



# PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13 1981

## STATEMENT TO THE PARLIAMENT ON THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING

Mr Speaker, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, held in Melbourne and Canberra between 30 September and 7 October, was a success for Australia and the Commonwealth, and it can be expected to have an influence on world discussions.

The meeting confounded the critics who had predicted that differences of view would lead to division, and that irrelevant issues would distract attention from the fundamental themes. In fact, a spirit of compromise and practicality enabled 41 very disparate countries, most with strongly held views of their own, to reach agreement on a range of issues, and indeed, to agree to act on many of them.

The Commonwealth is a remarkable international organisation not only because its meetings are for Heads of Government rather than for officials or Foreign Ministers, not only because the meetings themselves occupy a period of time which allows for thorough as well as wide-ranging deliberations, not only because the membership of the Commonwealth cuts across some of the most significant lines of division in the world, and not only because the Commonwealth countries themselves comprise above one quarter of the world's population.

The Leader of the Opposition has said that the sole common link between the members of the Commonwealth is that they are all former British colonies, but in addition to the fact that we all also speak a common language, in addition to the fact that we all, as President Kaunda of Zambia put it, gained our independence from the British using their language, there is the further bond, again remarked on by President Kaunda, of a similar legal and administrative background among Commonwealth countries.

I would add that in a world which is still unfortunately marred by racialism, it is a truly satisfying experience to be in and of a gathering which repudiates racialism not only in words but by its nature. In the Commonwealth, brown, black and white meet as equals and friends, and as President Kaunda put it, "if God had made people green I am sure they would be represented in the Commonwealth as well".

So far as Australia itself is concerned, the success of the conference must be measured not only in the fact that the issues we had identified beforehand as central indeed turned out to be so, and not merely in the fact that our contributions to the discussions on these central issues were successful in advancing several initiatives regarding them. I believe that we have emerged from the meeting with an enhanced reputation as an active and concerned member of the Commonwealth, as an enlightened and responsible middle power.

Earlier this year, the Leader of the Opposition, in discussing the Australian Labor Party's foreign policy beliefs, said, "Australia and Australians can achieve anything on their own". Such words are not mere grandstanding, they are fanciful and ill-considered, especially when he has no practical proposals to help create more wealth or to improve the living standards of people in developing countries, or indeed to advance the causes of peace and stability on any other significant issues.

The Government's approach to its role in world affairs is vastly different, for we recognise the contribution we can make and the role we can play. We accept the responsibilities of that role, and are prepared to take such steps as we can towards helping to make the world a better and more secure place for our children.

From the purely Australian point of view, a further gain and success from the Commonwealth meeting has been that our visitors were impressed by Australia as a friendly and vital country with a great future. I want to pay tribute to those people, for the most part ordinary Australians, from right around the country but especially from Melbourne and Canberra, who conveyed to all the visitors the friendliness and confidence that the world now regards as characteristic of Australia, and who helped to make our visitors ambassadors for Australia.

The tributes to Australia from the visitors will surely be pleasing to all Members of the House, and indeed to all Australians. Pierre Trudeau went so far as to say that the 20th century can be said to belong to Australia. President Kaunda said that in the last few years his view of Australia has changed from one of "a country where there was indifference to suffering people of the rest of the world", to one of "decent human beings, an Australia with which we are very proud to be associated". And Sir Dennis Hamilton, of the Commonwealth Press Union, went out of his way to say that "the sense of self confidence of people (in Australia) at every level ... that they can tackle any problems ... is a bit of a refresher and encouragement for some of us who have come from some of the old countries".

I could instance many other tributes of a similar kind, but these are representative, and give the House the flavour of our visitors' impressions. And they show that the Leader of the Opposition's view of the meeting, at least before it was held, as "an extravagant indulgence", reflected a quite distorted idea of the impact which the meeting would have on the way in which Australia is regarded in other parts of the world.

From the Commonwealth point of view, the success of the Melbourne meeting can also be measured in several ways. The vitality of the Commonwealth was evident in the fact that three new members were present, and let me add that not a single member of the meeting, in welcoming Zimbabwe, would have found anything "quaint" or "ironical", to use the words of the Leader of the Opposition, in the fact that Australia played a role in the establishment by the Commonwealth at the Lusaka meeting of the conditions in which Zimbabwe was able to achieve independence.

The nature of the discussions between the Commonwealth leaders in Melbourne and Canberra, the meeting of minds that occurred, the understanding and friendships which were created, was a further confirmation of the relevance of the Commonwealth in a world in which divisions can too easily become entrenched, and in which a needless lack of understanding so often prevents the achievement of real solutions.

I believe that the success of the meeting for the Commonwealth will also turn out to be a success so far as the international community is concerned. The Commonwealth is obviously not an organisation with the power to settle major world issues, but between the extremes of either achieving a dramatic conclusive impact which will turn everything around, and of having no effect at all, there is room for the kind of influence which the Commonwealth can have, and which can be so important in achieving the right outcome rather than the wrong one.

The Commonwealth role is to a considerable extent a matter of helping, in an incremental fashion, to shape opinion one way rather than the other, to change the balance of considerations operating on those who have to make the big decisions, to ensure that there are no miscalculations because strongly held views have not been clearly heard. The Melbourne meeting sent out a number of signals which, because of their timing and because they represent the views of a significant group of leaders, will register with other governments, which, indeed, are already registering and having an impact. Strongly supportive comments about the value of the Declaration and the Communique such as that the Declaration appears to be a 'very significant document which would no doubt be widely discussed', and that both the Declaration and the Communique would be helpful in 'setting the scene' for Cancun, have been received at many of our missions.

The Melbourne Declaration and the Communique from the meeting are complementary documents. The Melbourne Declaration is a statement of resolve by 41 Heads of Government designed to demand urgent action to alleviate the plight of hundreds of millions of people living in absolute poverty, designed also to point out the despair which these conditions engender, and the insecurity which can so easily be encouraged when such conditions prevail.

Mr Speaker, when the House ponders the Melbourne Declaration it might bear in mind the words of Pierre Trudeau at the meeting that "history will judge this year as a watershed in North/South relations", and Mrs Gandhi's hope that the voices of the countries of the Commonwealth will reach out to Cancun.

The Communique addresses virtually every major issue facing the world today, and it reaches conclusions and makes recommendations concerning many of them and despite the need for compromise to achieve maximum consensus, it says some very pointed things. On the economic side, it addresses all the main topics encompassed by the North/South dialogue. It expresses strong support for an early resumption of global negotiations and seeks ways of improving the negotiating process. It strongly reaffirms opposition to protectionism and sets up an expert study group to examine the impact which protectionism has on developing countries. It supports the early establishment of an energy affiliate of the World Bank and a number of other practical measures relating to energy to be taken by the Commonwealth itself. It expands the Commonwealth's capacity to assist the food needs of developing Commonwealth members, supports increased food aid, improved food security arrangements and increased assistance for agricultural development. It reaffirms support for the Common Fund and outlines practical measures to be taken within the Commonwealth to assist commodity exporters. And it makes a number of recommendations for an expansion of the capacity of international financial institutions to help developing countries.

I should add that in addition to what is in the Communique, Australia has taken a number of initiatives of its own which will support and supplement the Communique's contents and general thrust. Among these are an increase in Overseas Development Assistance for the 1981/82 financial year by \$100 million or 18%, to bring the ratio of ODA to GDP up from 0.43% to an estimated 0.45%. Australia's food aid programme and assistance for agricultural development has been substantially expanded. Food aid has been increased by 15% to \$100 million in 1981/82 allowing about 445,000 tonnes of grain to be given, up from 400,000 tonnes in 1980/81 and 225,000 tonnes only a few years ago.

And Australia is more than satisfying its obligations under world food programme targets. Australia has increased its contribution to the international emergency food reserve from 30,000 tonnes to 45,000 tonnes. We are paying the freight on an increasing proportion of our food aid, including on 80,000 tonnes to Africa. Australia is establishing a centre for international agricultural research, to mobilise Australian agricultural expertise to address problems of importance to developing countries. In addition, we are continuing to give priority within our regular aid programme to agricultural development.

On energy, Australia has pledged an additional \$1 million in Nairobi for assistance for new and renewable energy sources. Australia has offered to make available to all Commonwealth countries, information and experience through the Commonwealth Regional Renewable Energy Resources Information System and also to make available to Commonwealth countries an exhibition of new and renewable energy technology which is being prepared as part of the work of the CHOGRM Energy Group.

On commodity trade, Australia has signed the instrument for ratification of the Common Fund Agreement and is making a voluntary contribution of \$5.5 million to its second account (for the promotion of development, marketing and production).

On trade, Australia has recently extended and liberalised preferences of significant interest to developing countries to the whole textiles, clothing and footwear area. Imports in 1977-78 accounted for 40% of the Australian market for textiles, 20% for clothing, and 28% for footwear. In addition a wide variety of products now receive special preferences in the South Pacific trading region. Australia's continuing examination of protection and the IAC general reference were noted and appreciated by Heads of Government.

On the political side, there is in the Communique: a reaffirmation of the Gleneagles Declaration; a strong statement on Namibia, with agreement between the contact group, front line and other members on the need for intensified efforts to seek settlement on the basis of Resolution 435; on Poland, agreement that the people of Poland should be left to determine their own destiny free from foreign interference; on Afghanistan and Kampuchea, strong agreement on the need for the withdrawal of foreign troops; on Africa, the view that African states should be able to pursue their own affairs without interference from any source; on the Law of the Sea; affirmation of the need for a convention to be concluded speedily; on the South Pacific, support for the call by the countries of the region for an immediate end to nuclear testing, and a welcoming of the decision by the South Pacific Forum to send a mission to France to discuss the future of French territories in the Pacific.

There was also very informal discussion among some leaders on the general question of re-admission to the Commonwealth. This is a new question which the Commonwealth has not had to consider before, and government leaders will be keeping in touch on the matter.

Mr Speaker, at the opening of the conference two weeks ago, I spoke of the intractable nature of the problems on our agenda and of the need, therefore, to think in terms of improvements and progress rather than total solutions. I spoke of the need to define success in realistic terms. In those terms, which are the only ones which can seriously be countenanced - this conference speaks for itself.

I want to make one comment about the security arrangements for the conference, because they have attracted a good deal of interest and attention, and the Leader of the Opposition actually described them as "somewhat ridiculous and, frankly, frightening". The frightening thing is not the arrangements that we made, but the fact that we live in a world in which such arrangements are necessary. But the inconveniences were minimised, and I am sure that I speak for the vast majority of

Australians when I say, especially thinking of the assassinations and attempted assassinations of world leaders which have taken place this year, that I am glad we took the precautions we did, glad that so many leaders commented so favourably on the arrangements we had made, and glad that the meeting passed without any incidents occurring.

Mr Speaker, three years ago, and again seven months ago, the Leader of the Opposition said that the Commonwealth is an "anachronistic institution, a talk shop of dubious value to Australia". I hope that the success of the Melbourne meeting has changed his view, as it has undoubtedly convinced countless Australians of the value of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is an instrument which enables the leaders of many countries, from many continents, to come together as colleagues and friends to make a contribution to the continuing process of resolving the world's problems. That is what the meeting at Melbourne was all about.

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