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Essay: 'The British Commonwealth is not breaking up but  
growing up.' Discuss.

Summary: Everything changes, and states and empires must change  
or perish. The reasons for and methods of acquisition of  
the British Empire. Different types of constitutions.  
The attitude of the mother country to her colonies.  
Loss of American colonies, and change in attitude. Change  
in status and Statute of Westminster. Other empires. Fall  
of ancient empires, present outlook of other modern  
empires. Needs of new dominions in the Commonwealth. How  
dominion leaders are facing difficulties. Ties that bind,  
student exchange, sport, commerce. Dangers ahead, methods  
of solution. Conclusion.

In the sixth century before Christ, a Greek, Heraclitus, said, "Nothing is stationary", and this constant flux is one of the *raison d'être* of the British Commonwealth, which has grown and developed from the British Empire. Another Greek, Aristotle, in the fourth century B.C., realised that "man is by nature a political animal", and man being also gregarious, wherever social units were formed, rules governing those units quickly came into being. The Greeks were constitutional experimenters par excellence, and though their experiments, owing to Greek geography and the boundaries of the known world, never extended as far as one people governing others on the large scale of modern empires, the saying has been equally true of all empire-building nations since then, of Britain and her empire in particular. States must always strive for what they consider to be the ideal constitution, and here <sup>+</sup>"to travel hopefully is better than to arrive", for when they have achieved their original aim, they must either alter to comply with changed conditions, or flourish for a while, become stagnant, and ultimately fall to a more vigorous power. This is what happened to the Roman Empire, and is what our enemies would have us believe is happening to the British Empire, but an examination of the Commonwealth will show us that this is not so, nor likely to be so.

There is today an infinite variety of constitutions throughout the Commonwealth and Empire, giving an indication of the haphazard way in which it has come into being, as conquest, settlement and cession have all played their part in its formation. It is clear that in the beginning it was not so much a conscious desire to govern more backward peoples, but a simple instinct to acquire wealth and develop trade and commerce that impelled the Elizabethans and their successors to venture overseas. Quite often the early commercial companies had to keep law and order and to administer justice on their trading stations. This happened in India with the East India Company, in Nigeria with the Royal Niger Company, and with the British South Africa Company in the Rhodesias. In India, "in under half a century (1757-1805) a trading company that possessed a few unimportant posts on the coast, became responsible for the government of a large part of India". But this task was an expensive one, which the commercial companies finally had to hand over to the government. Sometimes Whitehall was not anxious for this responsibility, and it is interesting to see an early intention to teach the indigenous peoples to look after their own affairs. In 1833 Macaulay was writing from India:

"It may be that having become instructed in European knowledge, they (the Indian people) may at some age demand European institutions. Whether such a day will ever come I know not; but never will I attempt to avert or fetter it. Whenever it comes it will be the proudest day in English history."

Many critics have said that Britain has not always appeared so willing to give up her guardianship, and it is true that some Britons have gone overseas and exploited the colonial peoples cruelly,



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using them as sweated labour in mining enterprises and on plantations. The wealth of Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow was in large measure founded on the triangular run - trinkets to West Africa, slaves from there to the West Indies, and sugar back to England. Of Elmina on the Gold Coast it has been said, "Here were inflicted all the cruelties of which man's inhumanity is capable in the name of personal wealth and national prestige." However a great many men have clung to 'the white man's burden' for a very long time because they honestly wished to leave their wards with a sound working economic foundation. In the last few years there has been little delay in giving independence to coloured colonial peoples, and since the second world war, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, and more recently Ghana have taken their places as full partners at Commonwealth conferences beside older white dominions, like Canada and Australia. Next year they will be joined by the West Indies. In 1959 nearly 30 million Nigerians, almost half the dependent empire, will achieve their independence.

The Empire is achieving its independence - but it is easy to refute the charge that the Commonwealth is breaking up, for all the emancipated coloured territories, with the exception of Burma, have stayed in the Commonwealth, in allegiance to Queen Elizabeth, who when she visits them is known as the Queen of Ceylon, or the Queen of Ghana. Burma, now a republic, maintains close contact with the Commonwealth.

The various types of constitution to be found in the different territories give an indication of the way in which they were acquired. The oldest form is that in which the British went to found white settler communities in lands overseas, as in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Here they tried to lead a normal British life, still thinking of Great Britain as 'home' - a concept which still lives, and provides a link that the coloured dominions lack. Elsewhere the British found themselves in less propitious climates; the search for gold and ivory took them to the tropics, where fighting against the savage natives often ensued. Today many of these territories are colonies or protectorates, Sierra Leone, Gambia, British Guiana, Kenya. Some territories, such as Somaliland, Nyasaland, Bechuanaland, were ceded by treaties with chiefs who realized the white man's superior techniques in warfare and administration. These territories were administered by a Governor and Executive Council - then leading citizens were invited to form a Legislative Council - then as education of the natives progressed, they were asked to join. The final stage will be common roll elections, and a new dominion will join the Commonwealth.

This idea of devolution of power to colonial peoples, which finds common acceptance in Britain today, is a comparatively new theory. Today we are embarked on the delicate and difficult experiment of bringing the colonial peoples to political maturity. It is the function of those in power to guide and give direction to the changes that are inevitable. In the early days of empire, most people in the United Kingdom looked upon overseas possessions as serving the interests of the mother-country,

Their economic development was to be subordinate to England's, and to benefit her commercial interests. Early on the white colonists began to take an interest in the welfare of their adopted country, and when in 1773 the American colonists expressed dissatisfaction at their exploitation Great Britain tried to hold them down with a war that aroused criticism in every quarter, and was not even successful. England lost her American colonies and was warned of what would lie ahead if she did not reconsider her attitude to her dependent territories. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, responsible self-government was achieved by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the South African provinces, and at the beginning of the first world war, four white self-governing dominions fought alongside Britain against the common enemy, Germany. After the war there was a feeling that there should be a more mature relationship between these countries and Britain, and following the Imperial Conferences of 1926 and 1930, the Statute of Westminster was passed in 1931. This, unusual because it is accepted that Britain and the Empire have an unwritten constitution, confirmed the complete equality of the dominions with Britain, and said that any legislation by Britain should apply to a dominion only with the full consent of that dominion. In future all co-operation amongst the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations would be on an equal basis, and any concerted action that took place must result from voluntary agreement.

This process is now taking place with all dependent peoples, and this conception of voluntary abdication of power by the British is something which no other empire, classical, mediaeval or modern, has ever had. The Athenian empire, indeed, had as its members maritime powers, who were originally allies, but had been downgraded by Athens' seizure of the common treasury. The Roman empire was merely an enlargement of the bounds of Rome, with Roman soldiers permanently quartered in each province, and such an empire was much more concentrated and continuous than modern ones. Despite the great stretches of ocean which separate her colonies from the mother-land, France has always believed in integration, maintaining that a black Senegalese is a black Frenchman. The Belgians have regarded the Congo as a territory where they could exploit the economic wealth at the same time as giving maximum welfare to the natives; but there has been no political development, and not only do the natives not get a vote, the white settlers do not either. The Portuguese look upon their colonies as provinces of the mother-land. The advantage of these methods is that they have not produced the colour-bar that is so obvious in British territories, where the white settlers realize that ultimate control is destined to pass to the coloured indigenous peoples, and are afraid for their hitherto privileged status. But nationalism and anti-imperialism are today rampant, and the local populations are crying out to have a greater share in their government, as can be seen from the troubles of the French in Algeria and the Dutch in Java. This would suggest that our



method of leading dependent peoples to self-government is not only more dignified, but is likely to pay dividends in the long run; it is the French, Dutch, and perhaps soon the Portuguese and Belgian empires that are breaking up. It is their colonies who are leaving them as America once left Britain. The British Commonwealth is advancing into a mature, friendly and stable relationship between the mother-country and the other members.

The emergence of the young dominions into self government is not easy. Besides political independence, they need a sound economic basis. We can help to give them this by financial loans for capital development, communications, health services, education, water-power, and other necessities, but they will also need loans from the United Nations and other sources. Many of these states are like Ghana, not very wealthy, and with a population that is ill-fed, ill-housed, inadequately educated, and disease ridden. These underdeveloped territories will need much help, for unless their leaders can lift their standards of living, they will be easy prey for political agitators, Communists or any other mischief-makers, and this would indeed be dangerous for the solidarity of the free Commonwealth.

Forward-looking leaders like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Norman Manley in the West Indies, and Tenku Abdul Rahman in Malaya, are well aware of these dangers, and evidence that the Commonwealth is not disintegrating is furnished by the fact that these men gladly come to London and take part in the deliberations with their sister-dominions. Every year at the Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers the white leaders, like Mr. Menzies of Australia, sit down with brown leaders, like Mr. Nehru, and black leaders, like Mr. Nkrumah, to argue freely about their respective financial and economic problems. Other meetings of Commonwealth ministers, such as that of the Finance Ministers this year in Canada, are now developing, and so it can be seen that this voluntary association of the Commonwealth is a living, growing, dynamic, organic society.

Another factor which keeps the Commonwealth closely knit is the healthy exchanges in economic and social affairs between the overseas territories and the United Kingdom. Until they have sufficient universities of their own, a very distant prospect, young men and young women of the Commonwealth come to London, Oxford, Cambridge, and other seats of learning, for their higher education. At present there are about four thousand young Nigerians at our universities and technical colleges, about one thousand Ghanians, and hundreds of students from Kenya and Tanganyika, being educated in the United Kingdom. This constant flow backwards and forwards of coloured students speaks well for mutual understanding, and a happy and harmonious future. These thousands of English-speaking colonials will go back to their homelands to play leading parts as politicians, local government officers, civil servants, doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, and engineers. They take back to their own states English ideas of parliamentary democracy, honest local

government, and impartial justice, high standards of academic scholarship, and an incorruptible civil service.

In many other fields we are growing up together. We play the same games, especially cricket, tennis, association football, hockey, and badminton. Their touring sides visit us, and we in return enjoy their hospitality. The bond of cricket is particularly strong, for the Commonwealth has seven teams, black, brown and white, which visit each others' countries regularly, and the younger coloured nations are proving themselves equals in this sport. The deeds of the West Indies at cricket, the West Africans at boxing, Indians and Pakistanis at hockey, Malaysians at badminton, show that they are our peers in sport. Again in the field of business and commerce, we see the British and the peoples overseas working out a partnership together. In West Africa, famous firms like the United Africa Company are expanding in the new dominions, and are wisely Africanizing their firms. Africans are promoted to become managers and even directors, in the same way that they advance in the civil service and politics. The commercial ties that link the dominions to the United Kingdom are not only those of capital invested by the old country in the newer ones, but the mutually beneficial ones of trade. The other members of the Commonwealth are all more sparsely populated than the United Kingdom, and have been great food providers for Britain, taking in return finished goods, textiles, machinery, and not least, skilled workmen. This reciprocal trading underlines interdependence, and though two world wars have drained much of the capital from the United Kingdom, and there has been an invasion of American capital into Australia, and Canada, so near geographically, there has never been a question of secession. In fact, recently there has been a high-powered Canadian government economic mission, led by the Prime Minister, to work for closer economic and social ties with Britain.

It would be foolish however to become complacent and pretend that great dangers do not exist. Perils lie ahead wherever we have plural societies, for here conflict between the races and religions can easily occur. However, today we live in an era of discussion, and although nations may object to having what they consider domestic issues discussed in the United Nations Assembly, the consequences of war are so frightful that world opinion is strongly in favour of peaceful methods of settlement, and a problem that would in earlier times have led to war is now decided round a conference table.

Many countries of the former British empire are now equal partners in the Commonwealth, and others are on their way. But independence is obviously impracticable for the small islands (like St. Helena or the Falklands) of which the French said, during the period of English mercantile expansion, "il ne faut pas les laisser trainer" (you mustn't leave them lying about - the implication being that the British would take possession of them) Because of their small size and fundamental poverty in natural resources, these will never be able to support or



defend themselves, and their future will lie either in a loose association with Britain, where she retains control of only their defence and external affairs, or in federation with their neighbouring dominion, as New Guinea has joined Australia.

The Commonwealth was a great experiment, and one that so far is working. For the first time in history, an empire is ending - for the British empire is ending - not by fire and the sword, to pass into small states, one of which will arise to found another empire, and fall again in endless cycle, but in the creation of a new idea, a conception of a higher and more advanced association than an empire, in the free Commonwealth of Nations. The British have not always seen clearly what they ought to do for their empire. There have been mistakes, set-backs and disasters. But now the pattern is clear. The group of countries known once as the British Empire and now as the British Commonwealth is advancing from darkness into light, from incomprehension into understanding, from inequality into partnership, in fact from childhood into maturity.

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