

THE COMMONWEALTH TODAY

By SIR ROBERT E. HOLLAND

FROM the point of view of a cynic or materialist, the Commonwealth and Empire seems to have withered and shrunk sadly in the past twelve years.

For a long time, the pious belief was widely held that England had been entrusted by Providence with a mission to civilize and uplift the world, and was discharging it in a manner which did not admit of criticism. Now the scene has changed. The structure built through centuries has been shaken to its foundations by two wars; our trade has shrivelled; our seapower has dwindled; the civilization that we have tried to spread has been disparaged; and worst of all, faint-hearted or feather-brained persons within our own fold have set themselves, with a considerable measure of success, to pull down what our forefathers built up.

We don't any longer "hold the gorgeous East in fee", nor are we, as once, "the safeguard of the West". We have seen the foundations of civilization crack, and we are not at all sure that the cracks are being filled with anything more than putty. We may see them reopen in the very near future under the dangerous conditions which confront us at the moment, and they may widen to abysses in which many things that we have treasured in the past will be swallowed up.

I cannot help thinking that our period of recession began when Mr. Chamberlain started, in 1938, what was then called 'a new orientation of British foreign policy'.

To put it briefly, he wrenched aside the course of diplomatic relations with Germany and Italy in the hope of striking a bargain for peace, but this could not, in fact, be done without making some surrender of the position which Britain had previously taken up regarding the principles which should govern international relations. Great Britain had previously stood, in the eyes of the world, for the enforcement of treaties against lawless might, and for the prevention of aggressive interference in the internal affairs of independent States. It was a strange and unprecedented thing that Britain, in the face of veiled threats, should start negotiations with Dictator Powers for new relations without insisting, as a prior condition, on the fulfilment of solemn obligations. It was, in other words, the much-derided policy of 'appeasement'.

Now there is nothing wrong with appeasement *per se*. We should always be prepared to appease provided that such action is not merely in accordance with the principles of sound diplomacy but is demanded by conscience. Appeasement should always be refused when it involves compounding with wrong, and when the impulse to make some concession arises only from craven fear. The right course always is to follow our conscience and deal with every situation in the light of moral principle. Policies governing the enrolment and direction of military forces, in particular, are always liable to be swayed, in present circumstances, by nationalistic spirit—by patriotism, group prejudice, avarice, or other ulterior motives. In the past, diplomats responsible for conducting the relations of their countries with other States have often been constrained to base their policies on other considerations than moral principles. This is especially the case in so-called democratic countries when the masses of electors are swept by waves of emotion. Mankind in the mass under the influence of unreasoning fear or anger is prone to favour action which is plainly unmoral, in the hope that practical advantage may result. But, all too often, in the long run even that hope is betrayed, and only the evil survives. An eminent English diplomat, Sir Edward Grey, once said that in the course of his long career he had found that "to do the right thing is generally the right thing to do" when any grave decision has to be taken.

This is the first point which I want to make today, namely that, both in international relations and in daily life, we can only be assured that our aim is true through testing by the canons of conscience each individual action leading towards it. I believe that it was our failure to do this in 1938, our abasement for the time being of our own standards, that led us into great misfortunes and lessened respect for the sincerity of British ideals.

But we paid the price, we reformed our ranks and set up our banners. The name of the British Commonwealth and Empire became high among the nations because it withstood and defeated the Axis Powers for so long unaided; because, in the face of much calumny and misrepresentation, the honesty of British purpose and actions was once more vindicated; because in England, all political parties as of old, came into line over external policy when grave decisions affecting security had to be taken; and because the Commonwealth nations represented in the United Nations, though by no means voting in unison

on all issues, yet have often demonstrated their solidarity when a question of moral principle is clearly involved.

There is a fundamental unity of spirit which, though not manifested in any defence pact between the members of the Commonwealth and Empire, nevertheless animates their institutions, their policies, their mutual relations, and their attitude toward world problems. Our system is soundly based on the Rule of Law administered and developed by Governments assured of parliamentary support. As a great writer has said:—"Our system of government has always been *of* the people, *for* the people and *with*—but not *by*—the people." That is why the British Commonwealth not only sets a valuable example to the rest of the world, but may some day attract other peace-loving nations into its orbit.

The unity of the Commonwealth is essential to its own peace and welfare. It is also a vital element in the struggle to achieve world peace.

Now let us consider briefly the problems which face the Commonwealth nations at the present day, and try to estimate how our unity is standing up.

Early in January, a Prime Ministers' Conference, nine men with their respective staffs, met in London. The main problem for discussion was, of course, what contribution can the Commonwealth make by way of helping to counteract Communism's threat to world peace: and in particular,

(1) What assistance can be given by our various countries towards the erection of a military bulwark by the North Atlantic Treaty Powers (the enterprise of which General Eisenhower has been appointed Supreme Commander), and

(2) What attitude should be adopted with regard to the China-Korea involvement.

As regards the first problem, the Middle East is the special responsibility of Commonwealth countries, and one of the first objects of the Conference must have been to work out how organised help from different directions can arrive in that area in time to resist attack, when expected.

In this matter, hopes for agreement on effective cooperation were seriously clouded by the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir which, until settled, requires the two dominions to direct their military preparations against each other. The Pakistan Prime Minister declined to attend the Conference until he was assured that consideration would be given to the

Kashmir problem. Informal discussions and exchanges of views on the subject did in fact take place, but unfortunately without satisfactory result. Therefore, we have to face the fact that neither India nor Pakistan will, in the foreseeable future, be in a position to subscribe effective help for the maintenance of international security, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. Pakistan's strategic situation as a neighbour of Soviet Russia, her strained relations with Afghanistan which is already under strong Soviet influence, her close ties with Persia, Turkey and the Arab world—all these things combine to make her an essential factor in the security of the Middle East. Reports indicate that the Pakistan people are becoming increasingly resentful at the failure of schemes for a free and impartial plebiscite in Kashmir (78% of the 4 million inhabitants of Kashmir are Muslims), and resentment is now directed not only against India but against the British Government, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations. There is a painful possibility that Pakistan might decide that her destiny is not, after all, linked with the West. She might conceivably sever her ties with the Commonwealth and look to the Kremlin for support. The Muslim world generally is sure to sympathise with Pakistan's grievance over Kashmir, and this fact has a sinister bearing on Britain's present strained relations with Egypt, caused by the Egyptian demand for the withdrawal of British troops from the Canal Zone, and the handing over of the Sudan.

The Kashmir dispute, as the Australian Prime Minister remarked in London, is not only a threat to the peace and good government of the subcontinent of India, but a grave threat to the peace and security of the entire world.

It seems to be a blind spot in India's vision of world peace, which Prime Minister Nehru has so often and so eloquently presented.

A complex question of principle seems to underlie the opponents' contentions. Ought national allegiance to be governed by religious conviction as well as by political and economic considerations, because the Islamic way of life is not secure if those who follow it are subject to the political or military domination of an alien creed?

Or is Mr. Nehru right in advocating what he has called "the secular State", which purports to confer equal rights on all citizens without regard to creed?

Leaders in India have said that, if Kashmir were to join Pakistan because it is largely Muslim, the whole aspiration of

the "secular" State in India would be shattered. India's forty millions of Muslims might be dangerously moved.

There is a Quranic doctrine enjoining 'holy war' (jihad) against non-Muslim lands (dar-ul-harb) until they are included in Muslim dominions (dar-ul-Islam). During many centuries, the doctrine was responsible for untold horrors in India, but it eventually lost momentum under the amenities of British rule. Are we about to witness its recrudescence?

The next move in this delicate matter is up to the Security Council of the United Nations.

Effective military preparations by the Commonwealth for defence of the Middle East must also, unfortunately, be prejudiced by present conditions in South Africa.

The "Apartheid" policy of course constantly embitters the Union's relations with India and Pakistan; but apart from that, it is certain that South Africa's powerful and efficient defence forces are likely to be preoccupied with local defence problems. The size of any expeditionary force available, for example, for the defence of the Suez area against a Communist attack is likely to be small.

The vast African native population is favourable soil for the spread of Communist ideas, and Union forces will have their work cut out to maintain law and order in the southern part of the Continent, and to secure South Africa's position as a repair base, supply area and training ground.

To sum up, the Commonwealth is not in good shape to discharge its responsibility for protecting the area between India and Egypt, and the vast oil reserves located there. The U. S. A. Government's expectations in this regard are likely to be disappointed.

Let us now consider the second problem, namely, the attitude which Commonwealth countries should adopt as regards Communist advance in the Far East, and the China-Korea involvement. This was, of course, the most important subject discussed by the Conference, the aim being rather to achieve a common policy towards Communism as demonstrated by Russia and China, than to work out technical plans for operations.

The guarded summaries of Conference discussions, journalistic comment, and the record of interviews afford considerable indication of the views held by the individual Prime Ministers representing nine Commonwealth countries. It is hardly necessary, however, to analyse them, in view of the fact that on Jan. 30 the U. N. political committee rejected a final attempt by the

Arab-Asian bloc to bring about a cease fire in Korea and peace negotiations with Red China, and, by an overwhelming majority, passed a resolution branding China as aggressor in Korea. India, alone of Commonwealth countries, voted with the minority; and the Indian delegate cried in despair that the bloc had tried to halt the march towards disaster, and that the result of the ballot would cut off all negotiations with Red China. The General Assembly on Feb. 1, by a vote of 44 to 7 with nine abstentions, confirmed the resolution of the political committee.

The question of future military or economic measures against China was not dealt with in the resolution, and no authority to bomb Chinese territory was given. Further steps anticipated were the appointment of a three-man 'good offices committee' to seek ground for a peace settlement, and a larger committee to consider what measures can best be adopted for repelling Chinese aggression.

In the light of moral principles for which the Commonwealth stands, how are we to assess this development and the part played in it by all but one of Commonwealth delegates to the U. N.?

Conscientious doubts may certainly be felt in many quarters as to the true merits of the case: as to which nation was initially responsible for commencement of the 'aggrandisement' trouble, whose fear first clamoured for expansion of a strategic frontier, whose hand actually lit the fuse of combat, who made the fundamental mistake of declining to recognise Red rule in China as a *de facto* government of the country, and, in short, which side has behaved with the 'uprightness' which, as the Psalmist tells us, 'shall inherit the earth'.

The British delegate agreed that the U. N. must establish its "moral position" by condemning Red China, (incidentally, the fact of condemnation seems tantamount to recognition of the *de facto* Red government of the country); but he then told the Assembly that Britain had "the gravest doubts whether any punitive measures can be discovered which are not dangerous, double-edged, or merely useless, or any which will materially assist our brave troops now fighting in Korea." Britain warned the U. N. to go easy on 'sanctions' against China until every effort has been made for a peaceful settlement.

To the ordinary observer, it looks as though Commonwealth countries (except India) decided that at all costs, even involving sacrifice of judgement and principle, a breach with

the U. S. A. must be avoided; that the American drive to brand China must be supported in order to preserve a united front against Communism; but that the significance of the move should be minimised in every possible way by stressing the importance of further negotiations for peace, and by cold-shouldering punitive measures.

If this represents the Commonwealth leaders' process of thought, one is inevitably reminded of the excuse offered in Marryat's "Midshipman Easy" for the appearance of an unheralded baby,—that it was "only a little one". Are we viewing another instance of 'appeasement', but inverted this time and directed towards our friends, not towards enemies?

It is hard to extenuate divergence from the straight and narrow way, however skilfully it may be camouflaged, and however dire the apparent alternative.

The course is set, and we can only hope that the 3-man committee's peace efforts may bear early fruit; and that, in the mean while, the cause proclaimed may suffice to arouse the will to fight in our soldiers' hearts. This is by no means certain.

Finally, a word as to the United Nations' role in tagging the aggressor.

Voting in the Security Council and in the General Assembly does not transmogrify the realities of power and position, nor does it necessarily engender a fighting faith in defence of righteousness and liberty. Red China and the seven nations who voted adversely on February 1 represent a land mass covering about half the earth's surface, inhabited by about a billion people. Communist leaders have evolved a pattern of fighting faith for their adherents, a faith which fortifies them in their blind fear of Western aims and ideologies, and which may launch hordes against what they regard as the benighted nations.

How are our leaders going to enlist the hearts and minds and souls of men who are still free, in defence of all that they hold dear? War-weary peoples hope that U. N. may yet prove the fountainhead of world peace. But no peace can be expected to flow from condemnation or coercion. Wars must continue to be fought in this dark hour by nations and coalitions struggling for survival; but, as Benjamin Franklin said, "There never was a good war or a bad peace".

Is it not, therefore, anomalous that the U.N. should take sides

¹The Canadian Government for instance, has been bitterly criticized in the United States for slowness in rousing the people for the anti-Communist battle, and for apparently holding views which differ sharply from those of America in regard to the war in Korea. Britain has also been vilified for lukewarmness, and India's stock is at its lowest.

in strife and that the flag which bears the olive branches of peace should fly on the battlefield? Is it not the true function of the U. N. to foster the vision of the people, to create conviction that through unswerving adherence to moral principles an international conscience will some day be born, and that the "mandate of humanity" will ultimately extinguish war by overriding all national rivalries, group intolerance and human greed? Is it not high time that the ideal of renunciation of war as an instrument for the maintenance of peace should be enshrined in the Charter, in spite of the fact that, at the present stage of man's evolution, wars must happen and those who most fervently desire peace must, nevertheless, prepare for war? Should it not be plainly stated that man's "right to security" is rooted, not in himself, but in his relationship with the Supreme Power?

If the Assembly became a forum in which all issues were debated on the highest plane, instead of being an arena for branding the aggressor by mustering votes, puzzled humanity might find the guidance which would inspire men to resist tyranny and to unite "for the purpose of living as brethren, aiding each other to their reciprocal needs".
