

Royal Empire Society Essay 1956.

Class A.

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Books consulted in preparation of Essay

The Times British Colonies Review

The British Group. C. E. Key.

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The Commonwealth To-day.

What is the Commonwealth?

The British Empire. George W. Southgate.

The British Empire and Commonwealth. J. A. Williamson.

Preface to Royal Empire Society Essay.

Initial description of British Commonwealth association, its composition, aims, ideals, and common interests.

The Queen as Head of the Commonwealth.

Statute of Westminster 1931, its terms regarding Britain and her relations with Member countries.

Prime Ministers' Conferences.

Importance in world affairs. We should feel proud to belong to such a vast concord of nations.

Desire of British Government to confer self-government as quickly as possible.

British Colonial policy and assistance it renders. Natives receiving better education and food, enjoys higher standard of living.

Increased importance of individual countries in Commonwealth advantages of Commonwealth citizenship.

Establishment of social services staffed by colonial-born technicians.

Problems of changing lives of the natives - susceptibility to Communist influence. Colonies to be made aware of advantages of British experience.

Growing consciousness of interdependence. Resulting security, trade opportunities, increased prestige.

Freedom of Nations to follow own policies.

Commonwealth membership as lasting partnership.

United Kingdom - New Zealand association.

Possible arguments against Commonwealth membership: futility of them.

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Advantages of Imperial Preferences.

Domination of world by power. Commonwealth must hold its own.

Summary of advantages and disadvantages of Commonwealth membership.

The Royal Empire Society.

1.

A discussion of the main advantages and disadvantages of remaining within the Commonwealth for,

(a) a non-self-governing territory approaching independence and,

(b) an independent ^{country} of the Commonwealth and Empire.

Before attempting to discuss the main advantages and disadvantages of Commonwealth membership for both the non-self-governing and the independent countries of the Commonwealth and Empire, let us first investigate the nature and substance of the British Group. The Commonwealth is a free association of eight sovereign independent states: the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon. There are other possessions which will shortly assume independence, Nigeria and the Gold Coast for example. Most of these territories have a certain amount of self-government but external affairs continue to be the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government.

The United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have dependencies for which they are directly responsible. The United Kingdom colonial policy was laid down by the Secretary of State for the Colonies when in 1951 he said, "First, we all aim at helping the colonial territories to attain self-government within the British Commonwealth. To that end we are seeking as rapidly as possible to build up in each territory the institutions which its circumstances require."

as there is no central government, defence force or rigid juridical obligations or commitments, the Commonwealth is not a federation but a confederation or an alliance between a number of nations. There is no written constitution, but all members are bound by a common sense of values and ideals all aiming at common interests; peace

freedom, and world security. The foundation of this over-all interest rests on the fact that each nation was once responsible to the United Kingdom. We, therefore, have to a large degree, a common historical background, sharing a common political heritage and even in spite of racial and religious diversities, this has given rise to a common pattern of institutions whether legislative, executive or judicial.

At the head of all Governments, except India, stands the Queen in whose name administration is carried on. Deputizing for her in overseas countries are Governor-Generals, the representatives of the Crown. As Head of the Commonwealth, the Queen is the symbol of the free association of nations.

Commonwealth territories cover approximately one quarter of the world's land surface and therein exist wide diversities in history, religion, language and population. Canada is more under American influence and can act as interpreter between the United Kingdom and the United States, while Australia, more British in composition, has closer connections with the East-Asian countries.

The Statute of Westminster of 1931 laid down that the United Kingdom cannot decide policies for any Member country. The United Kingdom cannot declare war or make peace for another Member, it cannot decide its foreign or financial policy, or use its army without the Government concerned giving permission.

At regular intervals, delegations, headed by Prime Ministers meet in London for Commonwealth Conferences so that the different points of view can be presented. This body is purely advisory or consultative and does not have any legislative or executive power, although Governments usually abide by unanimous resolutions. Since the war, seven Prime Ministers' Conferences have been held in London, where intimate, frank, useful discussions have taken place. Occasionally, meetings

of Ministers are held to discuss particular subjects, Foreign affairs for instance. In January 1950, Foreign Ministers met in Colombo, where the Colombo Plan was inaugurated.

We have now discussed what the Commonwealth is and what it stands for. The British Commonwealth represents one of the greatest experiments in human organisation in history. Its vast extent, its great wealth and resources, its problems of race and language, colour and religion, make it a unique partnership which is outstandingly important in world affairs. Every week our newspapers contain numerous references to the various parts of the Commonwealth and daily our radios remind us of our contacts with other Commonwealth Members. We all must feel proud to belong to this vast family of peoples and should be keenly interested in its history and present-day problems. We have a wonderful heritage with immense possibilities for the good of all mankind. Here, then, is the fundamental advantage for any body, self-governing or non-self-governing to be associated with this great family. All the parts are interdependent and to a large extent the welfare of one is bound up with the welfare of the whole group. Members like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, can claim all the privileges and responsibilities of government such as Britain enjoys. They have their own Governments, are members of United Nations where each nation is free to vote as it thinks fit. During the height of the Suez Canal crisis we note that Canada did not feel obliged to support Britain in her intervention in Egypt, a clear example of the Commonwealth Members' internal independence.

It is the policy of the British Government to help all the various types of governments towards further freedom and self-government. The words of the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1943, Colonel Oliver Stanley, summed up the position when he said,

"I have no inclination to apologize for the British Empire. In the past, as even our critics must admit, we have brought to millions of people security for life and property and an even-handed justice which they have never known before. Now it is our responsibility and pride to help those millions along the road to a full, happy, and prosperous share in the world of the future."

Under the Colonial Development and Welfare act of 1940, large sums of money have been set aside for the improvement of social services in dependent countries. a series of university colleges have been established in the West Indies, Nigeria, Gold Coast, and in Malaya. a large sum has been set aside for the training of colonial-born Civil Servants. Ten-year plans have been submitted by the Colonial Governments for the improvement of water supplies, village sanitation, child welfare and maternity, and housing conditions. We may ask, what does this mean to the inhabitants of the Colonial Welfare? It means the African will have a better education and better medical attention; the West Indian will have more food and houses; it will mean all the people in the same category will lead a happier life.

It is now clear that Members have abandoned former policies of isolation and now participate actively and positively in world affairs. This is done by the Commonwealth nations wanting to play their parts mainly through the United Nations; but by working together the British Group can exert considerable influence because it incorporates such a large portion of world opinion. Each of the Members will continue to grow in national and international stature, but there is no reason to fear that the increased strength of each will not also be the increased strength of all. alone, a nation's influence is limited, but in an association such as the British Commonwealth, a nation is more likely to readily obtain support from its fellowship and close relations it enjoys with other

Members. A country's particular conditions or desires will be met with much more sympathy and understanding from its Commonwealth friends because a uniformity of opinion is likely to exist.

As well as having its own local citizenship, each Commonwealth nation recognises its inhabitants to be British subjects. Commonwealth peoples do not regard one another as foreigners. On the contrary, they extend to one another privileges which are not granted foreigners. Even yet, the Irish Republic which came into being in 1949, is not regarded by Commonwealth nations as alien, nor are her citizens thought of as foreigners. As a result, all nations have that "common factor" in that we are all "in the family." This is a valuable advantage in travelling for an Englishman on reaching New Zealand is immediately a New Zealander without having to await naturalization.

It seems likely that in the future there will be more co-operation than ever before between the United Kingdom and the Member States in the very important activities of administration and scientific research, specially those directed towards Colonial problems and needs. Over recent years a growing number of recruits from overseas territories have been travelling to Britain to join the Colonial Service. Similarly, in the technical services closer co-operation is being fostered. The Central Medical School in Fiji, which is controlled by the Administration of that Colony, trains medical students from New Zealand, the United Kingdom and American dependencies to serve all over the Pacific Ocean.

There are strong influences at work striving for closer integration of administration, economics and other activities in the Commonwealth, which will grow in strength and effectiveness. In many parts of the Commonwealth we see signs of economic progress, enlargement of political freedom, and in the Members a growth in international stature which will

greatly contribute to the safety and welfare of the whole Society of Nations.

The Colonies will present a continually increasing range of difficult problems. The vast economic and political changes going on continuously are shifting the very bases of the lives of the natives. British influence has taught them to be more than subsistent as he has been for thousands of years. Now he has to produce a surplus so that he may buy food, clothing and other requirements from the world market. No matter how wisely and generously the Colonial Governments may discharge their responsibilities, such a fundamental economic change must bring with it enormous social, political and other problems to complicate the situation still further. Agitators, particularly Communist agitators, are finding fertile soil for their propaganda in the masses of confused and discontented natives who do not realize what these changes mean. It is, therefore, imperative that these colonies, particularly those approaching independence, should be made fully aware of the good intentions of the British and that immeasurable advantages accompany Commonwealth membership. The very serious troubles in Malaya and the less extensive troubles in the Gold Coast illustrate ^{this}. It is true that the Commonwealth will need the services of its very best sons and daughters of all its countries if these formidable problems are to be solved. When independence has been reached, it must be assured that the territory will continue to be sympathetic towards Britain and will continue to use British experience to the best advantage.

Now that the independence of Members of the Commonwealth is no longer in question, the emphasis shifts more and more to a growing consciousness of interdependence. Each Member realizes or should realize, that by its association in the Commonwealth, while retaining complete independence,

it also enjoys added security, greater opportunities for trade and cultural exchange, and advancement, and increased prestige in the councils of the world. The United Kingdom and Members have in common the same readiness to seek practical solutions to problems by discussion and exchange of view and it would be safe to say that this has contributed more than any other factor to the success of the Commonwealth association.

In 1914 the United Kingdom went to war, automatically involving the rest of the Commonwealth. In 1939 she did not have any authority at all to speak for the rest of the Commonwealth. Australia and New Zealand instantly declared war, but Canada acted a week later after a vote of Parliament. The South African Parliament debated and defeated a proposal for neutrality and then declared war. Eire remained neutral.

Lord Listowel, then Secretary of State said in the Second Reading of the Burma Independence Bill in the House of Commons in 1947,

"We here do not regard Commonwealth membership as something to be thrust by force upon a reluctant people, but as a priceless privilege granted only to those who deeply desire it and are conscious of its obligations as well as its advantages. The essence of the Commonwealth relationship is that it is a free association of nations with a common purpose, who belong together because they have decided by their own volition to give and to take fair in a world-wide partnership." Burma severed all relations completely with Britain, but has not benefitted by doing so. Member States do not think in terms of the right to secede. It is the basic assumption that the Commonwealth is not only voluntary and friendly, but a lasting partnership.

We in New Zealand have the strongest possible connections with Britain, the principal one being blood. Many of us have

family connections living in Britain and here exists the family tie in true meaning. Apart from that we feel a strong sense of protection and companionship from membership. Although Britain cannot afford us absolute protection because we are such a distance apart, we feel much more secure under the wing of the Mother Country. We are inclined to look to the United States for the practical protection as we did during World War II, but our views, general outlook and traditions are essentially British.

It can be argued that being linked with Britain is disadvantageous for we are likely to be involved in quarrels which do not concern us. In both wars it may be said we had no real quarrel with Germany. But these quarrels do affect us. Britain's cause was our cause. Germany was aiming at the very substance of our living and it was necessary for all to act.

In the colonies, Commonwealth connections can limit the ability to develop strong national spirit and can lead to a conflict of loyalties. The question arises whether to be loyal to one's own country or Commonwealth first. With the similarity of ideals such conflicts will hardly cause serious trouble or at any rate have not done so far. Commonwealth membership carries with it many trade advantages in the form of Imperial Preferences, a system which gives the general sense of material solidarity between the Mother Country and her territories. In this way the Commonwealth is largely a self-contained unit economically and can avoid trade upsets, and each Member can be sure of not being left behind in world trade.

The world today is dominated by nations of such magnitude and power that no Commonwealth country can compare in power or size with them. It is clear that the Commonwealth can only hold its own against Russia and the United States by co-operating and pooling all resources. Commonwealth disintegration would dangerously undermine Britain's position and.

her status as a world power would no longer exist.

On the whole, the advantages for Commonwealth membership greatly outweigh the disadvantages. To the independent territories it gives valuable aid politically and economically. As it is the United Kingdom Government's policy to confer self-government as soon as possible, the territories have no fear that they will always be dominated. They receive incalculable benefits in setting up and carrying out the workings of government. With the assistance of British technicians, higher standards of health are reached, agriculture is improved, education is made more national, communications and transport are set in motion, houses are built and the people are able to assume a greater standing among nations. The independent territories are given that added sense of security and protection, and prestige. As a New Zealand Premier has said, "It is independence with something added to it." A country can partake of Commonwealth membership without any sacrifice at all to its own freedom, for complete independence and self-government was guaranteed by the Imperial Conference of 1926 when it stated,

"The British Empire is not founded on negations. It depends essentially, if not formally, on positive ideals. Free institutions are its life blood. Free co-operation is its instrument. Peace, security and progress are among its objects. And, though every Dominion is now, and must always remain, the sole judge of the nature, and extent of its co-operation, no common cause will, in our opinion, be thereby imperilled."