance Ministers. Whether such instruments can serve to continue something identifiable as the British Commonwealth, with a powerful voice in world affairs, will depend very largely on the importance which we attach to our contacts and the goodwill and

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resolution which we bring to them. To put it in another way, the future of the British Commonwealth is no longer a matter to be decided by formulae or by generalized expressions. Everything will turn upon our means and spirit of contact and consultation. There will always be scope for a general conference, like that of Prime Ministers. But on specific matters, I believe that more functional conferences, political or official, will need to be the practice. Indeed there may well be some problems in which limited or regional conferences between selected British countries will need to occur.

In my own time, the machinery of consultation has considerably improved. Practically all the countries of the Commonwealth now exchange High Commissioners with competent staffs. Conferences are more frequent. And yet one cannot be satisfied that our contacts are strong enough, or that consultation always occurs at the right time. It may seem a small matter but I for one believe that our post-war conferences on the Prime Ministerial level have been much too hasty. When Prime Ministers come from around the world, they should have abundant time for easy, informal personal discussion. Why we should all be the slaves of some inexorable air timetable, I do not understand. After all, the less structure there is in our association, the more vital it becomes that we should establish that degree of mutual knowledge and confidence which alone can make a functional association effective. But the matter goes further. Whitehall is not the repository of all knowledge of the special interest of remote British nations. Nor, may I say, is the Commonwealth Relations Office the only United Kingdom Department whose decisions may affect, say, Australia or New Zealand.

I am no carping critic; but I would courteously suggest that one text might be boldly printed in every Department in London, New Delhi, Canberra, and the other Seats of Government – ‘Will any decision I am today contemplating affect some other nation of the Commonwealth? If so, have I informed or consulted it?’ There are other practical proposals which are worth consideration if we are to give to our functional association some of the strength of the old structure. The Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations ought to travel a lot, but stay in office for a long time. There is no Minister whose continuing knowledge and influence are more vital to the Commonwealth. We need to review our attitude (in some countries at least) to the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Its periodical conferences are a wonderful vehicle for goodwill and understanding. It would be good if we could all decide that selection for such conferences should be concentrated upon Members who will some day be leaders and Ministers.

I conclude by saying that I for one believe that the time has come when, in the British Commonwealth, we must give ourselves furiously to think about where we are going and what road or roads we should take. Unless we are conscious of our mutual problems and constantly working on them, we will, as they emerge, have little more to contribute to their solution than a vague and wistful sentiment.