

# The Commonwealth Today

*R. Palme Dutt*

**I**N *The Crisis of Britain and the British Empire* I included a prefatory note on "Commonwealth and Empire". This note, as revised in the last edition (1957), brought the situation up to the time of writing. Since then further developments have taken place in this highly fluid situation. It may therefore be useful to examine the Commonwealth as it is today, and its relation to the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism.

In this connection the recent Commonwealth Premiers' Conference has highlighted the new questions which are arising. The Commonwealth Premiers' Conference which took place in May, and the sequel of the Conference, have brought sharply into the forefront of attention the deepening problems of British imperialism in relation to the advance of the national liberation movement all over the world.

This Conference was attended by the Premiers of ten States (in the case of South Africa, Foreign Secretary) constituting the States of the Commonwealth: Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, representing Britain and the older pre-1914 White Dominions ("White" in the case of South Africa, in the sense of the Government not of the population); and India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana and Malaya, representing the newly independent States in Asia and Africa which have been constituted as independent States since the Second World War, together with the observer participation of the Premier of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, which is not so far an independent member State of the Commonwealth.

The Conference, which normally takes place at irregular intervals about every two years, sometimes more often (previously, 1946, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1957), took on a special significance this year for a number of reasons. It was the first Conference in which the number of representatives of the newly independent Afro-Asian states equalled the number from Britain and the older White Dominions. The prospect of the accession of additional African States and the West Indies in the immediate future raised questions of a developing shift in the balance of composition and the consequences arising therefrom. Second, the conflict over colour and racial discrimination reached extreme sharpness at the moment of the Conference through the crisis over the South African policy of Apartheid and the

Sharpeville massacre. This led to a public division nearly disrupting the Conference. Third, economic questions had also reached an acute point, especially over the issue of the European Common Market and the Commonwealth, and also in relation to the penetration of United States capital. Fourth, the Conference took place on the immediate eve of the Paris meeting of Heads of State, so that Premier Macmillan passed straight from the trials and strains of the Commonwealth Conference to the Summit fiasco.

## 1. What is the Commonwealth?

"The Commonwealth", as the formula is used today, is the relatively new term now officially used to describe the present latest stage of the British Empire. Historically the term "The Commonwealth" was the title of the First British Republic established by the seventeenth century democratic revolution. Thereafter the term fell into disfavour save among democratic writers, usually with left-wing and sometimes socialistic tendencies (the title chosen by William Morris for his socialist journal was "The Commonweal"). In British official circles up to the First World War the only recognised term was "The British Empire"; the King was the "King Emperor"; even the self-governing White Dominions were referred to collectively as "the Colonies"; and the Conferences with their Premiers were termed originally "Colonial Conferences", later "Imperial Conferences".

It was not until after the opening of the general crisis of imperialism, following the First World War and the victory of the October Revolution, that successive changes began. The effective full independence of the White Dominions was recognised by the 1926 Conference and the Statute of Westminster in 1931. The term "Commonwealth" began to be used to describe this association of Britain and the White Dominions, although in legal usage the term was defined to cover the entire range of "Britain and the British Dominions Overseas", including equally the White self-governing Dominions and the subject empire of India and the colonies, comprising six-sevenths of the whole. Thus the term "Commonwealth and Empire" began to be used as a supposed description of the two sections, the self-governing section and the subject section. In this way the Official Handbook issued by the British Government in

1946 was entitled "Handbook on the British Commonwealth and Empire". By 1959 the latest version has become "The Commonwealth in Brief".

It was after the Second World War and the sweeping victories of the national liberation movement over the world that the process of adaptation of the British imperialists, both in political technique and in terminology, became rapid. As Professor W. I. Jennings, joint author of *The Constitutional Law of the British Empire*, and the leading authority on Imperial Constitutional Law, explained in 1949 (*Times* 6.6.49):

"Empire was associated with 'imperialism' which was the deadliest of all political sins. The use of 'Commonwealth' made political conditions slightly less difficult."

However, in 1949, an official statement on behalf of the British Government (Premier Attlee in the House of Commons on May 2, 1949) still laid down that the three terms, "the Commonwealth, the British Commonwealth, or the British Empire" should be regarded as interchangeable and equally valid: "there has been no agreement to adopt or to exclude the use of any one of these terms." As late as 1952 *The Times* could still write in an editorial:

"The extension of the term Commonwealth . . . has blurred the edges of meaning . . . It would be more than a pity if the name of Empire were to be driven out" (15.1.52).

Today a far more advanced stage has been reached in the disintegration of the old forms of imperialism. In face of the strength of the national revolt in all territories, and the failure of the manifold colonial wars of the nineteen-fifties, most powerfully demonstrated in the fiasco of the Suez aggression, the British imperialists have had to concede the formation of politically independent states over nearly all the territories they formerly ruled, while retaining as much economic and strategic hold as they are able. The directly subject colonial empire is now reduced to 70 million, or one-ninth of the whole; and this will be still further reduced to less than one half this number, or under 6 per cent of the whole, in the immediate future with the establishment of the independence of the Nigerian Federation and later of the West Indies. The term "Empire" is now officially and finally abandoned, despite all the nostalgic lamentations of Sir Winston Churchill and *The Times*. On the very eve of this year's Commonwealth Premiers' Conference, that last stronghold of traditional Conservatism, the Primrose League (founded under the patronage of Disraeli, who first introduced the term "Empire" into official British usage, formally

deleted the term "the Empire" from its title and substituted "the Commonwealth". Even "the British Commonwealth" has had to go. What is left is "the Commonwealth".

The latest official definition of the Commonwealth in the Government Handbook *The Commonwealth in Brief* (1959) runs;

"The Commonwealth is an association of ten sovereign independent States—the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana and the Federation of Malaya, together with their dependencies."

Here the colonial empire as a separate section has disappeared: there are only the independent sovereign States, and the subject colonies are classified with these as "dependencies" of the sovereign States, in fact almost entirely of the United Kingdom. On this basis the territory of the Commonwealth is computed at 11.9 million square miles, and the population at 650 million, roughly one quarter of the earth's surface and one quarter of the world's population.

## 2. What links the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth thus comprises almost completely the same area and the same population as the old Empire. The only exceptions of any importance, which are now formally outside the Commonwealth, are Eire and Burma; and even with these in practice close ties of British imperialism are maintained, both with Eire, which remains economically in fact an agrarian hinterland of industrial Britain, with a backward economy and impoverished population, serving mainly as a source of supply of cattle and migrant cheap labour, and with Burma, where British assets in the plantations and raw materials continue considerable.

Hence it may be said that the Commonwealth today, while reflecting the manifest weakening of British imperialism, represents a significant measure of provisional success of the British imperialists in adapting themselves to the new conditions (the "winds of change", as Premier Macmillan has termed it in his recent speech to the South African parliament). For within the new political forms the economic and strategic hold of British imperialism remains considerable; and the technique of the "new colonialism" is actively pursued to extend that hold through the forms of "economic aid", "developing projects", strategic agreements and the establishment of bases.

What holds together the existing States of the Commonwealth after they have established their political independence? The old conventional formulas originally offered by the early propa-

gandists of empire, like Seeley's *Expansion of England*, which spoke of community of race, "a great homogeneous people, one in blood, language, religion and laws, dispersed over a boundless space", "the destiny of Anglo-Saxondom", have long lost their application. There is neither community of blood, language, religion or culture. Previously the bond of unity used to be presented as the common link of the Crown. But India, Pakistan and Ghana, are now Republics, Ceylon has announced the intention to become a Republic, and Malaya is established under its own local sovereign. Failing other links, the alternative has been presented as identity of political parliamentary institutions, "a common political language . . . a broadly similar pattern of institutions, whether legislative, executive or judicial" (*The Commonwealth in Brief*, 1959). But that line of argument has also broken down since Pakistan became a military dictatorship, not to mention the actual character of South Africa as a semi-fascist police state. So the final current formula is to speak of a "mystic" of association not susceptible of other explanation than the fact of association.

However, the actual link is not so mysterious or insubstantial. The decisive link of the Commonwealth, as of the old Empire, is British finance capital. The traditional range of operations of British finance capital in the countries of the old Empire is carried forward in the countries of the Commonwealth. Very nearly one half of Britain's trade is conducted with countries of the Commonwealth. The lion's share of foreign capital assets and investments in all the countries of the Commonwealth (with the exception of Canada, where the United States dominates) is held by Britain. The sterling area, including all the Commonwealth countries except Canada, makes Britain the centre of the international financial and commercial transactions of the Commonwealth countries, with all the rich pickings for the City derived therefrom. The dollar earnings of Malaya, Ghana or Nigeria have helped to cover the dollar deficit of Britain. It may be noted that the sterling area also includes countries which formally left the Commonwealth, like Eire and Burma, but which remain within the net of British imperialism. Similarly Jordan, Libya and the "protected states" in the Persian Gulf are in the sterling area. Of the overseas sterling balances held in London, amounting to £3,912 million in 1957, two thirds, or £2,699 million, were from Commonwealth countries, nearly one half of this, or £1,269 million, being from the subject colonies of Britain. Thus the Empire, alias Commonwealth, is still very much the foundation of Britain's economy.

Strategically also the links remain close. Through

the Commonwealth Britain is able to maintain its ring of overseas bases round the world, although the resistance of the national liberation movement compels continual shifts and adjustments. Thus the Canal Zone base had to be transferred to Cyprus, where the conflict over the base delayed implementation of the Zurich agreement, and concentration is now being transferred to Kenya, with new conflicts looming there. Similarly the enforced evacuation from Trincomalee in Ceylon led to the establishment of the base in Gen in the Maldiv Islands as the alternative, with resulting new troubles arising there.

Close strategic co-operation in training, personnel, organisation and arms equipment is maintained between the countries of the Commonwealth, again with Britain as the decisive centre and leader. The British Chief of the Imperial General Staff holds an annual conference attended by Army Chiefs of all the Commonwealth countries. Permanent United Kingdom Service liaison staffs are maintained in the overseas Commonwealth countries and vice-versa. The Imperial Defence College, Joint Services College and Royal Air Force Colleges in Britain are all attended by officers from the other Commonwealth countries.

At the same time there are special economic inducements and advantages maintained by Britain to induce the ruling circles of the newly independent countries to continue attached to the Commonwealth. Thus the system of Imperial preference ensures advantages for the food and raw materials of the primary producing Commonwealth countries in the British market. Similarly, for the raising of capital, Government support is able to ensure more favourable terms for loans of Commonwealth countries raised in London. In addition, special networks have been built up through the Colonial Development Corporation, and more recently, the Commonwealth Development Finance Company, set up in 1953.

Over and above these direct organisational links, there are further close ties in practice; economic, social and political between the new ruling upper class elements to whom, at a certain stage of national revolt outstripping the possibilities of forcible suppression, power has been handed over by Britain in the newly independent countries. In the majority of the newly independent countries the new rulers are the representatives of the national bourgeoisie, the bigger capitalists and traders (in an economically more advanced country like India, big monopolists), who have played a certain vacillating national role in utilising the mass struggle to win their own position against the domination of imperialism, but who have at the same time very close links, both of interlocking

business interests, and of a British-trained educational, social and cultural background, with the British ruling class.

In the political and strategic field this takes on the character of a conscious common interest against the fear of a mass popular revolution or communism, which they see as threatening the end of their privileged position. Thus underlying the atmosphere of "sympathetic mutual understanding" and "friendly co-operation" described as characterising these conferences of the Premiers from the diverse Commonwealth countries lies the common ground of anti-Communism, which in the last analysis draws together, despite contradictions, the varied trends represented by a Nehru or a Macmillan, a Nkrumah or a Menzies, an Ayub Khan or a Diefenbaker, or even Verwoerd, however much the others may deplore the latter's tactical methods of a racialist programme for "suppressing communism".

### 3. Increasing Contradictions of the Commonwealth

These links of economic, social, political and strategic common interests which still hold together the ruling classes of Britain and the Commonwealth countries in the loose association of the Commonwealth do not rule out the existence and growth of contradictions of interests which increasingly strain the links.

In the case of the older White Dominions the direct conflict of economic interests has long been evident, and indeed gave rise to the eighteenth century War of Independence of the United States, which represented the first breach in the British colonial system and was followed by the Canadian Revolt of 1837. In the modern era since the turn of the century the determination of the bourgeoisie of Canada, Australia and South Africa to carry forward their own industrial development has come into conflict with the interests of the British industrialists, who have sought to see in these countries primary producing territories for the supply of food and raw materials and markets for British industrial goods. This conflict, which found expression in the establishment of the successive stages of economic and political independence, culminating in the Statute of Westminster in 1931, has found further expression in the increasing trend towards the United States as the source of capital and industrial supplier, steadily reducing Britain's former privileged position in these countries.

In the case of the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa, reaching their formation as independent states only recently in the course of intense anti-imperialist struggle, this contradiction

has been and continues much greater. These countries were not countries occupied (after extermination of the original inhabitants) by settler off-shoots of the British bourgeoisie. They were conquered subject colonial countries, peoples invaded and subjugated by the British imperialists, with retarded colonial economies and prevention of industrial development. Despite the existence of common links, and some common class interests against the popular masses, the developing interests of the emergent national bourgeoisie reveal increasing contradictions with those of imperialism. Their urgent task becomes the task of economic reconstruction and industrialisation. It is true that the national bourgeoisie, usually linked with the old land system and landlordism, is unable to carry through the basic agrarian revolution indispensable in order to break the old colonial economy and create the conditions for successful industrialisation. Hence their efforts are half-hearted and fall far short of the needs and possibilities (as in the Indian five-year plans). But the conflict of interests is visible. Imperialism warns against "over-ambitious" plans of industrial development, and seeks to canalise "aid" in such a way as to continue to concentrate their role as primary producing countries. (World Bank Report on Indian Third Five Year Plan). Under these circumstances the national bourgeoisie in these countries begins to look towards alternative sources of effective aid for real reconstruction now available from the socialist world.

The existence of the socialist third of the world is the decisive new factor in the present development of the newly independent states in Asia and Africa. On this basis it has become possible for these countries, though in themselves weak, to enter on a course independent of imperialism and even against its wishes. Following the victory of the Chinese Revolution, India began to develop an independent foreign policy, played an important role in facilitating the negotiation of the armistice agreements in Korea and Viet Nam, and over the Suez war came out in direct opposition to the aggression of British imperialism. Socialist economic aid has not only powerfully assisted industrial development, but has forced the imperialists to attempt a belated imitation, as in the case of the Indian steel mills.

In the new world situation of the balance between socialism and imperialism it has become possible for the newly independent countries to build up close relations along their own path of "non-commitment" or "positive neutrality", aimed to maintain friendship with socialist and capitalist countries alike and support the aims of peaceful co-existence. The first Conference of Afro-Asian

States at Bandung in 1955 was a very significant indication of this new trend in world politics. Although in fact a minority of Asian States by no means accept the principles of "non-commitment", but are entangled in the sectional military alliances organised by imperialism to disrupt the anti-imperialist front and maintain Western domination in new forms, such as Cento and Seato, nevertheless the conception of Afro-Asian co-operation for peace along the lines of a policy independent from imperialism has exercised an important influence, and the grouping of Afro-Asian States in the United Nations has been able to play a significant part. On the popular level the successive Conferences of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity have further carried forward this development.

Hence the continuing participation of the newly independent Asian and African States, which were formerly under British rule, in the present stage of the form of association of the Commonwealth should not be seen in isolation as the sole or even decisive form of international participation or grouping of these States even in the current transitional phase. While there are still important links, as indicated, attaching these Governments to the Commonwealth, they are simultaneously participating in other forms of international association, such as the grouping of Afro-Asian States, separately from the Commonwealth. The former, representing the past, may be declining in strength, while the latter, corresponding to the new rising forces of the national liberation movement, may be advancing. For the two forms of association are by no means necessarily always in harmony or compatible. This was already shown sharply at the time of the Suez War, when all the Afro-Asian States with India playing a leading part, were opposed to the aggression of British and French imperialism and cast hostile votes in the United Nations Assembly. The Commonwealth was publicly split, and the ties of Afro-Asian solidarity against imperialism proved stronger. A new example of the same type of basic conflict arose this year over the South African Government's policy of Apartheid or White Supremacy and colour bar suppression, which nearly disrupted the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference.

#### **4. Conflict over South Africa and Apartheid**

The issue of the South African Apartheid regime of racial oppression in the interests of White domination, the Sharpeville massacre and the following Emergency reign of terror dominated in fact the proceedings of the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference, despite all the attempts of the British Prime Minister, supported by the other White Prime Ministers, to keep the

issue off the agenda. International opinion had been outraged by the Sharpeville massacre. The Afro-Asian Premiers, especially those from the more recently formed States, Malaya and Ghana, came mandated by their Cabinets or Assemblies to press the issue and demand an explicit condemnation of Apartheid as incompatible with the principles of the Commonwealth. Even those with the most reactionary internal regime, such as Pakistan or Malaya, were committed to fight on this issue, and were even in some respects the most vociferous in proclaiming their determination to fight on it, possibly welcoming the opportunity to find at any rate one issue on which they could rebut the popular charge of being tied to imperialism.

For the British imperialists, however, and in varying degree for the other White Premiers, the issue raised the most embarrassing dilemmas. On the one hand, they could not afford to outrage the feelings of the Afro-Asian majority of the population of their Commonwealth by appearing openly to condone the unconcealed and barbarous system of racial colour bar servitude practised in South Africa. On the other hand, they had no wish to lose South Africa, in which the British finance-capitalists have £865 million invested, bringing rich profits from the slavery of Apartheid. Already in his tour of Africa, including South Africa, immediately preceding the Conference, Premier Macmillan had endeavoured to bridge the unbridgeable and combine benevolent words towards African aspirations with close practical solidarity with the White oppressors and advocates of racial supremacy. In South Africa he had sought to satisfy his hosts, the Verwoerd Government, by refusing to meet African leaders and by denouncing the international boycott of South African goods, while at the same time in his speech to the parliament at Capetown on February 3 he warned of the necessity to adapt to the "winds of change" sweeping over Africa and inserted a diplomatically worded hint on the dangers of maintaining a too rigid policy of racial suppression in the modern world. In vain. His words only aroused the anger of his hosts without affecting their policy. The Sharpeville and Langa massacre, killing seventy, shot dead by police firing on an unarmed crowd trying to run away (mostly shot in the back), followed within three weeks of Macmillan's Capetown speech.

Hence all the endeavours of Macmillan at the Commonwealth Conference were to keep out the explosive issue of South Africa. The question, it was alleged, was purely one of "internal" "domestic" policy of South Africa, and therefore

ineligible for inclusion as an item into the Conference agenda. An untenable argument. For the United Nations Assembly had already thirteen times condemned the South African system of Apartheid as a violation of human rights under the Charter, and on the last occasion the only opposing votes had been those of Britain, France and fascist Portugal. When discussion became inevitable, it was ruled that any discussion should be an informal exchange outside the agenda or official proceedings and should be strictly private. Once again reality tore down the curtain of concealment. After the South African Foreign Minister Louw had given an outrageous press conference, arrogantly defending Apartheid in the most extreme and uncompromising terms, the Premiers of Ghana and Malaya indignantly demanded equal publicity for their views. The South African question became the main issue of the Conference reported in the press.

In the final outcome the traditional device of a "black-white" formula was devised for the communiqué to cover the rift. The formula satisfied Verwoerd by not condemning Apartheid, and by emphasising non-intervention in the "internal affairs" of member states. At the same time it made meagre concessions to the critics by stating that the points of view had been explained, that the future membership of South Africa in the Commonwealth after becoming a Republic would have to be subject to the agreement of the other members, and by adding a final key sentence on the "multi-racial" character of the Commonwealth:

"The Ministers emphasised that the Commonwealth itself is a multi-racial association and expressed the need to ensure good relations between all member states and peoples of the Commonwealth."

Even this seemingly innocuous formula was a monument of hypocrisy. The real world of imperialism contradicts its smooth phrases at every point, and not only in South Africa. Under cover of the "multi-racial" phrases Premier Welensky operates an essentially similar system of racial suppression in Southern Rhodesia as in South Africa. The massacre by police shooting in Nyasaland (a "police state", according to the Devlin Report) immediately preceded that in Sharpeville. From Uganda to Bermuda the colour bar is maintained. Premier Menzies of "White Australia" excludes coloured immigrants and solemnly signs the declaration repudiating racial discrimination. The agony of Notting Hill cries in vain in Britain, and the sanctimonious British Government signed the declaration repudiating racial discrimination immediately after refusing to ratify the Inter-

national Labour Office convention condemning discrimination in the choice of jobs on grounds of colour or creed. Even in the standard official photograph of the Commonwealth Premiers in the garden of No. 10 Downing Street, reproduced in every newspaper, the five White Premiers were firmly seated in a phalanx in the centre, with the five coloured Premiers (including Nehru) relegated to the outer edges.

The "innocuous words" of the Conference formula, as *The Times* described it, could solve nothing. "A precarious balance" was the verdict of the *Daily Telegraph* on the outcome of the Conference. "Never before has so large a crack been papered over so thinly," commented the *Guardian*. "This is not a schism that can be healed with comfortable words," warned *The Times*.

The Afro-Asian Premiers did not conceal their fury. The more clamorous among them had only been manoeuvred by the astute Macmillan into signing the declaration, thus ranging their signatures alongside the signatures of the hated racist Louw, by allowing themselves to be impressed with the solemn humbug that the rule of unanimity had to be obeyed. The Malayan Premier Abdul Rahman (by no means a representative of the left) in an immediately following public statement revealed his mortification and his anxiety lest he should be accused of betrayal:

"No Prime Minister will keep his mouth shut when he gets home. I shall express myself fully when I get back to Malaya. Otherwise what will my people think of me? They would think from reading the communiqué that I have let them down."

Similar angry statements were made by President Ayub Khan of Pakistan (also no representative of the left) and Premier Nkrumah of Ghana.

Subsequently to the Conference, Ghana has announced an official decision to begin a boycott of South African goods. The eleven independent African Governments, meeting at Addis Ababa in June, have agreed to establish a similar boycott. Malaya has also announced a boycott on South African goods and an embargo on the supply of rubber and tin to South Africa. The Afro-Asian Governments in the United Nations are understood to have under consideration a resolution recommending economic sanctions against South Africa so long as the system of Apartheid is maintained. Such a resolution would place the Macmillan Government, with its attempted two-faced policy, in an embarrassing position. The way is open for the intensified pressure of British popular opinion.

Thus the battle within the Commonwealth continues to develop.

Many other issues arose in the proceedings of the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference this year which would require fuller separate examination, and which have an important bearing on the future of the Commonwealth.

### 5. Economic and Strategic Questions

In the economic sphere the main issues turned on the European Common Market and its relation to the Commonwealth, and on the source of the flow of capital for development in the underdeveloped Commonwealth areas, especially Africa.

In relation to the European Common Market the communiqué contented itself with an innocuous formula of "concern at the prospect of any economic division of Europe" and the "hope" that the new plans would "avoid damage" to the Commonwealth countries and that "these problems could be speedily and satisfactorily resolved, with due regard to the interests of countries outside Europe". No policy was set out, nor could it easily be set out. For Britain to enter the Common Market, with its avowed aim of eventual complete economic-political integration, would mean to say a final farewell to its dreams of world power as the centre of Commonwealth, and to become no more than a constituent State in a West European combination dominated by West Germany. On the other hand, to fail to enter could mean to reduce Britain to increasing economic inferiority and failure in face of the two giants of the capitalist world, the United States and the Common Market, alongside the socialist world. Nor could the phantasies of Commonwealth economic integration offer any practical alternative, since experience had long shown the lack of basis for these old phantasies of the imperialists (the long dead plans of "Imperial Economic Federation", or "Empire Customs Union" or "Empire Free Trade"). The issue was left undecided. But after the Commonwealth Conference, and after the Summit fiasco, Britain has opened new initiatives towards attempting to reach an agreement with the Common Market. Influential organs such as the *Economist* and *Observer* have advocated complete entry. On the other hand, it is pointed out that two fifths of Britain's exports go to the Commonwealth and only one seventh to the Common Market countries. The issue still remains undecided. The increasing urgency of the question of the Common Market reveals the further weakening of the basis of the Commonwealth.

On the supply of capital the Achilles' heel of Britain's domination of the Commonwealth was revealed. The recurring problems of Britain's balance of payments, and the overwhelming

superior strength of the United States as an exporter of capital, have combined to place in jeopardy Britain's key position at the centre of the empire, since the maintenance of that position depends on the ability to maintain and renew continuously the export of capital. In this sphere Britain has had steadily to lose positions to the United States, with a surrender of dominance in Canada, a marked shrinking of the old superiority in Australia, and a significant increase of United States penetration in India and Africa. All the internal economics and politics of post-war Governments in Britain whether Labour or Conservative, have in fact revolved around this central aim: to force up the export of capital in order to maintain the empire. The communiqué of the Conference recorded that proposals were considered for "co-operative action among members of the Commonwealth in assisting the economic development of Commonwealth countries in Africa which have recently attained or are approaching independence." i.e., to seek to draw in the now developing Canadian and Australian finance-capital to reinforce Britain for the further exploitation of Africa.

In the strategic field also important questions are arising, and the silence of the communiqué by no means indicates that these questions were not discussed. For it is precisely at this moment that the collapse of Britain's nuclear strategy based on Blue Streak and the Thors, that is, based on vulnerable fixed missile sites in Britain, has led to the new strategy of dispersal, to seek to keep the bombers constantly mobile from a ring of bases round the world. The fulfilment of this so-called "imperial defence system" would require the continuous operation of the manned bombers from "forward bases" in the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East and Indian Ocean, and the Far East. The key points of such a chain of airfields would be represented by Cyprus, Kenya, the Central African Federation, Aden, the Maldives and Singapore. Hence, just as Britain's naval supremacy in the old days rested on possession of the chain of naval bases round the world, so Britain's nuclear strategy today requires domination of the chain of air bases in the Commonwealth countries round the world.

But it is precisely these bases that give rise to especially sharp conflict with the national consciousness and demands for independence in the countries concerned. During these years since the war Britain has had to evacuate base after base in the old dependent empire or newly independent countries, in face of the overwhelming demand of the national movement and hostility of the local population, after the expenditure of vast sums on

their installation and equipment. What happened to the old Suez Canal Zone base? Or Habbaniyah? Or Trincomalee? Will a different fate await the bases in Cyprus? Or Kenya? Or Aden? Or Singapore? Once again the deepening contradictions of the present precarious Commonwealth structure are revealed.

## 6. Queries on the future of the Commonwealth

Around the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference a widespread discussion has developed on the future of the Commonwealth. The immediate issue of this discussion has turned on the future of its political structure. The further extension of current policy would bring the accession of a further series of newly independent countries, some larger such as Nigeria (33 million), some smaller such as the West Indies (3½ million), some considerably smaller, such as Sierra Leone, Malta, Cyprus, Singapore. All these as sovereign States, if continuing in the Conference, would have equal rights to participate on an equal basis in future Commonwealth Premiers' Conferences, thus swamping the original members. The Conference would become "expanded into a debating society of a score of delegations". (*Times* 27.4.60). A recent House of Lords' debate in July revealed the anxieties over this prospect.

The intensity of the debate on this prospect did not only turn on the question of expanding numbers, although formally this was the only problem that was brought into public discussion. We have seen that in the Conference this year for the first time the number of Afro-Asian Premiers equalled the number of White Premiers from pre-1914 members. We have also seen that the sharp conflict arising over the system of colour discrimination, as practised in South Africa, nearly disrupted the Conference. With the prospective further expansion of numbers, unless new methods should be devised, the Afro-Asian Premiers of newly independent countries would be in a majority, and the decisive domination of the British imperialists and their close allies, utilising the Commonwealth structure, could be thrown into doubt.

Many propositions were canvassed in the public discussion around this issue. The first proposals put forward, for "two tiers" of membership, with a distinction between senior, larger, more important members, and junior, smaller, minor members, were soon dismissed as obviously undiplomatic in the delicate situation arising. Alternative proposals have been put forward for a "steering committee" with a core of permanent members and a rotating panel of elected or representative members from

regions, on the model of the United Nations Security Council. The Conservative Political Centre's newly published booklet *Wind of Change: The Challenge of the Commonwealth* advocates a series of "functional committees". In the Conference communiqué the question of the future "constitutional development of the Commonwealth" was mentioned as having been held over for further "study".

This discussion is symptomatic of the many question marks recognised by the imperialists themselves as arising over the future of the Commonwealth. On the eve of the Conference *The Times* published a series of editorials on the problem arising, and the first was entitled "Anxieties" (27.4.60). The picture drawn was gloomy:

"Every meeting of the Prime Ministers—indeed every Imperial Conference in earlier days—has found the Commonwealth a little more loosely articulated. . . .

The argument that the Commonwealth is moving down a slippery slope to dissolution is formidable . . . No Member, happily, has gone over to the adversary, but the possibility is not unthinkable . . . The Crown is rejected by these peoples (of Asia and Africa) as something irrelevant and alien. Even Australians, loyal and forthright, find themselves leaning more towards the United States. . . .

Many marks of the old imperial unity have dissolved away. Strategically it happened long ago . . . The task of policing the world has largely been handed over to regional associations, in which member States of the Commonwealth participate individually, but the collective voice is not heard: The interchangeable citizenship, once the glory of the Empire, has disappeared."

The solution offered in the final article is hardly convincing (29.4.60):

"It is easy to suggest schemes for tighter organisation. The truth is that the Commonwealth has to be accepted as the varied and voluntary organisation that it is. . . . Reforms can only be gradual and marginal."

Underlying these doubts and uncertainties of the imperialists on the future of the Commonwealth is revealed their deeper fear which governs their approach. This is their fear that all the manoeuvres may in the end fail them, and that the former subject peoples of the Empire, who by their revolt have already won the recognition of their independent states, although they are still heavily under the economic and strategic yoke of imperialism, still suffering from the inheritance of a colonial economy, still paying rich dividends to the financiers in London, may refuse to accept the present halfway stage, and may continue their revolt and advance to complete economic and political independence from imperialism, or . . . as the im-

perialists define it . . . to Communism. Here is the spectre which haunts them, which drives them to make concessions, to acclaim the national aspirations which formerly they crushed, or to repudiate the colour bar and racial discrimination of which they were most zealous upholders. The spectre still haunts them.

In the review of the Commonwealth by *The Times* quoted above the view is put forward that the granting of national independence was "a gamble" in the hope of defeating Communism:

"There has always been present the fear that national sentiment, if unsatisfied in the Commonwealth, may be taken under alien and Communist patronage. In the trust that, when uncontrolled, it will be less likely to seek such affiliation there is something of a gamble".

The Canadian Premier Diefenbaker declared during the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference that the declaration of the equality of races in the Commonwealth was indispensable in order that the Commonwealth should fulfil its function as "a bulwark against communism:"

"A major principle of the Commonwealth must continue to be the equality of all races and peoples in all parts of the Commonwealth. Unless we accept that as a basic principle, everywhere in the world, the Commonwealth mission will ultimately be greatly diminished".

Truly the fear of Communism is the beginning of wisdom even for the most hard-boiled imperialists.

"A bulwark against Communism." Such is the imperialist conception of the Commonwealth. Through all the changing forms, with infinite flexibility and capacity for manoeuvre, they hope still to keep flowing the tide of surplus profit to maintain the British "affluent" paradise. But the wheel of history cannot be turned backwards. The manifest strains and unsolved dilemmas of the recent Commonwealth Premiers' Conference have demonstrated the deepening crisis of imperialism.

The real question is not one of forms, but of content; not of labels, but of living and concrete economic, social and political relations.

It would be idle to assume that some forms of the Commonwealth may not continue into the next stage (for example, the association of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and possibly Canada, on grounds of historical, racial and cultural associations) as to assume that the artificial frontiers carved out by predatory imperialists will govern the political forms of the future, or that the peoples of West Africa or Africa will not fulfil their dream of closer political association, irrespective of previous imperialist frontiers, or similarly the peoples of the Arab world, or of the Caribbean or of South East Asia. At the present moment such anticipations can only be speculations of the future. The revision of the Communist Parties' formulation on future fraternal relations of the victorious British working class with the newly independent nations, following solidarity in the common anti-imperialist struggle, adopted at our 25th Congress, has helped to prepare the Party in readiness for the widening variety of prospects now opening out.

But the present reality is still the struggle against imperialism. The present essential necessity is the fraternal fighting alliance of all the peoples in the present Commonwealth against imperialism and against the policies of imperialism; against colonial wars, national oppression and imperialist military pacts; against racial and colour discrimination, economic exploitation, and denial of democratic rights; for the right of self-determination of all peoples; for economic liberation; for disarmament and peaceful co-existence. What is certain is that, despite all the skilful manoeuvres to juggle with forms and phrases to deceive the people, imperialism is doomed. What is certain is that, through whatever forms and stages, the peoples will advance to the final and complete victory of their economic, social and political liberation.