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THE COMMONWEALTH CONFERENCE

Interview given by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton
for ABC Television on his return from the Singapore Conference

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Interviewer : Robert Moore

- Q. Prime Minister, it seems that most of the reports that have come out on the Conference have been gloomy rather than optimistic. People have suggested that it was a waste of time, if not something worse. Do you feel, as you look back on it, that the Commonwealth has come out stronger than it went into the Conference?
- PM No, I don't think anybody could say that. But I don't see how anybody could say it was gloomy or the reports were gloomy if not worse. The Commonwealth Conference broke up without anybody leaving the Conference, and before the Conference was held it was thought that some countries might do that under certain circumstances. So far, this has not happened. On the other hand, the underlying questions have not really been resolved. But I would say, it was much the same as it was before the Conference.
- Q. Were you disappointed in any way at the conduct of the Conference, or the items that were discussed or the manner in which they were discussed?
- PM Yes, I was a bit disappointed at the manner in which a number of items were discussed. That is to say, a formal sitting around a large table and the reading of formal speeches, much on the United Nations model. I was a little disappointed at that, and I wasn't alone in this. A number of other delegations also said they thought it would be much better to get away from this formalised kind of sitting around and reading of set speeches, and the handing out to the press afterwards. And also I was a little - I suppose "disappointed" is the word - at so much of the time of the Conference, a very great deal of the time, being taken up discussing this one question of Britain and the provision of maritime naval facilities and arms to South Africa. It finished up with nobody changing their position. It did seem to me that people could have stated their position once, or if necessary, twice, and then said, "Well, those are our positions" and gone on to something else. But at least two full days was spent in going over and over that.
- Q. Prime Minister, some reports have pictured you as a "loner", as the tough guy of the Conference. I think one of the Singapore papers called you "Two-gun Gorton". What were your relations with the other leaders, particularly the African leaders? Were you so tough? Did you stand on your dignity so much?

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PM I don't think I stood on my dignity at all. But what I do believe one should do at international conferences or Commonwealth Conferences of this kind is to say what one believes, is to put one's point of view exactly as one sees it. And indeed, other members of the Conference apparently had the same view. I can see no point in using so much roundabout diplomatic verbiage that nobody knows what you mean, and you can have a disagreement about what you meant later. Maybe that was what they had in mind. But as far as relations with the other individual members were concerned, I feel they were very good. I like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and he did go to some trouble to come and say goodbye especially before he left. Kaunda, in his last speech, suggested it would be a good thing if people from Australia went through Lusaka and saw more of his country, and if he and others could come and see more of us for understanding. I don't think there was anything but good personal feeling between us, although we had slightly different points of view.

Q. What was the role of Mr. Trudeau? Some people have suggested that he was an honest broker, or mediator, or a smoother-over of troubled waters. Did he play a big role, say, in the final draft on the Declaration?

PM Well, he played a role in it, but I don't think he played as great a role as the Australians played, and by the Australians, I don't just mean myself - I mean myself and Mr. McMahon. There was a Declaration which was going to be made and which all members were asked to subscribe to, and there were some things in that Declaration which we felt - and we were not alone - but we felt we couldn't subscribe to because we weren't in fact going to carry them out, and therefore there should be changes in the original draft. Now, Mr. Trudeau knew the African leaders (he had had one of his aides over there speaking to them beforehand), and he spoke to them and he got a suggested amendment and then I put in a particular amendment saying that racialism, when we talked about it, meant the practice of racialism within our own nation, each one within its own nation....

Q. Do you think it is fair to say that you pursued what one might call a hard line at the Conference?

PM Yes, I think it is fair to say I pursued a hard line in two respects - one is that the Commonwealth Conference must operate in the way it has always operated in the past, and that is by people expressing points of view to each other and not trying to pass resolutions which purport to be binding, not trying to take decisions by majority vote, not trying to reach consensus of opinion which is expected to be accepted by those who don't have that opinion.

Q. Well, what is left then, Sir, if you....

PM What has always been there. This idea that you might adopt the practice of the United Nations, of passing resolutions and things is completely new, as far as Commonwealth Conferences are concerned. What is left is for people sitting around a table, putting their point of view to each other, agreeing on particular matters or agreeing to disagree on particular matters, and then going on to things on which some constructive action can be taken. This has always

been the concept of the Commonwealth, and if it is to turn into a United Nations with a majority vote, it will, I am sure, destroy itself.

Q. Would the kind of Commonwealth and the kind of Conference you have in mind allow for criticism of the policies of various countries by other countries?

PM Oh, yes. But not for communiques and declarations issued by majority vote criticising. It would allow for discussion and argument and criticism the way Commonwealth Conferences in the past have always done.

Q. But only in private meetings?

PM Yes, that's right.

Q. Well, I wonder if we could turn now to the issue of the proposed sale of arms by Britain to South Africa. Was this issue resolved in any way at all at the Conference?

PM No, I don't think it was. It was the African countries, for reasons which are thoroughly understandable, who were very upset at the concept of the sale of naval vessels to South Africa by Britain. And they argued their case very cogently and they said this could lead to an upsurge of feeling against Britain, and the African countries turning to Russia and China and so on. One of the good contributions that was made in that field, I think, was made by Mr. Trudeau, who said, well, he could see that and that was fine, but supposing Britain didn't sell arms, sell these maritime arms, France was presumably going to do it. Would that make a difference to the African countries as vis-a-vis European countries, would they not be still as angry at Europeans coming in - if perhaps Portuguese or Germans or some other country would sell arms, would that not still leave the problem just as it was before? And he went further, and said, in any case, while South Africa exists in the way in which it exists and is governed at the present moment, won't there always be in the African countries, the focus for turning to Russia, or turning to China. . . . will the thing be really changed merely by Britain refraining from fulfilling what she regards as her contractual obligations, and some other country coming in and fulfilling them. I thought that was a good analysis of it.

Q. Do you feel that the British Government will wait for the result of the investigation by the so-called study group before making a decision?

PM All I can say on that is that Mr. Heath made it abundantly clear, and perfectly clear and on the record that he was not bound in any way to wait for any decision by this study group.

Q. Well, what do you see as the status and function and value of the study group? For instance, would Australia be bound by any findings it might make about the threat of the Russian Navy in the Indian Ocean?

PM No, no, no. Not at all. As a matter of fact, the wording of the study group was "to examine" - I speak from memory - "to examine the factors leading to strategic threats to the sea routes of the world". It was pretty high, wide and handsome terms of reference. It was then confined to the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. I think it may have been in the minds of some of those who proposed it that if this was accepted, then Britain would say, "Well we will wait until this has been carried out" but Britain, in fact, did not accept that and made it quite clear.

Q. Do you see this study group as having any real function at all? Or is it really just window-dressing?

PM Well, I would like to wait until the terms of reference are completely worked out. I don't know that it will affect in one way or another Britain's decisions.

Q. Or Australia's?

PM Australia hasn't got any decisions to make.

Q. It must be very interested in . . .

PM We are not selling arms to South Africa. The whole question is - should Britain sell maritime arms to South Africa?

Q. I imagined the study group took in much wider territory of trying to make some judgment on the threat to maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Australia would have an interest in that.

PM Oh, we would have an interest in it which I declared and made clear in the Conference. But our interest is that there should be friendly ships - if I can put it that way - able to lend assistance to the security of the trade routes on which we so much depend. Those friendly ships can only operate if there are bases from which they should operate. And we are interested in bases being available. Now, it is up to Britain to decide whether, from military points of view, from financial points of view, she can best do this, in her own judgment, as a result of using the Simonstown base.

Q. Prime Minister, is it your impression that some African countries will leave the Commonwealth if Britain does sell arms to South Africa?

PM Oh, I think we have to wait - I wouldn't speculate on that.

Q. You were not able to get any insight into that?

PM I don't want to speculate on it.

Q. It seems to many observers, I suppose, that one of the problems facing the Commonwealth now - I think this was shown at the Conference - is that there is probably an irreconcilable conflict of priorities in the minds of the various members. I would like to quote very very briefly to you something from President Nyerere's background paper which seems to me to put that so-called African point of view very succinctly. In his paper, President Nyerere says the Africans do not expect all Commonwealth countries to have the same order of foreign policy priorities. And now here I quote " "But we do expect that they will have South African racialism on their list of priorities even if it is not at the top." Now is South African racialism on the list of our foreign policy priorities?

PM In the sense of taking action against the South African Government, no, it isn't. And this is one of the reasons why we couldn't go along with the Zambian Declaration. The original Zambian Declaration suggested that all countries should seek every means of combating racialism - every means - and deny all regimes which practise it any assistance which could consolidate or strengthen them. Now this means, or could be interpreted to mean undoubtedly, that you would break off trade relations with any such country, and you would break off diplomatic relations, and indeed, if you take it seriously - that you would use every means - you could be required to go to war against them. Now, we are just not going to do this.

Q. To come back to President Nyerere's point of view... South African racialism is not a foreign policy priority for us?

PM It is some thing which we deplore publicly and say we don't agree with. We don't agree with the way it is applied but it is not something which we propose to take international action to combat.

Q. The African countries seem to want you to say, or the Commonwealth to say not just that racialism is bad but that it is the worst thing in international relations or human relations.

PM Yes, I think that the African countries, when they speak of racialism, don't completely have in their minds racialism as practised in countries all over the world. I think to them racialism means South African domination. I don't think they are at all concerned with disagreements, racial practices - such as an African nation against Asian citizens or perhaps the problems that we have seen in England or in America or in other countries. That comes into it partly, but basically I believe - whether they know it or not - when they speak of racialism they really mean South African and Rhodesian domination.

Q. Is there really any hope of countries which disagree so violently and emotionally on their priorities in foreign policy, any hope that these countries can live together as a Commonwealth for much longer?

PM I would think that there was and there ought to be because while one may disagree as to priorities, nevertheless there should be and there is, within a number of foreign policy objectives, or economic policy objectives, things on which these countries can and do agree. Now that ought to bind, and people ought to be able to say, "Well, these other things, we don't quite agree, but let's go on to the ones we do agree about".

Q. In the weeks leading up to the conference, our position on the sale of British arms to South Africa was often described as being neutral. Now, in what sense was it neutral? What could we have against it?

PM What could we have....?

Q. Against the sale of arms to South Africa to make us neutral?

PM Well, we had to consider two things : One, the feelings of other people in the Commonwealth to some extent; secondly, that this was, basically, a British Government's decision. We did not - we, as I said before, we want to see that the Indian Ocean trade routes are protected, particularly since there is now a growing Russian interest in the area. There have to be bases from which these ships can operate. I have a belief that if Simonstown were in Tanzania, if it were not in South Africa, that everybody would say, "Yes, of course, this is the place for a base and this is where these things can best be done".

Q. Could I put it to you, then, if the same security arrangements could be made in another way, would you prefer arms not to be sold to South Africa?

PM I am afraid that we have taken the view, and I think that it is the correct one, that we are interested in the protection of the Indian Ocean trade routes. If Britain in her judgment feels that any action she takes contributes to the protection of the Indian trade routes, that is her decision, and the results of that, as far as the Indian trade routes are concerned, would be in Australia's interest. But we don't urge or condemn.

Q. Well, put it in another way, then. Is a strong South African essential to our security in the Indian Ocean?

PM I wouldn't want to comment on that. After all, we are talking simply about whether the base which Britain occupies, which she monitors, under which there is an agreement, should be continued to be used by her for the protection of naval routes - trade routes. I can only repeat that we think it is her decision on this, and we don't propose to condemn her for making any decision she makes or protest against any decision she makes, or urge her into making any decision.

Q. But you wouldn't rather have the security if another base could be found and not have the arms sold to South Africa? Wouldn't that be a kind of compromise....

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PM I would like to leave this to Britain's decision.

Q. What precisely is the degree of threat now, of the Russian Navy in the Indian Ocean?

PM I don't think it is great - I don't think it is great at all. It is comparatively - you know, ships deployed are comparatively small. But there is a new element that has been introduced. Russian ships in the past have come into the Indian Ocean and gone away again. But there is clearly a much greater degree of interest, a much greater period of time during which ships of the Russian Navy are in the Indian Ocean, a clear greater interest and greater action to sustain that interest. And this is comparatively new.

Q. You allow that the Russians do have some kind of legitimate interest in the Indian Ocean or....

PM I suppose that all countries really have an interest in all oceans, but I agree with Britain that when there is a new element introduced into a situation, then you have to take cognisance of that new element.

Q. Is the threat really to the trade routes or is it something else?

PM I didn't say there was a threat, you know. I just said there was a new element that had been introduced and that this, therefore, had to be taken care of. And I don't suppose that we would have been acting as we are, to provide naval facilities in Western Australia, if we didn't feel this.

Q. Why is the study group then looking at the security of maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean if there isn't some kind of hypothetical, I suppose, threat from somebody?

PM ... I think that this was something that was put up by somebody at the Conference - I think I told you this before - perhaps in the expectation that if it were put up and adopted then it would delay Britain making a decision. But Britain made it quite clear that this was not so.

Q. Well, can I put it this way. If Russia were to be a threat in the Indian Ocean, would it be through its effect on our trade routes or would it be something else? I mean, what could it do about the trade routes?

PM Well, I don't think that in talking about the Commonwealth Conference and what occupied the Commonwealth Conference, I want to go into kind of Defence Papers on what the effects of a new presence in the Indian Ocean might, from a defence point of view, be, other than to say as I have said before, we are interested in maintaining a trade route. Britain is particularly interested in maintaining her trade routes; there is a new element introduced; Britain and ourselves feel that we need to take more interest in it ourselves. That's all.

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Q. Now, Prime Minister, we will leave that there. Could I turn now to another subject which arose - not at the Conference - but while you were in Singapore, our immigration policy. In your speech to the Australian Alumni Association, you were quoted as saying, of Australia, that "it may provide the first truly multi-racial society, with no tensions of any kind possible between any of the races within it. At any rate, this is our ideal". Now, did you see that as a major statement of new policy?

PM No, I didn't.

Q. What did you mean by multi-racial then, a multi-racial society?

PM I meant a society in which there are people with different coloured skins, of different racial extraction, such as in fact we have in Australia at the moment. We have Australians, we have aboriginals, we have Australians of Chinese extraction, of Japanese extraction, of a variety of races. You see, Singapore - I was speaking in Singapore and speaking to the Singapore Alumni people - Singapore says, "We are a multi-racial society" and so they are. They are Chinese, Malays, Indians, Europeans, Eurasians, but they are also a homogeneous society. I don't know the percentage, but I would think 90 per cent at least are Chinese. They are homogeneous, but there are many races. And there are also tensions there between the races from time to time. And as far as Australia is concerned, I believe we must remain homogeneous. I believe in the present application of our immigration policy, but under our present immigration policy, people of other races can come in and be assimilated. I feel there is little or no racial feeling in Australia towards such people. And this being continued could lead to a multi-racial society in the sense that there were a number of different races, without racial tensions which exist in almost every other country of the world. But can I perhaps make it more clear by reading some sentences of what I said... because one of the speakers had spoken about our immigration policy. I said,

"As far as the application of an immigration policy is concerned, I have no hesitation in saying what I am now going to say, and I propose to make no apology for saying it. Looking around the world, I see social problems between Negro and Asian in some parts of Africa, I see tensions between Negro and European in England. I see grave danger to normal living in the split between the races in the United States, and I read not long ago of riots between races not far away from where I am standing now, riots which could have easily spread to Singapore. I am not going to allow that kind of danger to occur in Australia."

Q. Prime Minister, if I could just come back to that, you also did mention that Australia might become the first truly multi-racial society in another part. I don't want to bandy words with you. Now what you are saying there is that to the extent we become a multi-racial society, it won't be so much through deliberate policy as through accident or stealth or....

PM Well, I think it will be through deliberate policy in that we are not proposing to change an immigration policy in order to allow large numbers of other races to come in, because that would create racial tension. Can I quote the words that you are quoting?

Q. Yes.

PM/ "I think that the course which we are following" - that is our present immigration policy - "holds great chances of achieving real racial tolerance. I think it holds better chances than if we were to risk the kind of racial conflicts that other countries have".... which I believe we would risk, if we abandoned our present policy. "I think if we build up gradually inside Australia a proportion of people without white skins, then there will be a complete lack of consciousness that it is being built up"and that we will arrive at a state where we will have a multi-racial country without racial tensions - and perhaps the first in the world. The key to that is that we do maintain our present policy.

Q. If there were not tensions - no racial tensions in a multi-racial society - would you prefer a society which wasn't homogeneous, but which in fact did have great diversity of race, of language, religion...

PM You are asking me a question that if there were no racial tensions, and wherever I look in the world, I can see no instance where there aren't racial tensions.

Q. What I am really asking is - is a homogeneous society a preferable ideal to a very diverse society? It seemed to me you were hinting....

PM If you look at ideals as distinct from realities, of course an ideal is something that one must ultimately strive towards, but it is not something which can be applied in a world of reality.

Q. Well, if Australia goes on being so relatively free from racial tensions, given the limited amount of non-European immigration, would you like to see, or would you expect to see a gradual increase in the number of non-Europeans migrating to Australia?

PM I would want to see Australia remaining homogeneous, overwhelmingly homogeneous, as I think that is the only way one can avoid racial tensions. There are racial tensions - and I am quoting again - "There are racial tensions, and whether there ought to be or not, doesn't matter. We live in a world of reality. We don't live in a world which would be different if we could shatter it to bits and remould it." And living in a world of reality, I believe that if we were to abandon our restricted immigration policy, that we would get tensions that we won't get if we continue with the liberalised policy we have now got.

Q. Of course, it is often suggested, and I am sure you have heard this, that our policy is a racist policy - people of other countries sometimes say this, often not looking at their own policies, I agree. But one of the things, of course, that they do beat us with now is the fact that we don't grant assisted passages to non-European migrants - not so much the number, but we distinguish on that ground. Do you feel that it would be worth removing that charge?

PM No. No, I don't.

Q. Why?

PM Because I believe that what we apply, and what almost every other country I can think of applies, is a racist immigration policy. If it were not, then anybody from anywhere could come in equal numbers and this simply doesn't apply. But what I believe is that the racial implications of abandoning our present policy would lead to the kind of trouble that we have seen in other nations, and not only European nations.

Q. Prime Minister, now when we look ahead after the Conference, where do you see the Commonwealth in our overall foreign policy? How big a part does it, or will it, play?

PM It is a very hard question to answer. You say "in our overall foreign policy". I don't quite know how to fit one concept into another. I would say, for example, quite clearly Indonesia, in relation to our foreign policy, is far more important to us than many countries in the Commonwealth are - far more important. So I don't think the Commonwealth impinges on that area of foreign policy at all. But perhaps where it impinges is that one can, or one hopes in the future, meet around the table, a group of people from different countries in the Commonwealth and explain to each one of them one's own foreign policy, and perhaps reach things on which one can agree and which one can co-operate.

Q. Prime Minister, I suppose the worst cynics suggest there won't be another Commonwealth Conference. Will there be?

PM I can't tell you. I would be surprised if there were not. The Commonwealth is not going to disappear because if the worst came to the worst, and some nations in it decided not to be in the Commonwealth... it would depend on how many nations still wished for there to be a Commonwealth, how many nations wanted to go to a Commonwealth Conference. And I think there would be quite a number.

Q. Prime Minister, thank you very much for talking to us.
