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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER

OPENING CEREMONY OF THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING

NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS - 16 OCTOBER 1985

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We Commonwealth leaders assembled here at Nassau are the inheritors of a great tradition. It is the tradition of a Commonwealth emerged from Empire; like most great traditions it is not without flaw or blemish.

But the very fact that we are a Commonwealth that has emerged from Empire with a greater measure of common purpose is itself a measure of the strength of this tradition.

Let us at the outset of this Meeting ask ourselves the question - what have been the elements, the secret if you like, of that strength? And let us ask that question seeking to find in the answer a guide in discharging our high responsibilities.

If I could put it in a simple phrase, I believe the essence of that strength has been in an understanding of the limits of power.

Let me be precise. In the immediate post-war period, it would have been possible for Britain to maintain for longer than it did the colonial status of the Indian sub-continent.

It had the instruments of power to do so, but it understood the limits of that power.

And those limits were understood through a proper perception of the force of other rights and interests which together constituted a countervailing power. These included the right and determination of peoples to be free to determine their different destinies; and it included an enlightened self-interest on the part of a Britain which understood that, in the long term, its own economic, political and strategic concerns would be better protected by accommodating the new realities.

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This countervailing power is not so susceptible to measurement as the power that can be accounted in battalions, squadrons and the elements of military and economic weaponry. But all our history as a Commonwealth has shown that it is no less real for that reason. It has an inexorable capacity to grow and ultimately to overcome those who would take refuge in this sterile accounting of conventional power.

Some would argue that, at times, the limits of power have not been understood sufficiently early. It has been argued of Britain. It has been equally argued of Australia, in relation to Papua New Guinea.

But I repeat, we assemble as a unique institution representing a quarter of the world's population, one third of its sovereign and independent nations, meeting as equals because, however faltering at times, we have together learned the limits of power.

And that learning process has given the Commonwealth a particular capacity to recognise in time the need for change; to discern civilised directions for change; and, at important moments, to be an effective agent for change.

If my answer then to this question - what is the secret of the strength of our Commonwealth tradition - is correct, I believe it can usefully inform our approach to the major issues before us in the coming week.

Without doubt the predominant of these is, and should be, South Africa, an issue of historic concern to the Commonwealth.

If ever there was a regime which should have learnt from our experience the lesson of the limits of power it is that in South Africa.

They are the sterile accountants of our day who would measure their capacity to insulate themselves against the pressure of inevitable change by the size of their military arsenal.

They are wrong. For the force of that countervailing power is growing, it is inexorable and it is unquenchable. The spirit of men and women yearning to be free, to have that right to determine their own destiny will not be extinguished. It will not be extinguished, however brutally that arsenal is unleashed upon them.

The world that is witness to events in South Africa is becoming increasingly impatient. I believe it is looking to us to draw upon our tradition, to seek to apply to South Africa the lessons we have learned from our own experience.

This will require us to strengthen, by our decisions, the countervailing power that is growing by the day within and outside South Africa.

This will require us to examine and to be prepared to implement the option of further effective economic sanctions.

But just as importantly it will require us to sustain the flame of enlightened self-interest that has now been lit in South Africa, and is manifest in the recent talks in Lusaka between representatives of South African business and the ANC. For the fact is that all the economic capacity that has been established in South Africa and which now disproportionately benefits the few, will only endure and be available for the benefit of all if a new, free and just South Africa is created.

Equally, Australia believes that all nations have a duty to encourage the two super powers to recognise the limits of power. They have the capacity not only to destroy each other a thousand times over but indeed to obliterate the human race from the face of this planet. This threat, and the squandering of resources it entails, is now central to the concerns of mankind.

And so, while repudiating the illusory calls of unilateral disarmament, we from this Commonwealth have the opportunity to bring the pressure of our resolution upon the super powers to understand and discharge their obligations to all peoples to work for the progressive reduction of nuclear arsenals through balanced and verifiable agreements.

The peoples of the South Pacific have themselves projected this resolve by their recent successful introduction of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.

Finally, in our deliberations in the economic area we should acknowledge the limits of power. Australia believes that we live in an era in which recognition of the mutual benefits of a multilateral trading system are in danger of disappearing. Increasingly there are those who would embrace the ultimately self-defeating power of protectionism. This is a dangerous outlook, and one which we should seek, by our work together, to dispel.

We have learned from our experience, we reflect in our tradition, that conflict can give way to harmony. We rightly accept as an article of shared faith that the colour of people's skin is as irrelevant as the colour of their eyes to their political, economic and social rights.

Let us by our approach to our task in the coming days, and by the decisions we take, not only confirm this article of faith within the Commonwealth but seek to make it a reality for all those who look to us for help.

ENDS