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Preface.

Subject of Essay: "Britain's role in European and world affairs is at once strengthened and weakened by her Commonwealth ties." Discuss.

Preface

The actions of an individual must to some extent be conditioned by the society ^{in which} he lives. In the greater society, or community, of nations, it is even truer that the role of any one nation is influenced by its ties to some, or all, of the members of the group.

Britain's role in European and world affairs must be affected by her Commonwealth bonds for various reasons. For one thing, the democratic character of the means that the opinions of the individual members must be heard. Their views cannot be disregarded without the risk of earning their hostility, resentment, or even losing their friendship.

In the essay that follows, some specific political and economic issues will be discussed. For example, we will presently see why Britain's participation in military alliances, like NATO, is disapproved of by the Asian and African Commonwealth members but supported by the western Commonwealth members, and also the ^{influence} ~~results~~ of these two diverging attitudes on Britain's role in European and world affairs.

Besides NATO, the other issues discussed are the Suez crisis of 1956, Britain's membership in the Commonwealth sterling bloc, the British Colonial Policy, India's role as mediator in the international disputes, and the racial

problem in South Africa.
The essay follows.

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Professor

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in NATO, is a disapproval of by the Union and
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diverging attitudes on Britain's role in European and
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Within NATO, the other main discussion are the
long crisis of 1955, Britain's membership in the Commonwealth
during that, the British Commonwealth, which led to
debates in the international disputes, and the recent

"Britain's role in European and world affairs is at once strengthened and weakened by her Commonwealth ties."
Discuss.

The British Commonwealth may be described as a group of countries which are drawn together by a common history, a homogeneity of cultural and political outlook and a sharing of common specific interests. The essence of this association of nations is the practice of democracy; all member-nations are independent and equal in rank, irrespective of race, colour and creed, and irrespective of their economic development or their political power.

In their communications to one another and in their free exchange of ideas at conferences of all members of the group, where opinions are expressed on a great range of topics, ranging from economic affairs to matters of national policies, the Commonwealth demonstrate that democracy is a workable proposition. At these conferences, which are held every four or five years, the members, from the youngest, Malaya, to the oldest, Canada, speak to one another on a level of equality.

As the head, though not the dictator, of the Commonwealth, Britain's role is not easy. The views of the individual members on matters affecting the group are often diverging and democratic practice demands that every member's opinion be considered before action is taken by the group. The decisions, especially those on important matters of policy, of one member are bound to affect the others in the group, and when we remember that the Commonwealth comprises peoples of many races and diverse backgrounds, then we will appreciate the subsequent complication that may arise.

An ^{analogy} ~~picture~~ of the ^{inter-play of forces in} ~~inter-dependence~~ of the Commonwealth may be drawn from chemistry; in a mixture of more than two reacting substances, the reactions between any two will disturb to some extent the relative compositions of the other substances which will in their turn exert some influence on the speed and nature of the products of the reaction;

the result is to cause a change or shift in the position of chemical equilibrium. In short, the behaviour of any one substance will affect, and also in its turn, be affected, by the presence of the other substances.

Similarly Britain's ^{commonwealth} ties will exert some measure of influence on the direction of her role in European and world affairs. Whether the Commonwealth attachment strengthens or weakens her role will depend on various circumstances. Let us consider Britain's participation in the various military alliances, like NATO, for example.

The Commonwealth countries, particularly India, question the wisdom of Britain's membership in NATO. According to India, the existence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation acts as a provocation to Russia and adds to world tension. In India's opinion, Communism can be checked by eradicating poverty and improving the welfare of the masses; once the people's stomachs are satisfied, Communism will lose its appeal. While Britain agrees that economic development is important, she still maintains that it should go with a minimum measure of military preparedness. Moreover, the surest way of provoking a war is to have one side strong and aggressive in intent, but the realisation that an attack on one is an attack on all will act as a deterrent and is a great step towards peace and security. Furthermore, the smaller nations are able to remain free and neutral because a few big ^{powers} ~~nations~~ are willing to defend the right of every nation to pursue its own form of government. Hence, the establishment of defensive military pacts is necessary.

The other grounds for India's objection to NATO are that Britain, in her effort to keep NATO intact, will be driven to over-ride Commonwealth considerations and be forced to give moral support to the unpopular colonial administrations of her NATO partners. Why, ask the Asian Commonwealth countries, does Britain support the position of the French in Algeria?

So far, we have considered the feelings of the Asian (and, for that matter, African) members of the Commonwealth towards NATO. However, Canada, Australia and New Zealand support the establishment of military pacts for defensive purposes. They are convinced that the only way to check communist aggression is to show a willingness to resist it — perhaps, even to the extent of using force — and they are satisfied that NATO has been successful in halting the advance of communism in Europe. For that reason, they are in favour of Britain's membership in NATO.

These divided opinions give us an idea of the complications that ~~spun~~ Britain has to contend with. The same divergence of views are encountered on the desirability of SEATO and the Baghdad Pact.

No doubt there are different reasons for these attitudes and they are related to as apparent factors as geographical (Australia, for instance, feels insecure because of her isolation and her proximity to a continent where one of the powers is Communist) and as complex factors as sociological backgrounds (~~in~~ India, among other things, is widely influenced by Gandhi's concept of non-violence and passive resistance). But these factors place Britain in a difficult situation; if she leaves NATO or any of the above-mentioned military alliances, she will not only leave a big gap in European defence, but she will ~~enlarge~~ the Anglo-American alliance, which is so vital to the interests of the free world; if she continues as a member of these pacts, as at present, she can only hope that the Asian and African countries of the Commonwealth will come over to her way of thinking, or that at least these differences of opinion will not be so serious as to split the Commonwealth.

We all recall the regrettable Suez incident of 1956. Britain's invasion of Egypt brought forth unfavourable reactions from most parts of the world. And, moreover, when moral support was most needed, she found that India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, to name a few of

her friends, joined in the criticisms of her action. The unity of the Commonwealth was threatened, and, at one stage, it was in danger of disintegration. The fear of this happening was partly responsible for Britain's decision to withdraw her troops from Suez. Therefore, it may be said that Britain's role in the Suez crisis was weakened by her Commonwealth ties.

Nowadays, it is hard to draw the line between an international ~~incident~~^{issue} and a domestic one. Those who defend Britain's action argue that since the Suez canal concerns the economy of so many nations, the Suez crisis is therefore an international incident and Britain was justified in taking action. Moreover, the claims of nationalism should be subordinated to the interests of internationalism. Much may be said for the stands on both sides of the issue but this episode seems to illustrate once again the extending influence of the Commonwealth tie.

We now turn to another aspect, the economic aspect, of Britain's role in world affairs. Britain is linked to the Commonwealth economically through her participation in the Commonwealth sterling bloc. The members of this bloc aid one another in their trade by offering what is known as Imperial preferences. That is to say that the ~~goods~~ duties on products from the other ~~Commonwealth~~ members are lower than those on the same products from ~~and~~ countries outside the bloc. This reciprocity of trading privileges, it is hoped, will encourage the growth of intra-Commonwealth trade.

Part of the earnings of the members are paid into a pool at the Bank of England. In practice, Britain makes the bulk of the contributions towards the pool but after the war, she needed all her money to build up her economy and had to cut down on her contributions ~~to the pool~~. In fact, she had to turn over to the pool the financial grants she received from the Marshall Plan. And it looks as if her finances will be strained further by the loans or grants which the newly-independent

countries will demand of her.

In addition, there are the Sunders of the Commonwealth Development Fund, the Colombo Plan and the Commonwealth Technical Co-operation Scheme, the principal costs of which are met by Britain, Canada and Australia.

The countries which benefit most from participation in the sterling bloc are the Asian and Africa members of the Commonwealth. The other members, especially Britain and Canada, gain little and sometimes lose by their memberships in the sterling area. As mentioned before, Britain's economic responsibilities in the Commonwealth sterling area ~~are a~~ considerable drain on her resources and hence it may be said that this is another example of the weakening influence of her Commonwealth bonds.

Perhaps in the matter of colonial policy, Britain is most handicapped by her attachment to the Commonwealth. The Asian and African members take a great interest in Britain's colonial policy; and often they tend to be critical and want to hasten the speed of transfer of power from Britain to colonial territories. Recently, this impatience has died a little; some, like Malaya, (possibly, with the example of Indonesia in mind) urge that it is better for Britain to effect the transfer of power in gradual stages.

On the other hand, other Commonwealth members, Canada, for example, advise that Britain should not grant self-government to her colonial territories too rapidly but suggest that the indigenous peoples of the colonies should be given education and experience in Parliamentary government, based on the British model, before being handed the reins of self-government.

A note of ~~growing~~ discord is struck by South Africa which complains that Britain is rushing some of her colonies towards political self-determination. South Africa resents the transfer of power in territories where there is a white minority and a coloured majority. In particular, South Africa resents the proposed formation of self-governing colonial territories just north of her border.

With so many differing voices, who is Britain to

listen to? Britain is committed to a policy of enlightened colonial administration and so at the risk of offending some, a risk, which, anyway it is hard to avoid, she has to implement her policy of "the gradual ending of the colonial system by Education of the people in self-government and the development of the resources of the territory, thus preparing them for an eventual liberation from tutelage." *

What divides the majority of the Commonwealth is rather questions of pace and method, and not, as in the case of South Africa, of goal. On the whole, Britain has shown remarkable moderation in her colonial policy; it is unavoidable that a few ^{impatient} Commonwealth voices be raised; but the Britain's colonial record has raised her prestige and her achievements in Commonwealth relationships can only strengthen her role in world affairs.

Now we come to an issue, which, while it remains unresolved, will continue to be a source of embarrassment to Britain. This is the racial problem in South Africa.

It will be observed that the Asian and African members of the Commonwealth place most emphasis on the need to raise their standards of living, while the Western members of the Commonwealth (who already enjoy a high living standard) are more concerned with meeting the Communist threat. These two attitudes are very understandable. The attitude of the Asian and African members is partly owing to their belief that the Communist threat is not as real or as immediate as the Western members think. Despite this, it is inconceivable to think of the Asian and African members remaining neutral when their Western brothers are involved in a war again with the Communist powers. In fact, one Asian member, Pakistan, has assured the West that she will not stand by as an onlooker in the event of a war between the West and the Communists.

At the moment, the neutrality of India may even be an advantage to the Commonwealth and to Britain because

* "The Colonial Problem", a report by a study group of members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs."

India can then play an important role as mediator in international disputes. India's part in agitating for negotiations between the warring factions of North and South Korea helped to bring the Korean war to an end. Western observers are agreed that India can make valuable contributions towards lessening world tension, and also acting as a bridge between East and West. In the quarrels between the Communist and the West, India's presence can serve as a calming influence. The use of her good offices in arranging for disarmament talks and for the resolving of differences between Russia and the West offers a ray of hope for a peaceful settlement of all these problems. Britain may well be proud of her protégé, India, and grateful for this strengthening Commonwealth link.

Now we come to an issue, which, while it remains, will continue to be a source of embarrassment to Britain. This is the racial problem of South Africa. Whenever this problem is debated in the world forum, the United Nations, it gives rise to expressions of ill-will between India and South Africa. The policy of racial segregation practised in South Africa, and the deprivation of political and economic rights to of the natives has drawn much criticism from Commonwealth members and countries outside the group. Britain, as head of the Commonwealth, has a moral as well as a political responsibility ^{see, that} to the Commonwealth develop into a multi-racial community of equal states. If, therefore, a Commonwealth country persisted in denying in practice the principle of racial equality, or having promised partnership and equality, continued to practise discrimination, then the whole Commonwealth is affected. The present state of affairs in South Africa is a challenge to Britain's moral leadership. If Britain shirks the moral issues involved, ~~British~~ ^{her} prestige will suffer in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The examples discussed have provided evidence of the two effects of the Commonwealth link on Britain's role in European and world affairs. Sometimes, the link is weakening (as during the Suez crisis), sometimes it is strengthening (as shown by the esteem ^{which} a former British protégé, India, is winning ^{through} her role as mediator in international disputes).

and finally it may both be weakening and strengthening
at the same time (as in its effects on British colonial policy).

And, as long as this tie exists, it will continue
to influence Britain's career in European and world affairs.

Books consulted.

1. "The Multi-Racial Commonwealth" by Nicholas Mansergh
2. "The Colonial Problem", a report by a study group
of Members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.