

# Public Affairs

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## *Century of the Commonwealth:* The United Kingdom's Role

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I AM acutely conscious, as I begin this article, of my microscopic unimportance compared with the magnitude and majesty of the subject, and compared also, no doubt, with the eminence of others who will be contributing to this symposium. Who am I to address myself to such a theme, and in such company? An obscure young journalist, with only interest, curiosity and enthusiasm—and the fact that I do at least belong to the United Kingdom—to commend me. It has been said that this is the Century of the Common Man; and that I should have been asked to write this article certainly lends some support to the saying.

But in fact, surely, with all due respect to the Common Man (whoever he may be), it would be much truer to say

that this had so far been the Century of the Commonwealth. The experiment which began when Lord Durham accepted, and put forward in his famous Report, the Canadian Robert Baldwin's idea of responsible self-government under the Crown, has during the last fifty years reached an advanced stage of political evolution in the Statute of Westminster and in the recent Downing Street Declaration, whereby India has been enabled to become a Republic while remaining a member, and while continuing to recognize the King as Head, of the Commonwealth. And when the world was reeling under the impact of the first great economic crisis the nations of the Commonwealth, by taking concerted action, powerfully assisted not only their own recovery, but that of other

nations as well. But above all, by entering both World Wars at the beginning and fighting right through to the end, the Commonwealth nations may fairly be said to have twice saved civilization and to have established an unequalled record as the champions of freedom, justice and humanity. God forbid that we should ever sink to being nothing better than a mutual admiration society. But, if anything could be worse than that, it is that we should become a self-abasement society; that we should be apologetic, unsure of ourselves, and unwilling to assert the principles for which we stand against all who, through ignorance or spite, see fit to disparage us. We must all guard against this perversion.

But this is beside the point. My subject is not the Commonwealth as a whole, but the position of the United Kingdom in relation to the Commonwealth at this convenient milestone, 1950. Obviously the United Kingdom occupies a special position. Every Commonwealth nation does so, and the United Kingdom is no exception. To all of us uniformity is anathema. But it may be useful to assess with some care those respects in which the United Kingdom has, at the time of writing, a unique position in the Commonwealth.

To some the expression "mother-country" is apt to cause offence. But it is a pity to take offence at the truth, and the truth is that the United Kingdom is the mother-country of all the *British* nations of the Commonwealth. It is still referred to as "home" by countless people who have never even visited it and whose forebears in many cases left it long ago. It is, as Joseph Conrad (himself no Anglo-Saxon) wrote, "the great flagship of the race." And those Commonwealth nations that are under-populated are bound to look to it, not without eagerness, for new emigrants of British stock.

But the Commonwealth is only partly British. Racially, therefore, the United Kingdom is only the mother-country of a section. But in certain other ways its influence has been, and largely remains, far wider. Its special connection with the Crown is one example. The Crown is of course the outward and visible sign of

Commonwealth unity and it shines to the ends of the Earth. Nevertheless the traditional abode of the Royal Family is the United Kingdom; they take their name from a Berkshire borough; most of the King's precursors are, literally, a part of English soil; and the loyalty of the whole Commonwealth is often focussed on Buckingham Palace or Westminster Abbey. Another important institution, which derives from the Crown, is the United Kingdom Privy Council, to which not only local British personalities, but also many leading Commonwealth statesmen, seem willing enough to belong. And this Privy Council has a highly significant offshoot, the Judicial Committee, which is still the nearest approach we have to a Supreme Court of Appeal for the Commonwealth, but which is still permanently located in London. Moreover in some senses, which it would be tedious to enumerate, the United Kingdom must be regarded (to use a horrible word) as the "cultural" centre of the Commonwealth. I should not wish it to be thought that I am recording these facts, or some others which will follow, with unqualified approval. But facts they undoubtedly are, and comment and criticism must wait their turn.

## II

**E**CONOMICALLY, the United Kingdom is very curiously placed. It is no longer, since the accession of India and Pakistan, the most highly populated nation of the Commonwealth; nor is it any longer "the workshop of the world"—the leading industrial nation—as it was during most of the last Century. But it is still by far the most populous Commonwealth nation with a high standard of living; it is still the centre of the Sterling Area; and it is still a very considerable hive of industry, comprising some of the most inventive brains, and some of the most highly skilled labour, in the world. For one or other, or for a combination, of these reasons it is still the largest single market for Commonwealth products and the largest single exporter of manufactured goods to the Commonwealth.



Yet all is far from well. The present state of affairs is based upon artificial conditions which cannot be expected to last and which, for as long as they last, will be unhealthy and ignominious. Some of the United Kingdom's most vital imports—including food and raw materials for industry—come from the Dollar Area. But with the Dollar Area constituted as at present, these vital imports can only be paid for with the help of gigantic loans and gifts from Canada and the United States. This problem has only fallen upon us in its full severity since the recent war; it results from our sacrifice of foreign investments to pay for American military aid before Lease-Lend, and upon the breakdown of a triangular system of trade, involving South Africa, which enabled us to balance our payments between the Wars. But there is no call for us to be sulky or petulant. Sooner or later the freakish character of our economy—which Mr. Winston Churchill has compared to that of Venice amid its lagoons or Holland behind its dykes—was sure to find us out.

At the moment there is in the United Kingdom—and, it is fair to add, elsewhere—much confusion of thought on this subject, and much wishful thinking. Some people, including Sir Stafford Cripps and Mr. Hoffman, appear to think that the United Kingdom will be able permanently to balance its payments with the Dollar Area by reducing dollar imports from that area, expanding production, and improving sales technique in Canada and the United States. This opinion and policy will be further discussed: meanwhile they must be duly noted as the official opinion and policy of the United Kingdom on the most serious economic problem confronting it at mid-century. And another fact, which is equally evident, must be placed on record: that the fortunes of Great Britain and those of the Sterling Area are linked today as never before. Devaluation was for us and our partners the economic counterpart of Dunkirk.

Another peculiarity of the United Kingdom is that it is still responsible for virtually the entire Colonial Empire. Together we form a single legal category: I am described on my passport as a "citi-

zen of the United Kingdom and Colonies." The Westminster Parliament is still in a very real sense the Imperial Parliament; and the Secretary of State for the Colonies is a British politician (or, very occasionally, a British statesman) with his Office in London. The economic development of the Colonies, upon which their development in other ways must depend, has so far been largely due to British investment, the work of British settlers "on the spot," and to Government schemes supported by the British taxpayer. Much has been done; a good deal has been left undone which should have been done; but, above all, an enormous amount remains to be done.

The share of the United Kingdom in Commonwealth Defence is another point which should not be overlooked. Apart from India and Pakistan (whose vast expenditure on armaments cannot, in the circumstances, be regarded as a contribution to general peace and security) the United Kingdom, in devoting about twenty per cent of its anyway outsized Budget to Defence, is setting aside for this purpose a larger percentage of its revenue than any other Commonwealth nation. Moreover conscription remains; and substantial British forces are serving overseas, in Germany, Malaya and elsewhere.

One last distinctive aspect of the United Kingdom's position must now be considered. The British Isles belong, geographically, to the Continent of Europe. But this fact has been acquiring a new significance since the last War because of the steadily growing movement for "European Unity." Obviously Great Britain could not join a Federal European Super-State or a European Customs Union without inviting, amongst other ill-effects, a major crisis in Commonwealth relations. But this has not yet happened and will, in fact, never happen. British politicians may from time to time, for the benefit of Federalists at home and abroad (especially the latter), indulge in airy statements about "abating Sovereignty" or "removing trade barriers": but in their hearts they know that the British nation will never consent to the mortgaging of its essential freedom. Most of them also know

—but are still curiously unwilling to assert publicly and in clear language—that the Commonwealth method of achieving unity, by guaranteeing rather than denying national sovereignty, while fostering the maximum cooperation in every practical sphere, is more appropriate to Europe, with its deep and various traditions, than the federal method would prove to be, if it were ever seriously tried. This may perhaps be deemed an example of that lingering self-distrust and lack of positive faith in the principles of the Commonwealth, from which, except in times of great emergency, our public life is rather too apt to suffer.

### III

SO FAR I have been trying to write only of the past and present, and in a stock-taking way, setting out as briefly and as dispassionately as possible the United Kingdom's "peculiarities" as a member of the Commonwealth at mid-century. But are these peculiarities on the whole good or bad? Are they all perfectly in accordance with the main theme of Commonwealth development. Should there or should there not be some change? An attempt must now be made to answer these questions.

Most people now laugh at the old idea of Great Britain as a central Sun surrounded by its family of Satellites. "How absurd", they say. "We have changed all that! The nations of the Commonwealth are now completely self-governing, internally and externally; they all have exactly the same status; and they can now even become Republics without altogether losing touch with the Crown. The old 'solar system' is a thing of the past." This is obviously quite true up to a point. *Politically*, as was mentioned earlier, the Commonwealth experiment has reached an advanced stage of evolution. But political evolution, when it only consists in propounding Statutes and Declarations—in formulating the self-evident—is a comparatively easy process. The work involved is mainly literary; and above all the process is inexpensive. But not every

form of Commonwealth evolution might follow the same agreeable pattern. If all unnecessary manifestations of the old paternalism were not rigorously excluded—as I for one believe they should be—some of those who have been lately asserting their "independence" with the most frantic, or pedantic, emphasis might find that this would in future affect not only their pens, but also their pockets! Moreover the accent would have to be less upon the independence of nations within the Commonwealth, which as a legal proposition could be taken for granted, than upon the interdependence of the Commonwealth as a whole.

Of that interdependence the radiant symbol is the Crown. But the wearer of this, and the whole Royal Family, are normally resident in the United Kingdom. On the surface this would seem to be completely at variance with the theory of the Commonwealth: but in fact, surely, there is something to be said for it. Most human beings are not nomads; and the Royal Family will be all the better fitted to play their part in the Commonwealth, where home life counts for so much, if they are themselves accorded a certain domestic fixity. But this most assuredly does not mean that they need be static. The present King, for instance, has shown a marked desire to travel extensively in the Commonwealth, and Royal tours and periods of residence overseas will probably become more frequent as time goes on. Commonwealth Prime Ministers will no doubt see to it that plenty of hospitable pressure is exerted. They might also, in my opinion, exert themselves in another way. Even though the Sovereign may spend much of his time in the United Kingdom, his entourage need not be drawn almost exclusively from that country. As many Commonwealth nations as possible should surely be represented on his staff. This would provide an additional means for them to keep in touch with him, and he with them.

The present confused status of the United Kingdom Privy Council and its Judicial Committee is a startling example of hangover from the old Imperial system. In some quarters this has been recognized



and *negative* action taken. But the real need is for thought and action of a *positive* kind. Positive thought there has been: a remarkable paper on the subject was written in 1937 for the London Grotius Society by Mr. Edward F. Iwi. But this did not, alas, produce any practical result.

Can it be congenial to the new Commonwealth spirit that some of the most eminent and senior statesmen of the Commonwealth should be admitted in twos and threes to a Privy Council designed to accommodate, among others, a very wide selection of United Kingdom Ministers, of whom many are not eminent and some not even senior? Surely this cannot be right. The United Kingdom should have its own Privy Council for internal purposes, as have other nations of the Commonwealth: but this should not, as at present, have overtones suggestive of a *Commonwealth* Privy Council. At the same time the case for a Commonwealth Privy Council is very strong indeed; and though it would be irrelevant to give the arguments here, I must say that I am one of those who earnestly hope such a Council will soon be brought into being by the King on the advice of his Ministers throughout the Commonwealth. When attention is given to the ambiguous and anomalous position of the United Kingdom Privy Council, no one need think in terms of a purely negative solution.

The problem of the Judicial Committee is essentially the same as the wider problem of the Privy Council. How can the taint of paternalism be removed while the services of a Commonwealth Supreme Court, with roots incomparably deep and strong, are retained? To repudiate such a Court simply because it needs to be reformed is about as logical as to repudiate the world itself! But reform is certainly overdue and the line it should take not hard to discern. The Judicial Committee must represent, if possible, the highest wisdom and talent not of Great Britain only, but of all the Commonwealth nations concerned in its jurisdiction. This would of course be facilitated if a Commonwealth Privy Council were created and

the Judicial Committee were to become a Committee of this rather than of the United Kingdom Privy Council: but it could anyway be achieved by altering the balance of representation on the Committee, which is now overwhelmingly, if not entirely, British. And while it is one of the virtues of the Committee that it is rooted in the past, it is definitely not a virtue that it should be rooted in London. The Judicial Committee of the future should be itinerant and should hear cases at appointed times in different parts of the Commonwealth, so that witnesses would not have to come impossible distances. Of course not every member of the Committee could be expected to go on all its perambulations: but it should not be too hard to mobilise a quorum for each session, and it is quite certain that no Court which aims at serving the whole Commonwealth can afford to be static.

THE "cultural" magnetism of the United Kingdom is an attribute which it would be impossible, and anyway wrong, to destroy. But it is one thing to be a magnet and quite another to be a dog in the manger! And obvious as it may seem this exquisite distinction is sometimes lost sight of in the United Kingdom. I will give an example. In the cellars of the Tate Gallery in London there are thousands of very good pictures which never see the light of day, because there is no room for them upstairs. But I cannot believe that there would be no room for them in the British Commonwealth. In fact there would be room for many of them in provincial galleries in the United Kingdom and some at least ought to hang in these. But would it not be better still if many of them could be sent on loan to different parts of the Commonwealth, where they would otherwise never be seen except in reproduction? Some slight alteration of the law might be necessary to enable such works of art to be sent overseas: but this could easily be effected if Parliament were favourable, as it should be, to the whole idea. This example of the United Kingdom acting as a dog in the

“cultural” manger may be isolated, but it cannot be ignored.

#### IV

**N**EARLY all the comment which remains to be made comes under the heading Economic. The freakishness of the British economy has already been mentioned and it has been suggested that this appears at its worst in the United Kingdom's inability to balance its payments with the Dollar Area, and that, on account of Great Britain's special position, the difficulties which it has been experiencing have contributed to a grave weakening in the world-wide position of Sterling. But a trade and currency system cannot do without a centre and the United Kingdom should probably continue to act as the centre of the Sterling Area.

But everything cannot go on as before. For one thing, the United Kingdom must learn to show more tact and consideration than it has recently shown in taking action which concerns not only itself but the whole Sterling Area. Some would quote in support of this the way devaluation was lately handled. But an even worse case was the Washington Loan Agreement of 1945, the terms of which gravely affected all Sterling countries, but which was signed by the British Government with incredible haste and disregard for reasoned opinion. Moreover the days of Great Britain's economic supremacy are past: the special circumstances which gave us that supremacy no longer exist. But hopes still seem to be founding themselves on the strength of old-fashioned preconceptions. The official view, as I have said, is that the United Kingdom, with its population little if at all diminished, should be able to maintain itself by its industry, close the dollar gap, and play its part as before in the Sterling Area. To my mind (and I must again apologise for my temerity) this theory is too precarious even for these times. It assumes an unwonted self-restraint on the part of those natural economic forces which, in spite of many ingenious palliatives, still lurk menacingly in the back-

ground. It also assumes that British exporting capacity will not be increasingly hit by foreign competition: but all the evidence seems to be against such an assumption.

I am therefore convinced that the economic survival of the United Kingdom on anything like its present scale presupposes the decision of Canada to accept Sterling, at any rate partially, as payment for goods. It is not my business here to recapitulate the massive arguments in favour of such a decision which have been expounded, first and foremost, by that great Commonwealth statesman-economist, Mr. L. S. Amery. But there can be no question of Mr. Amery approaching these matters in any narrowly national spirit; and his case for Canada's total or semi-adherence to the Sterling Area takes fully into account the future welfare of the world and the interests of Canada. But although I will not restate the case, I am entitled to this article to emphasize my view that, unless Canada takes the action which Mr. Amery advocates, the United Kingdom and the whole Sterling Area will suffer incalculably. Of course, whatever happens, the population of Great Britain cannot stay at the present level, and a great outflow of emigrants to other parts of the Commonwealth will be one of the dominant facts of the next fifty years. But let us hope that this will be permitted to occur gradually and without tragic precipitation; and that it will not have as its corollary the industrial collapse of Great Britain and the break-up of the Sterling Area.

At the moment Great Britain is still supplying, publicly or privately, most of the capital for Colonial development: but more assistance from other nations of the Commonwealth would be welcomed, not least by the Colonies themselves. Should the task of administration also be more evenly shared? A fair number of Commonwealth men have volunteered for the Colonial Service in recent decades; and it is probably better that as many as possible should participate in this way than that the Colonial Empire and its Civil Service should be regionally sub-divided under different Commonwealth nations.



Some local arrangements have been made in the past and others could always be considered on their merits. But a general sub-division is hardly called for, and would almost certainly not be feasible. The same is true of regional security within the Commonwealth. The whole area cannot reasonably be split into a series of water-tight compartments, with one or two Commonwealth nations answerable for each. But there is room for more co-operation than heretofore. For instance, it is an urgent necessity that Australia and New Zealand should have more to do with the defence of Malaya and with maintaining the sea-base at Singapore. Steps in the right direction have already been taken, but there is still quite a long way to go. Some nations of the Commonwealth may feel that the United Kingdom is spending too much of its revenue on Defence: but the United Kingdom may in its turn have a hunch that some nations are spending too little. And it might also argue that, in view of the complete equality of all Commonwealth nations, they should all seek to send the same proportion of their manpower to serve overseas in time of peace!

But it would be wrong to end on a truculent note. Enough may have been said to show that the United Kingdom is not, on the whole, clinging to past glories, but is carrying on the good work of the Commonwealth at least as keenly as the rest. The first fifty years of this century have certainly proved the virtue and value of that work; and the United Kingdom, which has had its fair share of problems, has made its contribution. But now, at mid-century, it may perhaps be agreed that the United Kingdom has rather *more* than its fair share of problems; and as this is incompatible with the modern theory of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth will have to see what can be done about it! The problems of today may well be forgotten when the year 2000 dawns. But it is most unlikely that the Commonwealth—the first great *successful* association of free peoples—will be any less vital then than now. And it is also most unlikely that the United Kingdom will have lost its influence in the Commonwealth because, whatever its political status and responsibilities and whatever its material power, it cannot help being a rather special country.

