

Bradley, Kenneth

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Commonwealth Based on Secure Foundations

by Sir Kenneth Bradley, C.M.G., London

The Commonwealth now comprises 28 members plus NAURU (a "Special Member", the only limitation being that it does not attend Prime Minister's meetings). These countries, together with their dependencies, spread right across the world and include 800,000,000 people of almost every race and creed, only one in ten of them white.

All these countries were once in the British Empire; all of them, on becoming independent, chose to remain in the Commonwealth and any of them can leave it whenever it likes. The only formal link which binds them is the common recognition of Queen Elizabeth II as the symbol of their unity and, as such, Head of the Commonwealth. She is Queen of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, Malta, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius, Ceylon, Sierra Leone, the Gambia and Guyana; but Malaysia, Swaziland and Lesotho have their own kings, and many are republics.

Apart from this one symbolic and very flexible link, the Commonwealth has no constitution and no rules. It is not an artificial creation, like the United Nations, but a unique association which has evolved naturally during the last 140 years, constantly adapting itself to contemporary ideas and needs. That is why it is unique and why it has such a great potential.

Golden Thread of Affection

The evolution of the modern Commonwealth out of the British Empire began in 1848 when one of the colonial governments in Canada was enabled to administer the country's own domestic affairs. It was believed that if the colonists were given more freedom, their ties of loyalty to and affection for Britain would become not weaker, but stronger. This philosophy, extended as time went on to include the final goal of complete independence, has been the golden thread running through British colonial policy ever since. By the early years of the present century all the colonies settled by British people—Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand—had achieved full self-government, and between the two world wars this also came to be accepted as the ultimate destiny of India and all the colonies in Asia and Africa.

The second turning point in the history of the Commonwealth came in 1949, after the Indian sub-continent had been divided into the two independent countries of India and Pakistan. Nehru then suggested that India should remain in the Commonwealth as a republic, owing no allegiance to the British Crown, but recognising King George VI as the symbol of unity and, as such, Head of the Commonwealth. Only thus, he said, could the people of India feel that they were really independent. The ready acceptance of this idea by Britain and all the older Commonwealth countries made it possible for other Asian and African countries, which might similarly have been reluctant to perpetuate their allegiance to a British monarchy, to join the Commonwealth on achieving independence in the knowledge that they could become republics or have their own monarchies.

Independence Absolute

In order to understand the Commonwealth it is important to realise that every full member country is completely independent, each government being responsible entirely to its own people and in no way subject to British control. Britain has no power to restore peace in Nigeria or to interfere in racial disorders in Malaysia. Independence is absolute. The Commonwealth is not an economic bloc. Since each government is free to decide its own foreign, military and economic policy solely in its own interests, the Commonwealth could be none of these things. Its people change their forms of government at will; they belong to different alliances, such as NATO, ANZUS and SEATO, as suits them best; not all of them belong to the sterling area; some are, or want to be, associated with the European Common Market, while others, in Africa, are trying to set up common markets of their own.

The essence of the Commonwealth lies not in any kind of central control or organisation but in consultation and co-operation. Consultation began many years ago in the form of regular Commonwealth prime ministers' conferences, and it has now developed into a whole network of conferences which are constantly taking place, not only between ministers of every kind but also between parliamentarians, departmental officials

and representatives of the professions. These conferences do not take decisions or make policy, which would be impossible since each delegate is responsible to his own people, but they provide invaluable opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for promoting personal friendships and understanding between them.

No Headlines

The most recent prime ministers' meeting, held in London last January, was the largest consultative gathering of heads of governments, representing 28 countries, to have taken place since the conference in San Francisco to draft the Charter of the United Nations. It produced no headlines—it was not intended to—but those leaders who were there considered it to have been particularly helpful and useful. Commonwealth governments often disagree and sometimes quarrel, but they seldom misunderstand each other.

One of the most remarkable features of any kind of Commonwealth conference is the speed with which business is transacted. This is because all the delegates not only share English as a common language but have such a wide common background of ideas and institutions, inherited from 100 years or more of their connection with Britain, that they need waste no time in explaining themselves to each other, but can get down to business straight away.

It is, in fact, this great common heritage which all its peoples share that gives the Commonwealth association its strength and usefulness. Parliamentary government, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and a civil service divorced from politics are only part of this heritage, for it also extends far and wide into almost every aspect of peoples' lives which has in any way been influenced by western civilisation.

English, for example, is the common language of all educated people in every Commonwealth country and, with certain local exceptions, all their systems of education are based on British principles and practice. Because the peoples of the Commonwealth have for so long been accustomed to working together, they have built up a vast network of relationships. There are thousands of such links between public bodies, the professions, universities, schools, firms, vol-

untary societies and individual men and women. Britain gave this heritage to a quarter of the world, but it also gave freedom, and gave it willingly (if in some cases rather more quickly than it would have done if the pressures of nationalism had been less strong), and that is why the Commonwealth exists today and why it will probably endure.

Commonwealth Secretariat

In 1965, the governments together provided the Commonwealth with its own machinery, not in order to set up any kind of central control, but to take over from Britain all the services which it had hitherto provided for the organisation of conferences, the exchange of political and economic information, and for promoting the ever-increasing range of practical co-operation in the economic and scientific fields, and, especially, in education.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, with headquarters in London, is staffed and financed by all the governments, and its first secretary-general, Mr Arnold Smith, is a distinguished Canadian diplomat. The secretariat has already won the confidence of the governments to which it is responsible and its value is to be measured not only by the success of the last prime ministers' meeting but by the co-operation which it fosters between Commonwealth countries in almost every kind of activity. The Commonwealth has come of age and shows a new maturity and stability which augurs well for its future. Some people still think of it as the British Commonwealth. This is wrong, but, because of the great heritage which Britain has bequeathed to every other Commonwealth country, it obviously plays a leading part and occupies a special place in the economic, social and cultural affairs of the Commonwealth.

Maintaining Currency Stability

Britain's economic stake in the Commonwealth falls under three heads, the sterling area, investment, both public and private, and trade and aid. Most Commonwealth countries (and some others) still keep the bulk of their reserves in London, and this has been very useful for them both because of the range of profitable investments available there and in financing their overseas trade. In March, 1969, Britain's net liabilities



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in sterling amounted to nearly £6,000 mn of which some £2,500 mn related to sterling area countries. Its gold and convertible currency reserve amounted only to just over £1,000 mn. How long sterling can or should remain a reserve currency is now a matter for debate. Some economists think that the system is out-dated.

Yet the great prestige of the City of London and the facilities it offers for raising export capital by floating loans for Commonwealth Governments (about £260 mn has been raised this decade) or commercial stock issues, still make it the financial centre of the Commonwealth. All Commonwealth countries are net importers of long-term investment capital and the annual flow to them of private capital has recently been over £500 mn a year; British private investment in the Commonwealth has been about £225 mn a year in recent years.

In addition to this private investment, capital from public sources includes both investment in over 150 projects by the Commonwealth Development Corporation, and direct contributions in the form of loans (now mostly interest-free). Of an average over the last few years of £190 mn of bilateral aid to developing countries in the form of grants, loans and technical assistance roughly 90 p.c. has been to Commonwealth countries. In recent years loans granted for financing development projects have usually carried the obligation of buying British equipment, so that aid ceases to be philanthropic and becomes of direct help to Britain in its balance of payments problem and part of the Commonwealth pattern of trade. This pattern has, of course, greatly changed during the past 20 years, as the independent countries have widened their markets throughout the world and have also accepted aid, often with the same purchasing obligations, from wherever they could get it—including some communist countries.

The result is that Britain's proportion of the external trade of Commonwealth countries has fallen, but nevertheless the total value of its trade with the rest of the Commonwealth has, thanks in some small degree to the long-established system of Commonwealth preference, increased. Outright grants and technical assistance average more than half of Britain's total aid programmes of £215 mn a year for the developing countries.

In terms of value for money, by far the most important contribution made by the British Government takes the form of technical assistance—the provision either of skilled manpower or the necessary training facilities. It was realised some years ago that the developing countries were just as short of teachers, managers, salesmen and skilled labour as they were of universities, secondary schools and factories, and that these would be useless unless properly trained staff were available to run them. A special Ministry of Overseas Development was therefore established,

and one of its major responsibilities has been to meet the needs of the developing countries both by the recruiting of skilled staff for them and by providing training courses in Britain. In an average year about 5,000 British teachers, expert advisers, professional men and women and technicians are sent out to work on contract in the services of the developing countries, and in most cases Britain pays a share of their salaries.

1,000 Scholarships a Year

This particular form of aid is but one aspect of the network of co-operative endeavour which links the peoples of the Commonwealth. Rightly, the closest and most effective co-operation is in education where, as the fruit of regular Commonwealth education conferences, Commonwealth governments give over 1,000 scholarships a year to enable students to go to other countries, such as Canada, India, Australia and Britain, for further education.

Co-operation is not therefore merely between governments. It runs through the whole range of what may be called the British way of life, which is the common heritage of all Commonwealth peoples. Parliamentarians, lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects and most of the other professions co-operate closely through their associations and through the Commonwealth Foundation, established by all the governments precisely for this purpose, to preserve common standards and practice; all the leading voluntary societies originally established by Britain exist throughout the Commonwealth and preserve their links as closely as they ever did. The Royal Commonwealth Society, the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movements, and a hundred other social organisations, as well as learned societies of all kinds, are to be found everywhere, still preserving the old ideals and the old friendships. There are, in fact, more than 250 separate organisations actively devoted to promoting friendship and co-operation between the peoples of the Commonwealth.

Complementing UNO

The Commonwealth is part of the world community, not rivalling the United Nations organisation but complementary to it. It is only one of the instruments available to governments for raising the living standards of their peoples and fighting racial discrimination, but it is a particularly useful instrument for these purposes. It is world-wide; it includes every race, creed and culture; it has grown out of history naturally, as a tree grows, and it is in the final analysis a partnership of peoples equipped, through their long association, with well-tried machinery for mutual help and with the will to improve and make good use of it. No one who understands the true nature of the Commonwealth doubts that its future is now assured.