



PRIME MINISTER

For Media

THURSDAY 5 MARCH 1981

SPEECH TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMEMORATING COMMONWEALTH DAY

Members will recall that a decision has been made by the members of the Commonwealth to set aside the second Monday in March each year as a day on which the purpose and achievements of the Commonwealth would be duly marked. As this is the last sitting day before this year's Commonwealth Day I would like to take this opportunity to make a brief statement to that end.

This year's Commonwealth Day is especially noteworthy for Australia in two respects. First, it marks the 50th anniversary of the Statute of Westminster, an Act of the British Parliament which gave birth to the Commonwealth. Second, this year Australia will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting for the first time.

To an exceptional extent the history of the Commonwealth has been one of gradual evolution, marked by continuity and subtle modifications rather than abrupt change. But if there is one event which constitutes a decisive step in that evolution, it is surely the passing of the statute of Westminster in 1931. That event marked the decisive transition from empire to Commonwealth.

By establishing the principles of autonomy, equality and free association among members, it created the conditions for the Commonwealth to grow, diversify and establish a distinctive role in an era of far-reaching changes. Thus as decolonisation proceeded with great rapidity, most of the newly independent countries found it natural and advantageous to become members of it. A leading Australian authority on the Commonwealth (Professor Bruce Miller) has referred to the Statute as "a masterpiece of ambiguity", and no doubt in legal and constitutional terms it was that. But politically it pointed clearly in one direction. The time when discussion of the Commonwealth tended to be clouded by rather dubious metaphysics and the search for the definition of an essence is long since past.