

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MR HAROLD HOLT AT THE SAVOY HOTEL, LONDON.

16th September, 1966.

We've just concluded a remarkable Conference perhaps an historic one. To take the brightest view of it one could even speculate that this marks another milestone in man's long search for peaceful collaboration on a basis of multi-racialism - but that is, I repeat taking the optimistic view of things, and this could only be confirmed by subsequent experiences in which the lessons of this Conference had been learned and some of the more unsatisfactory features of it removed.

There were some unsatisfactory features. Most of these were evident enough. The practice which had developed, I think it showed itself at Lagos, but this was the first time I'd experienced a process of regular Caucus meetings on what was blatantly a racial basis of membership and we would be most critical of the continuance of this kind of practice on any sort of regular basis at any future meetings.

The concentration of attention on Rhodesia occupying more than six days of the discussion necessarily limited opportunities for consideration of the very many other important matters before us and in the result consideration of such important areas of discussion as the world political situation and the world economic situation tended to be disjointed and inadequate as to the total time available and on some aspects of subsequent subject matters there was scope for little more than a perfunctory treatment. I think that although delegates had opportunity to speak, the fact that there was limited time had the effect of reducing the contribution which many would otherwise have made and, in some instances, I think discouraged delegates from making any contribution at all. In the result the discussions were unsatisfying in these two important fields, containing as they did these matters of considerable importance and concern for Australia.

I made a statement myself on the world political situation concentrating my own remarks on the Asian scene and Vietnam in particular, and when we came to the communique I registered at that point my concern that we had not had an adequate and satisfying discussion on Vietnam and gave notice that if this issue was still a current topic, that we would expect a very much more complete discussion on Vietnam at the next Conference.

On the world economic situation I was given the role of leading the discussion there and, although there were some other speakers it didn't secure a very widespread discussion - not that any great significance should be attached to that - it was not a controversial field for Commonwealth Prime Ministers. We were very much in agreement as to the general courses that should be followed. The communique reflects to a considerable degree the Australian contribution and we were not challenged on any of the more positive points that I put forward in the course of my own presentation.

I said at the outset that taking an optimistic view of things, one could regard this Conference as having brought the Commonwealth successfully through a critically testing period, not only was it an issue of great difficulty, complexity and delicacy involving as it did aspects of race, aspects of minority rule, historic association between Great Britain and Rhodesia, the evolution of new nations on the continent of Africa itself, these were only some of the facets of this most absorbing but typical question and although the communique reflected the differences of view that were held at some stages of the Conference it seemed most unlikely that any communique reflecting at least that degree of agreement could have been produced and there were even expectations that there would be walk-outs from the Conference, perhaps on a quite considerable scale. And so. /2

to have come through all these swirling currents and landed the Commonwealth safely on the other shore is something of an achievement.

It has left problems unsolved, including the Rhodesian issue itself. It has merely pointed two directions in which action may follow but even the most optimistic would not imagine that we had satisfactorily settled the Rhodesian issue. But have in mind that of all the situations in the world that could present difficulties for us this is the only one on which any powerful disagreements were voiced; there were other matters on which differences of view, of course, are held. There is no uniformity of view, for example, on Vietnam but I think it's worth commenting that there was so much agreement on so many other issues and the communique reflects a good deal of constructive, positive work at less controversial levels which mark an organisation capable of doing a job of work for its member countries.

I think that the Secretariat has provided some valuable strengthening on the organisation side. We're still feeling our way with the operation of the Secretariat, I think several members would be reluctant to see it build itself into an organisation that was attempting to influence policy thinking of its members, but it can do a very useful job at the administrative level and in maintaining closer co-ordination between Commonwealth countries making the affairs of each more widely known to the others, and these things can be counted as credits which have emerged from this particular Conference.

So that weighing the experiences of the last two weeks on a scale of balance, I would feel that on balance the conference has demonstrated some successes. It has also revealed dangers in relation to our future conduct which if allowed to go unchecked, could themselves lead to a weakening of the Commonwealth Association.

Would you like to put any queries, Gentlemen, on any of these aspects?

Q. Was the Common Market discussed at all?

A. Yes, but Mr Wilson made it clear that there was no early move in contemplation that Britain did want to enter the Common Market. The terms of entry had not been made any easier for it as the recent visit of M. Pompidou revealed, but he repeated the assurance that he's given on other occasions that the United Kingdom would not enter the Common Market without giving full consideration to the views and situation of other Commonwealth countries.

Q. Mr Holt, from the tone of your speech this morning it seems that you would examine rather carefully coming to a Commonwealth Meeting again if Rhodesia was going to be dominating the conference to such a degree with the African Caucus.

A. Well I wouldn't be serving ultimatums up myself but I think that when the agenda for the next meeting is proposed we would want to be assured that there would be reasonable opportunities for discussion of the wide variety of matters which interest so many other members of the Commonwealth, as I found it necessary to point out on the sixth day, or was it the seventh day that we had for six days of the conference been discussing the affairs of, or leaving untouched the affairs of nine-tenths of mankind, and in resisting the move that was being made then for another adjournment so that the Caucus could go into action and this is so with three-fifths of the world's population east of Suez, and we hadn't got within a week's sailing of that area after the first six days.

I see some paper this morning has a reference as to how I came to be in the chair - perhaps I can clear that little point because I ... /3

thought it was not without - and I don't want to make overmuch of it - my temporary occupancy of the chair actually arose as the result of a proposal by Mr Lee Kuan Yew it wasn't Mr Wilson's nomination. He was away at the time and they wanted to get on with the business. so having occupied the chair at that session I think on occasions when he was absent subsequently Mr Wilson thought it convenient that I should carry on and did so. but somebody I see in the paper mentioned that it was because I just happened to be across the table from him - so did Mike Pearson and a few other people - but I think we can say that Australia found a friendly atmosphere among the delegates.

We talked quite frankly and realistically on matters involving questions of race. There was no disposition on our part to either retreat from the Australian point of view or to conceal its light behind the curtain, and I feel that there has been a gain for me personally in relationships which have strengthened with the heads of delegations. I've come to know a lot of them much more personally and had many opportunities for formal discussion with them which was helpful.

I gather that some of the Asian delegations in their comments to the Press have expressed appreciation that Australia was showing such an interest in Asian affairs and playing an active part so that too is useful - India, in particular, commented a lot on it.

Q. Mr Holt, do you think our relationships with Africa have been harmed at all by our close stand with Britain on this Rhodesian issue?

A. Well no, I think that follows from what I have just been saying. I don't think so because Australia made it clear throughout that we regarded the Rhodesian issue as primarily a matter between Great Britain and her Colony and while we welcomed the opportunity which Great Britain had provided to other Commonwealth countries to offer their views about the situation, we still felt that in the final resort it was a British responsibility to decide how it was going to deal with the situation and so we were anxious to avoid adopting courses which were not acceptable to the United Kingdom and which would merely serve to complicate its task. We were therefore against the use of force, and we feel that so far as the aspect of sanctions are concerned, again the United Kingdom will have to be selective in the application of sanctions if difficulties are to be avoided and dangers escalate in the southern part of Africa.

Q. There would be no doubt about your support of Britain in the United Nations for these sanctions if she chose to apply them?

A. I don't contemplate any difficulty for Australia in that course, but I've not yet, of course, had an opportunity to go over the work of the Conference fully with my own colleagues or, for that matter with Parliament, but this is a consistent course that Australia has been following.

We've applied sanctions to imports from Rhodesia covering about 96 percent of our trade from that Country and the particular matters on which further sanctions might be applied don't affect Australia - oil, for example, if they decide to intensify oil sanctions. I would just emphasise that Australia remains a free agent in the course that it is to adopt. We're not committed to any line of action but you asked whether I thought there would be any difficulty about it. I don't foresee it. but we're able to decide our own course on that.

Q. You say you'll want assurances when the next agenda is drawn up

that Rhodesia won't dominate it and that you'll have an opportunity to discuss other matters. Say if these assurances aren't forthcoming.

- A. I'm not talking about formal assurances. I think there's general agreement that there was a quite disproportionate amount of time - even conceding the importance of the subject and the highly argumentative content of so many of the contributions - but we felt, several of us, that the Commonwealth was suffering in the eyes of outside observers from what would appear to them to be a failure to manage its business in a practical and sensible way.
- Q. There wasn't a move to have the next Conference other than in London?
- A. Yes - Well, when you say there was a move, that matter was discussed and we all agreed that it was not a question of a principle involved. One suggestion had been that because Britain had formerly been regarded as Head of the Commonwealth whereas now we were all equal members - at least in a juridical sense - that we shouldn't come repeatedly to London. I took up the comment on this myself pointing out that it was a matter of convenience for most of us to meet in London, that most of us had bi-lateral arrangements with Great Britain on a variety of matters and we were able to deal with these at the same time as coping with the affairs of the Prime Ministers' Conference. Most of us had larger official establishments in London than any other part of the Commonwealth. It is the headquarters of the Secretariat so that it would be rather more of an operation to move all the officials around, and most of us, if it were held somewhere else, would still find it necessary to come on to London to take up discussions with Ministers here. But where we came out on it was that we agreed that we wouldn't adopt any hard-and-fast rule that as a matter of practice meetings would be held mostly in London, but we didn't exclude the possibility of going to another Capital either to mark some historic occasion or (interjection such as the Centenary of Canada) - well such as the Centenary of Canada, well I don't know how Mr Pearson would respond to that, but I rather got the impression that he thought London was a pretty good place to hold Conferences.

However, there was no lengthy discussion or any substantial argument about it - it was accepted generally as a statement of how things might operate in the future.

- Q. Mr Holt, you mentioned your concern that so little time was spent in discussing Vietnam. Do you think the Commonwealth could really do anything useful in this regard?
- A. Well, I think it's important that the Commonwealth be better informed and more knowledgeable about Vietnam than it is. It seems to me to mark an inadequacy of attention when I point out that I'm the only Head of Government, so far as I'm aware, certainly from within the Commonwealth and for the last twelve months anyhow outside it, to have visited Vietnam and a lot of people make very powerful speeches about what ought to be done in Vietnam without really having very much direct knowledge of what is occurring there. But if we can't have visitations well at least let's have some really searching discussion - and I would like to find my fellow Commonwealth colleagues declaring where they stand on it, if they take exception to Australia's stand indicating why they do so. At the moment I think we've got, as do most of our members, a fairly wishy-washy attitude on Vietnam, full of aspirations but not a very practical contribution to what ought to be done there.
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