RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS

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EDITOR

1. The Commonwealth since the Second War: An Historical Survey

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One of the historic forces in the world, “the Commonwealth” used to connote imperial federalist sentiments applicable only to the white settlement colonies. With the passage of time and the growth of national consciousness in the dominions, both the expression and the relationship have been altered.

It is not within the scope of this paper to detail the process by means of which the British Empire was transformed into a Commonwealth. It is sufficient to note that a variety of forms has been employed since 1917. In a speech delivered on May 15, 1917 General Smuts of South Africa referred to the self-governing territories of the British Empire as a “…community of nations which I prefer to call the British Commonwealth of Nations”! The Imperial War Conference of 1917 referred to an “Imperial Commonwealth”. The term was further adopted and given official sanction by the Balfour Report of 1926 which defined the dominions as

autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.  

During the interwar and war years the term “British Commonwealth” has come into increased usage, but since the 1948 Prime Ministers’ Conference it has been simply called “The Commonwealth”. Simultaneously, the Commonwealth has shifted from being an exclusively caucasian club to a multi-racial and interregional association. In the forties its character was altered by the accession of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon, and since the fifties by that of Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Jamaica, and other Afro-Asian-Caribbean states.

Today’s Commonwealth includes 28 states (over 25% of the world’s land) and some 800 million inhabitants. Member states range from transcontinental federal states such as Canada and Australia, to unitary island communities such as Mauritius and Barbados, and include the major races and major regions. Obviously size is no criterion for membership – the only prerequisite is that all members have been former British colonies. As Professor Brady aptly observes:

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Whatever their other differences all its members share a common and concrete experience: they have been ruled for varying periods within Britain's empire; they lived and had their being under decisions made at Westminster and Downing Street. Despite shared experiences there are marked differences between the post- and pre-World War II Commonwealth. The old Commonwealth countries never achieved independence at one moment – the word carried overtones of the American Declaration of Independence. Instead they chose the path of evolution rather than revolution and by 1931 achieved a measure of constitutional parity with the mother country. This is not surprising since each country had a developed parliamentary system and an educated elite. The Westminster model of government was not an imported commodity but part of their heritage. There was likewise a sense of unity bred largely from a deep attachment to Britain rather than to the Commonwealth. This was strongest in Australia and New Zealand, less so in Canada, and weakest in South Africa. Australia and New Zealand did not adopt the Statute of Westminster until 1942 and 1947 respectively (they wanted to make sure that autonomy would not diminish the imperial connection) whereas Canada and South Africa welcomed the new relationship. The newer Commonwealth states, on the other hand, first achieved independence and then applied for and received Commonwealth membership. The only exceptions were Burma, the Irish Free State, the Cameroons, and Somalia. The first two chose to leave the Commonwealth, and the other two joined other exiting communities.

Whereas the settlement colonies enjoyed an extensive period of responsible government, all the non-settlement colonies experienced a comparatively brief span. This disparity resulted from unforeseen events rather than design. In some non-settlement territories the move from representative government to dominion status was so hurried that the transition took less than three years. For example, the first election to fill seats in the Legislative Council in Tanganyika was held in 1958-9. Three years later Tanganyika obtained responsible government and was granted independence. Again in 1954 the Secretary of State for the Colonies declared that there was no African in Zambia qualified to fill one of the unofficial places in the Executive Council, yet by 1966 Zambia had become an independent republic. This brief interlude of responsible government partially explains why the two-party or multi-party system has not worked smoothly in some of the new states. The party system and responsible government did not have the necessary time for mutual adjustment before they were subject to internal and external stress and strains.

I. The Position of Settlement Colonies

With the exception of South Africa, the most important feature of the older Commonwealth countries is their predominantly caucasian character and their relatively long period of association with the mother country. Their high standard of living, derived in part from an abundance of natural resources as well as developed industrial and agricultural sectors, has placed them among the more affluent states. Further shared features include extensive underpopu-

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