

COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING 1971

Address at the Closure of the Conference

by the Chairman, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew,

on 22nd January, 1971

My colleagues,

This Conference is now drawing to a close. We have got to know each other better after 9 days. It does not mean that we have altogether changed our respective positions. However, we should not rule out the possibility that there could be further adjustments and modifications of our different defence and economic policies. Our attitudes to colour and other conflicts may shift, if only slightly, as a result of listening to the arguments expounded. But whether it is arms sales to South Africa, or the consequences of Britain's entry into the Common Market, or the financing of Commonwealth technical development and co-operation between the developed and the less developed countries, enlightened self-interest is tempered by a sincere desire to do what we can to improve the lot of the others, or at least make it more bearable.

There were some thoughtful and constructive contributions from a good number of speakers on the World Economic Situation and Trends, and the impact of Britain's membership of the E.E.C. I am grateful to my colleagues for their conscious moderation in the tone of their speeches. It stopped almost irreconcilable positions from becoming completely irreconcilable. Restraint and good manners prevented face to face encounter from degenerating into disorder, which characterised the French Assembly of the Fourth Republic.

I have tried to give every major item adequate time for discussion, and every participant his fair measure of attention. I was grateful that those being provoked stayed cool and calm.

It is nearly 9 years since I was present as an observer at a Commonwealth Conference in September 1962. The then British Prime Minister was explaining why they wanted to join the Common Market. Although they valued the ties of history, family, language and culture with the old and new Commonwealth, Commonwealth co-operation in trade was not an adequate base for modern technology. The massive costs of research and development, and the marketing of products of high technology, required land masses with extensive transportation networks, and large populations with high purchasing power. If Britain did not have access to a conglomerate economic base like the E.E.C.,

then her technologic and industrial standards would inevitably fall behind not only those of American and the Soviet Union, but also that of the European Six. It was an acceptance of the changed circumstances of the contemporary world.

This Conference, 9 years after 1962, has met under very different circumstances. Britain is still not in the E.E.C. But from 1962, all her Commonwealth partners have been more actively diversifying their trade and economic relationship to lessen the blow to their economics if and when Britain joins the E.E.C.

On Southern Africa, there was a marginal change of attitudes. Perhaps as a result of further discussion and reflection, there may be slight shifts in the position of all.

Of course, Singapore derives an advantage from a British presence East of Suez, even a modest one. It gives us time to build up our own small, but not insignificant, defence capability. It also helps the transition into new power balances.

The Prime Minister of Canada made an outstanding contribution in our private session. He, of Caucasian stock, Prime Minister of a country with the

highest per capita income of any Commonwealth country, felt that the stature of man himself would be diminished if we treat our fellow humans the way South African whites are doing. But, emotion notwithstanding, his intellect probed the problem further. He has allowed me to paraphrase him. He said the problem would not be solved even if Britain did not sell arms to Africa. Other would. In any case, China or Russia would supply arms to the oppressed Africans in these territories. Bloodshed and suffering were inevitable.

A logical step was that the liberals in the West should supply African freedom fighters with guns. He declared honestly that he could not contemplate this. But Canada could significantly help the economic transformation of Africa.

I would briefly repeat Singapore's position on this question. We stand with our African colleagues in the Commonwealth in combating this evil of racism. We stand committed to the principle of human equality and dignity, in the struggle against racism, and towards this end we are prepared to help by way of education and finance.

Contact and dialogue with South Africa was accepted in the Lusaka Manifesto. It may modify their attitudes. One delegate appropriately but inadvertently called them boers. I do not believe that boerish behaviour can be

wholly changed by dialogue. It was not contact or dialogue which made the white South Africans classify the Japanese as white for the purposes of apartheid. The Japanese used to be considered a strange, outlandish looking people, with strange dress styles. But by World War I, they had demonstrated that they were more than the equals of the Africaaners. I read recently that the Chinese in South Africa were to be allowed access to some white facilities.

This is vicarious reward for the enormous sacrifices made by the toil and discipline which the People's Republic of China had to extract of their people. It demonstrated their capacity as a people to match the West in nuclear science and missile technology. White racist-supremist theories can only be demolished by clearly demonstrating that the whites are not superior.

It is not from weakness that one commands respect. However desirable it may be to persuade white South African through contact, and not isolationism, to think and behave differently, I fear history will prove that it can only be done otherwise, more by force than by reason.

However, in a different sense, the British Prime Minister may be right about contact and dialogue. Present-day technology in mass transportation and communication is cheap, safe and convenient. Kipling's verdict on East and West has an ironic conclusion in the twain having met, and met permanently in

Britain herself. So too in France. East has met West. Black has met White. They are living in one society, in America, Britain, France and several countries of Europe. A shortage of workers for the jobs in the lower social order has tempted governments to seek the easy way out, by allowing immigrants to take up these jobs. Now, they have to live with the problems of accommodation and integration. Australia used to be concerned with what she thought was the yellow peril, hordes of Japanese poised to invade pure white Australia in 1942, and to ravage and ravish her. Nearly 30 years from then, the logic of geography, and Japan's superior technology and productivity, has turned her into one of the major purchasers of Australian raw materials, whilst Japan supplies sophisticated products, like camera's , T.V. sets, and small cars.

We cannot despair either for the white, black, brown, or the yellow man. There are in every ethnic group the outstanding intellect, that percentage of high-flyers. Ralph Bunche or Arthur Lewis, in diplomacy or scholarship, or James Baldwin and Richard Wright in literature, many blacks have made outstanding contributions in open competition with a mainly white population.

But the problem the less developed countries face is not that we do not have the individuals with exceptional qualities. The problem is that we are judged by our performance as a group, not as individuals. And for group

performance, more than a few men of outstanding qualities are required. The cultural ballast, the value patterns, the solid discipline, the organisational framework of effective government within which individual endeavour is made rewarding, and collective performance becomes a source of national pride -- these are crucial ingredients. Then we will command equality, both as individuals, and as ethnic and social groups.

History, deciphered from stone relics and parchments, has many instances of the rise and fall of many empires. Great civilisations have flourished and perished. Who would have believed when the Romans conquered Britain in the early years of the christian era, that the barbarians they found there would, by the end of the 19th century, become the supreme naval and industrial power of the world? Who could have foreseen that this people, in the progress of 300 years of naval supremacy, seeded colonies in the New World, which have overtaken them, both in technological supremacy and material wealth? But who can say what will happen to American if she does not solve her own problems of overabundance, the listlessness which leads to drugs, permissiveness, the near breakdown of civilized living in the urban ghettos as violence and organised disorder become a way of life? Some 25 million American negroes are not going to disappear from the face of North America by the year 2000. Their problems of large families, poor education, poverty and deprivation of human dignity must

be solved. But how? Unless the family unit is recreated after being destroyed in slavery, and family care and pride keep the numbers of children down to a few who can be nurtured and nourished, all the money spent on the Vietnam war diverted to Black housing, education and job opportunities, cannot solve them.

The world has become too small for us all. It will become even smaller with the jumbos, the supersonics, the hydrofoils, and the hovercraft. It is becoming ever more economically inter-dependent.

But we shall be disappointed if we believe that this dissolving of primeval prejudices will happen overnight. Behind the intellect is the primordial nervous system, reacting involuntarily with fear and prejudice to the strange and the unaccustomed. Worse, this is reinforced in so many ways by the portraying of inferiority of certain ethnic groups in literature, on television, and even in dolls.

In a multitude of ways, this Conference has mirrored in miniature some of the irreconcilables the world community faces. They must be made less irreconcilable. It will become too costly and painful for mankind if these conflicts are not tempered by the spirit of common brotherhood.

Early this morning the Singapore Government pledged to contribute towards the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation in accordance with

the U.N. Formula. This was in response to the Canadian promise to contribute 40%, and the call by the British Foreign Secretary to the less developed members of the Commonwealth to match the British contribution of up to 30%. In view of this the Singapore Government has now decided to treble its present contribution, which is almost double of what its liability would have been under the U.N. Formula.

As I bid you a safe journey home, please remember that we do not pretend to be virtuous. Hypocrisy is not a feature of Singapore's leadership. Our different racial, cultural and linguistic groups, each has its strength and weaknesses. But by education, by economic and social policy, we hope to lessen these weaknesses. Those entrusted with authority for the time being, from my colleagues and I in the Cabinet, to the teacher in school, to the foreman, we all make a conscious effort towards a more equal and a more just society. I hope if you re-visit us in the 1980's, you can find that we have moved along with the rest of the world, into a more easy and equitable relationship between different racial, religious and linguistic groups.

Finally I would like to thank the Secretary-General and his efficient Secretariat staff. Without their thorough preparation before this Conference, their constant attendance upon our needs, their work at awkward hours, which

we toss unexpectedly at them every now and again, our meeting would not have been so expeditious. But I must especially mention the energetic optimism of the Secretary-General. Without his zealous efforts to seek solutions to the most intractable puzzles, our meeting would have foundered.

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