

'What sort of Commonwealth?' from The New Statesman and Nation (26 June 1957)

Caption: On 26 June 1957, the London weekly political magazine The New Statesman and Nation considers the nature of the United Kingdom's relations with the countries of the Commonwealth and wonders about the future thereof.

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What Sort of a Commonwealth?

What sort of a Commonwealth? Does the British Commonwealth even exist as anything more than a term of journalistic art? Is there not a danger, as the Prime Ministers and their substitutes assemble once again in London, of the whole affair being regarded as merely an annual jamboree, with not much more meaning than the Lord Mayor's Show or the New Year Honours List? Is Britain now any more the centre of the Commonwealth than Delhi, Ottawa or Canberra? And would it not be wise to vary the capitals in which the premiers meet?

There is, of course, a special reason of internal politics to explain Mr. Macmillan's decision to convene this particular meeting. If he is to establish his premiership securely, he must rid himself of the curse of Suez. Having "fixed" the Anglo-American alliance, he now faces the more difficult task of repairing the damage which last year's folly did to Commonwealth relations. This may not be so easy as Whitehall hoped. Even getting the invitations accepted can no longer be taken for granted; Mr. Macmillan has called spirits from the vasty deep, but not all of them have come. Britain's changing role in the Commonwealth is well exemplified by the absence, from this week's meeting, of the Prime Ministers of South Africa, Ceylon and New Zealand.

Yet there is something left which brings Nehru, Menzies, Nkrumah, Surahwardy and the rest, despite their differences of outlook and interest, across the world to sit around a common table; and it is something more than protocol or banqueting at Buckingham Palace. It is no longer, for instance, the Crown which holds the group together: the royal symbol may still appeal to the provincialism of Australia and New Zealand; but it means much less in Canada and little or nothing in India and the Gold Coast. It is certainly not a common policy: Suez, South African racialism, Kashmir, the Baghdad Pact, "white" Australia — the issues which divide are perhaps as numerous as those which unite. Nor is it a general desire to accept the political leadership of Britain: when Sir Anthony Eden split the Commonwealth over Suez, he demonstrated the complete divergence of political outlook between the nostalgic "white leadership" school of thought, which prevails in London and Canberra, and the anti-colonial, anti-cold war idealism of the emergent African and Asian countries.

The fact, perhaps, is that the Commonwealth is held together at this moment by little except historical accident — a common language, a common (despite South Africa) cultural tradition, a common mistrust of Russia, and the fact that strategic necessity has not driven the U.S. — as it might have done in other centuries — to occupy physically the position which Britain now occupies only symbolically. But a cohesion such as this cannot endure for long unless it is buttressed up by something much more real. And it can be. The political momentum of the Commonwealth at present derives not from the nostalgia of empire, but from the emergence of free men in parts of the world which have hitherto been subject to external rule. The economic trend is no longer towards the exploitation of backward countries in the interests of shareholders in London, Johannesburg or Melbourne, but towards the development of undeveloped resources in the interest of the people to whom they naturally belong.

If the white Commonwealth can grasp this essential fact — as the British Labour Party seems to have done — a new partnership, based on complete political equality and common economic purpose, can grow to the mutual advantage of all the Commonwealth communities. Such a partnership, which is distinguished from old-fashioned imperialism by its foundation in political equality, could introduce a new and virile political idea, effectively challenging the neo-imperialism of both Russia and America. The test, in other words, of this week's conference, will not be the well-worn platitudes about a "family of nations" and a "frank exchange of views" with which we expect the communiqué to be stuffed, but hard decisions about the Volta scheme in Ghana, the release of sterling balances and the help which India can get towards the fulfilment of her second Five-Year Plan.