CHAPTER SEVEN
NORMALISATION, EARLY 1960s–MID-1970s

The Commonwealth’s occasional tribulations during the 1950s had not tarnished its general reputation as ‘a good thing’. But then the pace of change accelerated, the Commonwealth was assailed by unpredictable crises, problems arose in all quarters, and within a few years the association was being viewed in a different, more critical, light. The old members suspected the newer ones of taking a coldly instrumental approach towards it. Lament for the loss of earlier, and allegedly sounder, values was in the air. It was most keenly expressed in Britain.

Britain lay at the heart of the Commonwealth. She had created it and without her it would not have survived. She also benefited from it, as the Commonwealth greatly facilitated her honourable extrication from colonial responsibilities, and cushioned her adjustment to the decline of imperial might. In 1956, when she joined France and Israel in invading Egypt, she was dismayed to find that her prized Commonwealth housed some ‘critical & uneasy lodgers’. These scars soon healed. But a decade later things had perceptibly gone downhill, even in relation to the older members. When in 1967 Charles Ritchie became Canada’s high commissioner in London, he discovered that while ‘[w]e and the British were excellent friends . . . we were no longer members of the same family.’ Australia was going through the same process of adjustment and by 1972 was said to be at last ready ‘to emerge finally from the [colonial] chrysalis’. Meanwhile, in March 1961 another founder member, South Africa, had in effect been expelled (she left formally at the end of May); and in 1972 Pakistan made an abrupt departure. The South African question was the first important occasion on which Britain had failed to prevail within the Commonwealth, and an ‘utterly miserable and distressed’ Harold Macmillan (Conservative prime

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1 Miller (1966) 180.
2 L.B. Walsh Atkins (West Indies Department, CRO) minute, 2 January 1957, TNA, DO35/5012.
3 Ritchie (1983) 90.
5 Lord Kilmuir quoted in Horne (1989) 393.
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minister, 1957–63) said it was also his ‘first real defeat’. The event has been linked to Britain’s subsequent decision to seek entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), but minds had been turning in that direction for some time, and Macmillan was already personally committed to making an application. When that was done in August 1961 it could hardly fail to suggest, despite Britain’s protestations to the contrary, that she was starting to put Europe above the Commonwealth in her list of priorities. As it happened she was not admitted until 1973, but the writing was on the wall. The Commonwealth had started to look like a normal international arrangement.

Nowhere was this process more sharply evident than at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meetings. During the 1950s they had been gentlemanly ‘occasions where problems [we]re discussed informally, as among friends, not as at the United Nations where words are weighted, and contacts soured with suspicion or preserved in a deep-freeze of protocol’. They had been ‘agreeable as well as valuable. There was… the charm of the Royal presence, and all on a scale that was like a small and pleasant house party’. By 1962 they were ‘becoming a sort of miniature United Nations’, and Macmillan shrank from these ‘troublesome’ occasions. The two 1966 Meetings were, for Harold Wilson (Labour prime minister, 1966–69, 1974–76), ‘purgatory’ and ‘hell on earth’; and Wilson’s commonwealth secretary spoke of Britain ‘clutching vipers to her bosom—and paying for it’.

Other leaders in the old Commonwealth were also distressed. Australia’s prime minister, Robert Menzies (1949–66) found having Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus as a colleague ‘almost as bitter a pill to swallow’ as the South African affair, and objected to associating with states ‘like Ghana’, who were ‘more spiritually akin to Moscow than to London’. Nor did the disruptive influence of racism go away with the departure of South Africa, for then the Commonwealth focused...

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6 Harold Evans quoted in ibid.
7 Carrington (1955) 145.
8 Macmillan-Robert Menzies (Australian PM) personal telegram, 8 February 1962, BDEE 1957–64 II, 664.
9 Ibid.
12 Woodard (2000) 89.