CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

IMPERIAL/COMMONWEALTH ELEMENT IN BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY

By the dawn of the present century, Britain was forced to recon with the new nationalism that was emerging in her self-governing colonies. Till then, she treated those colonies more or less as her appendages abroad, and hence she was fully responsible for their foreign relations. The Imperial Conferences then were meant just to brief them about the British thinking and approach on various international issues. Beyond this, there existed no participation or dialogue between Britain and the self-governing colonies in framing foreign policy.

A sound foreign policy is based on material as well as psychological factors. In both respects, for Britain, the Commonwealth assumed great importance, as it constituted one of the main pillars of her power status and diplomacy. But it may be seen that between the dawn of the century and the First World War, the Commonwealth, as an institution, was not a factor in British foreign policy at all. The Dominions were given powers only on internal matters; and the participation in the formulation of "high policy" was beyond their power. They had no right to enter into treaties, nor establish

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1 Till 1907, they were called "Colonial Conferences". These Conferences, held in the Colonial Office, were then presided over, not by the British Prime Minister, but by the Colonial Secretary. The 1907 Colonial Conference decided that the British Prime Minister would be the ex-officio Chairman of the Conference. Accordingly, at the 1911 Imperial Conference, held for the first time in the Foreign Office, the British Prime Minister occupied the chair. See L.S. Amery, Thoughts on the Constitution (London, 1947), p. 110.
diplomatic relationship with other countries. Decisions on questions of war and peace were the responsibility of the United Kingdom. But a noteworthy factor was that while, on the one hand, Britain was not inclined to associate Dominions on foreign policy questions, on the other, the Dominions, on their part, also did not demand such participation, though they desired it. Therefore it was that Britain declared war on Germany in 1914 both on behalf of the Dominions (without even consultation with them) and herself.

The period between 1914 and 1920 was significant in the evolution of the Commonwealth as a factor in British foreign policy. The active, and unreserved participation of Dominions in the British war efforts made it obligatory for Britain to concede their demands for a right to have a voice in the formulation of foreign and defence policies. A significant development in this direction took place in 1917, when Britain summoned a "Special War Conference of the Empire", which consisted of the Dominion Prime Ministers and the five-member British War Cabinet. This was the beginning of a full partnership of Dominions in the formulation and implementation of policies on foreign and defence matters. The great achievement of the Conference, from the Commonwealth point of

2 This is known as the Imperial War Cabinet.

3 It was in this Conference that the phrase "British Commonwealth of Nations" was incorporated in Resolution IX of the Conference. Cd 8566 (1917), p. 5.
view, was that it passed a resolution to the effect that a special Imperial Conference be held after the war to readjust "the constitutional relations of the component parts of the empire". It said:

Any adjustment, while thoroughly preserving all existing powers of self-government and complete control of domestic affairs, should be based upon a full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth, and of India as an important portion of the same, should recognize the right of Dominions and India to an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations, and should provide effective arrangements for continuous consultation in all important matters of common Imperial concern, and for such necessary concerted action, founded on consultation, as the several governments may determine. (4)

This was followed by the Dominions' demand, two years later, for "absolute equality of status". To an extent they achieved this aim during the Paris Peace Conference, and in getting a status equal to other non-Great Power nations in the League of Nations.

Dominion-British relations underwent a metamorphosis during the period that followed the end of the First World War. Britain realized the growing desire of the Dominions to assert their right to conduct foreign relations, and also the need to respect the Dominion aspirations in playing a role in world affairs. In 1922, Canada asserted its position through the announcement of the appointment of her own representative as Minister to

4 Ibid.

5 Originally it was proposed that the Dominions should be represented at the Paris Peace Conference only as part of the British Empire delegation. Dominions were not happy over the arrangement. Ultimately, Canada, Australia, and South Africa got two delegates each, New Zealand one and India two.
Washington. But this did not jeopardize the underlying unity and confidence between Britain and the Dominions, which were necessarily based on a generally common approach to world problems. The tie between the Dominions and the mother country were so deep-rooted that it was not possible for the Dominions to deviate much from the main stream of British thought and approach. Therefore, ultimately, all this amounted only to a theoretical recognition of Dominions' right of participation in foreign policy decisions. This was good enough to satisfy the ego of the Dominions for the time being. It was in tune with this climate of change that W.H. Hughes, the Australian Prime Minister, at the Imperial Conference in 1921, told his colleagues: "We were colonies, we became Dominions.... we, the representatives of the Dominions are met together to formulate a foreign policy for the Empire". 6

The Dominions asserted their independent approach on external relations during the Chanak Crisis, in the Middle East, in 1922. They shrugged off their shoulders when, in September 1922 Lloyd George appealed to the Dominions for support to the British policy in the Middle East. To quote Prof. Hancock: "To his [Lloyd George's] cry 'come over and help us', New Zealand had answered 'yes' with enthusiasm, Australia had answered 'yes' with resentment and misgiving, Canada had answered 'This is a matter to be considered'." 7 This indicated

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that the Dominions were even prepared to pursue foreign policies different from that of Britain. However, how serious they were in this pursuit could not be tested, since the crisis\(^8\) was solved without an armed conflict. Perhaps, Canada had used the occasion to make it clear that Britain could not take the Dominion support for granted in her foreign policy decisions. Since then, the British Government became more careful over the possible Dominion reactions, whenever a major change in policy was proposed.

Britain's formal approval of Dominion autonomy in foreign policy questions first found expression in 1925 when she signed the Locarno Treaty. She formally exempted India and the Dominions from the Treaty obligations. Article IX of the Pact stated: "The present Treaty shall impose no obligation upon any of the British Dominions, or upon India, unless the Government of such Dominion, or of India, signifies its acceptance thereof". The Locarno Pact thus marked the beginning of the end. It was the beginning of Britain's formulation of an individual policy, and also the end of the collective Commonwealth policy on the basis of British decisions.\(^9\) But despite this, the underlying Dominions' sympathy and the British response continued undiminished until 1939.

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8 Britain was occupying a neutral zone between Greece and Turkey. But in 1922 she was threatened by the Turks. And there was a possibility of war, which, however did not materialize.

It may be seen that the freedom of action the Dominions acquired during the interwar years, weighed heavily in formulating the policies of Britain's external relations; and Britain was not always sure whether Dominions would stand by her in times of crises. Therefore she was determined that in the event of another war, she would not be in it without the support - implicit or explicit - of the Commonwealth. Similarly, the Dominions also did not want an automatic involvement in a European war, even if Britain jumped into it for other reasons. They did not like the Polish Guarantee of 1939\textsuperscript{10} thinking that its fulfilment might drag them into war along with the United Kingdom. But despite the dislike, they had respect for British commitments. Therefore, they knew that while they had nothing to do with the Guarantee as such, they could not escape from the consequences arising out of the British commitment. This kind of uncertainty and embarrassment made Britain to reconcile her views and interests considerably with those of the Commonwealth in order to keep it intact and cohesive.

The attitude of other Commonwealth countries had powerfully influenced the British policy of appeasement of Hitler in the late 1930s. At the 1937 Imperial Conference, the Prime Ministers made it clear that the chief objective of the Commonwealth was

\textsuperscript{10} On 31 March 1939, Chamberlain announced Britain's full support to Poland in the event of a threat to its independence. UK, House of Commons, Parliamentary Debates, vol. 345, Session 1938-39, col. 2415. Later in August 1939 the Anglo-Polish Pact of Mutual Assistance was signed in London.
the preservation of peace. It was viewed then that "the settlement of differences that may arise between nations... should be sought by methods of co-operation, joint inquiry and conciliation". They expressed the view that "differences of political creed should be no obstacle to friendly relations between Governments and countries, and that nothing would be more damaging to the hopes of international appeasement than the division, real or apparent, of the world into opposing groups". This made it clear that basically the Dominions favoured peace with Germany. They were united on a policy of concessions, rather than of resistance. When the Commonwealth was in such a mood, Britain had no alternative but to pursue a policy of appeasement, at least until the Dominions revised their stand. Perhaps, this was an important reason that prompted Prime Minister Chamberlain to meet Hitler, with his reknowned 'umbrella'. In view of this delicate situation Britain always preferred to take the Dominions into confidence in every measure she took. This British attitude was the obvious indication of Dominion influence and participation in an increasing measure on her foreign policy decisions. In fact, the declared reluctance of the Dominions for a war was one of the reasons why Britain could not intervene on behalf of

11 Cmd 5482 (1937), p. 16.

12 This was adhered to when Britain negotiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1936, when she intended to reopen discussions with Italy in 1938, and also during the discussion before the Munich Agreement in 1939.
Czechoslovakia in September 1938, and played cool to Germany's aggressive posture.

Evidently after Munich, the policy of appeasement proved to be a failure. By March 1939, the Dominions, except South Africa under Hertzog, lost their faith in appeasing Hitler. They realized that appeasement could hardly cope up with the German threat. The realization brought an abrupt change in the British policy, which was made known by the Prime Minister on 23 March 1939. The overnight change from appeasement to readiness to fight was perhaps the result of careful watching of the changing climate in the Dominions, which was slowly catching up in favour of armed resistance. The changed mood in the Dominions certainly encouraged Britain to go forward with confidence with the altered policy of resistance to threats and aggression. Dominion statesmen, on the other hand, realized that in the event of a war involving Britain, Dominion neutrality would be impossible, in view of the interlocking nature of their mutual interests. Consequently, within a short time after Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, every Dominion, except South Africa, opted for war and declared solidarity with Britain.

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13 According to Chamberlain's biographer, this sudden change in the British policy was due to the pressure from Dominions. See, Keith Feiling, Neville Chamberlain (London, 1947), p. 400.

14 Dominion Governments acted independently in taking the decision on their participation in war. While Australia and New Zealand declared war on Germany on 3 September itself, Canada declared it only on 9 September. In South Africa it needed a Governmental change to go along with Britain.
Though there was no Imperial War Cabinet during the Second World War, at all times, there was maintained between Britain and the Dominions the closest possible consultation. As a matter of routine, right from the beginning of the war, Britain used to send at least one secret telegram daily to the Dominion Prime Ministers appraising them of the military situation. Only in 1944, all Dominion Prime Ministers met together in London and discussed common problems for the first time since the outbreak of the war. However, the unity that prevailed between Britain and the Commonwealth during the course of the war could be seen in a moving speech Winston Churchill made in the House of Commons, on 18 June 1940, after the fall of France and when Britain decided to continue the fight, if necessary alone. He said he had "fully informed and consulted all the self-governing Dominions, and I have received from their Prime Ministers, Mr Mackenzie King, Mr Menzies, Mr Frazer and General Smuts, messages couched in the most moving terms in which they endorse our decision and declare themselves ready to share our fortunes and to persevere to the end".

In 1941 the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand stayed for a fairly long time in London and attended meetings of the War Cabinet. This enabled them to participate


17 Robert Menzies stayed from 21 February to 20 May 1941, and Peter Frazer from 21 June to 26 August 1941.
directly in taking decisions pertaining to the war. But, ironically, Churchill did not consult the Dominions before he made the famous broadcast on 22 June 1941, the day on which Germany attacked Russia, declaring that "any man or state who fights on against Nazidom will have our aid", though the terms of the Anglo-Russian Agreement, that followed, were announced only after they were fully endorsed by them. However, it may be noted that right from the beginning, and till the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, in December 1941 followed by the entry of the United States into the war, the Commonwealth was a main source of strength for Britain in her war strategy. It was during this dark period of loneliness that a Canadian Division was deployed in the United Kingdom to protect her, while the Australian, New Zealand, South African and Indian forces manned the Middle East. Undoubtedly, after the British defeat in Dunkirk, it was these forces, which were placed at the disposal of Britain, that ensured Britain's survival. They defended Britain as if they were defending their own homes. As Bernard Braine wrote: "If Hitler and Nazism are dead, if we in Britain have survived, these blessings are due in no small measure to the solidarity,


the loyalty and faith of all the Empire countries". This was the supreme hour in the entire war history in which the importance of the Commonwealth was most felt in Britain. But this importance gradually waned in the wake of the American entry into the war. After that, Washington and London shared the responsibility of taking every major decision, though the Commonwealth remained to be an important pillar of British strength until the final victory.

The War brought in fresh factors into the British–Commonwealth relationship. The scare that was spread by Japanese military conquests in the Far East drove Australia and New Zealand straight into the orbit of the United States. In the latter half of the war, New Zealand and Australia were under great American influence, and, in fact, the Australian forces were placed under an American general and the New Zealand forces under an American Admiral. This caused great heart-searching in Britain, because, till then, Britain treated the Dominion forces almost like the British forces. But after Pearl Harbour, the Dominions wanted special control and supervision of their forces. This was evident from the fact that despite requests from Churchill and Roosevelt to divert Australian troops from the Middle East to Burma, the Australian Government insisted that they should return home.

Similarly in South Africa, while the war was on, the extreme nationalist elements demanded, in August 1940, the ending of the British connexion and declaration of the Union a republic in order to get out of the war.21

Financial relations between Britain and the Dominions were very close all these years. Trade relations also were very strong and were further strengthened by the Imperial preference system of 1932. The establishment of the sterling bloc (which since 1939 is known as Sterling Area)22 made the United States Government suspicious. This lead America to look with disfavour these two tangible Commonwealth links – the Commonwealth Preference and the Sterling Area – since then.

When the war ended in 1945, there was a visible change in the Dominion attitude towards their own position in the world. In the Pacific Dominions, this change was largely due to their getting closer to the United States and the new confidence that grew in the American military strength. In the circumstances, the Dominions tended to take independent lines in their external relationships and felt that they were truly independent. This had its first demonstration at the United Nations conference at San Francisco in 1945 to consider the draft of the United Nations Charter. There, Australia and

21 The Union of South Africa, *House of Assembly Debates*, vol. 40, cols. 324-25. The move was made by Strijdom. In 1942 Dr Malan also made a similar demand. See *Ibid.*, vol. 43, col. 34.

22 All Commonwealth countries except Canada were and are members of the Sterling Area.
New Zealand opposed the principle of veto, though Britain strongly stood in favour of it. Similarly, on the question of post-war development of colonial territories, these Dominions argued in favour of the concept of "Trusteeship" much against the wishes of Britain. Developments such as these were significant in that they definitely secured more independence in foreign policy questions than they had at the beginning of the war. Therefore, for Britain, practical co-operation called for a change in the treatment meted out towards the Dominions, perhaps to a degree more or less on equal terms. Thus, as Prof. Miller states, "at the close of the war, Britain and the four Dominions stood at the edge of a new epoch in their relations". This made the Commonwealth an increasingly important factor in Britain's post-war foreign policy. The legacy of the war to the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth was the sea-change from command to co-operation, a factor Britain was forced to recon with.

THE POST-WAR EVOLUTION OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The post-war evolution of the Commonwealth constitutes the most significant part of the Commonwealth history. It infused multi-racialism and the principle of absolute equality into the Commonwealth. The unique character of this continued association

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23 For more details see P.L.W. Wood, The New Zealand People at War (Wellington, 1958), Chapters 22-26, pp. 303-84.

of nations and an international organization helped a great deal to overcome the many challenges it faced during the post-war period. The expansion of the Commonwealth, from a group of five White countries to a group of thirteen nations (in 1961) of different racial and cultural backgrounds, made it a miniature United Nations. The change in the composition of the organization naturally and inevitably lead to a change in the traditional connotation of the term 'Commonwealth'. It demonstrated the ability of the association to adapt itself to the changing circumstances, and to make it more purposeful and stronger.

The evolution of the Commonwealth was the outcome of peaceful unscrambling of the British empire, which, in turn, resulted from the interplay of colonial nationalism and British liberalism, and "sustained by the sentiments produced by history". Despite the fact that, legally, there was continuity in the evolution of the Commonwealth between inter-war and post-war periods, the post-war change in the nature of the Commonwealth was distinctly revolutionary. In the sixteen years (1945-1961) long history of the post-war Commonwealth, one comes across two important landmarks – India's membership in the Commonwealth in 1947 and 1950, and the Union of South Africa's departure from it in 1961.

India's Membership

When the Attlee Government initiated the decolonization of the British Empire, it was anxious to see that the new nations become members of the Commonwealth. Attlee looked to the

Commonwealth very warmly and wanted to evolve it into a multi-racial organization with additional members from Asia. Therefore, he was keen to bring the new nations of the Indian sub-continent into the Commonwealth. His eagerness to bring them into it could be seen in the appointment of Lord Mountbatten as the last Viceroy of India, who accepted the offer mainly to find out ways and means of ensuing association of the new nations with Britain and the Commonwealth. To quote Mountbatten: "One of my major reasons for accepting the extremely complicated and difficult task of transferring power in India was that I had a tremendous desire to retain the newly emerging countries within the Commonwealth". Attlee and Mountbatten achieved their objectives when the transfer of power took place in an atmosphere of cordiality and amity, which facilitated the new nations to become members of the Commonwealth. As Gordon Walker writes, Attlee "secured the willing decision of India and Pakistan to remain in the Commonwealth". The old Whitemen's club became a new multi-racial association.

In the evolution of the Commonwealth, Britain faced a difficult situation when India expressed the desire to continue membership of the Commonwealth even after becoming a republic. The question was informally considered at the 1948 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting. The solution largely depended


28 See Daily Mail (London), 14 October 1948.
upon British initiative and accommodative spirit. This spirit was evident in the interest Britain took to persuade India to remain in the Commonwealth and in her expressed willingness to make necessary changes in the nature of Commonwealth relationship to facilitate the republic to stay in. As per the formula formally adopted at the 1949 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting, the Indian republic was freed from owing allegiance to the Crown and India, on her part, accepted the King "as the symbol of the free association of its independent member nations, and as such the Head of the Commonwealth".29

The word "British" was dropped from qualifying the "Commonwealth of Nations". This formula was in fact the result of the combined handiwork of two outstanding statesmen - Lord Mountbatten and V.K. Krishna Menon.30 In agreeing to make these changes, a major British consideration was to ensure the steady growth of the Commonwealth association. This was fully achieved by the British initiative and the Indian response.31


30 Mountbatten records: "I was closely associated with Mr Krishna Menon in finding a formula by which India could remain within the Commonwealth after becoming a republic. The formula was basically that India would accept the King as the Head of the Commonwealth". Lord Mountbatten, in a letter to the author on 27 November 1970. In a recent article P.C. Gordon Walker wrote that it was he who originated the formula. See Gordon Walker, n. 27, p. 507.

31 Expressing his appreciation Sir Winston Churchill said on 28 April 1949: "It is the duty of us all whenever we sit to try our best to make this new expression of this unity of our world association of states and nations a practical and lasting success". Manchester Guardian, 29 April 1949.
The decision was epoch-making, because it gave a new impetus to the association. By way of accepting republican India as a member of the Commonwealth, Britain could dispel all doubts of prospective members about their status and independence within the Commonwealth. This necessary factor poised the association for an unprecedented growth.

South Africa's Departure

The Union of South Africa was quite unhappy over the evolution of the Commonwealth into a multi-racial association, especially with additions from black Africa on equal status. Immediately after Ghana's independence South African Prime Minister Strijdom expressed his displeasure in admitting black African States into the Commonwealth. He said that it was possible that such countries like Malaya, the West Indies, Nigeria and Uganda "may gain their independence and then demand admission to the Commonwealth at a stage when they are not sufficiently developed or experienced in democratic process. Whatever Britain's policy may be, I think, she should take account of these things when granting these countries independence... Britain should not be overhasty in granting independence and Commonwealth membership since this is a matter which affects all other members". 32 It may be recalled that when Ghana's membership of the Commonwealth was considered, the Union tried to block admission, insisting that admission should precede the approval of all other members.

32 Manchester Guardian, 3 May 1957.
Though ultimately the Union gave in to Ghana's admission into the Commonwealth, the trail of colour prejudice remained to be a source of friction and irritation in the association.

As primus inter pares in the Commonwealth, Britain was very much concerned, though not outwardly, over this disquieting trend in the association. In the new trend, Prime Minister Macmillan saw a potential danger. Foreseeing the difficulties in store for the association if the Union continued the racial prejudice, when visited the Union in February 1960 he politely warned South Africa against the practise of apartheid. The Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960 shook the conscience of the world and gave birth to a new offensive against apartheid. The Union's racial policy became a real threat to the Commonwealth. The threat became severe when the Union's apartheid policy was informally discussed by Commonwealth Prime Ministers on 9 May 1960 and 13 March 1961. All the members, including Britain expressed, in unmistakable terms, their abhorrence of the racial policy pursued by the Union. Though joined with other countries in expressing abhorrence, Macmillan was interested in keeping the Union in the Commonwealth. But opposition of the other members to the Union's continuance in the Commonwealth, without changing her apartheid policy, was so violent that he felt it impossible to retain the Union in the Commonwealth without splitting it. The other members insisted that racial equality should be accepted as a basic principle of the Commonwealth association. Therefore, in order to save the Commonwealth from
disintegration, Britain reconciled herself, though reluctantly, to the idea of parting company with the Union.

Technically, the Union left the association voluntarily. But in fact, she did so under duress, after realizing that she would not get Britain any more to plead for her with other Commonwealth countries that apartheid was the Union's domestic affair. Dr Verwoerd, in a statement issued on 15 March 1961, said that he withdrew the application for continued Commonwealth membership in order to help Britain. He stated: "My decision was taken not only on behalf of South Africa, her honour and her interests, but also in the interests of our friends in the Commonwealth, particularly the Union Kingdom. I could not place them in the invidious position of having to choose between South Africa and a group of Afro-Asian nations". 33

There is no doubt that the exit of South Africa from the Commonwealth was the glorious climax of Macmillan's "wind of change" speech in Capetown in February 1960. In fact, it was the fellow feeling for a Commonwealth country that inhibited Britain for many years from criticizing South Africa openly on the issue of apartheid. She thought that the Union would liberalize its racial outlook if she was exposed to outside influence. When Britain lost that hope, and when she realized that the Union's apartheid policy threatened the future of the Commonwealth, it rose to the occasion and took every measure to ensure the endurance of the association. After the Union's departure,

33 The Times (London), 16 March 1961.
at a press conference in Trinidad on 28 March 1961, Macmillan said that South Africa's apartheid policy was "bad, unChristian, wrong and fated to fail". The new British outlook was spelt out by Duncan Sandys, the Commonwealth Secretary: "It must, however, be recognized that apartheid has aroused deep emotion throughout the world, and has ceased to be a matter of purely domestic concern". This new British outlook not only forestalled the disintegration of the Commonwealth on racial issues, but also laid a strong psychological foundation for its sustenance and growth.

The two above-mentioned milestones in the evolution of the post-war Commonwealth represented two distinctive phases of British's outlook towards the association. Immediately after the war, Britain looked to the Commonwealth very warmly and took special interest in bringing new members into it. But the warmth gradually began to wane when the informal atmosphere of the association began to disappear due to the heterogeneity that ensued simultaneously with its growth. The diversity was brought to the surface when a good number of members refused to follow the British line in international politics on various issues like the Suez crisis. This considerably eroded her world power status, which she was maintaining as the primus interpares of a world wide Commonwealth.

This erosion had its effect on Britain's foreign policy. As diversity of opinion in the Commonwealth grew, Britain had to accommodate increasingly the opinions of other Commonwealth countries, with a view to preserving the organization intact. But eventually this (along with certain other trends) led to considerable disenchantment with the Commonwealth in Britain.