

Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference 1971

"COMMONWEALTH IN THE SEVENTIES" AND COMMONWEALTH DECLARATION

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Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Before I actually discuss the Commonwealth in the Seventies and President Kaunda's Declaration which is intimately bound up with the Commonwealth in the Seventies, there is one thing which I think it is rather appropriate to say.

I think it was Mr. Forbes Burnham who in his set speech earlier in this conference jokingly remarked on whether Great Britain went by the name of Britain or went by the name of the United Kingdom, which is sometimes confused, and he thought it might have something to do with the place around the table at which the representatives from that nation sat. I think perhaps I might add to this.

It is really quite immaterial which place at the table the representatives of Britain occupy, because if it were not for Britain there would be no table at all for anyone to sit around. We are all of us former colonies and we were, all of us, governed by former Governments in Great Britain. We all achieved independence - sometimes given more reluctantly than at others - but we all achieved independence. And having received it, we were able to form an association which I think no former colonial power would have been able to form with those whom it had previously governed. And as we look forward to the seventies, and as we look forward to what the Commonwealth may do or may not do in those years ahead, we may perhaps spare just one brief moment to look back with some appreciation of the acts which made the Commonwealth possible.

There is undoubtedly going to be in this new decade further problems with which the Commonwealth must concern itself in all areas. And it is because we are at the beginning of a new decade that I thought it was appropriate for President Kaunda to set down, as he did, statements as to what the Commonwealth was, how the Commonwealth can operate, and what the Commonwealth saw as the major problems facing it in this coming decade of the seventies. And I was therefore able to support fully in principle the unusual course that such a declaration should be made by this Conference.

But I would like first to express Australia's opinion of what the Commonwealth is and as to how we think it should operate.

It is, as the proposed Declaration quite clearly says, "a voluntary association of independent sovereign States" and it comes from the six continents and the five oceans and it has certain positions in common and certain aims in common. It may be that in the achievement of those aims and in the working of the Commonwealth as it meets together, there may be required to be changes of some kind in the way it operates in future.

But I believe that in other cases it is vital that there should not be changes but there should be retention of the way in which the Commonwealth has operated in the past.

In that way the nations of the Commonwealth come together to exchange views, to listen to the point of view of those who come from other nations, to get to know individuals - which is of quite some importance. But it never operates in the context that there should be decisions made by Commonwealth members that are binding on any single member of the Commonwealth, and it never operates on the concept that a general consensus of view should be in any way binding or taken seriously and acted upon by any constituent member who does not share in that consensus.

I believe, Mr. Chairman, and I wish it to be clearly stated in the record, that Australia believes that that principle must be retained. It is utterly essential that there should be no attempt, conscious or unconscious, to turn the Commonwealth into a mini-United Nations. Because as I see it, if that course is followed, then the Commonwealth itself will tend to disintegrate. It cannot be a gathering of people seeking to impose views on any single member.

And that goes for all those sitting around this table. Certainly that is the concept that Australia has of the role of the Commonwealth. Those are the ideals, those are the concepts which we seek in the Commonwealth, and I would like all to be aware of that.

We ourselves do not, and will not, seek to impose our point of view on anything on anyone else. Similarly, we will not accept the concept that there could be an imposition on us of a point of view with which we do not agree.

And so that, Sir, is what I would hope the Commonwealth would continue to be in the Seventies - a voluntary association of independent sovereign states, each state retaining complete independence, no state, either alone or in conjunction with others, seeking to try to make decisions binding on any other member of the Commonwealth.

I think, perhaps, that it is not altogether a good development that we have been so concerned with seeking to get forms of words which can meet with general agreement. The end result of that is very often there is a form of words to which everybody says they subscribe and views which everybody says they hold, but a form of words which in fact does not fully set out completely the views of anybody. And I think it is much better for the Commonwealth to operate in future without worrying about different views being expressed.

For our part, we would be perfectly happy to be the only nation sitting around this table who disagreed with what everybody else wanted to do or say. And we would think none the worse at all of any other nation should they alone differ from the views of others. This, of course, is an extreme example, but it is put to underline what I believe to be the principles on which the Commonwealth should operate as it approaches the problems of the seventies. Those problems have in my view, very properly been isolated in President Kaunda's Declaration. I would like to see them stated as problems with which the Commonwealth must concern itself and not go any further in indicating how the Commonwealth or members of it should concern themselves with overcoming them. But there is a value to my mind at this stage, at the beginning of this decade, in saying what the problems are and, in the old traditions of the Commonwealth, exchanging our views on those problems and the methods which might be adopted to tackle them.

In the Declaration we have before us, which deals with the Commonwealth in the Seventies - and I think the study of that and the Declaration are indivisible - there is properly first set down the need to maintain peace if the prosperity of all Commonwealth nations is to proceed without interruption. There could be few, if any, who would deny that this was a major task, and that this was something which vitally concerns us all.

I don't myself believe that peace is threatened, as others generally do, by a difference in wealth between one country and another. That may exacerbate tensions, but I do not believe that that is a major threat. Rather I think that the threat comes from conflicting ideologies, and that, I would suggest, might be recognised by all as the major cause threatening the continuance of world peace. It was not a difference in living standards which led to North Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. It was not a difference in living standards which led to Laos being subject to military aggression. It was a difference in ideology.

I would have liked this Declaration to contain within it the words that "the Commonwealth condemns any armed attack made by any nation upon any other nation." I cannot myself see why there should be any objection to that. If peace is to be maintained, and there is a basic need to maintain it, there should not be aggression by any nation upon another, and more particularly perhaps there should not be any aggression upon any small state.

It is quite properly stated later in this Declaration that the independence of all the countries sitting around this table is of concern to all others. Any armed attack made on any small state anywhere puts in jeopardy all small states everywhere. I hope a recognition of that might be a contribution towards the maintenance of that peace which President Kaunda so rightly put at the head of his Declaration.

The other problems which we must meet, the ones we all have, include the question of providing international aid to countries which are developing but still have much scope for development. May I, for emphasis, say in regard to that, that, comparatively, Australia is a rich country. Comparatively, if one takes other comparisons, it is not a rich country. I don't feel that we are doing any injustice to anybody by being a comparatively well-off country. We have been lucky - we work hard. But I don't think that is doing any injustice to anyone, and I am glad to see that that phrase does not, as I understand it, appear in the declaration now.

That is not to say that there is not a need for those who are better off to assist those who are not so well off, and that is not to say that it is not to the self interest of those who are better off to try to assist those who are still growing. I do not see the aim of international aid as being a handout, rather must it be a well thought-out attempt to provide to those nations who are in need of further development the capacity for that development, to provide the capital for a particular project, for industrialisation, for improving agriculture, for providing the means by which such countries can assist themselves. And certainly, as the Chairman of this Conference so cogently remarked several days ago, no nation is its brother's keeper. It isn't. But it must be its brother's helper; it can help its brother to help himself. And in that way there can be no obligation. Obligations are nasty things.

So I would say, in approaching the problem of aid, what is needed is a clear understanding that what is done in this field is done to provide the capability and the capital to the nations who are developing so they can raise themselves to an economic position where they will no longer need such help. This will take some time but this is the basis of the approach to this problem.

I would add one thing to my remarks on aid. This is provided, and I hope it will continue to be provided, and we are playing our part in international aid, but let us all listen to those other words of the Chairman of this Conference. That is that while it is necessary to assist the growth, to assist the people of developing countries to help themselves throughout the world, there can be no obligation to do this indefinitely if every advance so made is swallowed up by an increase in the population of the countries being helped. This is a matter under the control of the countries concerned and this is of as vital interest to the real economic growth of the countries as is the amount of aid of one kind or another that is provided.

Those statements in themselves are not enough to deal with this second point which President Kaunda made. Supposing this is done, supposing nations are helped to industrialise, are helped to increase production of various kinds so that internally perhaps the standards of living may rise. Yet that will not be enough unless we can somehow devise outlets in other countries for the products which are produced as the result of such industrialisation. The two matters go

absolutely hand in hand, and the two matters are ones with which the Commonwealth should concern itself, with which we are happy to concern ourselves. The solutions are not easy because there are vested interests to stop the flow of manufactured goods not only from less developed countries but even from such countries as Australia. These will need to be matters which we must seek to overcome in the seventies and proper matters to which we might direct our attention.

Another matter in this Declaration which I believe to be of great moment in the Seventies is the question of feeling between different races. It is of no use, I think, pretending that in general there are not, in many countries at any rate, racial feelings between people with different coloured skins. There ought not to be but there is, and we must start from that premise. Let us try and do one thing that is reasonably easy, and that is that each one of us say - as I am prepared to say and mean - that we will, within our own country, abolish all governmental discrimination of any kind. That we can do, that each nation here can do, and that each nation here has not yet completely done. If we could do that, and I am prepared to do it - I will do it anyway - that would be one advance. But not enough, because that after all is only governmental discrimination and there would still remain the areas in which governmental discrimination was not a factor.

And can we perhaps seek to diagnose this illness of racialism? For only by proper diagnosis can a proper cure be worked out. I think there is not a feeling between countries when those countries contain people of different races. There is not, I hope, a feeling against Australia by Zambia, and certainly no feeling against Zambia by Australia. I don't believe that the people of any nation feel objections to other nations on social grounds. That would be my first attempt at a diagnosis of the problem.

But we see that within nations this problem is hard to eradicate and it is hardest to eradicate if in any nation there is a large proportion of people with a different skin colour from others. That is why, I think, we see more evidence of racial feeling coming to the surface in a country where such a situation exists.

If that is so, how is that overcome? Well, a beginning, I think could be made, by making sure that, if there are in any countries large groups of people of different race, there is not, to reinforce that racial feeling, economic differences affecting any particular race. Such differences reinforce any racial feeling that there may be, and we must give our attention to that.

And, secondly, we should try to see, all of us, in such ways that we can, that in the circumstances I have outlined, there should not be a reinforcing of racial feeling by religious feeling... because that again reinforces and makes it difficult for this whole problem to be overcome. And perhaps in these 1970's, we may be able to take some steps along this road.

It will take a long, long time - in my opinion for attitudes of the masses completely to change. There is no such attitude among intelligent people, but it is largely there in the masses. In the circumstances I have outlined, it will take a long time to change, but if each of us in our own countries seeks to do what we can, then gradually this change will take place.

I don't think it can be forced, I don't think it can be a forced change but I do think there should be a constant attempt, and I do think that attempt can well be successful.

We believe that the Commonwealth, as it is at present constituted, and without any changes, is of value and has proved itself to be so. We also believe that the potential value of the Commonwealth is much greater than at present. This value is slightly vitiated, as we have seen in this conference, by us all spending most of the time talking at enormous length about the things on which we disagree. I don't say that we shouldn't talk about things on which we disagree. We should. We should each put our point of view and others should say they agree with it or disagree with it and then go on to something else. Something else, I would hope, on which we all agreed and could work on with a common goal.

So we see the Commonwealth as of value, provided it operates on the principles I have enunciated. We see it of an even greater value in the future because it is likely that if our efforts are successful, then the areas of disagreement will contract, the things on which we have discussions from different sides can be reduced. If this happens, there will be a bigger opportunity to work on matters on which we agree, and we might have more constructive results in the end.

It has been suggested to me from time to time - you might have even diplomatically hinted at it yourself, Mr. Chairman - that Australia tends sometimes to be rather an intransigent country. But in declarations, which I hope will not become a practice, or in resolutions, or in other matters, we do not think that we should put our name or give our support to statements that we do not thoroughly agree with or say we will take courses of action which we will not, in fact, adhere to.

And we will not do this.

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