

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

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MC/MAR/19/78 (Foreign Affairs)

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SPEECH BY MR A RAHIM ISHAK, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AT COMMONWEALTH DAY DINNER OF THE
COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE AT THE SINGAPORE
CRICKET CLUB ON 11 MARCH 1978 AT 8.00 P.M.

18 MAR 1978

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I am happy to be with you all this evening to celebrate Commonwealth Day. This day was decided upon by the Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1975, two years after Britain joined the European Economic Community. The Commonwealth leaders felt that it was necessary at least once a year to remind their peoples of their continuing association in a family of nations that had its origin in the British Empire.

Even before Britain's entry into the EEC, the links that bound the Commonwealth together with Britain as the spoke of a wheel, were loosening. With independence and the withdrawal of the Imperial British presence, more compelling factors of geography, geopolitics and economics were dictating shifts in every member nation's focus of interest from the former imperial centre to new metropolitan or regional powers. Thus Singapore and Malaysia were finding greater relevance in ASEAN, as well as in the US, Japan and the EEC as a whole for economic reasons. On the other hand the African members were more involved in the OAU, where their Commonwealth links were often not compatible with their new imperatives.

After Britain's entry in the EEC, its economic importance to the rest of the Commonwealth also diminished. Thus its trade with the other Commonwealth countries declined from 8% of its total world trade in 1970, to 5% in 1976. The imperial preferences of old, which made, for example, Australia and New Zealand, her chief suppliers of meat and dairy products, have given way to EEC agreements and restrictions, which Britain has to observe and apply against her former colonies and dominions. One can therefore well understand why Commonwealth countries so affected have to look for other markets and seek new arrangements.

However a decline in the role and influence of Britain does not spell the end of the Commonwealth or a diminution of the Commonwealth's role

as a binding influence among its members. The Commonwealth countries can and have found new regional identification among themselves. Thus African Commonwealth countries have found a common bond which transcends the obstacles of tribe, nation or geography and gives them a sense of solidarity to match the Francophone states. Likewise with the Caribbean countries. In the Asian-Pacific region, the lack of such an identification was rectified when Commonwealth Heads of Government from the 12 countries in the area met for the first time last month in Sydney. They were able to sit down together informally, discuss problems of common concern without any interpreters, and succeeded in defining their common interests in a way which defied expectations. As our Prime Minister put it, he was agreeably surprised that the meeting was able to achieve more than he had thought possible. That is the measure of the intangible strength of the Commonwealth connection.

The Commonwealth survives and continues to be active in meetings at various levels, the members finding common ground in their English-speaking heritage, despite the sharp differences in political styles and systems that have developed among them. Through the Commonwealth Secretariat they continue to help one another in technical training and advice and in education at tertiary level. The English language has been the most valuable bond shared by the Commonwealth. That it is also the language of international trade and communication as well as science and technology, has, no doubt, been a persuasive consideration in its continued use in the Commonwealth.

By the same token, the Commonwealth has to be of relevance to its members in our rapidly changing world in the main issues facing us. It must be able to reflect the different circumstances in which the members find themselves and respond to their different aspirations. For example, it must take into account the fact that it numbers among its members a significant proportion of the poor nations of the Third World. Only four members belong to the Group of developed countries - Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. The rest are developing countries, some a little more developing than others.

The Commonwealth can perform a valuable service in the current North-South dialogue for a new international economic order by adopting a moderate approach to the intractable economic problems of the world. The confrontationist style adopted in some international forums might be necessary to move some adamant nations, but they will not necessarily ensure

a solution for those problems.

However the developed Commonwealth countries could show the way for other developed nations to follow by entering into special arrangements to help improve two-way trade and the terms of trade; by setting the lead in areas like reducing tariffs, removing non-tariff barriers and entering into preferential arrangements with the developing Commonwealth countries. In the field of industrial cooperation and transfer of technology, the developed members could demonstrate a new approach by phasing out their less efficient and lower-technology industries to the developing countries. That these are goals difficult of realisation in the immediate future is undeniable and understandable. But it is a worthwhile effort for the developed members to consider, and the developing countries to encourage, with a view to re-arranging the economic relationship in the world from the present unequal division to a more equitable balance.

This serious intention underlay the recent regional meeting in Sydney. The outcome of the meeting was constructive - the Asia and Pacific leaders found sufficient common ground to agree to meet again at Delhi in two years time. Before that the follow-up action agreed upon should have resulted in some practical steps in trade and regional cooperation in energy, communications, industrial ventures, as well as in such global problems like combatting terrorism and illicit drug trafficking.

Singapore is a member of ASEAN and a strong advocate of greater economic cooperation among its five members. Even as we consolidate existing frameworks of cooperation, such as ASEAN, we should not shut out the possibility of other avenues for constructive relations with other countries so as to best protect and advance our interests. There can be advantage in belonging to more than one regional club. It was in this spirit that we took an active part in the Sydney meeting of Asian and Pacific Commonwealth Heads. For we believe that our participation in the regional grouping not only supplements Singapore's efforts to secure maximum security and prosperity, through a diversified approach to our international relations. The regional grouping of Asian and Pacific Commonwealth countries also represents an additional leg for us to stand on in the changing configuration of international politics.

Such regional cooperation, reaching across geographical expanse and traditional inhibitions, add a new dimension to the Commonwealth idea. And

ultimately, it is the idea of the Commonwealth that gives it its indefinable strength, notwithstanding its diffusion and the diversity of its members, its multi-cultural complexity, its economic contradictions and its political incompatibilities. Today we rededicate ourselves to the belief that this mini-United Nations of one billion people, speaking at least one language in common, represents a moderating and hopeful voice in the big debate on the major issues facing the world. I congratulate you as members of the Commonwealth Society for contributing in a small but significant way to the shaping of that voice of one quarter of mankind.

Also I wish to thank you for inviting my wife and I to your dinner tonight.
