

ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY ESSAY COMPETITION 1976-77

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CLASS A QUESTION NO. 2

Discuss the statement made recently by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, His Excellency, Mr. Shridath S. Ramphal, "The modern Commonwealth - the Commonwealth today - has not evolved from empire; it is the negation of empire; and therein lies its character".

The present day Commonwealth is far different in basic structure from the former British Empire, and in this aspect it is a negation, or contradiction, of empire. However, one is wrong in stating that the Commonwealth has not evolved from empire because the process of transformation from one state to another took many years, and the developments that occurred during the change occurred in a structured sequence, with each successive alteration depending on events that preceded it.

The first indication of Commonwealth attitudes appeared in January, 1839, with the submission of Lord Durham's Report on Upper and Lower Canada to the Colonial Secretary in London. In the report, Durham advocated the preservation of the British Empire through the use of liberal ideas, the main one being that a colony should adopt the political and judicial systems of Britain and manage its own internal affairs while Britain, the mother country, would hold authority only in foreign affairs, trade with other British colonies, and the establishment of the form of government. Durham stated in his report: "We (the British) should not interfere with the colony's internal legislation in matters which do not affect their relations with the mother country. The matters concerning us are very few."<sup>1</sup> Just as the initial act of Commonwealth can be attributed to the year 1839, the end of the British Empire can be set at a definite point of time - January 19, 1968, when Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced the final homecoming of the British legions. In between these two dates a series of events took place to continue the process of evolution from the British Empire into the Commonwealth of Nations, with the majority of changes occurring from 1900 onward.

The British Empire evolved into Commonwealth in two ways. It evolved in physical changes affecting size and structure. It also evolved through changes of thought and attitude.

In 1918, at the end of the First World War, the British Empire stood at its imperial peak. Britain had made vast territorial gains during the war, acquiring land in Africa including South-West Africa and Tanganyika; and Mesopotamia and Palestine in the Middle East. The nations of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa were dominions of the Empire, having reached their status through the establishment of responsible government. It was indeed the Empire upon which the sun never set.

1. H.H. Herstein, L.J. Hughes, R.C. Kirbyson, Challenge and Survival: The History of Canada (Scarborough, Ont. Prentice-Hall, 1970), p.184 cited, Lucas, Durham's Report Vol. 2, p.281.
2. Colin Cross, The Fall of the British Empire (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd. 1968) p. 357.



In 1926 the Imperial Conference decided that there had to be an explicit definition of the status of Britain and her dominions and it drew up a resolution proclaiming them as "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations."<sup>3</sup> The Statute of Westminster, as it came to be called, was passed by the British Parliament in 1931. This ultimately reduced the power of the Monarchy in the dominions.

In 1947 the India Act was drawn up and this proved to be one of the more significant events leading to the modern Commonwealth. The Act established India and Pakistan as separate and independent nations and it marked the first time that a mother country had granted independence to a nation of a race other than its own. When India became a republic in 1949 it was then decided that a nation could become a Commonwealth member without recognizing the Monarchy. In forthcoming years Britain would grant independence to numerous colonies all over the world. The Commonwealth had finally evolved to a full extent and it appeared much as it does today.

Evolution of thoughts and ideas progressed throughout the transformation from Empire to Commonwealth. At the 1917 Imperial War Conference Britain and the four dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were referred to as "autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth" rather than members of an Empire. After the war, the term "Empire" was carried primarily by loyal traditionalists whereas the expression "British Commonwealth" was used by the more realistic thinkers who were sharp to notice changing moral principles pertaining to the domination of one nation over another. One of these idealists was Jan Christian Smuts who was serving as Prime Minister of South Africa in 1917 when he stated in London:

"I think the very expression "Empire" is misleading because it makes people think we are one community to which the word "Empire" can appropriately be applied. Germany is an Empire. Rome was an Empire. India is an Empire. But we are a system of nations. We are not a state, but a community of states and nations ... We are a system of states, and not a stationary system, but a dynamic and evolving system, always going forward to new destinies."<sup>5</sup>

The Statute of Westminster adopted the views of Smuts and his contemporaries, although the word 'British' still dominated the term "British Commonwealth of Nations". The dominating title was eventually dropped for good in 1949 during the Commonwealth Conference in London, to eliminate a major point of friction that threatened to hamper India's attempt to become a republic.

It is apparent then that Commonwealth has evolved from Empire. One can argue that evolution did not occur, concluding that the Statute of Westminster turned the tables on the Empire and immediately formed a Commonwealth. However, in the Statute of Westminster, the dominions were still referred to as "... communities within the British Empire, equal in status ... united by a common allegiance to the Crown."<sup>6</sup> It was India's decision of 1949 to become a republic that abolished the monarchical requirement and instead realized that the Commonwealth should be a group of nations sharing common goals and perspective. It was ultimately a series of events taking place from Durham's report of 1839, through the establishment of responsible government in dominions from 1867 (Canada), to 1910 (South Africa), and the foresight of men such as Jan Christian Smuts that formed the Commonwealth. To contradict this pattern of transition as Ramphal has, is a gross error for "the British

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3. Commonwealth Secretariat, pub. Notes on the Commonwealth (pamphlet issued by the Commonwealth Secretariat, June 1975 iss.) p.3
  4. Colin Cross, The Fall of the British Empire (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1968) p. 172
  5. Ibid, p. 173
  6. Colin Cross, The Fall of the British Empire (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1968) p. 138



Empire-Commonwealth is an evolving community and no-one should deny continuity with the past." This evolving community has, nevertheless, formed a totally new concept from empire and in this aspect, Commonwealth can be correctly regarded as a negation of empire.

In the days of imperial rule, immediately following the First World War, British colonies were used to upgrade British prestige and power. The British under Prime Minister Lloyd George then "... controlled well over a quarter of the world's land surface and over a quarter of the human race." Attitudes have changed remarkably since then. Now the Commonwealth which Britain no longer dominates, is "... an association of peoples of every race who have freely joined together as equals in the hope that they have something to offer each other and can also give the world an example of inter-racial as well as international friendship and cooperation."

The British Empire centered around its monarch who expected allegiance from all British colonies. Although the monarch had no direct power over his subjects overseas, he was the pinnacle from which power was derived, in that his cabinet's wishes could influence the actions of colonial administrators. No such system exists now. After India's decision to become a republic in 1949 it was not a Commonwealth requirement to pledge allegiance to the British Crown. As a result, the role of the monarchy as a unifying force in the Commonwealth has deteriorated. "With or without a Monarchy, the Commonwealth will continue to develop ... according to its needs and interests."<sup>10</sup> Presently the Crown is a symbol of tradition, not a symbol of imperial rule as it was during the era of empire.

The British Empire was undoubtedly held together by the British Navy, whose fleets would make frequent visits to colonial ports and whose awesome power was a major deterrent to anti-British sentiments. The Navy also kept major trade routes open and this was necessary for the preservation of the Empire. The modern Commonwealth in contrast is held together by historical ties, common parliamentary systems of individual nations, and in a few cases necessity, for lesser nations have more influence in the closely-knit Commonwealth than they do in the United Nations which is primarily concerned with patronizing the major world powers and their selfish interests.

It is more difficult to express the true meaning of Commonwealth than it is to explain empire. The word "empire" is derived from a Latin word "imperium" which means supreme command. The expression "commonwealth" has a vague definition of "common welfare". "It is easier to describe what the Commonwealth is not than what it is. It is not an empire, an alliance, a power block or a mutual security group, or a diplomatic unit or a trading and security system for its members."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the Commonwealth combines nations in a co-operative group striving toward responsibility, understanding, and peace.

In that the Commonwealth is a negation of Empire brought about by an evolving transition, it has formulated its own unique characteristics based upon an ultimate rejection of Imperial values. Commonwealth members realize that they can benefit from their membership in a dynamic and evolving organization. Individual nations can learn from each other and co-operate to improve their social standing and therefore strengthen and intensify the Commonwealth bond.

The British Empire was strong in the military sense during and immediately after the First World War. The Commonwealth is strong in its bonding of nations in such an association and this forms a major Commonwealth characteristic resulting

8. Colin Cross, op.cit., p. 16
9. Lester B. Pearson, The Commonwealth 1970, Smuts Memorial Lecture, (Cambridge University Press, 1971) p. 28
10. Willie Hamilton, M.P., My Queen and I (published in Canada by General Publishing Co., Don Mills, Ont. 1975). p. 154
11. Lester B. Pearson, The Commonwealth 1970, Smuts Memorial Lecture, (Cambridge University Press, 1971) p. 6.



from its vast difference from Empire. "The greatest strength of the Commonwealth bond is the adherence of its members to its common ideals which assures mutual understanding."<sup>12</sup> This strength has been achieved as a result of the withdrawal of nations from the Commonwealth leaving a core of countries willing to co-operate for ideal mutual interests. Free choice concerning Commonwealth membership has resulted in the withdrawal of Eire and Burma, not to mention Rhodesia which declared itself unilaterally independent. Clement Atlee, Prime Minister of Britain in 1946 stated, "We want no unwilling members,"<sup>13</sup> for it is certain that nations possessing intense nationalistic feelings would have certainly disrupted Commonwealth unity.

Unity and strength are the common denominators of Commonwealth principles. They are the outcome of an evolving process from Empire to Commonwealth; a process that has eliminated obsolete and impractical imperial views, and has resulted in a more meaningful and useful form of co-operation exhibited by the Commonwealth of Nations.

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12. H.H. Herstein, L.J. Hughes, R.C. Kirbyson, Challenge and Survival: The History of Canada (Scarborough, Ont. Prentice-Hall, 1970) p. 419 cited: House of Commons Debates, Apr. 29, 1948 (speaker: Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent) p. 3449
13. Kenneth Bradley C.M.G. ed. The Living Commonwealth, (London, England, Hutchison & Co.) p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> Lester K. Born, The Commonwealth 1970, Senate Memorial Lecture, (Cambridge University Press, 1971) p. 8.

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